

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 1

Galatians 1:1-5

February 7, 1999

Tonight we begin a new series, this in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. I did a short series on Galatians in the very first few months of my ministry here, back in 1978, but only a few of you were present then and, in any case, this study will be much more comprehensive than that. What is more, we could easily argue that there are perhaps few books of the Bible that Christians ought to master more than this book of Galatians. It is a centerpiece of New Testament theology. There is no mistaking its epoch making role in the Protestant Reformation.

You remember that Luther himself paid Galatians the high tribute of calling it his "Katherine von Bora." And his Commentary on Galatians may well have been one of the two or three most influential books to come out of the Reformation. Luther's own studies in preparing to lecture on Paul's letter to the Romans in 1515 and to lecture on Galatians in 1516-1517 proved to be his own Damascus Road [Bainton, 60]. His lectures or Commentary on Galatians was a truly magnificent work, the furthest thing from dry and academic in its tone and character. It breathed fire and it started fires wherever it went, for centuries after its publication.

Here is John Bunyan in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Paragraphs. 129-130). He had been a Christian for a short time, but, as you may remember his story, the early years of his life were beset by powerful spiritual temptations.

"But before I had got thus far out of these my temptations, I did greatly long to see some ancient godly man's experience... Well, after many such longings in my mind, the God in whose hands are all our days and ways, did cast into my hand, one day, a book of Martin Luther; it was his comment on the Galatians -- it also was so old that it was ready to fall piece from piece if I did but turn it over. Now I was pleased much that such an old book had fallen into my hands; the which, when I had but a little way perused, I found my condition, in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart. This made me marvel; for thus thought I, This man could not know anything of the state of Christians now, but must needs write and speak the experience of former days.

But, of particulars here I intend nothing; only this, methinks, I must let fall before all men, I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy Bible, before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience."

And, then, most of a century later than Bunyan, we come to the experience of Charles and John Wesley. In May of 1738 both of the men were in a highly distressed state of mind and heart and Charles, under the influence of his spiritual depression, was also physically ill. Both knew themselves sinners and under the wrath of God but could not find faith and peace. They knew they needed Christ, but could not seem to find him.

One day another earnest seeker after salvation, a William Holland, a commercial painter, called on Charles and gave him a copy of Luther's Commentary on the Galatians. The following is from Charles Wesley's *Journal*.

"May 17. To-day I first saw Luther on the Galatians, which Mr. Holland had accidentally lit upon. We began, and found him nobly full of faith. My friend, in hearing him, was so affected as to breathe out sighs and groans unutterable. ... I spent some hours this evening in private with Martin Luther, who was greatly blessed to me, especially his conclusion of the 2nd chapter. I laboured, waited and prayed to feel 'who loved **me**, and gave Himself for **me**."

But William Holland's own account of this same reading of Luther on Galatians together is more triumphant.

Mr. Charles Wesley read the Preface aloud. At the words, 'What, have we then nothing to do? No! nothing but only accept of Him, "Who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption"', there came such a power over me as I cannot well describe; my great burden fell off in an instant; my heart was so filled with peace and love that I burst into tears. I almost thought I saw our Saviour! My companions, perceiving me so affected, fell on their knees and prayed. When I afterwards went into the street, I could scarcely feel the ground I trod upon." [Cited from Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, i, 183.]

Holland was now a Christian and he spoke of Luther on Galatians as "a very precious treasure that I had found."

Apparently over the next several days, William Holland was taking Luther on Galatians to other seekers and reading it to them as well. On Sunday, May 21st, Charles Wesley found peace with God. The next Wednesday night, John Wesley, went "very unwillingly," he says, to a meeting in Aldersgate Street where, he says, "one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans." And, as he read Luther's description of "the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ", Wesley wrote later in his *Journal*,

"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death."

The one who was doing the reading was most likely William Holland himself. But was he reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans? That is almost certainly a mistake. Luther on Galatians had been instrumental in Holland's conversion, an important step toward Charles Wesley's, it was but a matter of days later; and both of the men speak of reading "Luther" to others, Charles indeed to "a large company of friends", where the reference is clearly to Luther on Galatians: surely the same material was being read over and over again.

I could go on. But a book that was so instrumental in the spiritual life of John Bunyan and John and Charles Wesley is no mean book! Now, some of the credit for that, obviously goes to Martin Luther, but most of it goes to the Apostle Paul, for Luther was, after all, just explaining what Paul was saying in that Letter he had written long ago to the new believers in Galatia.

Coleridge says in his work, *English Divines*, "I never can separate the two names of Paul and Luther. How dearly Luther loved Paul, and how dearly would Paul have loved Luther!" [Cited in Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, iv, 172]

What was it that made that commentary so spiritually influential, so powerful in communicating new life in Christ to men who were seeking salvation? Well, it has everything to do with the fact that Paul, in this letter, is dealing with that very question: how is a sinner put right with God? Exactly how does it happen? What must be done on our part? What misunderstandings typically confuse our thinking about this? This is the main subject of Galatians. And it is a treatment of this question that has a special power because it comes to us white hot out of the controversy over this fundamental issue in first century Christianity. Galatians is no calm and colorless discussion of hypothetical questions. It is passion, anger, fear, love, and hope all compact, as Paul fights for the life of his converts in the Galatian towns where but months before he had founded these infant churches.

For these reasons -- the eternal, the life and death importance of the subject of the letter and the passion with which the truth is taught -- Galatians will always rest near to the heart of the church when she is spiritually awake. But, in our day, it has become of special importance again, as it has from time to time in church history since the Reformation.

First, it is once again important, precisely because of its controversial character as a doctrinal treatise.

We live in a day when two forces or tendencies in evangelical Christianity are converging in the most pernicious way. First there is, in our day of relativism and emotionalism, a lack of interest in Christian doctrine, in the precise statement of Christian belief. Such a concern is simply irrelevant in many Christian minds -- doctrine is not where people live; it doesn't touch their lives in practical ways; what is more, it tends to divide Christians from one another instead of uniting us in love. At the same time, there is a growing distaste in many quarters for controversy -- that is, controversy in the technical sense -- arguments over the truth, what it is. It can't be done without the appearance of making judgments against those who disagree -- and in our day, that is widely thought a cardinal sin --, it is a negative rather than a positive activity, so it is thought, and in our psychologized day, only positive, constructive, optimistic activities are regarded as helpful and important. And, theological controversy is widely felt to be elitist, a serious breach of evangelical etiquette in the late 20th century. Some Christians apparently think they are better than others because they can conduct arguments that most Christians cannot. Our entire culture breathes this spirit -- you see it in bold outline in a dispute such as that over abortion -- and the same spirit now infects the church. It is not ours to judge another's beliefs, you would be helping more if you built up instead of criticized, and

who are you to think you know everything and others do not.

Into that spirit and that atmosphere, Galatians comes like a cold blast of arctic air! We are hardly past the greetings before Paul has pronounced damnation on those professing Christians who don't agree with his construction of the gospel. He calls the Galatians fools for embracing a Christian teaching that on many points is in agreement with his own doctrine.

Here is J. Gresham Machen on Paul's polemic, his controversial argument in his Letter to the Galatians. In Machen's day the forces to which I had alluded had already surfaced, but they are much more powerful and much more deeply ingrained today than in the first 30 years of the 20th century.

"What was it that gave rise to the stupendous polemic of the Epistle to the Galatians? To the modern church the difference would have seemed to be a mere theological subtlety. About many things the Judaizers were in perfect agreement with Paul. The Judaizers believed that Jesus was the Messiah.... Without the slightest doubt, they believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. They believed, moreover, that faith in Christ was necessary to salvation but the trouble was, they believed that something else was also necessary; they believed that what Christ had done needed to be pieced out by the believer's own effort to keep the law. From the modern point of view the difference would have seemed to be very slight....hardly worthy of consideration at all in view of the large measure of agreement in the practical realm. What a splendid cleaning up of the Gentile cities it would have been if the Judaizers had succeeded in extending to those cities the observance of the Mosaic law.... Surely Paul ought to have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity. As a matter of fact, however, Paul did nothing of the kind; and only because he (and others) did nothing of the kind does the Christian church exist today.... Paul certainly was right. The difference which divided him from the Judaizers was no mere theological subtlety, but concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ.... Paul was no advocate of undogmatic religion; he was interested above everything else in the objective and universal truth of his message." [*Christianity and Liberalism*, 23-25]

We live in a day in which controversy will be necessary if any objective and universal truth is to survive in the message of Christianity. So Galatians is a most timely part of the New Testament for us to study.

Second, Galatians is once again a particularly timely study because its great, central theme -- justification by faith and not works -- is once again the subject of renewed doubts, even among Protestant evangelicals.

In a most surprising turn of events, evangelicals now are hearing prominent leaders assuring them that the old dispute between Protestants and Catholics over justification is more a matter of words

than substance and need not prove a barrier to reconciliation between the two parts of the Church. This is a genuinely astonishing development, so unexpected was it. But the controversy is here to stay. Longstanding brotherhood in ministry has been broken by it -- Ligonier no longer uses J.I. Packer to speak at its conferences, for example.

And Galatians is thrust to the front and center of this renewed debate, because Protestants have always charged, since the days of the Reformation itself, that the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification was, materially, for all intents and purposes, the doctrine the Judaizers taught and that Paul condemned as damning heresy.

Some of the questions we will want to answer, as we make our way through the argument of the letter, are precisely these questions: what is the doctrine of justification Paul taught and what was the alteration of it taught by the Judaizers. Then we can judge ourselves whether the Roman Catholic apologists succeed in their argument that the polemic of Galatians does not strike against their doctrine of justification.

Introduction

I could take a very long time introducing you to the questions that have long been debated concerning the date when the Letter was written and precisely to whom the Letter was written. But that detail would be to no one's advantage. You can study it yourself if you have an interest.

Let me, rather, at this point, summarize what I think are not only the conclusions that best fit all the data we have, but are the conclusions that best satisfy the mind of biblical scholarship, both evangelical and liberal, at least that scholarship that takes with some seriousness the historical veracity of the New Testament and the Book of Acts in particular.

Paul and Barnabas, you remember, had been sent out from Antioch on an evangelistic mission. We read of that mission in Acts 13-14. The end of that tour found them in the Roman Province of Galatia, what is today south central Turkey. Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe are the towns of that region that are mentioned by name in the account of that first missionary journey. In each of those towns people came to Christ and churches were formed. Indeed, Paul and Barnabas visited each town twice -- once the first time through and then, when they reached the end of their forward progress, they turned round and went back through the same towns again as they retraced their steps homeward to Antioch.

It is shortly after their return to Antioch that the controversy broke out there over the insistence of some Jewish Christians that the Gentile converts had to be circumcised in order to be saved. In other words, it was demanded that Gentiles become practicing Jews in order for them to become Christians in good standing. It was that dispute that sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles there and that prompted the calling of the first synod which hammered out an answer to the question of Gentile freedom from Jewish ceremonial regulations.

It seems virtually certain that Galatians was written between the time that Paul returned to Antioch

the first time, i.e. at the end of the first missionary journey, and the sitting of the Jerusalem synod. If the synod had already been held and the position on Gentiles and circumcision already determined - - favorable to Paul and his theology as it was -- it is inconceivable that Paul would not have mentioned that fact in his letter to the Galatians on this very subject, all the more given the fact that apparently the false teachers were claiming the support of the apostles in Jerusalem for their viewpoint.

We know that the Judaizing teaching was abroad, and that it was being disseminated to the churches on purpose by traveling teachers. It was this effort that provoked the opposition of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch and the calling of the synod in the first place. It is easy to believe that these teachers and this teaching would have already made its way to the cities in Galatia where Paul had established churches. In fact, it is not impossible that these teachers were simply following Paul and Barnabas to inculcate their own views in the thinking of these fledgling Christian churches. Acts 14:28 says that Paul and Barnabas stayed at Antioch, following their first missionary journey, "for a long time" -- whatever that means precisely. That "long time" gives time for the teachers to go to Galatia, spread their heresy, for the news to get back to Paul, and for him to write his letter and send it off.

The Lord himself had addressed the issue of Gentile freedom in the case of Cornelius, who was baptized and brought into the church **as a Gentile**, i.e. without circumcision. Peter explained to an initially suspicious Jerusalem congregation of Jewish Christians how the Lord had directed him to this end by the means of the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven (Acts 11:1-18). When they heard Peter's explanation they had no objections. But, in time, those objections began to surface again. These Jewish distinctives were so precious to Jews, so much a part of what it meant for them to be Jews, that, when it became clear that large numbers of Gentiles were coming into the church, some Jewish believers began to object. The power of this prejudice is seen in the fact, that, as we shall see, even Peter was cowed by it, the very same Peter who had introduced Gentile freedom to the church!

The fact is, this issue became the great problem of early Christianity. Jewish believers were still agitating on these questions late into Paul's ministry, long after the matter had supposedly been settled at the council in Jerusalem. And, frankly, it was the failure of enough Jews to embrace a no longer specifically Jewish form of Christianity and to be a minority in a largely Gentile church that explains, from the human viewpoint, the rather sudden disappearance of the Jewish element from sub-apostolic Christianity.

All of this being assumed, Galatians may be the earliest letter of the Apostle Paul, the first canonical letter he ever wrote, and one of, if not the, earliest letters of the New Testament.

If this is Paul's first effort, it is all the more remarkable; for there is no doubt it is one of the greatest and the most influential writings in all of human history. As Luther said, "Paul's words are not dead words, they are living creatures with hands and feet."

We shall see, Lord willing, that it is so!