

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 3

Galatians 1:10-24

February 21, 1999

Text Comment

v.10 The verses suggests the nature of the charge that his opponents had leveled against Paul, viz. that he tailored his message to please his audience. In this case that would have taken the form of their saying that Paul was playing to his Gentile audience by telling them that they had no obligation to the Jewish ceremonies. It is possible, of course, that Paul's conduct had contributed to this accusation that he adapted his preaching and his message to the group he was preaching to at the time. For, in fact, Paul did not treat every situation in the same way. His overriding principle was "to become all things to all men" (1 Corinthians 9:22) and, in loyalty to that principle, for example, he had Timothy circumcised, because he was half-Jewish, but would not circumcise Titus who was a Gentile. People who did not have Paul's gospel spirit, it is easy to see, might well view this as simply vacillation, moral weakness, or a penchant for playing to the crowd.

Paul denies the charge and asserts that he is bound to do Christ's will as his servant (or slave -- it is the same word, as in 4:1. It probably should be translated "slave" throughout.).

v.12 The entire next section of the letter, from 1:13-2:14 is an autobiographical account of Paul's previously anti-Christian manner of life, his summons both to salvation and apostleship on the Damascus Road, and his dealings with the twelve apostles subsequently. All of it is designed to demonstrate his independent standing as an apostle, a fact that his opponents had disputed, so calling into question the authority of his message. He is proving the statement made in v. 12 and so demonstrating the divine authority of the message he had preached to the Galatians, which message was now being subverted by those who were claiming that Paul was out of step with the **true, the genuine apostles**. Remember that we read in Acts 15:24 that the letter sent to the churches from the Synod in Jerusalem, met to deal with this very issue of Gentile freedom from Jewish ceremonies, began: "We have heard that some went out from us **without our authorization** and disturbed you..." That is, they were claiming the authority of Jerusalem and the apostles for their teaching about the necessity of Gentile circumcision, etc., but they did not really have it. Here in Galatians we can detect exactly that claim. "Paul is out of step with the **true, the genuine** apostles if he is allowing Gentile converts to come into the church without circumcision. But, then, no wonder. His credentials as an apostle were never what they should have been."

It is an ancient tactic. Undermine the message by undermining the messenger. We've seen it recently in our own national politics. Without entering into any political judgment whatsoever, it is easy to see that attacks on Judge Starr were a favorite tactic of the President's defenders. By attacking the integrity, the authority, the motives of the messenger, one undermines the message. Republicans do it too. The Jews did it with Christ as well: accused him of ethical lapses (a drunk and a glutton), or being a political revolutionary (to Pilate where the charge would do the worst damage), of being disloyal to the Jewish religion (his remark about the temple), etc. And all through Christian history it has been the

same. Theodore Beza, Calvin's younger colleague and successor was dogged through his life by accusations, especially from Roman Catholic enemies, based on the love poems he wrote and published before he became an out and out Christian.

Beza himself, very much like Paul surveying his own pre-Christian past, once wrote: "As to these poems, no one condemned them earlier, or now detests them more, than I, their unhappy author. I wish they were buried in perpetual oblivion, and that God would grant me that, since what is done, cannot become undone, those who read my other writings, so different from these, would rather congratulate me on the Lord's kindness to me, than continue to accuse one who, of his own accord, confesses and deplors this sin of his youth." [Cited in Cunningham, *Reformers...*, 348.]

- v.14** We are given this history in other ways in the NT: in Acts, in Philippians 3, in Romans 7. Paul uses his sinful past and, especially, his zeal as a practicing Jew, even to the point of becoming a persecutor of the church, to magnify the grace of God. But the "you have heard," at the beginning of v. 13, may suggest that Paul's enemies were also telling the story, but with a different purpose: to suggest that Paul was still a shady and unreliable character. Note his reassuring them on just this point in v. 20. His own personal history, of course, made Paul an expert in the very questions that were at issue in Galatia as he wrote the letter. He knew the Jewish mind inside and out, and, as he will now tell us, he also knew the gospel, from first hand experience with the saving grace of God. His own experience of a zeal not according to knowledge made him well acquainted with the mindset of his opponents. He knew how he himself had gone after the advocates of this doctrine when he was of the same mind and how willing he was to use any means to confound them.

"the ancestral traditions" would be especially the beliefs and practices taught by the rabbis in the Pharisaic schools. Here lay the real problem, a mis-shaping of the true law of Moses in the hands of men of a legalistic spirit. This was the "yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear", as Peter called it (Acts 15:10). The Mosaic law denatured and turned into a way of salvation. You have only to read the Jewish *Mishnah* or *Talmud* to see the difference. Jesus made this point very explicitly in his preaching, e.g. the Sermon on the Mount. The problem was not with the law of God, it was that that law had been overwhelmed by Jewish interpretations that completely altered its fundamental spirit. We will have occasion to speak much more of this.

Because we think of Paul as a Christian hero of the first order, we are inclined to pass over these descriptions of his earlier persecution of Christians as old news. We'll try to recapture what that past must have meant for Paul in a few minutes.

- v.15** Strongly reminiscent of Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations..." No evidence here, however, for the view of infant regeneration taught by some good Reformed men over the years, that covenant infants may be born again, even in the womb, but that their spiritual life fail to appear for years afterward (Voetius and Kuyper). They held that Paul was thus born again as an infant but that his new life did not appear until the Damascus Road. We don't deny the possibility of infant regeneration, of course. The Bible teaches it.

But we do deny that the Bible teaches anything like such a long-dormant regeneration. A new heart produces a new life. Paul is referring to his election, not his regeneration! The calling is a reference to his summons to faith and life and a new life's purpose and assignment on the Damascus Road. Voetius took "calling" to be contemporaneous with "set apart" and assumed it meant that Paul had been sovereignly called to know life (Romans 8:28ff.) while an infant in the womb.

The point Paul is making is that even Paul's vicious hatred of the gospel was no match for the divine power and plan. "God was pleased..." that was all.

- v.17** Paul is discussing his apostolic calling and commission because that is what has been called into question. He does not question at all the authority of the twelve, but he is making the point, he will make more fully later, that he did not derive his authority from them, but directly from God. He also directly asserts his equality with them in the apostolate. It will be clear in 2:2ff. that Paul had no bone to pick with the twelve and was properly respectful of their ministry as equal to his own. He is here simply rebutting the charge -- a charge that, apparently, had gained a wide circulation among the Galatians -- that he had been instructed early on by the apostles in Jerusalem, that that instruction had included the requirement that Gentiles be circumcised, but that Paul had broken free of their teaching and begun to follow his own path.

Rather, some take him to mean that he turned away from all human influence to gain solitude in which to reflect on his new relationship to God and his new calling. It does not say that he was in the desert three years as we often hear. He apparently was there only briefly before returning to Damascus where he began to preach (as we read in Acts 9:19,20). Three years elapsed between his conversion and his first journey as a Christian to Jerusalem.

However, it is very possible, if not likely, that his going to the desert had nothing to do with contemplation or retirement for that purpose. It may well be that Paul went to Arabia precisely to begin fulfilling immediately the calling he had been given to preach to the Gentiles. This suggestion is rendered much more plausible by Paul's recollection, in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33, that his being lowered from the wall of Damascus in a basket (after his first preaching stint in Damascus, Acts 9:23-25) was made necessary because of an effort made to seize him by the "governor" or official of King Aretas, who was the King, not of Damascus, but of Nabatea, the likely reference of "Arabia" here in v. 17. Apparently Paul had offended the Nabatean government, much more likely the consequence of his bold preaching in that kingdom than that he used their desert spaces for personal reflection. His argument will then be: "The Lord called me to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and this I began to do immediately in answer to his summons."

- v.18** It may not have been three years as we measure them -- i.e. 36 months. In ancient times part of a unit was often reckoned as a whole unit, as in the case of the Lord's rising from the dead on the third day. But, the point is, some significant time passed before he went to Jerusalem. This is the visit to Jerusalem described in Acts 9:26-30. There we learn that the disciples were understandably suspicious of their former enemy, but Barnabas was

instrumental in overcoming their suspicions and in introducing Paul to the apostles -- apparently only Peter and James in this case (the latter a kind of "honorary" apostle; this the author of the NT letter and, by now, becoming a leader of the Jerusalem church).

The NIV's "to get acquainted" is probably correct. But the classical use of the same verb was "to interview." No doubt Paul did that as well, getting the story from the horse's mouth as it were. Imagine Peter telling the story to this promising new convert and imagine Paul's active mind -- interrupting, seeking clarification, asking Peter the meaning of things that the Lord said and did, etc.

- v.21 This agrees with Acts 9:30 where we read that when Jews in Jerusalem plotted his death, the brothers took Paul to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus (which is in Cilicia).
- v.24 That is, after his brief visit to Jerusalem he traveled and preached elsewhere, outside the direct influence of the apostles. His argument against the report being circulated about him seems to be this: First, I got my gospel directly from Christ not from the apostles and, second, even if I hadn't, I clearly didn't get it from Jerusalem.

But, even given the fact that Judean Christians in general never saw him or heard him in person, they did accept believe the report of his conversion and did rejoice in his salvation and his new calling. They didn't doubt his credentials.

That is a great deal of detail on the text itself, but I wanted the sense of Paul's words to be clear, as the larger context of the letter and its historical situation does illuminate Paul's meaning in a most important way.

There is no doubt that in some very important ways Paul is the **representative Christian** in the NT. Our Savior can be an example for us in many ways, but not in every way. He cannot be our example in conversion or in repentance from sin. But Paul can be and is, more than any other figure in the NT. In part that is because we know so much more about him than the other figures, even Peter, though Peter is important also. Indeed, we are given an account of Paul's conversion five times in the NT (here, three times in Acts, and once in Romans 7), and there are other allusions to it. Paul is the convert **par excellence** for us.

And his conversion teaches us more about new life in Christ than almost anything else in the Bible. Talk of the mercy of the Lord, of the power of divine grace, of the effect of that grace on a life, and we think immediately of Paul.

O Wisdom ord'ring all things in order strong and sweet,
what nobler spoil was ever cast at the victor's feet?

Put yourself in Paul's place. Think of the hatred he had shown to the Christians; of his dragging husbands and fathers away from their families to throw them into prison. Think of him standing there, collecting the clothes of Stephen, watching him bludgeoned to death. Think of yourself on that mission to destroy the fledgling Christian church in Damascus. And now all of that overturned in an instant by encounter with Christ on the Damascus road. And then think of going to Jerusalem

that first time and making the acquaintance of those same Christians. Imagine what Paul thought; what they thought. I can see Paul telling his story at the front of a meeting of Christians there in some house and I can see him tearing up and his voice faltering as he begs forgiveness for what he did, as, perhaps, he even sees a face or two that he had seen before in his hunting down of Christians. No wonder Paul, all his life as an apostle, had such an interest in the fortunes of the poor in Jerusalem. Some of those folk were folk he had made poor himself in the day of his ignorance [Whyte, *Paul*, 48.] Widows whose husbands he had sent to prison or worse.

And, then, imagine what the Christians thought as it became clear to them that the Lord had taken their fiercest, cruelest, most dangerous enemy and not only saved him, but made him a minister, and not only a minister, but a minister to Gentiles -- the very thing that would have just galled Saul the Pharisee!

As one man who has been in the jungle once said, "when you hear the sound of a hyena growling in the bush, you may think it is a lion. But when you hear the growl of a lion, you know [darn] well it is a lion." Well, the Lion had roared and the world had been shaken!

Paul did his best to ruin the cause of Jesus Christ and, in a single moment, Paul was cast at the feet of Jesus Christ and made his most loyal and effective servant. It reminds me of what Edgar Brightman once said of a polemicist he knew who not only always annihilated his opponent, but then dusted off the place where he stood! Well so Christ with Paul the persecutor of his church.

In some ways, of course, this is Paul's whole point. To see salvation in the terms he had been taught to see it in by his own experience -- the power of God and the grace of God overtaking a soul that was in the deepest rebellion -- the idea that circumcision should be an essential ingredient in this salvation was absurd.

And then imagine the conversations of those two great men, two of the greatest men in all the world, in the same room for hours on end for fifteen days. Imagine Paul at Peter's feet, learning everything he could about the Lord Jesus. Peter would have started with John the Baptist and then his brother Andrew bursting in on him to tell him that he had found the Messiah. And then he would have given a detailed account of the Lord's life and ministry and death and resurrection, about the forty days after of his teaching the apostles, and about his ascension to heaven; about Pentecost and the early days in Jerusalem after the Spirit fell. What questions would you put to Peter if you had the opportunity as Paul did? Alexander Whyte says, "If you would tell me two or three of the questions you would have put to Peter, I would tell you in return just who and what you are; just how you stand to-night to Jesus Christ and how He stands to you: and what He thinks and says about you, and intends toward you." [p. 50]

And, already, we can imagine Peter at Paul's feet getting the full story of the Damascus Road of the events that followed. And telling Paul his own experiences at the house of Simon Cornelius. And then those two men talking late into the night about where the gospel must go from here and what the Lord would have them do with their lives.

See those two men there and then cast your mind back to Stephen's martyrdom and the fierce persecution that scattered the saints and drove them out of Jerusalem and see what God's grace had

brought to pass!

And what was it that brought that change? Just this: Paul met Jesus Christ. He saw Christ the Lord of Glory and heard him speak and had him revealed to himself the King of Kings and Savior of sinners.

You see the point if you compare v. 12 with v. 16. In the first we read that Paul received his gospel through the revelation **of Jesus Christ**. That is literally how it reads and the NIV's "from" is a mistake. It misses the point. It is an objective genitive not a subjective genitive. It isn't Christ's revelation but a revelation of Christ. And that is confirmed, I think, in Paul's wording in v. 16 -- where it is not Christ who is doing the revealing, but God who is revealing Christ to Paul. Christ was revealed, that is the point. There may even be an emphasis on the inner revelation in the words "in me" in v. 16. That is, the outward vision of Christ on the Damascus Road and the inner illumination of Paul's heart to understand the truth about Christ and then to believe in Christ were contemporaneous. He saw with his eye and heard with ear on the one hand, but he also heard with his mind and embraced with his heart on the other and at one and the same time.

It was embracing Christ that made Paul a new man -- it was the union of these two persons, Jesus and Paul, that transformed Paul and made him a new creation. And he is going to argue that the problem with the judaizing viewpoint is precisely that it diminishes the place of Christ Jesus himself in salvation and in the sinner's heart. And that danger is always present to us as well. To place other things between ourselves and the person of Jesus Christ who loved us, gave himself for us, has made himself known to us, promises to be with us, and has summoned us to walk with him. Jesus Christ can become a religious idea, a part of our religious belief, a religious principle -- or he can be the supreme, the one altogether luminous personality in your life, looming above and before you every day, in whom you trust, to whom you disclose your needs and wants, whose love and power you count on for everything truly important in life, especially, every day, your peace with God and God's blessing upon your life. That is what the Bible means by living faith. It is the same thing as living by, through, for, and with Jesus Christ.

The Jews of Paul's day had turned Moses' religion of personal fellowship with a present God -- love, trust, dependence, grateful service -- into a religious program. The judaizers were threatening to do exactly the same thing with the new Christian religion of personal fellowship with Jesus Christ.

And you, listening to me now, know very well, how easily you do this yourself. You know better; I know better; but day after day, we catch ourselves living the Christian life by simply doing the things that Christians do, rather than by walking with Christ himself, by making our daily lives an extended conversation with a present and interested Savior, by seeking with what we say and do to please and honor a present Master, by entrusting ourselves in matters both great and small to our present and caring Redeemer.

Paul's great point in this letter is going to be that there is nothing wrong with circumcision or with obedience of any kind. These are good things. But even the best things can be ruinous to the soul, if, they are allowed to turn into the parts and pieces of a religious program in which our actions are paramount and determinative of our relationship with God, **if they are allowed to displace our**

own personal and absolute dependence upon and trust in and love for and walking with the Lord Jesus himself, who said before he left the world, behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

The world thinks it a small point. It is, in fact, the difference between heaven and hell, because it is the difference between the vain hope of my saving myself and the sure hope of Christ being my Savior. And all the words in all the worlds cannot tell how great a difference that is. The Devil seeks to make it seem very little; our task is to keep the difference very great in our minds, our hearts, and our daily lives.