

THE UNEXPECTED APOSTLE

SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS

By Steve Zeisler

Galatians has been called the Magna Charta of Christian liberty. The theme verse (5:1, NASB) insists, “It was for freedom that Christ has set us free....” and gives us the responsibility to “therefore keep standing firm and...not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” We’ve been granted freedom in Christ, and we need to fight for it.

Jesus, our liberator, said something profound about freedom’s origin and nature: “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32, NASB). Our fight for freedom needs to focus on truth. Those who would take away the freedom that God intends for us will do so by undermining the truth, by trafficking in lies and distortions.

The argument between deception and truth is at the heart of the first chapter of Galatians. We saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4682) that Paul spoke of enemies who would seek out his friends in Galatia, claiming to have another gospel, which was not another gospel but a distortion and which was opposed to the truth. So the battle was joined.

We saw, further, that the particular type of distortion in this case was religious. There are others. We are taught elsewhere about worldly distortions and the lies of idols. Some voices deny that any truth exists at all. There are a number of ways in which “the father of lies” will make his case. But in this setting the issue was “another gospel.”

In the passage we’re going to study in this message, there are two main ideas. The first is an argument declaring that the God-breathed truth that sets us free, the gospel, is self-authenticating. We can depend on it. It needs to be declared, rather than defended.

The other important argument here is that Paul is the most unlikely person to be given a revelation of God, and therefore we can conclude that God is at work. It is frequently the pattern in the Bible for God to choose, from our perspective, the wrong person, wrong place, wrong circumstance, and wrong voice to reveal himself.

Self-authenticating truth

Let’s return to Galatians 1:10, where we ended in the last message:

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

There is the tension between truth and lies. Those who tell lies ultimately want the approval of the human circle they are in. Those who tell the truth want the approval of God.

Verses 11-12:

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

The gospel of grace in Christ is a revelation that comes undiluted, directly from God, without mediators or “official” commentators. God’s message has been recorded faithfully for us in the text of the Bible. What we read in Scripture are the God-breathed words of divine revelation. That has some important consequences that we will consider in a moment.

Truth is not enhanced because it is declared by someone who has an impressive degree, who speaks eloquently, or who is otherwise impressive in the world’s eyes. What should impress you is the self-authenticating truth. Whatever spokesman declared it, the gospel is the direct revelation of Jesus Christ, and therefore it can be trusted.

Verses 13-17:

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might preach him among the gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

(He probably means that he left the city of Damascus and went out to the wilderness, the desert of Arabia, not far away.)

Verses 18-24:

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles--only James, the Lord’s brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they praised God because of me.

The commitment of God to tell us about himself directly has always been ridiculed. Any self-respecting sovereign would hold himself at some great distance from his subjects. He would issue edicts and would have minions do his bidding for him. He would have layers of functionaries between himself and the grubby subjects of ordinary life. Very few of us in our respective settings, whether business or academic life or whatever, get to deal with the folks at the top. Communication is always mediated by somebody, and what we hear is one person’s version of someone else’s comments, and so on. It is striking, therefore, that God speaks to us directly. The Scriptures are God-breathed. Those unlikely souls who were called to declare, “Thus says the Lord,” said his words. We can receive them with confidence. We can judge everything else by them.

Jesus had some of the same problems that we are identifying in Galatians. His authority to speak was questioned by the religious establishment. Yet Mark 1:27 says that the people were amazed and debated among themselves: “What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.” All authority comes from God and its bearers often surprise us.

Spurious mediators of truth

The arguments of the deceivers in this case, we’ve noted, were mostly religious. They claimed that the Scriptures consisted of rules about externally measured behavior. The tone of such pronouncements is negative,

alert to failure, concerned with looking good, with fussy attention to obscurities, with narrowing options. For proponents of such religion life is drained away, leaving only a list of dry duties. Against such Paul hurls the passionate challenge of a gospel of grace.

The specific issues for the first readers of the book of Galatians were different from ours. Our issues are those of the evangelical subculture of modern America. Theirs were Jewish, primarily: circumcision, holy days, what you could eat and when you could eat, with whom you could eat under what circumstances, and so on. But the psychology remains the same. Religious “experts” can confuse young disciples regarding what matters to God. The result is bondage instead of freedom.

What is the false teaching in our setting that is analogous to the situation that prompted the writing of Galatians? In what ways do we focus on externals and court the approval of people rather than that of God?

Too often we learn in church to defer to the rich and well connected, as if worldly success were a sign of God’s favor. On occasion we act as if God prefers rigidity to enthusiasm in worship, until we read the Bible and find out he has no such preference.

We are sometimes taught that sins create ill health. Sometimes we learn that those who have a past without extreme moral failure are better suited to leadership than those who have been forgiven of such sins. But God doesn’t prefer people who have refined sinful pasts to those who have rough ones. We imagine that maintaining the appearance of uprightness is preferable to the difficulties of confessing sin and failure. We think we’re a lot better off if everybody in the circle of faith is a bit hypocritical and no one tells the truth about their current struggles. Meetings are shorter, events are more predictable, and it’s easier to get things done.

We’re taught that personal discipline is always preferable to joyful spontaneity, but the gospel teaches no such thing. Some will oppose fellow believers who like to drink beer with pizza, or think sex is sometimes funny, or wear T-shirts to Sunday worship services. No word of Scripture endorses such opposition.

We need to hear the grace-filled heart of God expressed in the words of the Bible. False instruction from modern “religious experts” is as damnable as that of Paul’s opponents in Galatia.

An unlikely ambassador for Christ

Finally we turn to Paul’s defense of his apostolic credentials. He declares, “The gospel I preached...I received from Jesus Christ.” It is clear that Paul is as surprised as anyone to find himself an apostle of Christ. His opponents had better pedigrees. They had likely spent time in the Jerusalem church and could claim to quote the first apostles in addition to the legal doctrines of Judaism. Paul had no Christian catechism. His fervor for Judaism led him to persecute believers; his conversion was an astonishing act of grace spoken from heaven.

Let’s observe some of the details that Paul gives. First of all, he says, “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age....” Most of the men who were disturbing the Galatian believers would once have been his contemporaries in Jewish studies in Jerusalem. He outdid them. He well knew that pride of accomplishment in religion can lead to hardness of heart.

He notes that he had been chosen from before his birth and called by God--at the least likely moment. On an errand of persecution he was claimed by Christ.

He received no Christian instruction from the apostles, having spent only two weeks with them during the years he was being fashioned into a spokesman for Christ.

He describes a lonely three-year stint in the Arabian desert. Most scholars believe that there he was taught directly by the risen Christ what the other apostles learned during the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Paul's argument is remarkable: "Do you want to know why you should believe in me? Not because I have historic or academic credentials. I don't have any." His apostleship was a miracle, his teaching a "revelation of Jesus Christ," his credentials from heaven, his message filled with self-authenticating power. But this should not surprise us. All revelation from God is a miracle.

Paul refers to Peter (Cephas) and James in verses 18-19. Later in this book he will mention Abraham and Sarah. What kind of people speak for God? Which are the vessels to whom he most often chooses to make himself known in a direct way? God's own Son was born on this planet as a poor man from Galilee--in the wrong place, unappreciated, without fanfare. Abraham was an idolater in Ur. Sarah, who would be the mother of a multitude, was barren until very late in life. Or consider the Lawgiver himself, Moses, a murderous rebel who didn't believe he could speak. David's father cared so little about him that he didn't present him to the prophet Samuel along with his other sons. Later David committed adultery and murder and almost destroyed his nation. Peter, at the most crucial moment in his discipleship with the Lord, abandoned him and cursed him as he left. James, the brother of Jesus, thought he was insane and tried to get him locked up.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation. May it persuade us to freedom, and strengthen us to resist the voices of distortion that have only human credentials to commend them.

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