

# Laboring in Birth – Again

*Galatians 4:12-20*

*With Study Questions*

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*Galatians 4:12-20*

Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I *became* like you. You have not injured me at all. <sup>13</sup> You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. <sup>14</sup> And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, *even* as Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. <sup>16</sup> Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth? <sup>17</sup> They zealously court you, *but* for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. <sup>18</sup> But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you. <sup>19</sup> My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, <sup>20</sup> I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you (Galatians 4:12-20).

## Bait and Switch

I heard of a college professor who used to ask how many of his students were Christians. He followed up his initial question by asking, “When you became a Christian, did you know what you were getting yourself into?”

Implied in his question was that the beautiful, winsome and liberating gospel they initially heard was a far cry from reality; in time the shackles begin to appear. It’s the old bait and switch; promise one thing, give another.

In this bait and switch the social constraints go far past the law of God!<sup>1</sup> The new Christian is now introduced to rules regarding things like drinking, dancing, a certain Christian lingo, and a general adherence to a social Christian sub-culture including styles of child-rearing and educational philosophies?<sup>2</sup> A certain level of adherence to this demi-law becomes necessary for social acceptance.

The religious requirements also go beyond the text to the purpose and design of church. Salvation by water baptism is a widely held religious belief. The need to participate in every spiritual event the church provides for fear of appearing immature in the faith can be plaguing as well.

The professor wanted to know if Christianity was genuinely providing all that it initially promised or if it had become pesky. It is truly a sad state of affairs when our journey through Christianity produces in us the notion that it is not as liberating as it had originally been billed.

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<sup>1</sup> As if the law of God were insufficient!

<sup>2</sup> Not that the Bible has nothing to say of these things. But it is often not as simplistic or specific as the modern Christian gurus would have us believe.

## Growing in Maturity and Knowledge of Grace/Liberty

This is not to say we shouldn't grow and mature as Christians. Nor is it to say that we should disregard the commands in Scripture to seek to obey God's law. It is to say, however, that we should have a richer understanding of the liberty found in Christ as time goes on and not vice-versa.

Unfortunately, what is taking place in many churches (like in the churches of Galatia) isn't contributing to this progression in our understanding of liberty. You "get them in," under a guise of liberty, and then demand a certain level of religious and social production in order to make them feel that God finally approves! Having begun in the Spirit you are made to feel that you need to be perfected in the flesh (Galatians 3:3).

The apostle Paul had been a Pharisee of Pharisees (Colossians 3:5). If anyone had confidence to boast in his religious accomplishments it was Paul, yet he considered them rubbish. Paul did not wish to be found in his own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith. I believe it is with this concept in mind that Paul writes to the Galatians saying,

### Become Like Me

**Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I *became* like you. You have not injured me at all (Galatians 4:12).**

Paul had become like them (not constrained by the Jewish law). But now the influence of the false apostles was bringing them into bondage so Paul is encouraging them to become like him (not constrained by Jewish law in order to believe they are in God's good graces). Paul wanted them to remember the freedom they initially enjoyed when they first learned of justification by faith. Paul reminds them of their early encounter.

**You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. <sup>14</sup>And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, *even* as Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me (Galatians 4:13-15).**

### A Precious Commodity

Paul may have had some physical infirmity that kept him from leaving Galatia. By God's providence (the affliction) these churches enjoyed the extended benefit of Paul's presence and loved it.

They were not put off by whatever ailment Paul had (often Jews viewed ailments as God's judgment—John 9:2). But they received him as an angel, as Christ himself. Those who properly handle and deliver the word of God are to be considered a precious commodity—those who mishandle it are to be cursed (Galatians 1:9).

It is no small responsibility to be a teacher of Israel (John 3:10). It brings great blessing and can also be the source of bitter judgment (James 3:1). This is something for both the congregation and the minister to consider with great sobriety. The Apostle Paul certainly deserved this type of reception. Paul reminds them of the great blessing they enjoyed when they first heard the message.

Paul is seeking to rescue them from the fate of the previously mentioned college students who found themselves in a form of Christian bondage. Paul will now compare himself to the false apostles.

**Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth? <sup>17</sup> They zealously court you, *but for no good*; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them (Galatians 4:16, 17).**

### Carefully Handling the Truth

The Reformers had no problem equating the Judaizers of Galatia with Roman Catholicism (nor do I), but we must be careful to recognize that the Apostle is writing with infallible authority. When he claims to tell the truth it is with absolute veracity. We, on the other hand, must recognize we are liable to err.

Nonetheless, what must be brought before us is the fact that the holy text carries the truthful message of justification by faith alone. And it is not uncommon for those who deliver that message to be thought of as an enemy—even of the church. We must be careful as to how we handle this message. It is no wonder the divines of Westminster wrote,

**The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care,<sup>3</sup>**

Justification by faith should be presented as a blessing before, over, and above an argument. And when the argument ensues (as it often does), it is critical to prayerfully consider your words; know when the conversation has degenerated beyond redemption. As Calvin counseled,

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. Westminster Confession of Faith. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC

**It is the part of a wise pastor to consider, not what those who have wandered may justly deserve, but what may be the likeliest method of bringing them back to the right path.<sup>4</sup> ...And here again pastors are reminded of their duty to come down, as far as they can, to the people, and to study the various dispositions of those with whom they have to deal, if they wish to obtain compliance with their message. The proverb still holds: "to be loved, you must be lovely."<sup>5</sup>**

We read in these words of Paul, a fatherly concern and not merely a desire to do battle.

### **Courted for no Good**

At the same time Paul does not give the detractors of the gospel the benefit of the doubt. They zealously court for no good and exercise exclusionary tactics (make you feel like an outsider until you cave) in order to promote themselves. Many are the methods of this ill practice. They may confuse you with sophistry, or browbeat like a telemarketer, or give the illusion of gentle love with warm smiles. But if the message is one of synergism (mixing the power of God with the power of man in salvation) then their motives come from an impure source, no matter how attractive or winsome the packaging.

Since there are wolves within the gates, should we then simply remain in the hen house? Should we be stingy with our enthusiasm? Should we exercise a sort of religious moderation in order to avoid appearing foolish or getting taken advantage of once again? Paul says "no."

### **According to Knowledge**

**But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you (Galatians 4:18).**

It is good to be zealous, but it must be according to knowledge (Romans 10:2). Running hard and fast is good provided you're headed for the proper goal line. Otherwise the highlight films prove to be an embarrassment rather than an honor.

And Paul is encouraging a certain level of viability. He shouldn't have to be hovering over them in order to keep them on the straight and narrow. They should be setting their sights on being teachers, yet they themselves are still on milk (Hebrews 5:12, 13). His next words reveal both a disappointment and at the same time a gentle paternity (fatherliness).

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 4:12). Ages Software: Albany, OR

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## Labor in Birth Again

**My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, <sup>20</sup> I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you (Galatians 4:19, 20).**

We of course realize that no one is saved and then saved again. Paul is not encouraging them to re-walk the sawdust trail as has been the practice of some (myself included). He is merely revealing to them the need he has to re-instruct them on the elementary principles of the faith.

The false teachers created birth defects in the children of the church. Paul's desire is that the new creation be unaffected by these detractors of the truth and deceivers of God's covenant people. Paul is, in a manner of speaking, bringing them back into the womb to undo the damage and send them on as healthy children.

He would prefer to do this in person, for a face-to-face encounter is always less muddy. Although Paul speaks as a loving pastor and parent, he also leaves them with a sense of his displeasure regarding their spiritual condition. This is not to discourage them, but rather to rescue them from any sense of false security in their newfound bondage.

## Knowing What He Has Done

As we shall read in the chapters to come, Paul's letter is not an encouragement of licentiousness. Any understanding of God's grace which we view as a consent form for disobedience is an improper understanding of God's grace. Yet we must be on guard. Our growth in terms of obedience and maturity must be accompanied by our increased understanding of what God has done for us. After all, was not this Paul's prayer for the church? Pay particular attention what Paul desires we obtain in his prayer.

**...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the *knowledge* of Him, <sup>18</sup> the eyes of your *understanding* being enlightened; that you may *know* what is the hope of *His calling*, what are the riches of the glory of *His inheritance* in the saints, <sup>19</sup> and what is the exceeding greatness of *His power* toward us who believe, according to the working of *His mighty power* <sup>20</sup> which *He worked* in Christ when *He raised* Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, <sup>21</sup> far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come (Ephesians 1:17-21 – italics mine).**

## Questions for Study

1. What significant differences have you observed in your faith since you were saved (pages 1, 2)?
2. Discuss the professor's question. What kind of answers do you supposed he received (pages 1, 2)?
3. In what type of righteousness did Paul find comfort (page 2)?
4. In what respect did Paul want the Galatians to become like him (page 2)?
5. How was Paul initially received by the Galatians (page 3)?
6. Discuss how Christians ought to handle the truth (page 3).
7. What was the motivation of the false apostles? What can we learn from this (page 4)?
8. Is being zealous good or bad? Discuss (page 4).
9. What did Paul mean when he said he had to labor in birth again with the Galatian churches (page 5)?
10. What is just as, if not more, important as growing in obedience and maturity (page 5)?