

¹Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—²and all the members of God’s family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ⁹As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

¹⁰Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

¹¹For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

In this age of emails and text messages, I only have one letter writer remaining in my life – my Aunt Margie. When Aunt Margie sends me her Christmas letter each year, it is truly a letter, two pages long, written in her script handwriting, giving me a report on who is healthy and who is not, how the soybean harvest went, what their travel plans are, and what has been going on at their church in Hector. If I handed one of her letters to you to read, you’d be able to make sense of most of what she was saying, though you may not know be able to tell if the Dennis she refers to is Dennis her son or Dennis her son-in-law. Other parts would be totally puzzling to you because what she writes is based on conversations and relationships that she and I know, but you don’t.

The same thing is true of the letters that Paul wrote that are included in the New Testament. For us to understand these letters, we need to know some background information – to whom was it written, what prior relationship Paul had with them, and when and why it was written.

When we look at the letter to the Galatians, the answer to the first question is found quite quickly. Paul wrote this letter to the churches of Galatia. If we pull out a 1st century map of the Mediterranean area, we will find that Galatia was a Roman province in central Asia Minor, today known as Turkey.

As to when the letter was written, we can’t give a more specific date than the early 50’s, some twenty years after Jesus’ resurrection. From what Paul writes in the letter, we can deduce that he had been in this area on an earlier missionary journey. He had come down with an unnamed physical ailment, perhaps an eye disease, and the people of Galatia had received him warmly and cared for him while he was recovering. Paul took the opportunity to share the story of Jesus with these people, all of whom were gentiles, or non-Jews, and many were baptized and became Christian. Several congregations were formed in the surrounding area during Paul’s stay, so that when he moved on he left behind an enthusiastic, but very novice, Christian community.

This letter was written many months, perhaps a couple of years, later. Paul has received a report from someone about the Galatian churches that makes him angry. Other missionaries had come through the area with the message that Paul had not told the people the whole story about Jesus. These missionaries were Jewish Christians, and they told the Galatians that in order to be truly Christian, one must first be Jewish because Jesus was Jewish. Jesus had kept the Jewish law, so it was expected that his followers should keep the Jewish law. That meant that males were to be circumcised and both men and women were to obey the Jewish laws regarding such things as what one could eat, with whom one could eat, and keeping the sabbath. These Jewish Christians denigrated Paul’s ministry, calling him a second-class apostle who had received the gospel second-hand from others and who watered down the gospel in order not to offend Gentiles. The Galatians were persuaded by the Jewish Christians that Paul’s message was incomplete and they had now begun to observe the Jewish laws.

With that background in mind, let’s look at the beginning of this letter again. All letters in those days had the same basic format, and Paul follows that format here, but with some very important things to note.

He begins, “Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ...” Paul immediately establishes his authority and responds to the charge that he is a second-class apostle. He asserts that his apostleship is genuine and conferred directly by Jesus Christ, not by any human being.

He continues: To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free..." This sounds like a pretty standard formula, but Paul is laying the groundwork for the main premise of his letter, that our relationship with God is based on what Christ has done, rather than what we must do.

If Paul had followed his general letter-writing practice, the next section would be a prayer of thanksgiving in which he expresses his gratitude for his readers or makes a word of affirmation about them. Not this time. You can almost sense Paul's anger as he now finishes the mandatory formalities and surges on to the purpose of his writing: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!" This is no time for flattering words. Paul believes that the very essence of the gospel is at stake, and he's ready for a fight.

It must have been personally painful to Paul to have his authority and integrity questioned. We will see later in the letter that Paul goes to great lengths to establish the authenticity of his apostleship and uphold his reputation. But what is most important to him here is not his own authority, but the authority of the gospel. He says, "There are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!"

One may think that Paul is over-reacting a bit here. After all, there is no evidence that these other missionaries contradicted anything Paul said about Jesus and his teaching. They simply said Paul was leaving something out. God's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, had always tried to follow the laws of Moses. Since the early Christian community understood itself to be the "new Israel," it seemed only proper that they should also try to follow these laws. Is that so horrible? It's not as if they were advocating sacred prostitution like the then popular mystery religions or promoting armed rebellion against Rome. This seems pretty insignificant. Circumcision was a tradition that had been practiced since Abraham. What's wrong with expecting male Christians to continue this tradition?

Paul says that EVERYTHING is wrong with this idea. The issue at stake is not whether the Jewish laws and traditions are proper or helpful, but whether they are necessary for someone to be a disciple of Jesus and part of the Christian church. To that, Paul says an emphatic "NO!" To add anything to the simple message of the gospel, that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" – to add any stipulations to this gospel negates the very essence of the gospel.

For the Galatians, the temptation was to hear that gospel good news and add to it "obedience to the Jewish law." For us today, the temptations to add something to the gospel are different. It might come in the form of someone asking, "Have you been born again?" – implying that if you haven't had the same type of spiritual experience they have had, you are not fully or really a Christian.

Or someone may imply that you are really a Christian only if you agree with them on certain issues. There is a long list of litmus tests that people use to identify real Christians, and sometimes they are polar opposites: Real Christians are pro-life. Real Christians are pro-choice. Real Christians oppose gun control. Real Christians favor gun control. Real Christians accept gay marriage. Real Christians oppose gay marriage. Real Christians do not invest in companies that sell fossil fuels or weapons. The list goes on and on.

There is a tendency for all people in all places (including me and you) to domesticate the gospel to fit our own culture and opinions and transform the gospel into an ideology. Paul is very clear in warning against this tendency. He states that the gospel is "of Christ" – it comes from Christ and is about Christ. Any other additions or restrictions, no matter how noble or worthwhile, are perversions of the good news that God has reconciled us to himself in Christ.

Next week we look at the remainder of the first chapter where Paul defends his apostleship. Your assignment, if you decide to accept it, is to locate that Bible you've got sitting up on one of your bookshelves, take it down, dust it off, find the letter to the Galatians, and read the entire first chapter at one setting. I promise not to tell anyone that you were reading your Bible.