

“THE APOSTLE AND HIS MESSAGE”

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians sometime after he preached the gospel in that region during one of his missionary journeys. It has been described by numerous commentators as “the Magna Carta of Christian liberty” because of how it emphasizes upon the freedom that the believer has in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia in order to confront the false teachings of the Judaizers, a group that was telling Gentile converts to Christianity that they needed to be circumcised and follow other Jewish ceremonial laws in order to find full acceptance with God. As a result, the Galatian churches were in danger of turning away from the gospel by adding works to faith as the ground of salvation. Paul responded to the teachings of the Judaizers by telling the Galatians that the grace of God in Jesus Christ sets us free from bondage to the law and enables us to live a new life in the power of the Spirit. Because of this, the letter to the Galatians contains the Bible’s most detailed refutation of legalism, the attempt to secure salvation based upon our works. This is why Galatians was such an important book for Martin Luther and John Calvin as they responded to the way in which the Roman Catholic Church had distorted the gospel. They proclaimed the message that is at the very heart of this letter, that justification is not by works but by faith alone.

Galatians may be the earliest of Paul’s New Testament letters, perhaps written as early as AD 48. One of the reasons why we cannot be sure about the date of this letter is because we are not certain about the identity of the Galatians. There are two possibilities because the term “Galatia” had two meanings in Paul’s day. It referred to a region in

northern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) that was occupied by an ethnic group known as the Galatians. But it also referred to a Roman province that stretched all the way into southern Asia Minor. This has led to the development of two theories concerning the recipients of this letter, known as the northern Galatian theory and the southern Galatian theory. Up until the past hundred years or so, the northern theory was widely held, but most scholars today hold to the southern theory. There are a number of reasons for this, but the main one is the fact that there is no mention of the establishment of any churches in the northern Galatian region in the account of Paul's missionary travels in the book of Acts. There are, however, a number of churches mentioned in the southern Galatian region, including those in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Paul visited all of those cities on his first missionary journey.

Tonight, as we begin our study of Galatians, we are looking at the first five verses of the letter, which is the salutation. While we might be inclined to read over these introductory verses without paying them much regard, there is actually quite a lot that we can learn from them. As with other ancient letters, Paul's begins his letter to the Galatians by identifying himself, naming his recipients, and offering an expression of good wishes to his recipients. This was the standard format in letter-writing in Paul's day. But there is more here than we might at first suspect. One of the things that we can see when we analyze the introductions to Paul's letters is that they often anticipate the contents of his letters in a summary fashion. In other words, Paul typically uses his salutation to introduce the key themes that he will develop in the body of the letter. We

can see this in this salutation in several ways. First of all, in contrast to most of Paul's other letters, there is no expression of praise to God for the Galatians in this salutation. He does not tell them that he thanks God for them. This is a serious omission, and it highlights the serious tone of the letter. Paul is very concerned about the spiritual condition of these churches in Galatia. Second, Paul places a great deal of emphasis in this salutation upon the nature of his authority as an apostle. And the reason why he does so is because the Judaizers were attacking Paul's credentials as an apostle, as we can see by what he writes in the second half of chapter 1. Third, Paul's greeting introduces the central theme of the letter: the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the doctrine that he will expound in order to refute the teachings of the Judaizers. And fourth, the salutation says that this grace sets us free from the power of sin, a theme that Paul will explore in the later chapters of this book. So as you can see, these opening verses to the letter to the Galatians have a great deal to say to us. They contain the argument of the entire book in a nutshell. And that is essentially what we will cover in the remainder of this sermon. Here is an introduction to the main themes of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

We begin by looking at Paul's reference to himself as an apostle. The term 'apostle' was used in a broader sense in the Greco-Roman world before the New Testament invested it with a more precise significance. In general, an apostle was someone who was sent and invested with authority by the party that commissioned him. He was an authorized representative of someone else. It is easy to see how this term came to be used in its more technical sense in the New Testament. Jesus' apostles were his specially

appointed and authorized representatives. They were commissioned by Christ to bear the foundational gospel testimony upon which his church would be built. This is what Jesus meant when he spoke these words to Peter as spokesman and representative of the twelve: “I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” [Mt. 16:18] And Paul says the same thing in his letter to the Ephesians when he writes that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” [Eph. 2:20] The apostles had a special kind of authority because they were directly appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why in Acts 1 the disciples went about replacing Judas Iscariot by casting lots. They did not make the decision themselves but placed it in the hands of the Lord, and through that process the Lord chose Matthias to take Judas’ place. An apostle was someone who was directly appointed by Christ. This is the reason why the notion of apostolic succession, which is taught by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, runs contrary to the teaching of Scripture. If the apostles were directly appointed by Christ, they cannot have any successors. The church is to be apostolic by remaining loyal to the doctrine that was once and for all set forth by the apostles.

Paul’s apostleship was under attack in the Galatians churches. The Judaizers were pointing out that Paul, unlike Jesus’ twelve disciples, was not with Jesus throughout the course of his earthly ministry. How then could he have been directly appointed by Christ? The Judaizers did not believe that Paul met the requirements of the office of apostle. They were driving a wedge between Paul and the other apostles in order to be

able to say that Paul's gospel was a distorted gospel. This is why Paul writes what he does in verse 1, saying that he is "an apostle - not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father." Paul was appointed an apostle when the risen Christ met him on the road to Damascus. He was authorized by Jesus himself, though in a manner that was different when compared to the other apostles. But because he truly was an apostle of Christ, Paul preached and taught in Jesus' name.

Paul is still under attack today. It is very common to hear people say that Paul is the real founder of the Christian religion, and that his version of Christianity was a tremendous innovation when compared to the simple message of love taught by Jesus. The New Testament scholar J. Gresham Machen wrote an important book to refute this notion in 1921 entitled *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, in which he showed that the teachings found in Paul's letters can be traced back to the teachings of Jesus himself. And Machen did not have to make a fanciful argument to prove this point. It is right there in the text of the New Testament. In fact, the only way to get around Machen's argument is to be selective in terms of which teachings of Jesus you accept as original. And it probably does not surprise you to learn that that is the very thing that many people do. It is a standard tactic among liberal Christians. Of course, the problem with that kind of approach is that it is completely subjective. Those who take this approach to the Gospels, like the scholars who formed the Jesus Seminar back in the 1990's, end up with a Jesus of their own imagining, a Jesus who bears a striking resemblance to a 20th century liberal scholar.

As Paul defends his apostolic authority, he says that he is an apostle of Christ and of God the Father. There is a double affirmation of the deity of Christ in this statement. First, Christ's authority is set in contrast to mere human authority. Paul says that he was not an apostle from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ. Second, the names 'Jesus Christ' and 'God the Father' are objects of the same preposition, the preposition 'through.' This kind of grammatical construction indicates the equality of the prepositional objects. These two factors make it abundantly clear that both Paul and the churches to whom he was writing affirmed the full deity of Jesus Christ. It was a given of the Christian religion, so much so that Paul does not even argue the point or take the time to explain it. This is especially significant when we consider the early date for the letter to the Galatians. Here is strong evidence against the argument that says that the idea of Jesus being fully divine only emerged over time. On the contrary, it was right there at the every beginning.

The greeting that Paul sends to the churches of Galatia in this salutation serves as a summary of the gospel. He sends them a greeting of "Grace and peace." These terms encapsulate the cause and the effect of the gospel. The grace of God is the cause of the gospel and peace with God is the effect of the gospel. By greeting the Galatians with these two words, Paul called attention to the difference between the gospel that he preached to them and the so-called gospel that the Judaizers were preaching. Grace stands in contrast to works-oriented religion, while peace stands in contrast to the anxiety that afflicts people when they embrace a works-oriented religion. Contrary to what was

being taught by the Judaizers, the only thing that we can obtain from God by merit is condemnation. Salvation has to come by grace. The only thing that we could ever earn from God is condemnation. Our only hope for salvation is for God to give it to us freely, by his grace alone.

And that is precisely what God has done in Jesus Christ. Paul develops this further by what he writes about Christ in verse 4. He says that Jesus gave himself for our sins. Jesus did this willingly, of his own accord, not under compulsion. He gave himself. And he gave himself for our sins. This means that he died in our place, as our substitute. He bore the judgment that we deserved. This is the foundation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the doctrine that is at the heart of this letter. The only reason why God can justify us, the only way he can declare us to be righteous, is because Jesus died for our sins.

Paul then says something else about Jesus' death. He says that Jesus died in order to deliver us from the present evil age. This world is a corrupted world, a world that has been ruined by sin, a world that is under the dominion of Satan, even though God is still Lord over all. Apart from Christ, we are a part of the kingdom of darkness, under the control of the spirit that is at work in the sons of disobedience. But when we place our faith in Christ, we are not only given a new record, a righteous standing before God, but we are also given a new heart. We are no longer under the dominion of Satan and sin. We have been set free, in order that we might belong to Jesus Christ and offer our lives in service to him.

And Paul says one more thing in this salutation about the death of Christ for our sins. He says that Jesus' death was according to the will of God. Jesus died because this was God's plan for our salvation. The ultimate source of our salvation is the eternal purpose and plan of God. We cannot take any credit for it. God is the one who planned it. God is the one who brought it about.

And this is why Paul expresses these words of doxology at the close of his salutation: "to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." God alone is worthy of glory for this great salvation to which he has brought us. He is a great God. He is the author of a great salvation. And he is greatly to be praised, forever and ever. These were the thoughts that sprang to Paul's mind when he reflected upon the gospel that he was commissioned to preach, the gospel that he was warning the Galatians not to abandon. Paul knew that the only right response to this gospel was to express praise to God. May we come to see this more and more as we study the letter to the Galatians.