
Illustrating the Gospel

Galatians 4:12-5:1

Introduction

Just this past week one of the great cartoonists and illustrators went home to be with the Lord on Saturday, April 7, 2007, at age 76 while working at his home in Nineveh, N.Y. Many of you read and loved the syndicated cartoon, 'B.C.' Johnny Hart was an outspoken Christian whose faith always shaped his Easter morning cartoon. Hart's 'B.C.' strip was launched in 1958 and eventually appeared in more than 1,300 newspapers with an audience of 100 million.⁹



Figure 1. Johnny Hart's Characters

The Gospel Johnny Hart embraced and exemplified is illustrated in our text today. The reality of what God has done for us is shown:

- In a personal relationship, the love between Paul and the church at Galatia;
- From a narrative text in the Old Testament anticipating gospel realities;
- With a potent application calling for gospel living.

Here once again is the gospel being illustrated. Affirm it together with me:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins *to deliver us from the present evil age*, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Anguish Troubling their Relationship (v.12-20)

Parents will recognize the feelings and the words here. There is a deeply felt love for these folks. There is a long history between them. Now, someone is threatening that relationship. There is that tearing mix of love and anger.

The Personal History Uniting Them (v.12-15)

They have a personal history together that should unite them. He appeals to them to become like he is, free as sons and not enslaved to the old creation. This sentence is meant to connect what he is teaching them in the letter to what he taught them when he was with them.

He reminds them of their care for him in the midst of his suffering while with them. He seems to be implying that he was with them for a longer time than planned due to some difficulty with his eyes. He was received then in spite of his illness causing difficulty for them. They did not reject him, but rather moved toward him with love and acceptance. They embraced as they would a messenger from God or even as the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what has happened? Why would those who were then willing to gouge out their eyes for him and counted it a blessing to be with him now refuse to hear and heed him?

The Purposeful Attack Dividing Them (v.16-17)

Listen to the pain in his voice? Has he now become their enemy because he tells them the truth? Here is a part of the subtle attack trying to divide them. The false teachers were doing two things to cut them off from Paul.

They seemed to have accused Paul of being against the Galatians themselves because he was against what they were being taught. In other words, Paul's attack on error was being construed to be an attack on the people. Thus, he was slandered as being their enemy because of what he was saying. The heart of the Galatian church was being turned against Paul. He was no longer their beloved friend and founder; he was now their enemy.

They were making much of the Galatians so that they would make much of them. They were enthusiastic and encouraging and praising of the Galatians. They were sucking up to them. They were flattering them in order to manipulate the people in the church. They would first make them the center of their attention and admiration. Then they would threaten to cut off friendship, to ignore and treat them poorly. They were playing on the human desire to be approved by people you admire.

This has little changed today. Many of the deadliest errors being taught today are coming from winsome, attractive people. They are interesting, engaging and enjoyable. They draw people into their orbit. They pretend to be shocked when people attack their errors and say that they are being attacked. They act as though they are above the fray. But what they are teaching will damn people to hell. This is particularly true of some the core leadership in the heretical New Perspective on Paul and the Openness of God.

Paul has no problem with exposing their motives and their methods. The reason he does so is to expose their message. These are intricately tied together. This is

why Paul in other texts will say that he what he is teaching is true; that how he teaches it is with integrity and that his motivations for teaching it are transparent to God and others.

The Perplexed Distress Grieving Them (v.18-20)

Yes, he acknowledges that it is a good thing to admired and approved. It is a good thing when people encourage you and motivate you to continue to grow, learn and change. But it is a bad thing to act as through there is nothing wrong. It is a dangerous thing to give people moving toward error a false sense of security and wellbeing.

Imagine you are walking through your neighborhood with a friend from another part of town. There in a yard is a beautiful dog. He sits watching you go by, his tail wagging in the grass. Your friend comments on how beautiful the dog is and begins to move toward it. But you know the dog is dangerous. You know that dog is chained away from the sidewalk for good reason. You are safe on the sidewalk. But are you a friend if you say, “Go ahead. He’s a beautiful dog. He loves people. Just go up and pet him.” No, a true friend will reach out with words and a quick grasp to pull them back. “Look out, this dog looks friendly, but he will bite you.”

But Paul is perplexed over them. He is like a mother in child birth who thought all was going well, but now some alarming pains have started. They are his beloved little children. He wishes he could be with them so that he could engage them and hopefully be able to change his tone. But for now, the danger that they will abort and not be truly God’s sons is great and grave.

Here is what it means to truly be a shepherd of God’s people. A deep and personal relationship is built over time. When someone attempts to teach error or drive a wedge, there is real pain and perplexity. For the true shepherds, there will be this mix of anguish and anger. Because eternal souls are at stake, there will be a rising tone warning of the danger and the deadliness of turning away from the truth of the gospel and embracing soul damning errors.

The Analogy Correcting their Error (v.21-27)

Now Paul turns from his relationship with the church as a whole to confronting those who were teaching and falling into error.

A Strategy to Confront Error (v.21)

We are given an example of how to deal with those who twist the Scripture to teach error.

Recognize that what one does flows out of heart beliefs and motivations. He locates their impetus in a desire for law (v.21a). Those who teach error when they have been instructed or confronted with truth are doing so out of a set of heart motivations and desires. He identifies them by this desire to be under the Law. So, a person who is teaching open theism (that is, that God does not know exactly which possible future will take place since God does not know what choice any person will make) does so out of a desire to protect the free will of man. Many people teaching the New Perspective on Paul (that is that

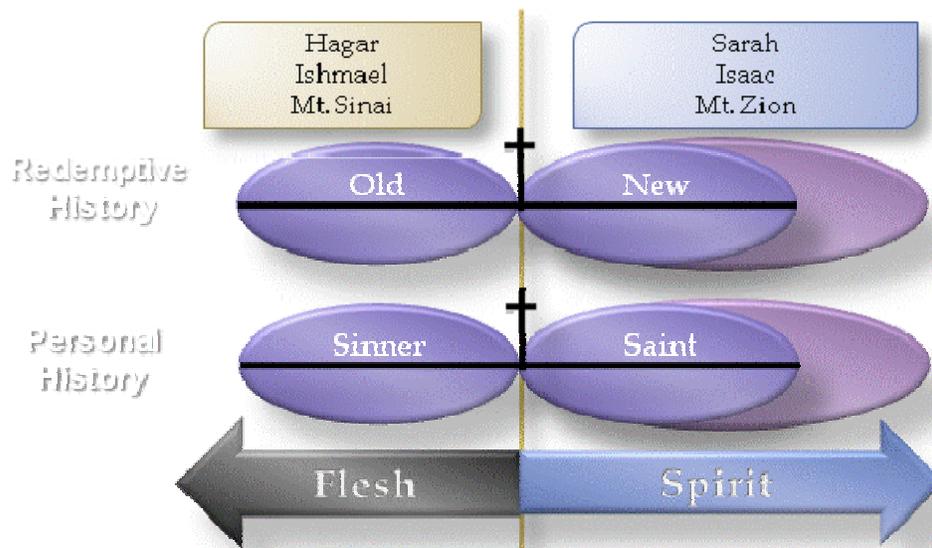
justification is not about our standing before God but rather our standing as a Gentile in relation to the Jews) does so because they are wanting to undercut the Reformation. Knowing these motivations helps uncover the hidden agendas and the end game of the error.

Challenge their reading and understanding of the Scriptures. Paul takes up one long narrative text and a prophetic text using them to answer and correct their error (v.21b). When someone is teaching error, generally they do so from texts. So, our response should be from texts including an even handed, honest handling of their own texts.

Expound and apply texts correcting their misuse of it (v.22f). I believe that Paul is using this text because the Judiazers are twisting it. How, we don't really know. But it seems that Paul is engaging the text in an "over against" way. He is laying out one element of a New Covenant hermeneutic. He simply says that the story of Isaac and Ishmael, Hagar and Sarah, are an allegory. They are intended to teach more than just the simple narrative would convey. How does he know that? He locates his understanding and use of the Genesis record in his quote from Isaiah 54:1.

A Biblical Argument to Clarify Truth (v.22-26)

To help us follow and understand Paul's thought here, I am taking a slide we used before and expanding on it. What Paul is saying is an example, an explanation and an elaboration on it drawn from this Old Testament narrative.



First, Paul locates them in the narrative he is concerned with and which they may be misusing. He has already argued from the idea of Abraham's heirs and Abraham's descendent, Jesus, as the foundation for our being sons. We know we are sons of Abraham and joint-heirs with Christ because we have received the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the down payment on our inheritance. He is the inauguration of our inheritance, a foretaste of its future glories. Therefore, we are now in the realm of the Spirit and no longer under the realm of the flesh.

Abraham however had two children, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was born as a result of relying on the ways of the world and thus is born according to the principles of the flesh. Isaac is born as a result of faith in the promises of God and thus is born according to the principles of the spirit. Paul shifts however to look at the mothers of these two children. There is little argument that Isaac and Ishmael all through the Bible represent these two realms, the one of the flesh and the other of the Spirit. But Paul goes on to expand that teaching. The illustration or allegory, as he puts it, can be extended to the mothers. Hagar represents the realm of the flesh, the fallen order in which Law rules. She is not the recipient of the covenant of promise. She has good done for her, but she is not the mother of the covenant. Sarah is the mother of the covenant. She has also been promised descendants and a son. So Hagar represents the realm of the flesh and Sarah the realm of the promise.

But those two also correspond to two mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. All through the Old Testament, these two mountains are filled with rich and elaborate allusions to truths greater than the physical locations. Mt. Sinai is the place the Law was received and immediately broken. It is there that God talked face-to-face with Moses. There the people hid and fled from the fearsome glory of God. Mt. Zion is usually the heavenly Jerusalem, even in the Old Testament. It is the ultimate dwelling of the glory God and is the homeland, the promised land, for all God's people.

Then Paul does a startling thing. He places Jerusalem in the realm of the flesh, in the trajectory of the Law. Now this would have been shocking to both Jew and Gentile. To the Jew, Jerusalem was the center of their Messianic hopes. To the Gentile Christians, Jerusalem was the location of the mother church. But Paul is making a point here. Remember in chapter two, where had the Judaizers come from? They were from a group *in the church at Jerusalem*. So he is warning them to look to their heavenly promises and graces, not to their earthly Jerusalem. Even though it is the location of the first church, it is not the source nor the mediator of the promise. We do not identify ourselves as citizens of Jerusalem. We are citizens of heaven.

The Biblical Grounds for Interpretation

(v.27)

Now, where does he get that? Is he reading his Old Testament in a way that we can as well? Is he authorized to do this purely because of he is authoritatively inspired by the Holy Spirit? I believe it is both. He is inspired by the Holy Spirit to read, understand, explain and apply the Old Testament narrative by a normal, New Testament hermeneutic. Now, this word "allegory" here has caused no small debate among Bible students and teachers. I think no better word has been said about this than the following:

... There is no question that the apostle here sees something that is not part of what we usually call 'the historical meaning' of a passage. The author of the Genesis narrative, as far as anyone can tell, was not seeking to distinguish between two covenants, nor was he trying to depict the relationship between Judaizers and Gentiles. Is Paul then mishandling the OT?

It is important to keep in mind that throughout the history of redemption one can see clear patterns in the ways events unfold. Perhaps the most obvious is the pattern of ‘testing resulting in disobedience’, seen clearly in Adam, and the Israelites in the wilderness, then broken by Jesus in his temptation. Especially important is the distinction between natural and supernatural, *i.e.* what humans tend to do in their own strength versus what they depend on God’s power to accomplish. That principle is communicated many times in the biblical history, and the story of Ishmael and Isaac is a particularly powerful example. Surely God was teaching his people to depend on him for their salvation. What could be more appropriate than to bring out that principle and apply it to the Galatian controversy?

Some scholars prefer to use the term typology (rather than allegory) to describe Paul’s method here. The point is that history, far from being minimized in the interests of theology, is seen as embodying that theology and thus anticipating later events as fuller manifestations of the principle in view... For Paul, it could not be a coincidence that the Genesis story had such important points of correspondence with the Judaizing issue. These correspondences are presented in the form of contrasts, as follows: Hagar/Sarah; slave/free; Sinai covenant/(new) covenant; present Jerusalem/Jerusalem from above; Ishmael/Isaac; ordinary birth (flesh)/birth through promise/Spirit; persecutor/persecuted; cast away/heir.¹⁰

Notice, what he says in verse 24-26 is because of what is said in Isaiah 54:1 which he cites here in verse 27. Isaiah 53 is the great suffering savior text. Immediately following the redeeming work of the Messiah and the promise that His salvation will be to all nations, we get this opening sentence to chapter 54. Who is the barren one? Who is the desolate one with no children? She is Sarah. He reads this text and sees that Isaiah speaks of Sarah as the mother of many children, not just in the tents of Israel, but throughout all people groups. God, through His redeeming work will fulfill His promise to His people and be their God and their husband (v.6-8). God establishes the covenant that brings peace (v.9-10; Romans 5:1). God will rule and reign from the heavenly city with His people gathered therein (v.11-12; Revelation 21-22). This will be the time promised by the New Covenant for Isaiah structures what he says in verses 13-17 on the promises of the New Covenant. Paul sees in flow of Isaiah 53-54 a pattern that helps him understand why the Genesis narrative says what it does.

There is much more that can be said about handling the Old Testament texts the way the New Testament does. We encourage you to listen carefully as we work out and demonstrate a Christ-centered, New Covenant based. New Testament guided and illuminated use of the Bible.¹¹

Finally, let me quote once again from D.A. Carson who summarizes what I have trying to say so very well.

Out of several interesting ideas implied by these contrasts, at least two require special attention. First, note the reference to the present Jerusalem over against the one from above (25–26). It is clear that Paul’s thought is strongly influenced by an ‘eschatological’ or ‘last-days’ view of biblical history, according to which the coming of Christ is said to bring in the age to come. The

point surfaced in 1:4 and undergirds such ‘fulfillment’ passages as 3:23–25 and 4:4 (*cf.* also 1 Corinthians 10:11).

Secondly, note the contrast between flesh and promise/Spirit in vs 23, 29. That contrast was first brought up in 3:4, so it is significant that this central section of the letter both begins and ends with such a reference. These terms are strongly related to the ‘last-days’ understanding of the gospel. The flesh—*i.e.* fallen human nature working in its own natural strength—is the distinguishing characteristic of the present age. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, inaugurates the coming age, so that Christians may even be said to be sitting in heaven (Eph. 2:6; *cf.* Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1–4). The ethical significance of this contrast is developed in 5:13–26.¹²

The Assertions Applying the Gospel (v.28-5:1)

Now he comes to the point of his argument. In doing so he makes 5 assertions that apply the gospel. I want to state those assertions as truths for us to affirm.

We are children of the promise. (v.28)

We, like Isaac, are children of promise. We are not the children of Hagar, Ishmael and Mt. Sinai. Because we have been born of the Spirit, because we are in Christ, because we have to life through the miracle of God’s work, then we must assert our identity as children of the promise.

The flesh and the Spirit are in conflict. (v.29)

Just as Ishmael and Isaac were in conflict, so the realms and principles of the flesh and the Spirit will be in conflict. Those who are still in the old will persecute those who are living by the principles of the new. Paul is saying that the Judiazers are in the flesh, not the Spirit. So, just as the false teachers of their day were in conflict with Paul and all holding to the truth of the Word of God, it is like that in our day. We can simply expect, until Jesus comes, that there will be false teachers who are of the flesh and will glorify the flesh and try to bring people to live or ministry by the principles of the flesh.

Those in the flesh are removed from the household.(v.30)

Hagar and Ishmael were expelled from the household and sent on their way. They were not allowed to stay and cause more trouble. They were sent away as a symbol of their being outside the family and not the true children, not the true heirs. A distinct line was being drawn between Isaac and his descendents and Ishmael and his. This is applied then throughout the New Testament. Unrepentant false teachers are to be silenced and to be removed. They are not to be given a place to confuse people or corrupt what is believed. Paul is calling on the Galatians to remove the Judiazers from fellowship and to identify them as outside the faith. And so must we. While we speak the truth in love among those who are learning and growing, we must not tolerate false doctrine.

We are children of the Spirit and are free. (v.31)

Live, love and learn as children of the free woman. Speak to yourselves over and over again that Christ has set you free. He has redeemed you from slavery. He has brought you out of Egypt. He has broken the chains and power of Mt. Sinai. He has transferred you into the kingdom of Mt. Zion. Abraham is your spiritual father, Sarah your spiritual mother, Jesus Christ your brother and joint-heir. This is where true spiritual freedom is. The principles of the world, the Law, the flesh will bind you to your sin and have no power to deliver you from your sin.

We must stand in the truths of the gospel. (5:1)

Since we are children of the Spirit and not children of the slave, we must not go back to living under the principles of the fallen world, the realm of sin. We must not try to live by the Law. We must not minister by the principles of the world. We must not return to old. We are free in the new. Sometimes, returning to the world feels like it is freeing us. This is an illusion. Returning to the world's principles does return us to slavery. Going back to Egypt is going back to slavery. The delights and delicacies, the wisdom and works of Egypt do not further the Kingdom of God. They enslave the people of God. We are bound for the Promised Land as citizens of that country – Mt. Zion our mother, Isaac our brother, singing songs of freedom, pursued by the world and the devil. We will arrive safely one day because God has given us His Spirit proving that we are His children and His true heirs.

Paul gives two commands that I want to conclude with.

Conclusion

STAND IN YOUR FREEDOM. You know what the Bible teaches. You know that God has delivered you from the slavery of sin into the freedom as sons. So commit yourself to stand in that freedom. How do we do that?

Learn what the Bible says about who you are in Christ. You cannot stand in what you do not know. Read through the New Testament listening for your identity in Christ. You are a saint, a son, a soldier, a servant, a sheep.

Memorize key texts to repeat often in your heart. Meditate on your identity in Christ. Think about it. Talk about with others. Pray it back to God. Fill your soul with words of affirmation of the truth God has given.

Prize these truths as precious and powerful. You will not hold to and will be influenced much by what you do not prize.

Use these truths to discern and reject error. Be alert to the barrage of worldly principles and methods to try to achieve spiritual maturity and to do spiritual ministry.

DO NOT SUBMIT TO THE YOKE OF SLAVERY AGAIN. Notice the command that counters passivity. Do not submit. How do we do that?

Be willing to disagree with error. We not only affirm what is true, but we deny what is not. You must be kind and gracious to people, but firm and unswerving in your holding to truth.

Do not regularly spend time with those teaching error. This means whether you are doing it in person, in your reading, by your radio or TV. Be wise toward what is good and simple toward what is evil. Many people are being sucked into NPP or the Emergent Church by the constant reading of their materials.

Actively reject and refuse what will draw you away from the truth in Christ. Religious bookstores are full of how-to books that are based either on legalism or on secular philosophies and psychologies. Watch out for the latest key to spirituality, holiness fad, psychological insight. Do not become entangled in the slavery.

Brothers and sisters, grow to maturity in Christ through the marvelous means God has given. There is true life and real freedom. Say the gospel with me again:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins *to deliver us from the present evil age*, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria.

NOTES

⁹ Comics used in the PowerPoint used by permission.

¹⁰D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: *The New Bible Commentary*. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Ga 4:21.

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¹²D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: *The New Bible Commentary*. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Ga 4:21.