

A Review of Galatians

(John Stott)

We have seen that the background, the situation which called it forth, was the presence in the Galatian churches of certain false teachers. Directly or indirectly Paul alludes to them throughout. They were 'troubling' the church. The same word occurs in Galatians 1:7 and 5:10 and means to 'disturb, unsettle, throw into confusion' (Arndt-Gingrich). And the confusion they were spreading was caused by their erroneous ideas. They were perverting the gospel, and Paul confronts them with hot indignation.

There were three main points at issue between Paul and the Judaizers, and they are still vital issues in the church today. The first is the question of authority: how do we know what and whom to believe or disbelieve? The second is the question of salvation: how can we get right with God, receiving the forgiveness of our sins and being restored to His favour and fellowship? The third is the question of holiness: how can we control the sinful desires of our fallen nature and live a life of righteousness and love? Addressing himself to these questions, Paul devotes approximately the first two chapters of the Epistle to the question of authority, chapters 3 and 4 to the question of salvation, and chapters 5 and 6 to the question of holiness.

1. THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

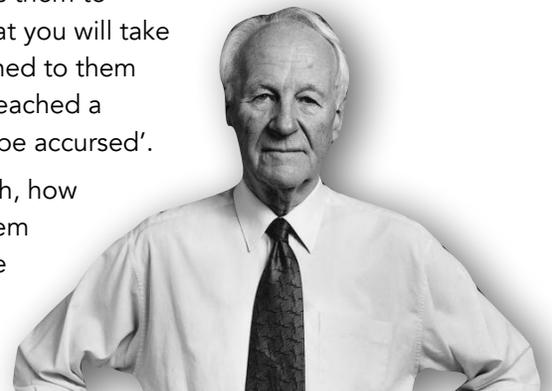
This was the fundamental issue. Paul and Barnabas founded the Galatian churches on their first missionary journey by their preaching and teaching. After their departure other teachers arrived—teachers who claimed to have the authority and backing of the Jerusalem church and who began to undermine the teaching of Paul. As a result, the Galatians were in a dilemma. Here were two sets of teachers, each claiming to bring God's truth, but contradicting one another. Which were the Galatians to listen to and believe? Both seemed to have good credentials. Both were holy, godly, upright and intelligent men, and both were plausible, winsome and dogmatic. Which were they to choose?

The same situation obtains in the church today except that, instead of a simple alternative between two viewpoints, we are faced with a bewildering variety of opinions to choose from. Moreover, each group has its particular appeal; its spokesmen are reputable scholars; and its supporters include theologians and bishops. Each group sounds reasonable and buttresses its case with strong arguments. But they all contradict one another. So how can we know which to choose and whom to follow?

We must see clearly what Paul does in this situation. He asserts his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He expects the Galatians to receive his gospel not just because of it, but because of him, not because of its superior truth, but because of his superior authority. The authority the Judaizers boasted was an ecclesiastical authority; they claimed to come from and to speak for the Jerusalem church. Paul insists, on the other hand, that both his mission and his message came not from the church but from Christ Himself. This is the argument of Galatians 1 and 2, in which he boldly advances his claim and then supports it by rehearsing the history of his conversion and his subsequent relations with the Jerusalem apostles. It was Christ who authorized him, not they, although, when he did later confer with them, they whole-heartedly endorsed his mission and message.

Conscious of his apostolic authority, Paul expects the Galatians to accept it. They had done this on the first missionary journey, receiving him 'as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus' (4:14). Now that his authority is being challenged and his message contradicted, he still expects them to recognize his authority as Christ's apostle: 'I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine' (5:10). The original message, which he had preached to them (1:8) and which they had received (1:9), was to be normative. If anybody preached a gospel contrary to this, however august a personage he might be, 'let him be accursed'.

Almost deafened by the babel of voices in the contemporary church, how are we to decide whom to follow? The answer is the same: we must test them all by the teaching of the apostles of Jesus Christ. 'Peace and mercy' will be on the church when it 'walks by this rule' (6:16). Indeed, this is the only kind of apostolic succession we can accept—not a line of bishops stretching back to the apostles and claiming to be their successors



(for the apostles were unique in both authorization and inspiration, and they have no successors), but loyalty to the apostolic doctrine of the New Testament. The teaching of the apostles, now permanently preserved in the New Testament, is to regulate the beliefs and practices of the church of every generation. This is why the Bible is over the church and not vice versa. The apostolic authors of the New Testament were commissioned by Christ, not by the church, and wrote with the authority of Christ, not of the church. 'To that authority (sc. of the apostles), as the Anglican bishops said at the 1958 Lambeth Conference, 'the Church must ever bow.' Would that it did! The only church union schemes which can be pleasing to God and beneficial to the church are those which first distinguish between apostolic traditions and ecclesiastical traditions and then subject the latter to the former.

2. THE QUESTION OF SALVATION

How can sinners be 'justified', accepted in the sight of God? How can a holy God forgive sinful men, reconcile them to Himself and restore them to His favour and fellowship?

Paul's answer is straightforward. Salvation is possible only through the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The Epistle is full of the cross. Paul describes his preaching ministry as 'placarding' Christ crucified before men's eyes (3:1) and his personal philosophy as 'glorying' in the cross alone (6:14). But why was the cross the subject of his preaching and the object of his boasting? What did Christ do on the cross? Consider these three statements in Galatians: He 'gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age' (1:4); 'the Son of God...loved me and gave himself for me' (2:20); and 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us' (3:13). That is to say, the sense in which He gave Himself for us is that He gave Himself for our sins, and the sense in which He gave Himself for our sins is that He became a curse for us. This phrase can mean only that God's 'curse' (His righteous displeasure and judgment), which rests upon all who break His law (3:10), was transferred to Christ on the cross. He bore our curse that we might receive the blessing which God had promised to Abraham (3:14).

What, then, must we do to be saved? In a sense, nothing! Jesus Christ has done it all in His curse-bearing death. Our only part is to believe in Jesus, to trust Him without reserve to apply to us personally the benefits of His death. For 'a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ' (2:16). The sole function of faith is to unite us to Christ, in whom we receive justification, adoption and the gift of the Spirit.

The Judaizers, on the other hand, were troubling the church by insisting that faith in Jesus was not enough. Circumcision and law-obedience must be added to it. This perversion of the gospel Paul vigorously denies. If people could win salvation by the law, he says, 'then Christ died to no purpose' (2:21). If we contribute our works to the winning of salvation, then we detract from the adequacy of Christ's work. If in His death He bore our sin and curse, then the cross is a sufficient sacrifice for sin and nothing whatever needs to be added to it. Such is 'the stumbling-block of the cross' (5:11), because it tells us that salvation is a gift freely bestowed on the ground of Christ's death and that to it we can contribute precisely nothing.

So the church is 'the household of faith' (6:10). Faith is the chief mark of God's children. We are a family of believers, and faith is the factor which unites us with all God's people of every place and age.

a. Faith unites us with God's people of the past

If we believe, we are the sons of Abraham (3:7, 29), for he was justified by faith (3:6) just as we are. In Christ we inherit Abraham's blessing (3:14). Thus, it is faith which binds together the Old and New Testaments and makes the Bible one book instead of two. As we read the Old Testament authors, we have no difficulty in recognizing them as our fellow-believers.

b. Faith unites us with God's people of the present

Galatians 3:26, 28: 'For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. There neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' This shows that if we are in Christ by faith we are both 'sons of God' and 'all one'. External distinctions of race, rank and sex are all rendered null and void. So far as our relationship to God is concerned, they count for nothing. It is to be 'in Christ' which matters. And Paul refuses to tolerate any teaching or action which is inconsistent with this.

So he castigates the Judaizers for their insistence on circumcision and opposes Peter to his face when he withdraws from table-fellowship with uncircumcised Gentile believers.

Still today faith abolishes distinctions. We have no right to deny our fellowship at the Lord's Table to any Christians who are in Christ by faith, on the ground that they lack episcopal confirmation, total immersion, the right colored skin, an acceptable culture or anything else. There is a place for order and discipline in each church, to ensure that its members are in Christ by faith. But there is no place for ecclesiastical, social or racial discrimination. The church is 'the household of faith'; it is faith in Christ crucified which levels and unites us.

3. THE QUESTION OF HOLINESS

The Judaizers caricatured Paul's gospel that justification was by grace alone through faith alone; they hinted that in this case good works did not matter and you could evidently live as you please. Paul denies this too. He agrees that Christians are 'free' and urges them to 'stand fast' in the freedom with which Christ has set them free (5:1), but he adds 'only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh' (5:13). Christian liberty is not license. Christians have been freed from the bondage of the law in the sense that they have been delivered from the law as a way of salvation. But this does not mean that they are free to break the law. On the contrary, we are to 'fulfill the law' by loving and serving one another (5:13, 14).

How is it possible to become holy? We have seen how Paul describes the Christian's inner conflict between 'the flesh' and 'the Spirit' and the way of victory through the ascendancy of the Spirit over the flesh. Those who belong to Christ, he says, 'have crucified the flesh', totally rejecting its evil 'passions and desires' (5:24). This is part of our repentance. It took place at our conversion, but we need to remember and renew it daily.

Christ's people also seek to be 'led by the Spirit' (5:18), to follow His 'line' (5:25) and sow in His 'field' (6:8), by disciplined habits of thinking and living, so that His 'fruit' will appear and ripen in our lives. This is the Christian way of holiness.

The last verse of the Epistle is a fitting conclusion: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit' (6:18). For the Christian life is lived by the grace of Christ, and this grace (unmerited favour) is expressed in the three spheres which we have been considering.

First, the answer to the question of authority is *Jesus Christ through His apostles*. Christ appointed and authorized the Twelve and later Paul to teach in His name, and promised them the Holy Spirit in special measure to bring His teaching to their remembrance and to lead them into all the truth. So 'what Jesus began to do and teach' during His life (Acts 1:1) He continued through His apostles, and He intended men to submit to this apostolic authority as being His authority: 'He who receives you receives me', He said. 'He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me'.

Secondly, the answer to the question of salvation is *Jesus Christ through His cross*. Jesus Christ came not only to speak but to save, not only to reveal but to redeem. On the cross He bore our sin and curse. And if we are in Christ crucified, united to Him by faith, all the blessings of the gospel—justification, adoption and the gift of the Spirit—become our personal possession.

Thirdly, the answer to the question of holiness is *Jesus Christ through His Spirit*. Christ not only died, rose and returned to heaven, but sent the Holy Spirit to replace Him. This Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, who dwells in every believer. And one of the greatest works of the Holy Spirit is to conform us to the image of Christ, to form Christ in us (Gal 4:19), to bring forth in our lives His 'fruit' of Christlikeness.

So we have Christ through His apostles to teach us, Christ through His cross to save us and Christ through His Spirit to sanctify us. This in a nutshell is the message of the Epistle to the Galatians and indeed of Christianity itself. It is all included in the Epistle's last words: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ—His grace through His apostles, His cross and His Spirit—be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.