

“DOCTRINE MATTERS”

As we noted in last week’s sermon, one of the things that stands out in Galatians is the fact that Paul does not express his customary expression of praise or thanks for those to whom he is writing. Such expressions are typically included by Paul right after his words of greeting, but that is not the case here. Instead, he opens this letter by expressing his dismay over the Galatians’ near-apostasy. One commentator has noted that this kind of opening would not have earned Paul very high marks from a fellow named Quintilian, who was the master of classical rhetorical style. Quintilian said that writers and speakers should begin their letters and speeches with “a courteous and natural opening.” [Ryken, 15] So much for style. As Paul himself admits in verse 10, he was not concerned with pleasing men. He was not worried about offending anyone. The stakes were far too high. The believers in the churches of Galatia needed to be made aware of the danger that they were in. And as we study this passage, we will see the importance that the Bible places upon sound doctrine.

Our passage begins with Paul expressing his amazement over the fact that the Galatians were so quickly turning away from Christ to embrace a different gospel. He is shocked to see such a display of ingratitude towards God. For, as he says, it was the Lord who had graciously called them to himself. Paul is not talking about the outward call of the gospel here. He is not speaking of himself as the one who called them by his preaching. He is speaking of the one who called them in the grace of Christ. He is speaking of the effectual call of God. This is the “I” in the acronym T.U.L.I.P., the

acronym used to teach what we refer to as the Five Points of Calvinism. The “I” stands for “Irresistible Grace,” which is simply another way of speaking of the effectual call of God. Our Westminster Confession defines effectual calling as follows:

“All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.” [WCF 10:1]

This is what Paul is talking about when he says that God called the Galatians in the grace of Christ. He is speaking of God’s effectual call.

But Paul says that the Galatians were in the process of deserting the one who had called them. They were committing the sin of apostasy, turning away from Christ. Now, this does not mean that this passage denies the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, the “P” in the acronym T.U.L.I.P. Paul is not saying that it is possible for a truly regenerate person to lose his or her salvation. But he is saying that it is possible for people who have the appearance of being regenerate to fall away from the true faith.

Paul speaks to the Galatians as professing Christians, but he wants them to know that they are in danger of renouncing Christ.

And notice how they were in danger of renouncing Christ. It was not that they were rejecting Christ altogether. They were not becoming atheists or pagans. They were not embracing a non-Christian religion. Instead, they were turning away from Christ by being drawn to a different gospel about Christ. The Judaizers, the false teachers who were troubling the Galatian churches, were not telling the Galatians to reject Christ. The Judaizers preached Christ, but they also preached that faith in Christ was not enough for salvation. They were telling the Galatians that if they truly wanted to be accepted by God, they needed to accept the sign of circumcision and other aspects of the Jewish law. The Judaizers were adding works of the law to faith in Christ as the basis for salvation. They were preaching a different gospel about Christ.

Paul is careful to point out, though, that there is no gospel other than the one that he preached to the Galatians. There is only one gospel of Jesus Christ. By distorting the gospel, the Judaizers were actually abandoning Christ. The gospel that they were preaching was not really a gospel at all. Any time people preach Jesus in a manner that is contrary to how he is preached in the pages of Scripture, they are preaching a false Christ. When liberal churches speak of a Jesus who is accepting of such evils as abortion and homosexuality, they are not preaching the true Jesus. When prosperity preachers speak of a Jesus who is only concerned with giving you whatever your heart desires, they are not preaching the true Jesus. When seeker churches speak of a Jesus who only sees you as a

victim in need of healing instead of an offender in need of forgiveness, they are not preaching the true Jesus.

Whenever this happens, whenever a false Christ is preached, the peace of the church is attacked. That is what Paul says in these verses. He says that the false teachers were troubling the Galatian churches. They were upsetting the peace of the church. False doctrine always has this effect. You may have heard it said that doctrine divides, but it is actually false doctrine that is divisive, not true doctrine. True doctrine unites the saints in Christ. False doctrine ruptures that unity.

The trouble caused by the Judaizers in the Galatian churches is one example of how the greatest threat to the church typically comes from the inside, not from the outside. In the words of Pastor Phil Ryken, “The most dangerous teachers are those who preach a different Christ but still call him ‘Jesus.’” [Ryken, 21] There are many examples of this in the world today. There are plenty of cults, plenty of heretics, plenty of false teachers in our world. But this is not just a problem for people “out there.” We are all susceptible to the danger of making the gospel into something that it isn’t. It is very easy for us to substitute something else for the true gospel. We can do it without even being aware that we are doing it. Sometimes it is not so much that the gospel is rejected as it is pushed to the side and made peripheral to other concerns. And those other concerns may even be legitimate. But the problem comes when those concerns become central and the gospel becomes secondary. It is not very difficult for a Christian today to end up seeing his religious identity in terms of being pro-life, or wanting to recover a ‘Christian America,’

or promoting family values, or opposing gay marriage, or pursuing social justice, or being pro-war, or being anti-war, or being concerned about the environment, or not being concerned about the environment. We need to realize that when the Christian faith becomes identified with a political philosophy or a set of social issues, the heart of the gospel is being set aside. It is not that these kinds of things are unimportant, but they are not the gospel. Whenever anything else supplants Christ as the center of the Christian faith, a different gospel is being embraced.

Paul has strong words to say towards anyone who propagates a different gospel. He says, "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." The term translated as "accursed" is associated with the curse that the Lord pronounced upon the cities of Canaan during the conquest of the Promised Land. Those cities were devoted to destruction because of their wickedness and because of God's promise to give the land to the people of Israel. Paul is saying that those who proclaim a false gospel are under the same divine curse. They are devoted to destruction.

This might sound harsh to us, but it underscores the fact that the stakes in this matter could not be any higher. Paul pronounced a divine curse upon those who preach a false gospel because the glory of God and the salvation of men are at stake. If people believe, as the Galatians were being told to believe, that there is something that they need to do in order to gain acceptance with God, their confidence before God will at least partially reside in themselves. They will think that they are able to take some of the credit for their salvation. But the Lord will not tolerate this. He is the author of salvation. He alone will

receive the glory for the salvation of his saints. Those who rely upon the works of the law for their salvation are under the curse of the law, as Paul will say in chapter 3: “For all who rely upon works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” The reason why Paul pronounced God’s curse upon the Judaizers is because they were telling the Galatians to rely upon works of the law as the basis of their salvation. By placing the Galatians back under the law, the Judaizers were placing them back under the curse of the law.

Paul even puts himself under the same curse-threat. He says that if he ever preaches a different gospel he will be under the same curse. Though Paul is an apostle, he is not free to distort the gospel. He does not speak on his own authority, but as an authorized representative of the one who has sent him, a representative of Jesus Christ. He has to preach the message that Christ has given to him. And the same is true for any minister of the gospel and any church. If we preach anything other than the apostolic gospel, we too are under God’s curse. This is the reason why we reject the Roman Catholic Church’s claim to be able to authoritatively declare things that are not taught in the pages of Holy Scripture, as it does with its teachings about purgatory or the sinlessness of Mary. If the apostle Paul said that his own teaching was to be judged by its adherence to the one true gospel, then how much more is this true for the church that is built on the foundations which was laid by the apostles.

Our passage concludes with Paul pointing out that he is not seeking to please men but God. This would seem to suggest that the false teachers were accusing Paul of being a people-pleaser. They were saying that the reason why he did not tell Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised was because he wanted to make conversion an easy matter for them. He wanted to be accepted by the Galatians, so he softened his message. He was being “seeker-friendly.” But here we see Paul’s response to such charges. He points to these strong words of rebuke he has written to the Galatians and then he asks them if these are the words of a man who is willing to soften his message to make it easier for his hearers to accept.

As I said at the start of this sermon, this passage shows us that doctrine matters a great deal in the Christian faith. Some people will say that a person is not saved by believing the right doctrines. They will say that a person is not justified by believing in the doctrine of justification by faith alone but by believing in Jesus Christ. While this is technically true, it can also be a bit misleading. No one that I know of claims that people are justified by believing in the doctrine of justification. I would never say that. Paul never said that. But this does not mean that this doctrine is not essential to the gospel. On the contrary, it is the thing that makes the difference between the true gospel and false gospels. The gospel is a message. It is good news. And as news, it is proclaimed with words, words that convey meaning, words that a person needs to understand if he or she is going to receive Christ. The gospel message tells people who Jesus Christ is. It tells them what Christ has done to make a way of salvation. It tells them what they need to do

in order to receive that salvation. But if this message is conveyed in such a manner that it leads people to believe that they can be saved in some other way, then it is no longer the true gospel. Paul makes this abundantly clear in this passage. The Judaizers were preaching a different gospel, a gospel that wasn't really a gospel at all. Paul is telling us that if a person hears a false message about Christ and embraces Christ as he is presented in that message, then that person has not received the true Christ at all. And that is why doctrine matters. The stakes could not be higher.