

Introduction

I was alone – happily alone, I might add – munching my sandwiches, relaxing on the grass by a rocky path during a walk on the moor and heather of Lewis. Nobody, no human habitation, in sight. Bliss! When... out of the blue – into the black, more like – my day was ruined. I was not, as I fondly imagined, alone; I had been joined – surrounded, engulfed – all uninvited, by a swarm of midges, a swarm, such as I, coming from England, had never met before. Although I had heard of the notorious midges of Scotland, a few seconds' experience taught me far more about them, and what a pest they were, than a five-hundred paged textbook ever could.

Thinking back to that experience of the Highland midges brings to mind Paul's acute discomfort – and worse – 2000 years ago, not with a swarm of *culicoides impunctatus*, but with infestations of what he called 'false brothers'. They never seemed to stop cropping up in his life. As fast as he dealt with one lot, another sprang up; for him, the ancient myth of the Lernaean Hydra had become a grim reality.¹ If he swatted them away in Antioch or Jerusalem, they erupted in Galatia, or Corinth, or Rome, or Ephesus, or Philippi, or all at the same time.

But, of course, there is a very large difference between my midges and Paul's. The midges that buzzed about my head could bite, but, in truth, they were just a nuisance, a very annoying nuisance, to be sure, one that could certainly spoil a day, but just a nuisance. Paul's midges, however, were lethal.

Hence he could speak of 'the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches' (2 Cor. 11:28), the false teachers – indeed, '*danger* from false brothers' (2 Cor. 11:26) – adding

¹ 'The Hydra possessed many heads... Later versions of the Hydra story add a regeneration feature to the monster: for every head chopped off, the Hydra would re-grow two heads' (Wikipedia).

Introduction

no small weight to his grief. Under no illusions about the lasting consequences of their teaching – detraction from Christ,² ruination of the gospel,³ and, in the long term,⁴ the marring of the *ekklēsia* and, not least, a life of anxiety for believers – and seeing how easily even men like Peter and Barnabas could succumb, he devoted a great deal of his writing to exposing the false brothers and dealing with their

² ‘You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace’ (Gal. 5:4). And, as I will show, it is not only over justification.

³ ‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ’ (Gal. 1:6-7).

⁴ I am speaking of the Fathers and the invention of Christendom. See my *The Pastor; Infant; Battle*; Appendix 2 ‘Christendom’ in my *Relationship*. Whether Paul foresaw this in detail, I doubt (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:10-12), but by the Spirit he certainly foresaw a great deal, and in detail: ‘Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times [that is, during the gospel age – DG] some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth’ (1 Tim. 4:1-3). ‘But understand this, that in the last days [that is, during the gospel age – DG] there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith’ (2 Tim. 3:1-8). ‘The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths’ (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Introduction

doctrine.⁵ How grateful we should be that God raised up such a man as Paul, at such a time, giving him, by the Spirit, the necessary wisdom, discretion and courage to stand firm, speak out, and act, whatever the cost.⁶ Popularity ratings did not count for this man. As he told the Corinthians:

With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged [that is, rated, assessed, given a score] by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge [that is, rate, assess, score] myself (1 Cor. 4:3).

He was certainly prepared to follow his Master (Luke 12:51) and make waves, cause disturbance, upset apple carts (Acts 13:50; 14:1-7; 17:5-9; 22:22-24; 24:5-8). But all for the cause of truth, for the sake of Christ.

With the *pseudadelphoi* (false brothers) on the rampage, the person of Christ, the gospel itself, the well-being of saints, and, in the coming centuries, the true *ekklēsia* were all on a knife edge! And under God, and with huge personal sacrifice, this man single-handedly kept them from being dragged into

⁵ Paul would have been fully aware of Deut. 13 and 1 Kings 18:20-40, for example, and God's requirement that truth mattered, and error had to be silenced. In the old covenant this translated into physical action; in the new, spiritual; nonetheless, just as clinical, and just as final.

⁶ Contrast the Puritan compromise with John Whitgift's Three Articles in the 1580's. 'The Puritans in the 1580's had made a dangerous mistake. They had failed to make a stand' (Patrick McGrath: *Papists and Puritans Under Elizabeth I*, Blandford Press, London, 1967, p217). Their failure to stand, to put it mildly, did nothing to prevent their utter defeat in 1660-1662, nor the incalculable misery of the intervening years (see my *Battle*). The price of buying peace is always excessive. Witness the outcome of the attempted appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s by Neville Chamberlain and his fellow-travellers – between 35 and 60 million dead, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and between 40 and 60 million displaced according to Wikipedia.

Introduction

the abyss, providing the definitive answer to the claims of the false brothers.⁷

So important is the material which the apostle laid out, and so necessary is it that it must never be allowed to fade away, but must always hold the dominant position it demands, I want to throw my mite into the treasury in achieving that end. It will require a measure of covering the same ground from time to time. I make no apology for this. The issue came right of the top of the list for Paul, and he showed no hesitation in repeating himself and his doctrine. He wasn't writing classical Greek essays for the predilection of scholars, but wrestling for the souls of men and women by setting out the truth.⁸ I hope I am not too big for my boots, but that is my motive. The pundits and their rules did not stop Paul. I have the same conviction. When he wrote, of course, he was laying out Scripture. I, on the other hand, am merely commenting on, and underlining, Scripture. The *pseudadelphoi* were promulgating their own views. In accordance with Christ's promise (John 14:25-26; 15:26; 16:1,4,12-15), by the Spirit Paul was setting out the definitive and abiding word of God.

⁷ Abuse of Paul continues to this day. Some still accuse him of taking the gospel away from Judaism into Greek philosophy. Here is a temperate sample (I have edited the wording slightly, and given no source, to avoid promoting the error): 'Paul... led believers away from the law and the truth'. Or, as the fictional Hermione Lytton Gore put it: 'The Church is all cluttered up with the Pauline tradition' (Agatha Christie: *Three-Act Tragedy*, Agatha Christie Ltd., London, p30). The truth, as I shall argue, is that Paul preserved the gospel from being ruined by being dragged back under the old covenant. Alas, again as I will show, the battle has to be re-fought again and again. (The tautology is deliberate). Hence this book.

⁸ 'And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided [determined] to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God' (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

Introduction

And it is that – not any man-made Confession – which must govern all.

* * *

Strictly speaking, the apostle used the word *pseudadelphoi* (false brothers) only twice – in 2 Corinthians 11:26 and Galatians 2:4. If, however, we factor in equivalent expressions, such as ‘false apostles’, ‘false teachers’, and the like, and go outside the writings of Paul to take in the entire New Testament – Matthew 7:15; 24:11,24; Mark 13:22; Acts 15:1-35; 20:29-31; Romans 16:17-18; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2; 11:1-15; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 6:3-10; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Jude 3-23; Revelation 16:13, for instance – the real extent of the swarms of false teachers infesting the early *ekklēsia* becomes evident at once.

Precision is essential. We are thinking of false brothers, *pseudadelphoi*: *pseudēs*, meaning ‘false’, ‘lying’, ‘deceiving’, ‘pretending’ in ‘appearance’ or ‘name’, nuanced by the sense of ‘conscious’, ‘intentional’. The apostle did not mince his words; he described them as ‘false apostles’, excoriating them as deceitful [*dolloi*] workmen, men who were disguising [*metaschēmatisomenoi*] themselves, teachers who were [masquerading themselves] as apostles of Christ’ (2 Cor. 11:13) – *dolios* meaning ‘using a bait, snare, craft, deceit, guile, subtlety’ above all ‘deceit’, and *metaschēmatisō* ‘to transfigure, to form oneself into, to assume one’s appearance’. They were out to make ‘slaves of you’, he warned the Corinthians. Yet, though they were victims, the Corinthians were putting up with it, even patiently if not rather liking it: ‘You bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face’ (2 Cor. 11:20). Power play in overdrive!

Yes, in talking about the *pseudadelphoi*, Paul used words that are pregnant with motive – contemptible motive, at that – words such as underhandedness, sleight with the intention to

Introduction

deceive.⁹ Though they were known as *adelphoi*, professing believers, a question mark must surely remain over that.

But there is no question that when Paul spoke of false brothers in 2 Corinthians 11:26 and Galatians 2:4, he had Judaisers¹⁰ in mind, teachers, professing believers who wanted to bring the law¹¹ into the new covenant, thus adulterating – ruining – the gospel, impose the law on believers thus bringing them into slavery, and so lead to long-term, irredeemable(?) damage of the *ekklēsia*. This, of course, was not the only error to assault the early believers: John had to write his letters in order to hammer the teaching of the Gnostics. And Peter dealt with another kind of error when he warned his readers:

There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words... They promise... freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption (2 Pet. 2:1-3,19).

Motive again!

Jude, too, had to write about false teachers that he had come across, their sneaky ways, and their horrible motive:

Certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 4).

And, writing to the Thessalonians,¹² it is obvious that Paul was making a contrast between his approach and that of others – not only in doctrinal content but in motive:

⁹ Compare Acts 17:5. Whatever their accusations against Paul and Silas, the Jews (*Ioudaioi*) at Thessalonica were jealous of them.

¹⁰ See *ioudaizein* – ‘to be Judaising’ – in Gal. 2:14.

¹¹ By ‘law’, I am referring, as the Judaisers did, to the law of Moses, in whole or in part. It goes without saying that the believer is under the law of Christ, and that is an integral part of the new covenant.

¹² I am not saying that the teachers he had in mind were Judaisers.

Introduction

You yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:1-12).

However, it was the Judaisers who were the bane of Paul's life, and the curse of the early *ekklēsia*. As soon as Gentiles were being converted, the Judaisers, with their insistence on circumcision, mushroomed everywhere. Talk of circumcision, or its equivalent (Acts 11:2; 15:1-24; Gal. 2:12; 1 Cor. 7:18; Gal. 2:3-12; 5:2-11; 6:12-15; Eph. 2:11; Phil. 3:3-5; Col. 2:11; 3:11; Tit. 1:10, for instance) in Paul's writings, is often shorthand code for Judaisers and their doctrine. Although these teachers majored on externals such as circumcision and dietary laws, it was the law, the Mosaic law, that was the issue. As Paul bluntly told the Galatians, it's all or nothing with the law; you can't pick and choose. The law is not a menu:

Introduction

I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:2-3).

Paul used a graphic, chilling illustration in making his point about it being all or nothing:

As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole hog and emasculate themselves! (Gal. 5:12).

As James put it:

Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (Jas. 2:10).

In truth, it was not a question simply of circumcision; nor even of the law; the real issue was the mingling of the old and new covenants. The false brothers wanted to bring back the law – in effect, the old covenant – even though Christ, in establishing the new covenant had fulfilled the old covenant and thus rendered it obsolete (Matt. 5:17; Heb. 8:13). Scripture is clear that although there is a measure of connection between the old and new covenants, the reality is the two covenants are discontinuous. The Judaisers were trying to amalgamate the two, flying directly in the face of Christ who had explicitly ruled out any attempt to mingle the old and new covenants:

No one puts a piece of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matt. 9:16-17).

I say again, the mingling of the two covenants old and new was the issue, with the Mosaic law in the forefront. Hence the amount of space given to the new-covenant teaching on the law that we find in Acts, Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians,

Introduction

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians,¹³ and so on. And Hebrews is a massive exposition of the discontinuity – and the connection – between the two covenants.¹⁴ Indeed, it is fullest exposition of that vital matter in all Scripture.

The point is, law-promotion, based on mixing the two covenants, the breaking down of the discontinuity between the two covenants, was one of the biggest, most widespread, and pervasive errors in the first days of the new covenant, and its promulgation by Judaisers who wanted to impose the law on believers, especially Gentile believers, constituted the greatest attack upon the gospel, upon Christ, upon the *ekklēsia*, and upon individual believers in those days. They were the midges that caused Paul so much grief.

Does all this seem OTT to you? If so, read on.

¹³ See also Tit. 1:10-16; 3:9-10. There may be hints of it in 1 Thess. 2:14-16 and 1 Tim. 1:7-11.

¹⁴ Hebrews is in a class of its own. It was written to Jewish believers who were deserting Christ and the new covenant, and going back to the old covenant; they were not trying to impose the law on Gentiles. Even so, the teaching of Hebrews could not be more relevant to the issue in hand. The lesson is clear: any mingling of the two covenants is a step towards the desertion of Christ (Gal. 5:2-4).