

TRUE GOSPEL Galatians 1:1-10

Do most people think that their understanding of “what is the church” and “what are the requirements for salvation” are the absolute truth? After all, if a person was not convinced their version was THE truth, then why would they believe it? Another alternative might be that many people really don’t have a clear understanding of either of these things. As you can appreciate, there are some who have no opinion about the church or salvation, some have a muddled understanding that might be described as fluid in that it changes based on the last sermon they heard, some might fit the description of amorphous in that they are slow to change from time to time, and some are set on what they believe and would never change.

How are such opinions and understandings and beliefs formed? Typically, someone or even several people in a position of “authority” provide information either orally or in writing. If the person is exposed to different ideas or belief systems, then he or she may try to fit them together so that in some convoluted way it sort of all makes sense. Of course, such a process produces a system of beliefs that may have many conflicts and can produce confusion. Is that a fairly good summary description of where many people find themselves today?

Many people who have attended church for decades will experience these conflicts and confusion in their doctrinal beliefs. We might find that some groups stress high moral standards. Many dedicated Christians tend to emphasize following a set of rules and rituals and doing things in a certain way or believing a certain sequence of events will happen in the end time as criteria for salvation. Among these, little or nothing is stated that would indicate they have any understanding of “salvation by grace, through faith.”

There are various requirements by Jehovah Witnesses, the Mormons, the Church of Christ, the Roman Catholics, Judaism, and even Islam for salvation that go to places other than salvation by grace through faith. There are people who will point out what they perceive to be conflicting statements in the Bible that says only the doers of the law will be saved and in another place that doing of the law will not save you. Many like to try to pit the claims of Paul against James’ letter and its emphasis on faith apart from works being dead. Over the next 13 weeks, in our studies of Paul’s letter to the Galatian church and James’ letter to Jewish Christians we will see what the Bible teaches and will show that there is only **one** gospel message. We will start with Paul’s epistle to the Galatians.

The Galatia area is part of modern Turkey and was settled by people who had come from the Gaul area of Europe that we now associate with France. The country of Galatia later became part of a Roman province that was called by the same name. The province also included territory to the south of where the Gauls had settled. Paul had visited cities in the southern part of the province during his first missionary journey. Some of the cities in that southern area were Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Some historians think that Paul also visited parts of the northern area and that his letter was intended for churches there also. The time period of this letter which was to be circulated among the various churches is thought to be around AD 50.

When Paul and Barnabas first visited this area there was not a significant Jewish influence there and most of the people had a pagan background. In response to a healing miracle in Lystra, the people called Barnabas and Paul Zeus and Hermes (names of Greek gods) and wanted to offer sacrifices to them. Paul and Barnabas shared the gospel. Some believed the Gospel message and an assembly of those who believed was established. Such assemblies (churches) were started in several cities in that area. When the Jews from the surrounding area

heard what was happening they quickly came and stirred up the people to the point that a mob tried to kill Paul in Lystra. As we remember from the Acts accounts there were believers who stood by Paul and these believers formed the core of the local church. Although Paul did return from Derbe to Lystra and appointed elders, there was not a lot of time for prolonged interaction with these new believers in any of these cities and we are not told how they were discipled after Paul and Barnabas moved on.

Several years later Paul learned of some significant spiritual concerns in these churches and the letter to the churches of Galatia was written to instruct them in the truth.

Appointed by God – 1:1-2

¹ Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), ² and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: Galatians 1:1-2 (NASB95)

Paul started his letter to the churches of Galatia by identifying himself and his basis of authority. We will explore the details of the points he made with regard to his calling and the source of his message. However, he wrote this letter to correct false information that had been given to the churches in the area by the Judaizers. The points we want to cover in our study can be grouped into the following topics: Being able to recognize the gospel truth, having confidence that the truth of the gospel has its origins with God, and to resolve to not accept a compromise.

The initial opposition that Paul and Barnabas encountered in the area years before this letter was written was from non-Christian Jews who opposed Christianity. After the churches had been started, it was not long before some Jewish Christians had come there and they had questioned the authenticity of Paul's ministry as to whether he was a true apostle.

The meaning of the word apostle is literally "one who is commissioned and sent." The question the Jewish Christians were raising was essentially "who had commissioned and sent Paul?" They could use selected parts of what had happened in Paul's life to raise this kind of doubt. Paul had said that Ananias had been instrumental in explaining to him what was happening in his life after the encounter with Christ Paul had on the road to Damascus. Historically, the group of believers at Antioch had been instrumental in sending Paul and Barnabas on that first missionary journey. An argument that was and is still made is that a "true" apostle is one who was with Christ during His earthly ministry and had been a witness of the Resurrection. Paul did not fit those criteria and so the Jewish Christians questioned his apostolic authority to faithfully declare the "true gospel."

In order to come to such a conclusion, these Jewish Christians conveniently omitted some really significant parts of Paul's testimony and the historical account of what had happened in Antioch. What Ananias did following Paul's conversion was putting his hands on him to recover his sight, and baptizing him; it was Christ that appeared to Paul personally, and made him a minister. Additionally, his being set apart with Barnabas, by the Antioch church, was under the specific direction of the Holy Spirit.

Paul could then truthfully claim apostleship since his call and commission was from Christ Himself and not from a man or even a group of men which he clearly stated in the greeting of this letter.

Through His Grace – 1:3-5

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. Galatians 1:3-5 (NASB95)

Paul used some parts of the greeting that he normally included in his letters. He specifically included “grace and peace” but notably absent is any mention of giving thanks and praise for their faithfulness which may be a clue of how concerned Paul was with what had happened in these churches. There was also no mention of them having the designation of saints as was consistently done in every other letter Paul wrote to churches.

Paul could wish them well (grace and peace) but he could not complement them in their abandoning belief in the sufficiency of “grace through faith” for salvation. He also included a brief statement of the gospel that Christ died for our sins that we might be set free from the bondage that was associated with the way of keeping the Law which was what the false teachers were advocating. As Paul had written to the church at Rome “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death.” This concept that the “just shall live by faith” has always been the will of God and this good news should certainly be a reason for giving Him praise.

Distorted by Some – 1:6-10

⁶ I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; ⁷ which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! ⁹ As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! ¹⁰ For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. Galatians 1:6–10 (NASB95)

Paul immediately addressed his concern of what was happening in these churches. When we think of troubled churches in the first century, the church at Corinth usually comes to mind. There were significant problems there that involved immaturity and failure of the people to apply kingdom principles to their lives. Paul was more concerned about the Galatian churches than the Corinth church since the Galatians had abandoned the foundational doctrines that Paul taught them for an alternative way of salvation. Their problems were not immorality, pride and jealousy as was so evident in the Corinth church, it was that the Galatian churches had gotten on the wrong road. The problem with being on the wrong road is that, no matter how well you drive, you still wind up in the wrong destination.

The Jewish Christians who brought in the false teaching had their own ideas as to what was required to be saved. They essentially said that one had to practice Judaism in addition to trusting in Christ. The new converts to Christianity in the Galatia area were easily swayed, they accepted what Paul said and they then added what the Judaizers told them. They didn’t have a reference book where they could check out what they were being told and they were not very familiar with the Old Testament writings. They were vulnerable to whatever teaching that might come along.

There are groups today that go from house to house and try to make converts to their way of thinking about salvation. They have some success because most people today are not familiar with what the Bible teaches and the false teaching is (in part) close to the truth. Typically, their teachings confuse the questions of cause and effect and they want to add human effort to the grace of God.

It is difficult to discern the emotions in a letter – especially one that was written nearly 2000 years ago and in a different language. However, it doesn’t take a lot of imagination to figure out that Paul was really upset by what had happened in Galatia. Those Jewish Christians who taught that a person needed to convert to Judaism before becoming a Christian came into the area and created chaos. Not only were they teaching a false doctrine, they were claiming that

Paul had no authority to establish churches and teach what he had preached to them. You can imagine how confused these brand-new Christians of Galatia must have been.

To say that these people were not “grounded” in correct doctrine would be an understatement. They had been given the correct doctrine but it was still new to them. So when Jewish Christians came into the area some time later and presented a different version of what God was doing, they were vulnerable to being deceived. These Jewish Christians had simply added the requirement of belief in Jesus as the Messiah to their other beliefs that taught that circumcision was necessary to be saved. The sad thing is that they really believed the bad doctrine they were espousing and they were sincere and they were committed to what they believed. The problem was that they were **WRONG** in what they believed.

Paul termed what they advocated a “distortion” or “perversion” of the gospel truth. Paul gave a brief reference to the gospel truth in using the words “the grace of Christ.” This is the root of the difference in the truth that Paul proclaimed and the distortion being put forth by the Judaizers. That same distortion is prevalent today in doctrines of many groups who claim to have a way to God or a route to heaven or eternal life. The “many groups” would include those who are non-Christian and some who label themselves as Christian.

How serious did Paul think this error was? You get a good idea of it by his repeated pronouncement of a curse on anyone who would teach such error. The Greek word he used was “anathema” which was used to designate a thing or person that was doomed for destruction with no hope of redemption. That is very serious and somewhat sad especially when the person who holds such beliefs may do so in ignorance. Paul did not give any consideration as to whether someone teaching such error was doing so for malicious reasons or because they thought they were trying to help others.

So what do **we** REALLY believe about how a person is saved? How many times have we heard someone who was a professing Christian make a statement such as they “hope they are saved” or that they are “a good person” or they “read the Bible and go to church.” Such statements show a basic misunderstanding of God’s plan of salvation. In spite of what we say, the real test is in our behavior. We will act in accordance with what we really believe regardless of what we say or what we profess to believe. Most of the time we are not even aware of the basic motives or driving forces behind our decisions and actions. Do we do the right thing because we know we are supposed to? Do we do the right thing because we don’t want to get into trouble with our spouse or the authorities? Do we do the right thing because we don’t want to jeopardize our ability to get into heaven? Do we do the right things because we love the Lord and want to please him?

The truth of the Gospel message has not changed. It is by grace that we are saved through faith in the completed work of Christ in dying for our sins on the Cross. It is not of any merit or actions on our part but entirely of God’s initiative. Once we have come into a saving relationship, then we will give evidence that we are saved by what we do. The good works are a result and not a cause of our salvation.