

Other Gospels

Galatians 1:6-9

With Study Questions

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Galatians 1:6-9

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel (Galatians 1:6).

The Apostle wastes little time getting to the point of his epistle. Barely six verses into the letter and the chastisement begins. Paul is stupefied! He is astonished! At what does Paul marvel?

A Tendency to Stray

Paul is amazed that the Galatian Christians could so quickly or hastily begin the process of turning away. It is bewildering how rapidly people can change their mind and behavior—especially in the wrong direction. The greatest tennis players in the world have coaches who were never as good as they are. The reason being no matter how excellent you become, there is always a tendency to err. Sometimes the error is going back to old bad habits; sometimes the error is due to fatigue, distraction, injury, etc. We must recognize that no matter how good the initial instruction, or how excellent the following of the instruction, there is a tendency to stray; and this straying can happen quite suddenly.

This problem Paul dealt with is chronic in the church throughout history. Luther writes,

A man may labor half a score years before he shall get some little church to be rightly and religiously ordered; and when it is so ordered, there creeps in some mad brain, yea and a very unlearned idiot, who can do nothing else but speak slanderously and spitefully against sincere preachers of the Word, and he in one moment overthrows all.¹

Three Questions

Here are some questions this verse poses. 1) From what, or whom, are these Galatian Christians turning away? 2) To what are they turning? 3) What does this say of eternal security?

¹Luther, M. 1996. *Commentary on Galatians*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.) (Ga 1:7). Christian Classics Foundation: Simpsonville SC

1) Turning From Whom or What?

Our first question is from what, or whom, are these Galatian Christians turning away? I place the question in this fashion because the “what” is the “whom.” We will come to realize through our study of this epistle that the Galatians were being seduced from the message of justification by faith (that our peace with God is found by faith alone). And, according to Paul, to depart from this message was to depart from Him, that is, Christ.

Imaginary Jesus

This is not very different from many modern notions of Christianity. Jesus has been reduced from the God/Man who accomplished actual events in history, which are factually recorded in the pages of Scripture that we call the gospel, to our kindly, bearded, imaginary friend. Often times when one considers what Jesus would do, the imaginary friend, rather than the Christ in Scripture is consulted.

This is never seen more clearly than in the rantings of one popular Christian motivational speaker who introduced a “Would Jesus drop the bombs?” parable. In this parable a non-Christian army recruiter is asked if Jesus would drop bombs during a time of war. This motivational speaker asserts that the non-Christian army recruiter knows better than most Christians that Jesus would never drop a bomb. This must be news to Sodom and Gomorrah. The power and persuasion of a man like this is effective because people trust more in an imaginary Jesus than a biblical Jesus.

Turning from Jesus

All this to say that Paul considers turning away from the message of Jesus—justification by faith—equal to turning away from Jesus. What you and I have of Jesus is a record of His words and a record of His actions. By His Spirit we come to embrace this record as true. To depart from an honest embracing of these facts is to depart from Christ.

Wrong Facts/Right Attitude?

Perhaps we can now see the danger of the words from the founder of one of the biggest modern Christian movements in the past twenty years.

I would rather have the wrong facts and a right attitude, than right facts and a wrong attitude. God can change my

understanding of the facts in a moment, but it often takes a lifetime to effect changes of attitude.

I generally seek to give people the benefit of the doubt, but this type of thinking is disastrous. First of all, God can change both understanding and attitude in a heartbeat. Second, it is through facts, the fact of the gospel, that God changes hearts. It was the wrong facts that these Galatians were turning to that grieved Paul. He would give them the right facts recognizing that the means by which the Spirit quickens and preserves hearts is by a proper preaching of the truth. These Galatian Christians were moving away from the true message, away from Christ, away from grace.

2) A Different Gospel – Not a Different Religion

Our second question is, to what are they turning? Paul calls it a different gospel which is not another. There is a different “good news” out there which is not good news at all. By the way, they weren’t turning to Baal worship or Molech or Dagon.² They weren’t turning to Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism.

Insufficient Christianity

They were turning to something that looked a lot like Christianity – only more complete. They were turning to a caricature of Christianity. It had been brought to their attention that the work of Christ was not absolutely sufficient for their contentment as Christians; some small finishing touches had to be added in order for them to truly be “right” with God; they were in need of something. They were turning to a notion of Christianity where peace with God was not found in Christ alone.

The Greatest Assault

Let us make no mistake about this. The greatest assault on the Christian faith is not a matter of moral impurity, evolution, or absence of pietism. The main assault on Christianity is an attack on the gratuitous nature of God’s grace. Playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey with the gospel turns the gospel into bondage.

Many Circumcisions

The “tail” these Galatians were being convinced had to be added was circumcision. This is very insidious since circumcision had been clearly a command of God. But any human action – even one God commands – cannot

² All false gods we read of in Scripture.

be viewed as man's contribution to his own salvation. Today we see this with tongues, levels of supposed spiritual vitality, baptism, and even faith. All these, and many other human efforts, have become modern day circumcisions. A refreshing cup of cold water can become deadly with a drop of poison. They were turning to something that looked like Christianity but with human ornaments.

3) What of Eternal Security?

If we believe in *eternal security* or *once saved always saved*, how is it possible these Christians were turning away from Christ? A couple of answers to this question:

Preserving Saints

First, these types of warnings in Scripture are the means by which God preserves His saints. As we read in the Canons of Dort, v. 14,

And as it has pleased God, by the preaching of the gospel to begin his work in us, so he preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, and by the use of sacraments.

In the same way the gospel is used as a means of salvation, the warnings in Scripture are a means of preservation. The true Christians will heed the words of Paul. This is why the biblical term isn't *eternal security* but *the perseverance of the saints*.

Progeny of Darkness

Secondly, there is a slow creeping apostasy that also takes place in the church. Some people piously assert that we should avoid unnecessary controversy and enjoy the fact that many Christians with differing opinions will still meet in heaven. In their minds, doctrine becomes a source of friction that must be dispensed with in the name of brotherly love.

But if there aren't Christians who are willing to lovingly fight for the truth, they may be consigning their spiritual posterity to perdition. These Galatian churches, started by the Apostle Paul himself, were rapidly on their way to the spiritual gutter. We may take joy in the security of our souls while we relegate the souls of our descendants to darker places.

...which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:7).

Many religions use the name "church" and the name "Christ" but have not the gospel. Justification by faith in Christ alone is the heart of the gospel. If religions are devoid of this they are devoid of good tidings for their constituency.

The Hottest Places in Hell

Paul does not excuse the Galatians for their rapid turning from the truth; but his most caustic assault is upon those who are causing the trouble. The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who disguise themselves as the teachers of Israel and seek to deceive God's covenant people. Read the words of Jesus.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves (Matthew 23:15).

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea (Mark 9:42).

Peters writes of these teachers:

These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever (2 Peter 2:17).

Troubling the Church

Paul will have his own choice words for these Judaizers when the time comes. Here he writes that they were troubling the Christians in Galatia. But did not the Galatian Christians freely receive the message of these teachers? Did they not sit under the instruction with willing minds and hearts? How often we watch churches slowly depart from the truth and gradually trap their members in their folly.

Troubled Churches

An extreme example of this might be churches that become dangerous cults. A common example are churches that preach a gratuitous gospel then place a yoke of Pentecostal existentialism on the necks of their members; levels of spiritual euphoria become a litmus test for maturity and genuine regeneration.

Another example might be churches that simply become vapid or bland. The message isn't perverted, it merely evaporates.

Turning the Gospel on its Head

Very often we, as Christians, seek to give people the benefit of the doubt. Paul writes of these spiritual leaders that they **want to pervert the gospel of Christ**. It is not the confused pew sitter that concerns me as much as the educated seminary professor. Paul indicates here that there is a will or a wish to pervert or turn around the gospel. They want to turn the gospel on its head. A similar thought is found in Amos, **I will turn your feasts into mourning (Amos 8:10)**. Those who seek to pervert the gospel turn grace in bondage.

Hellish Doctrines – Angelic Faces

Who are those who would do such a thing? Surely they have thick black moustaches and speak in gruff tones. Let us not be so foolish. Paul continues.

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:8).

Some of the most hellish doctrines proceed from the most angelic faces. Often times their face, and perhaps a gentle voice, is all they have. It is no wonder that the inability to fabricate an angelic face is the most common accusation against Reformed Christians. If you can't destroy the doctrine then show how unkind the person is who brings it. Of course most accusations are a demonstration of a not so subtle pride – a pride where the pious heretic assumes to know the heart of his rival.

Touch Not the Message

Paul writes, **But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel**. The message is not to be altered, regardless of how legit, sweet, winsome or authoritative the source may seem. Paul even includes himself in this warning. As Calvin writes,

He claims no superiority, in this respect, over other men, but justly demands from all, equally with himself, subjection to the word of God.³

³Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 1:8). Ages Software: Albany, OR

And along with the earlier denunciation of false teachers, Paul adds his own here. Those who bring another gospel are to be accursed or doomed.

As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:9).

Paul, with added emphasis gives a reinforcement of the curse. They had received the gospel from him. We have received the gospel in the form of the Holy Scriptures. We are to know this gospel and holdfast to it. To depart from this gospel – a gospel that teaches justification by faith alone – is to depart from Christ. Culprits who adorn the gospel with their own ornamentation should be filled with the fear of God.

Questions for Study

1. At what was the Apostle Paul amazed (page 2)?
2. From what were the Galatian Christians turning (page 3)?
3. How does one determine whether or not they are turning from Christ (page 3)?
4. Discuss the wrong facts/right attitude proposition (pages 3, 4).
5. In what respects were the Galatians being fed a different gospel (pages 4, 5)?
6. How does all this affect whether or not Christians can fall from grace (page 5)?
7. How do the Scriptures address false teachers (page 6)?
8. What is the danger of angelic faces (page 7)?
9. Why is it important for the gospel to remain untouched (pages 7, 8)?