

A GOSPEL GREETING PART 1

August 17, 2008

TEXT: GALATIANS 1:1-5

INTRODUCTION:

THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

The Good News of salvation through faith in Christ alone was the most important message in the world for the Apostle Paul.

The Gospel had radically transformed Paul from being a zealous, persecutor of the church (Acts 9:1; Gal. 1:13-14; Philip. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13) into one of the greatest preachers of free grace the world has ever known.

The Gospel was the sole boast of his life (Gal. 6:14). In his preaching, Paul sought to make known no other knowledge than Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). All of his missionary endeavors were guided by this principle, "I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it," (1 Cor. 9:23). He considered the Gospel a treasure (2 Cor. 4:7) that must be guarded (2 Tim. 1:14).

In the churches of Galatia, this treasure was now coming under severe attack. The Judaizer's conditional gospel, a mixture of law and grace, was threatening the Galatian's freedom in Christ and bringing them back under the curse and bondage of the law.

Consequently, Paul set out to defend the Gospel of grace and freedom against those who were distorting it and troubling the church (Gal. 1:7).

Thus Machen observes,

Paul was not like some modern preachers, who are inclined to mention the blessed doctrine of the cross only when they are taken to task for neglecting it. Paul regarded it as the very foundation of Christian life; and when it was belittled, as in Galatia, he put his whole heart into it defence, (*Notes on Galatians*, p. 34).

Time and again, church history bears witness to the significance of the message of Galatians, the imperativeness of justification through faith in Christ alone, apart from works of the law.

The truth of the Gospel was the primary motivating factor in Paul's fight against the Judaizers' false gospel (Gal. 2:5, 14).

Like Paul, the message of Galatians was the primary driving force behind Martin Luther's fight against the false gospel of the Roman Church during the Reformation. So important was this book's message, Luther wrote,

"...this doctrine can never be taught, urged, and repeated enough. If this doctrine be lost, then is also the doctrine of truth, life, and salvation, also lost and gone. If this doctrine flourish, then all good things flourish; religion, the true service of God, the glory of God, the right knowledge of all things which are necessary for a Christian man to know," (*Galatians*, p. xi)

A GOSPEL GREETING

From the opening three words of this letter, "Paul [an] apostle not..." it is immediately evident that Paul's greeting is radically different from his other letters. There is an urgency, which marks the tone of this letter from the very beginning.

Paul expresses no thanks for the Galatians. They are in the process of turning away from the grace of Christ for "another gospel." Such a sudden turn of events doesn't evoke thanks but rather alarm.

Paul, therefore, cannot remain idle or silent. Instead of giving thanks, he immediately engages in a battle for the truth of the Gospel and contends for the believer's freedom in Christ. He gives, we might say, a gospel greeting.

His greeting is more than a formal or courteous hello. The significance of it must not be overlooked, for as George explains, "The entire message of Galatians is contained in these words," (*Galatians*, pp. 80-81).

Both Paul and his gospel had come under attack. Hence, he at once introduces two major themes, which he will later elaborate in greater

detail: his apostleship (v. 1 cf., 1:10-2:21) and the gospel (vv. 3-4, cf., 2:15-4:31).

J.B. Lightfoot writes,

The Epistle to the Galatians is especially distinguished among St. Paul's letters by its unity of purpose. The Galatian apostasy in its double aspect, as a denial of his own authority and a repudiation of the doctrine of grace, is never lost sight of from beginning to end. The opening salutation broaches this twofold aspect...Lastly, in the postscript he again brings it prominently forward. The two closing sentences reflect the twofold aspect of the one purpose, which has run through the letter. 'Henceforth let no man trouble me. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.' Thus, his last words echo his first: 'Paul an Apostle not from men'; 'God who called you in the grace of Christ,' (*Galatians*, pp. 63-64).

And so this gospel greeting sets the stage for what follows. It immerses the reader into Paul's principle concerns that is the sufficiency of Christ and His atoning work on the cross.

In addition to his apostleship and the gospel, the greeting also introduces several other prominent themes in summary fashion. For example,

1. Adoption (cf., v. 2, "brothers"; vv. 3-4, "our Father")
2. Grace and Peace (1:3 cf., 6:16, 18)
3. The theme of freedom (cf., 1:4, "to deliver")
4. The glory of God (v. 5, cf., 6:13-14)

In just five brief verses, the reader is instantly confronted with Paul's main concerns, which may be summarized as follows:

Paul asserts his authority and authenticity as an Apostle in order to defend the Gospel of grace, which brings about deliverance from the condemnation and corruption of sin through the voluntary and substitutionary death of Christ in order to secure freedom and adoption as beloved sons all of which originates from the sovereign and gracious will of God our Father to whom belongs all the glory!

THE FALSE TEACHER'S TACTICS

Soon after his departure from the churches of Galatia, false teachers crept in and began teaching a false gospel. The false teachers tactics consisted of two parts.

First, they called into question Paul's authority as an apostle. The Judaizers maintained that observance of ceremonies in Old Testament Law (e.g., circumcision; Jewish holy days) was integral to the gospel. Their conditional gospel, then, insisted on justification by personal merit. In order to establish their "gospel," they sought to cast doubt on Paul's message by calling into question his apostleship.

The Judaizers falsely claimed that Paul had not been a personal disciple of Jesus and thus did not carry equal authority as the hallowed "Twelve" that had been personally commissioned by Christ.

Further, they alleged that his gospel had been conveyed to him through human rather than divine means, and therefore was not authoritative. At best Paul's position in the church was of secondary importance. At worst he was a self-appointed rebel, preaching a "novel" gospel, which disavowed the law.

Second, they sought to undermine Paul's Gospel. The false teachers didn't deny Christ or His Cross. They simply maintained that Christ's work on the cross was insufficient for salvation and needed to be supplemented by keeping the Mosaic Law. In addition, they sought to portray Christian liberty as leading to a life of lawlessness and license.

Paul denounces this new teaching as a perversion of the true gospel (Gal. 1:7) and offers two rebuttals.

First, he insists on justification through faith in Christ apart from works of the law (2:16). Second, he holds forth the Holy Spirit as the principle energizing force of the new life in Christ, which all believers (Gal. 3:28) have the benefit of as justified, adopted children of God (Gal. 3:23-4:7).

So, in the opening verses Paul dispenses with his customary greeting and gets right to the heart of the matter.

AN UNACCUSTOMED GREETING

As already noted, Paul's greeting to the Galatians is uncommon and revealing, both in what it doesn't say and does say.

There is not a single word of commendation. He expresses no thanksgiving. In his other letters, he pours forth compliments and praise and gives thanks for his readers (see: 1 Corinthians 1:2, 4; Philip. 1:3-5; Eph. 1:15-16; Col., 1:3-4; 1 Thess. 1:2-7). But, here he offers no words of praise for the churches of Galatia, which were quickly coming to the point of total defection from the Gospel!

Instead, he simply writes, "To the churches of Galatia:..." Commenting on this phrase, "to the churches of Galatia," Chrysostom notes,

"Consider too the grave indignation contained in the phrase, 'unto the churches of Galatia:' he does not say, 'to the beloved' or 'to the sanctified,' and this omission of all names of affection or respect, and this speaking of them as a society merely without the addition 'Churches of God,' for it is simply, 'Churches of Galatia,' is strongly expressive of deep concern and sorrow," (*Galatians, NPNF*, vol. 13, p. 4).

Paul's concern was for Christ, His Gospel, His Glory and the welfare of men's souls. These were the things, which had come under attack and constitute the reason why he dispenses with his customary greetings.

A THEOLOGICAL LINE IN THE SAND

From the beginning of his letter, Paul draws a theological line in the sand against the false teachers and their false gospel. He insists that law and grace cannot be mixed!

Paul deemed this the most serious and greatest of errors and thus pronounces anathemas to all who seek to distort the gospel of grace.

The integration of law and grace remodels the gospel and destroys the very foundation of the Christian faith.

Theodore Beza, a disciple of John Calvin, wrote,

"We must pay great attention to these things. For, with good reason, we can say that ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity," (*The Christian Faith*, 4.23).

In similar fashion, Martin Luther wrote,

“Grace cannot stand it when we want to give something to God or establish merit or pay him with our works. This is the greatest of blasphemies and idolatries and is nothing less than the denial and even ridicule of God,” (*Luther’s Works*, 14, 34).

And so, Paul begins his letter with a Gospel greeting. The stakes couldn’t have been higher. The issue at risk was the source of authority for the Christian faith, indeed the Christian faith itself. As one Bible teacher remarks, “It [Galatians- J.F.] shows how Paul saved Christianity from sinking to be a mere sect of Judaism, or, as he himself felt, degenerating into a form of paganism,” (Duncan, *Galatians*, p. xvii).

LESSON:

In his greeting, Paul declares the divine authority of his apostleship (vv. 1-2) as well as the apostolic content of his gospel (vv. 3-4).

I. PAUL DECLARES THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF HIS APOSTLESHIP (VV. 1-2)

As will be shown, Paul’s apostleship and gospel are integrally related. His gospel is authoritative truth precisely because his apostleship was of divine origin.

In vv. 1-2, Paul offers four verifications to support the authenticity of his apostolic authority and thus the authority of the gospel.

THE ASSERTION OF PAUL’S APOSTLESHIP, V. 1A

Paul begins by unreservedly asserting his right to the title, apostle (v. 1a). He claims for himself the very title, which the false teachers were denying him. Lenski writes, “Paul’s first drop of ink is a decisive, challenging contradiction,” (p. 21).

Paul does not declare his title simply to inform his readers of who he was. Rather, his claim to the title apostle is deliberate and intended to make a point.

The Judaizers challenged his right to the title of apostle and thus his right to speak authoritatively concerning the gospel. In contradistinction to Paul, these troublemakers boasted of their credentials in order to belittle him.

The false teachers claimed authority as specially commissioned apostles of the mother church in Jerusalem (cf., Gal. 2:12). They were the true scholars of the apostles, the true sons of Abraham, of those who possessed the Law, the true revealed Word of God.

Initially, the Galatian's attitude toward Paul had been warm and welcoming (Gal. 4:15).

However, as a result of these personal attacks by the false teachers, they were now coming to think disparagingly of Paul (cf., 4:16) and calling into question his apostolic authority (1:1; 2:1-11).

Consequently, Paul challenges the false teachers and begins his letter by boldly asserting his right to this title. The first three words of his letter are, "Paul [an] Apostle not..."

Before Jesus applied the term apostle to the Twelve, it already had a certain official meaning among the Jews.

The word "apostle" was understood to mean a special messenger, sanctioned by a higher authority than himself and entrusted with a special message and given special status (Cole, p. 65; see also Bruce, p. 72; cf., Act 9:1-2).

The word apostle in the NT has both an exclusive and wider use. Paul uses the exclusive sense here in v. 1.

In the exclusive sense, the word, apostle, refers to one who was a messenger or ambassador chosen, trained and commissioned by Christ (cf., Lk. 6:12-16).

In this case, the term originally applied to the Twelve whom Jesus chose at the beginning of His earthly ministry (Mk. 3:14; Lk. 6:13). Therefore, not just any one could lay claim to this title.

In asserting his right to the title apostle, Paul is stating that he belonged to this select company of men and was claiming equal authority with them, even though he was not among the original Twelve. Paul even states in 2:8, that he had received an appointment identical to that of Peter.

As an apostle in the exclusive sense, the Galatians were hearing not just Paul, but in Paul, Christ Himself and God the Father!

The authority of Paul's message was dependant on behalf of the one who commissioned him to speak. When Paul spoke or acted as an apostle, he did so with Christ's authority (cf., 2 Cor. 10:8).

Thus, from the very first three words, Paul emphasizes his right as an apostle duly called and commissioned by Christ and invested with authority to preach the gospel.

The Judaizer's denied the origin of Paul's apostleship as coming from Christ. And so everything, his apostleship and his gospel, depended on the one who commissioned him.

Therefore, Paul gives a second verification to support the authenticity of his apostolic authority, namely the divine origin of his apostleship.

THE ORIGIN OF PAUL'S APOSTLESHIP, V. 1B

The issue at stake concerning the origin of Paul's apostleship was the authority of the gospel. If Paul's calling and commission as an apostle was of human rather than divine origin, then his gospel was not primary and authoritative (Boice, Paul establishes the authority of religion).

Paul, the Judaizers claimed, might claim to be an apostle but he was merely a self-appointed apostle with no authority to teach and preach. The Judaizers maintained they were the true, authoritative apostles who were bringing the genuine gospel to the Galatians.

For this reason, Paul asserts that his calling was "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead..."

Some Bible teachers have suggested that Paul may have been quoting the phrases of the Judaizers who maintained that his apostleship was either "from men" or at best had come to him only "through man."

In distinction to his pre-conversion appointment and commission from the High Priest (cf., Acts 9:1-2), Paul emphatically and forcefully states that his apostleship was not by any human appointment or commission but through Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Moreover, Paul states that Jesus called and commissioned him before he had contact with any church or apostle (cf., 1:16-17).

In stating that his calling was “not from men nor through man,” Paul may have been referring to a body of men or man who might be assumed to have authority to appoint apostles. For example,

- the Twelve (Acts 6:3-6, 8:14; 11:22);
- the church at Jerusalem involving the Three Pillars, namely Peter, James and John (15:6);
- the leaders of the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1-3);

(Note: The false teachers argued that Paul was from an inferior church, which had altered the gospel by removing the legal requirements in order to make it more attractive to Gentiles. Also, Paul had already been a missionary before the church at Antioch sent him out.)

- Ananias, through whom his commission from the Lord was first confirmed (Acts 9:17; cf., Acts 22:12-15 w/ 26:15-18).

Whatever the case, Paul states that he was not acting and speaking for himself. His authority was not man-given or self-given, but rather he had received his calling and commission by the Risen Christ, who called him by name (cf., Acts 9:4; 26:16-18).

It is significant to note that Paul’s reference to Christ in v. 1, is an unequivocal statement of the deity of Christ.

The relation between Christ’s deity and Paul’s apostleship is vital. For, if Jesus were not fully God, then the origin of Paul’s calling and commission as an apostle lacked authority and his Gospel power.

Salvation and the forgiveness of sins belong to God (Ps.3:8; Jonah 2:9; Rev. 7:10; Matt. 9:2-6; 26:28). If Christ were not God, He could not deliver man from his sins (1:4) or the curse of the law (3:13).

Thus, the issue at stake concerning the origin of Paul’s apostleship was the authority of the gospel. If Paul’s apostleship was of human rather than divine origin, then his gospel was not primary and authoritative.

However, Paul’s apostleship is superior to the false teachers claims of apostleship because his calling and commission came directly through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

This leads to a third verification of Paul’s apostleship; he was an eyewitness of the risen Christ.

THE CONFIRMATION OF PAUL'S APOSTLESHIP, v. 1C

The resurrection of Christ was of deep, personal significance to Paul. His radical encounter with the resurrected Christ on the Damascus Road was a Copernican Revolution (Acts 9)!

The transformation of Saul the persecutor into Paul the preacher was inconceivable among those who were previously his victims (cf., Acts 9:21). For good reason, the disciples were afraid of him (Acts 9:26).

Yet, in a moment, the most zealous persecutor of the church was transformed into the most zealous preacher of the Gospel (Acts 9:22). Even when facing death, he was not to be deterred from declaring the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 9:23-25; 20:24).

Thus, Paul's reference to Christ's resurrection in v. 1 is not incidental but rather confirms his right to the title and office as an apostle.

The two primary qualifications for an apostle were to have been chosen and commissioned by Christ and to have been an eyewitness of His resurrection (cf., Mk. 3:14-16; Acts 1:21-22).

Throughout his ministry, Paul had to defend his apostleship in ways the Twelve didn't. Because he was not a part of the original Twelve, false teachers constantly accused Paul of being a latecomer, a self-appointed apostle (cf., 1 Cor. 9:2; 2 Cor. 11:5).

However, unlike the false teachers that were troubling the Galatian churches, Paul was a personal witness of the risen Christ.

In 1 Cor. 15:5-8, Paul explains how he himself was an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ, which took place on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:3-5).

Thus, no one who reads the story of Paul's conversion can take seriously the empty charge that he was a self-appointed apostle (see, Acts 26:14-18).

Again, the point being, Paul's apostleship was superior to the false teachers because it came directly from God the Father through the risen, glorified Jesus.

Concerning Paul's reference to the resurrection of Christ, Eadie writes,

"...it is the proof that Jesus who when the twelve were commissioned in the days of His flesh, belonged to Him as the ascended Lord. Eph. iv. 11. It may be said generally, the Father raised Him from the dead, so that all His apostles could proclaim the truth of which His resurrection was the primal evidence and a distinctive tenet (Rom. i. 4, iv. 24; Eph. i. 20; Phil. ii. 9); and specially, God the Father entrusted Paul with the apostleship, and did it through Jesus, whom He had raised from the dead: so that the risen Saviour invested with supreme authority, added, by a direct and personal act, one to the number of the twelve, with every element of qualification and prerogative which had been conferred upon them," (*Galatians*, p. 6).

In v. 2, there is one final way Paul verifies his apostolic authority.

THE DISTINCTION OF PAUL'S APOSTLESHIP, v. 2

What may seem to be an unrelated mentioning of his associates in his greeting, actually serves to further support his authority as an apostle.

By it, Paul distinguishes himself from "all the brothers" who accompanied him.

He claims for himself a title, which he does not give to them. They are "the brothers," but he is "an apostle." This further highlights the authenticity of his apostleship by showing that it was not dependent on any man, apostles, churches or fellow workers.

It needs to be noted that Paul not only distinguishes himself from "the brothers" but also associates himself with fellow believers who shared with him a burden for the gospel and the Galatian churches.

By the inclusion of "the brothers" Chrysostom observes,

"On What account then does he this? They made the slanderous charge that he was singular in his preaching, and desired to introduce novelty in Christian teaching. Wishing therefore to remove their suspicion, and to show he had many to support him in his doctrine, he has associated with himself, "the brethren," to show that what he wrote he wrote with their accord," (*Galatians*, *NPNF*, p. 4).

Such unity in the Gospel served as a rebuke to the broken fellowship, as a result of the false gospel that had infected the Galatian churches (cf., 5:15).

Before concluding, it is useful to briefly note Chrysostom's point regarding the charge of novelty.

Let it be clear that the charge of novelty arises from a legal spirit, from one who is ignorant of the mystery of the gospel. Such a charge is nothing new. This charge was also made of Christ (cf., Mk. 1:27). The charge of novelty is simply evidence of the natural man's predisposition toward the law and ignorance of the gospel (cf., 1 Cor. 2:14).

In light of the revival and awareness of gospel doctrine over the past several years, I often hear the charge of "novelty."

The charge goes something like this, "They are on that 'gospel kick. They will get over it.'" "All this talk about the Gospel is just another theological fad that will come and go," etc...

Perhaps for some individuals, all this "Gospel talk and emphasis" is some what of a fad, the next "Evangelical circus show."

But, for those, like myself who toiled slavishly for years under the weight of a legal spirit, coming to know Christ (or rather be known by Him, cf., Gal. 4:9) is exactly as Francis Schaeffer wrote,

"...when a man does learn the meaning of the work of Christ in the present life, a new door is open to him. And this new door then seems to be so wonderful that often it gives the Christian, as he begins to act upon the knowledge of faith, the sense of something that is as new as was his conversion."

This "newness" that Schaeffer speaks of is not to be confused with novelty. Rather, it is the joyful response of a sinner whose eyes have been graciously opened to the reality that however vile and unholy he has been, he is now adopted into God's family, wrapped about with cords of free grace, covered in perfect righteousness and allured by the enticements of unconditional love.

Those who are zealous advocates for gospel-truth need not despair over the charges of novelty. For as one zealous gospel-advocate put it,

“Let us not be deterred from gospel principles...it is better to be under the reproach of men for following Christ, than to be under the curse of God for forsaking him.”

CONCLUSION:

From the outset of his letter, Paul leaves his readers in no doubt concerning the authenticity of his apostleship.

In doing so, he establishes for all believers of all time the source of authority for the Christian faith.

As believers, we can take comfort and find assurance in the fact that the Gospel, which the apostle Paul received and proclaimed and in which we believe is of divine rather than human origin and grounded in the bedrock of history.

As Boice writes,

“The gospel committed to Paul is a great gospel to possess. Anchored in history, it has been articulated and communicated to believers of all times by those who were specifically chosen by the risen Lord and were empowered for the NT as well as for the OT, ‘prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Peter 1:21),”
(*Galatians, EBC*, p. 425).

The question we need to ask now is why? Why does Paul begin with such a forthright declaration that his apostleship is not in any sense human but rather divine?

Was his ego bruised because someone dared challenge his authority? Is this just an example of the boastful pride of life and vain conceit?

No!

The issue at stake for Paul was not his ego but rather his message, the Gospel!

Paul’s apostleship and his gospel belong together. If the false teachers were correct and Paul was not an apostle, then his message could also be rejected.

On the other hand, if Paul was an apostle, then when he spoke, Christ spoke. Paul's message was to be received as Christ's own words with Christ's authority.

So at the outset, Paul declares and defends his apostolic authenticity and authority in order to defend his message, the Gospel.

What was his message? It is to this that we look next.

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