

The State of Evangelicalism, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

What I want to do in this hour is help you understand how dangerous it is to try to rework or reinvent the Gospel. I want to look at why people are so prone to do that because it's been a running theme throughout church history all the way back to the apostolic era. People trying to remake or reinvent the Gospel, reformulate it so that it's more palatable, or more, more to the tastes of the people we're trying to reach.

And I want to look at why people are so prone to do that. And I want to think through those issues with you in the context of Galatians chapter 1. Galatians 1. You can turn there. And, by the way, this is the part that's still kind of negative. This is where Paul uses the strongest language he ever employed to curse anyone who thinks it's a good idea to propose an alternative Gospel.

Galatians 1. And in this chapter, verses 6-10, are often glossed over and ignored. But this is an extremely important passage and it's worthy of our special attention. So Galatians 1. Let's look at those, at those two verses, verses 6 and 7 where he gives this curse. And I want to see them in their context. Now you're aware, I'm sure, that this epistle was written to a group of churches. Galatia was not a city like Corinth or Philippi. Galatia was a region that dominated the central plateau of Asia minor. That's the large Turkish Peninsula.

And Paul's first missionary journey took him through the Galatian region. That's where he himself was from. So this is his sort of home region and in Acts 13 and 14, you have the description of his first missionary journey through there. And so these Galatian churches were churches that, for the most part, Paul himself founded early in his ministry. And they were filled with people who had first heard the Gospel from Paul himself. He was their spiritual father.

So our text is understandably full of passion, fatherly passion. But the mood here is not exactly warm and friendly.

He's, it's like an angry father. And from the opening verses, he writes with the kind of tone my dad used to use at me. It's a sort of abrupt tone. And it sets this letter apart, a, a little bit like an indigent father scolding his children. This is different from all of Paul's other epistles. And I'll show you that as we go through it.

Look at it. Galatians 1, verse 6. He writes, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but that there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." He's writing this epistle to confront the threat of some false teachers who had come in behind him and they were telling the Galatian churches and that Gentile converts in particular in Galatia, that if they wanted to be real Christians, they first needed to become proselytes to Judaism.

This was the gist of their error. They insisted that believers are required to follow the Old Testament ceremonial law, starting with circumcision. Like most who tinker with the Gospel today, they didn't overtly deny any of the essential

doctrines of the Gospel. They just wanted to add something that they thought was good, then sort of tack that onto the Gospel message. A good work.

And in their case, it was the ceremonial sign of God's covenant with Israel. So it's even a biblical good work. Circumcision. They turned the Gospel into a message that starts, then, with some ceremonial work that the sinner had to do in order to be redeemed. And that flatly contradicted what Paul had preached to the Galatians because, as you know from Paul's epistles, he always stressed that faith is the only instrument of justification. No works at all.

Romans 4, verse 5, "To the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." No good work and least of all, circumcision, is a prerequisite to our justification. That was the centerpiece of Pauline doctrine. That's what he always defended. It's what he always preached. And it's actually a theme in every single one of his epistles.

And Paul is very specific about how important this is in Romans 4, verses 9-11. He actually goes back to the book of Genesis and traces the chronology from Genesis 15 to Genesis 17 in order to show that Abraham was declared righteous. "He believed God and it was counted for him righteousness" years, several years before Abraham was circumcised. "He received the sign of circumcision," this is verse 11 from Romans 4, "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he already had by faith."

But these false teachers are saying, "No, no, Paul is only giving you part of the gospel message. It's an incomplete gospel." They said, "Faith is important. It's essential. You have to believe, but the works demanded by the law are also necessary before you can be justified." And in fact, this was a persistent error in the early church. Acts 15 deals with the same heretics, or the same kind of heretics, anyway.

So this same false doctrine, Acts 15, is what the first church council was called to evaluate. And they ended up condemning this heresy. And in Acts 15 we learn that the men behind this heresy were some Pharisees who professed faith in

Christ. They had apparently converted, but obviously not completely. Acts 15 verse 5 refers to them as “some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees.”

So these guys had dragged their pharisaical legalism into the church, Acts 15:1 says they were teaching the Gentile brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” So there it is. That’s the same error, just like some of the Hebrew roots cults of today, by the way. They were insistent that authentic Christianity must be thoroughly Jewish. And so we call these guys Judaizers. That’s the usual name for this cult that they represented. Judaizers.

And Paul usually called them the Circumcision Party. And sometimes he called them worse names than that. In Philippians 3, one of Paul’s later epistles, he calls them, dogs, evil doers, and those who mutilate the flesh. Pretty harsh. It’s the kind of thing you can’t do in today’s evangelicalism and get by with it. But Paul said it. And furthermore, he says their version of the gospel was really no gospel at all.

The Greek text in our passage, look at verses 6 and 7, uses two different words that can be translated in English as, another. In the King James Version, the phrase is, another gospel, which is not another. And the first, another, is the word *heteros*, which means another of a different kind. The second, another, is *allos*, which is the word you would use if you meant another one of the same kind.

So he's saying they're flirting with a whole different kind of gospel. And it's not a legitimate alternative to the true Gospel. There is no other Gospel and that's the theme of this passage. There's only one Gospel. And Paul makes this point with supreme vigor using the most severe language that he can righteously summon. He punctuates it with a double curse. Verses 8 and 9. "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."

And then he repeats himself immediately, does this for emphasis. "As we have said before," when before? Just, just right there, the sentence before, "so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received,

let him be accursed.” *Anathema*. And that double curse is actually the strongest language Paul ever used anywhere. And it comes at the start of an epistle that is filled with strong words.

In Galatians 5:12, for example, he suggests that if circumcision can make a person righteous than these guys should just go ahead and cut off their manhood completely. That’s harsh. But if you think about it, these two verses in chapter 1 are even harsher than that because what he’s saying is that these guys deserved eternal damnation.

And by the way, the immediate repetition of a curse like that was the Koine Greek version of retweeting something in all caps. So don’t pass over these maledictions without considering what you and I need to learn from them. There’s no legitimate way to soften what Paul is saying here. This is inspired Scripture and so you can’t brush it aside as an accidental overstatement. You can’t criticize it as something that maybe would better have not been said. These curses are as God-breathed as any other verse of Scripture. And they are meant to show what a profound evil it is to go beyond what is written and



redesign the Gospel just to suit it to your own tastes and prejudices.

These false teachers were probably former Pharisees. If that's true, they would have been once colleagues of Paul's, possibly men who he even knew personally. They have supposedly professed faith in Christ, if we go by Acts 15, calls them believers of the party of the Pharisees. So they professed faith in Christ. But Paul doesn't try to make nice with them. He doesn't show them any kind of artificial academic deference. He doesn't feign congeniality. He doesn't invite them to an amiable dialogue. He doesn't even challenge them to a debate.

He also doesn't write to them personally before criticizing them publicly. He simply brushes them off as utter heretics and he instructs the Galatians to have nothing to do with them. He says, "We're not to accept anyone who comes along promoting a different gospel, no matter who it is," and he says, "even if it's an angel or an apostle." Now, that of course, is pure hypothetical. There, there wouldn't be a true angel or an apostle peddling a different gospel. But he says if they do, let them be damned.

But understand the gravity of the error these guys were peddling. It, this wasn't some personal affront or indignity to Paul's ego. The Gospel was under attack. That was a, this was a blatant assault against the kingdom of heaven. And Paul understood that even though the other Apostles didn't always see it as clearly as Paul did. When Paul says, verse 6, "You are deserting him who called into the grace of Christ," even though he's their spiritual father, he's not speaking of himself there.

That phrase, him who called you, is a reference to God. God is the one who calls and draws believers through the Gospel into fellowship with Christ. 2 Timothy 1 verses 8 and 9, "God saved us and called us to a holy calling." Romans 8:30, "Those whom God predestined he also called." And later in the same epistle, this same epistle, Galatians 5 verse 7, Paul says, "You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you." Again, that's God he's talking about there.

God is the one who calls us into the grace of Christ and by flirting with this alternative gospel, the Galatians had gone to the very brink of turning away from God by turning to a different gospel. And so these preachers of a false gospel weren't merely thorns of annoyance in Paul's flesh, they were turning people against the truth of Christ. And that's why they were such a serious threat that they deserved the curse. That's why Paul calls them basically damnable heretics. And it's not just because they irritated him personally.

In other words, Paul is defending the message here. He's not defending himself. He's defending the Gospel. Now, these false teachers weren't openly hostile to Christ. It's not like they came in there as anti-Christ, we, you know, wearing a badge that said that on their lapel. They pretended to be preachers of the Gospel while they were systematically attacking the principle of divine grace that is the essential nucleus of Gospel truth.

Remember, they're teaching that the gospel is about what you must do for God, rather than simply declaring what Christ has done for sinners. That's the whole gist of their error. It's

pretty simple. And it would have been positively sinful for Paul to bless the purveyors of an upside down message like that. It would have been a sin even to ignore the danger that they posed. That is in fact what Peter tried to do in Galatians 2. And Paul rebuked him publicly for it.

In Titus 1 he mentions these same false teachers. And there he calls them “those of the circumcision party,” so same guys. And there he says of them, “their mouths must be stopped.” That’s not a politically correct sentiment in these post-modern times, is it? Incidentally, the Apostle John whose nickname was the Apostle of Love, also said something similar. He said we’re not supposed to be amicable to anyone who has an agenda to undermine or attack the core teachings of Christ.

In 2 John verses 9 through 11 he says, “Whoever does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting. For,” he says, “whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.” So both of these Apostles are saying that the Gospel is simple and it’s

specific and anyone who tries to tweak it or twist it or tamper with it is committing a damnable sin.

It seems to be the prevailing attitude today that if you engage in a verbal bare knuckle fight against error the way Paul does here, you automatically sacrifice your scholarly creditability. You can't do that as an academic person or a scholar. I say that's an emasculated view of scholarship. The best scholars throughout church history have always been vigorous polemicists. This goes back maybe 150 years. It's become totally unpopular to engage in any kind of vigorous debate over doctrine.

And the evangelical movement right now is overrun with false gospels. And the problem extends from the pages of Christianity Today Magazine to the fancy theatrical platforms of the, these evangelicals giga churches that Travis was describing. There has never been a time in all of church history when the church was more urgently in need of clear intelligent uncompromising voices that are willing to speak candidly and defend the one true Gospel just the way Paul does here.

Now, consider the context of our passage. Verse 6 is the, really the first verse of the epistle's main body. Verses 1 through 5 are a greeting and a benediction. That was the standard form for a letter like this in the First Century. And it's typical for the Apostle Paul to follow this pattern. The first word in every one of the Pauline epistles is the Apostle's name, Paul. And sometimes that's followed by the names of fellow laborers who are traveling or working with him.

And then you have the address, which names the person or the group of people to whom he is writing. And then he normally says something encouraging or complimentary to the church or to the person that he's writing to. Sometimes even if it's a bad church like even when he writes to Corinth, which is a totally messed up congregation with a long laundry list of serious problems and Paul deal with them in two epistles. But, nevertheless, he has some words of praise for them, and he starts the epistle with them.

Just think about how disorganized and confused the church at Corinth was. They had divided into warring factions, people were filing lawsuits against one another. They were neglecting proper church discipline. They were abusing their spiritual gifts. They were even getting drunk at the Lord's Table. So they were doctrinally confused on several levels, morally confused, struggling. According to chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, struggling even with the doctrine of bodily resurrection.

And ultimately the Corinthians would be susceptible to a group of heretics who tried to entice them to rebel against Paul's teaching and his authority. So it was a messed up church. But despite all of those problems, Paul needed to deal with barely four verses into his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul says, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge." That's a really nice thing to say to such a messed up church, isn't it?

But that was Paul's normal practice. He liked to start with a word of praise or encouragement and generally, that's a good,

good practice. In the, in the very first verse of Ephesians, he commends the people there for their faithfulness. And even when he needed to deliver a rebuke or some correction, he would always try to start with some gracious words about the people that he was writing to. And every one of his epistles follows that pattern, except Galatians.

And there is not a single word of approval or commendation from start to finish in this epistle to the Galatians. Nowhere. Not even a hint of gratitude or joy. It's very unlike Paul. But his greeting is followed immediately by a scolding. And instead of a blessing, he pronounces a curse, a double curse. And that's what makes our text electric. Rather than the normal polite formalities, Paul jumps straight to the point. And it's a passionate rebuke.

He says, "I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." And then the rest of the epistle, the whole thing is just that candid. It's an urgent and heavily didactic reprimand without mincing words. In chapter 3 verse 1, he calls



the Galatians, foolish. And he suggests that some evil agent has bewitched them, put them under a spell.

In chapter 4 verse 11, he says, "I fear for you that perhaps I've labored over you in vain." Nine verses later, "I am perplexed about you." And throughout this epistle, he is never merely insulting, but he maintains that stern tone of fatherly voice. He's scolding them. He never says anything that would blunt the force of what he has to say. He is clearly deeply and seriously trouble by their flirtation with a different gospel and from start to finish, you can hear all of that passion in his words.

Now, one other notable characteristic of Paul's epistles is that his opening words nearly always contain a statement of some core Gospel doctrine, some essential Gospel truth, or, or in some cases, even a summary of the Gospel itself. And of course he does that here because it's so desperately needed. Verse 4. This is a simple concise statement of what the true Gospel is about. "The Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age."

And anyone who's familiar with Paul's teaching can immediately see how pregnant with meaning those few words are. It comprises the principle of substitutionary atonement that Christ gave himself for our sins. That's substitutionary atonement. In other words, the point of his death is not to provide us with earthly and material prosperity, not merely to break down the, the walls of national boundaries and ethnic prejudices, not to redeem earthly art and culture, not to send a message about social justice, not to point us on a journey toward spiritual self-realization, and certainly not just to give us a pattern of self-sacrifice so that we can atone for our own sins.

He gave himself to make a full and final atonement for sin and thereby to deliver us from this present evil age. It's a simple message, right? Why do we want to add to it? In 2 Corinthians 4 verse 5, Paul says this, "What we proclaim is not ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord." That's a great thing to remember that the Gospel is not about you and me and it's not about what we must do. By making the message about circumcision, these false teachers were preaching themselves, not Christ.

Paul's ministry was markedly different. He told the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. We preach Christ crucified," he said, specifically, "We proclaim the good news," of our text, "that he gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present age." That's the one true Gospel message in a single statement and anyone who comes with a more sophisticated sounding narrative is to be rejected.

We're not supposed to engage in friendly dialogue with the peddlers of these enhanced gospels, so that everybody can consider their point of view and we can evaluate it fairly. That wasn't Paul's style at all. And it's intriguing and significant that a heresy this serious already crept into the early church so early in the apostolic era. Even Paul was astonished that they're so quickly deserting the truth. You know, some people have the misguided notion that the primitive church, the early church in the apostolic era the church was totally pure so that whatever was taught in the early centuries of the church should automatically be given total credence.

But Scripture itself says everything anyone teaches must be examined alongside the Scriptures to see if these things are so. That's what the Bereans did. And that's true even if the teacher is an apostle or an angel, Paul says. That is what discernment demands. And sadly, the church in practically every generation, starting with this first generation, has failed to take the stance that Paul takes here.

And that failure explains why the visible church always needs reforming. Always. There have always been professing Christians who join the church and identify with the people of God and their faith is just superficial, they don't really like the Gospel message. And they think that with a little tinkering, a little redesigning, we can reimagine the Gospel and remove the offense of the cross. Or tone it down, at least. As if we could fix the message so that Christ wouldn't be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense in the eyes of a hostile world.

We, we all have a tendency to want to do that. There's something innate, I think, in the heart of fallen humanity that makes all sinners wish for a different kind of gospel. And Scripture recognizes that. 1 Corinthians 1:18, "The word of the

cross is folly to those who are perishing.” And verse 23, “The message of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.”