

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 7

GALATIANS 1:1–2:10

THE BACKGROUND

The first Christians had no written manual of Christianity to guide them. When Paul established a church in a city in Galatia, he could not leave those Christians a guidebook detailing what they were to believe and how they should conduct the ministry of the church. The Gospels had not yet been written. Paul's inevitable departure from a newly established church almost always left a leadership vacuum.

As a result these early Christians might easily be swayed from the truth by a convincing false teacher. In some instances, the pressures of their culture might influence believers to engage in immoral behavior. Paul, therefore, faced two great challenges: establishing the churches and making mature disciples of the believers in those churches. Writing letters, making personal visits, and sending representatives like Timothy or Titus were the apostle's main means of guiding these early Christians.

One false teaching that threatened the early church concerned the very nature of the gospel itself. What did a person have to do in order to be saved? Paul maintained that salvation was by grace through faith alone. False teachers claimed that obedience to the law of Moses, or at least to some of the law, was essential for salvation. For example, they claimed that circumcision was necessary for salvation (see Acts 15:1). They demanded maintenance of the ceremonial law in an attempt to gain God's favor (see Gal. 4:10-11). These false teachers also questioned Paul's credibility and his claim to be an apostle. The Letter to the Galatians is Paul's forceful response to questions about the true nature of the gospel. Unless Christians are clear about the true gospel, they may be deceived about its content.

1. GOSPEL CONFUSION (GALATIANS 1:6-9)

Paul began this letter in a style characteristic of first-century letters by announcing the writer, the intended recipients, and the opening greeting. However, in Paul's letter each of these three elements is specifically Christian in its expression. Paul's self-identification of "apostle" (Gal. 1:1) is likely a response to one of the challenges to his ministry. His opponents not only questioned the gospel he proclaimed, but they also challenged his claim to be an apostle. In response, Paul clearly stated that Divine au-

thority lay behind his ministry.

The words "grace . . . and peace" (1:3) were typical greetings in the ancient world, but for Paul their meanings extended far beyond that intended by the standard salutations. "Grace" is a key word in Galatians and throughout Paul's Letters because it is the key to understanding God's disposition toward us and the means of our salvation. Grace stands against any suggestion of a salvation merited by works. "Peace," or wholeness, results from salvation.

Verse 6: *I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from Him who called you by the grace of Christ, and are turning to a different gospel—*

Typically, Paul would pronounce a thanksgiving for his readers at the outset of his letter. However, in writing to the Galatians, Paul omitted this customary praise for the recipients. Instead of being thankful or affectionately remembering them, Paul was amazed by their behavior. The word translated amazed indicates astonishment or surprise and can occasionally indicate accompanying irritation. Paul's irritation appears evident at specific points in the letter (see 3:1 and 5:7). We also should note, however, that the apostle wrote with a clear pastoral sense of concern. He loved the Galatian Christians and addressed them warmly at various points in the letter.

The reason for Paul's shock was that the Galatians were quickly turning away from Him who called them. The word translated *turning away* means "to change to another place." It was used of a deserter or a traitor. In this case, the Galatians had turned from God Himself. Instead of adhering to the calling that brought them near, they had turned away and deserted God by embracing what they perceived as another means of salvation.

This point is important. Paul often dealt with challenges to his authority, but the issue here is the gospel itself. God had called the Galatians to salvation by the grace of Christ. The term grace, by its very definition, must remain undiluted. Add anything, anything at all, to what Christ has done once and for all as a requirement for salvation and you have crossed the line into works. God's grace, accepted through faith, is the only basis of justification (see Eph. 2:8-9). At this early point in the letter, we confront the central matter of Christianity. By approving a message that added works to grace, the Galatians had embraced a different gospel, and thus deserted God Himself.

Verse 7: *not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to change the gospel*

of Christ.

Again, what we are talking about here is a complete denial of the gospel. Add one law and you have no gospel at all. Paul's expression was not that there is another gospel. The Greek word translated "another" (*allos*) is similar in meaning to the word translated "different" (*heteros*) in verse 6. Both words can be translated "another." Often, however, the word *heteros* means another of a different kind, while *allos* means another of the same kind. I may use *heteros* to describe drinking tea instead of coffee, but use *allos* to describe drinking different flavors of coffee. Applied to the gospel, the distinction Paul made is that the "other gospel" is absolutely no gospel at all! It is not even similar.

The different message came not from the Galatian believers themselves, but from some who were troubling them. The term translated *troubling* means "to shake" or "to agitate." Paul used it to describe these other teachers who tried to add works to the gospel and apparently gained a following. Throughout this Commentary we will refer to these false teachers as Judaizers [JOO day eyes uhrs]. Judaizers were persons from a Jewish background who insisted certain Jewish laws had to be observed in order for a person to be a Christian.

Verse 8: *But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!*

Paul contemplated an unlikely scenario in this verse. The apostle was not going to alter his message. As for an angel? Again, that was unlikely, but Paul perhaps had in mind here the tendency of some people to worship angels, a topic he addressed specifically in Colossians 2:18. Some of Paul's Jewish contemporaries, notably the Essenes, venerated angels and developed elaborate hierarchies of angels. Paul desired to cover all bases.

In the unlikely event the Galatians were to hear such an adulterated gospel from himself or from an angel, Paul pronounced a curse on the one who delivered it. The word translated curse is *anathema* [uh NATH uh muh]. It means "to set aside something for God's judgment and destruction." This word is an extreme and grave term, but it represents accurately how seriously Paul viewed the threat of heresy.

Verse 9: *As we have said before, I now say again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him!*

Verse 8 indicated an unlikely scenario. Verse 9 repre-

sents a likely scenario, and, in fact, something that was actually taking place. The Judaizers were preaching a gospel contrary to what the Galatian believers had received.

Why was this concern so urgent and intense for Paul? As far as we can discern, none of the laws claimed to be necessary by the Judaizers were bad. In fact, precisely what law from our Old Testament is bad? None! Even the food laws that Jesus nullified would not harm us if we were to observe them, though personally I would dearly miss crawfish.

In fact, we can take the argument a bit further and make a specific application. Paul the Pharisee obeyed the Ten Commandments. Did Paul the Christian obey them? Of course. A Judaizer might well argue that it is in fact necessary to do so, and what Christian could seriously deny that we should, in fact, obey the Ten Commandments? You can see how subtle and even reasonable their argument appeared.

The difference, however, is one of intent. Paul the Pharisee obeyed laws in an attempt to earn salvation. Paul the Christian obeyed the Ten Commandments because he was saved not in an attempt to merit salvation. No one has ever been more qualified than Paul to draw this important distinction. He knew what it was like to live by the law and he knew deep down what his motive was. His fundamental insight was that he could never be good enough. His best efforts, and he might argue that no one had ever made a better effort, was inadequate to justify himself before God. This insight drove him to grace and is the root of his strong opposition to anyone who would try to mix grace and law.

2. DISPLAYING PAUL'S CREDENTIALS (GALATIANS 1:11-12,15-16)

This section of the letter is autobiographical and extends through 2:14. It recounts Paul's conversion but focuses on the 14 years, or more, of his interaction with the church leaders in Jerusalem. The purpose of this section is twofold. In it Paul first demonstrated that his message was not a human contrivance but came directly from Christ. Second, because his calling and message came directly from Christ, his apostleship, therefore, was intact, and he was thus qualified to authoritatively address the challenges to the churches in Galatia.

Verse 11: *Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not based on a human point of view.*

The phrase *now I want you to know* emphasizes the ne-

cessity of the apostle's claims. The claims Paul was about to make were vitally important and had probably been misrepresented. Here, and throughout the letter, we can hear echoes of his opponents' charges. This particular argument counters the claims reflected in verse 10 that Paul was altering the gospel to make it more appealing to Gentiles. In fact, Paul was not altering the gospel at all. His opponents were.

Though his tone is strong and authoritative, Paul retained a warmth for and familiarity with the Galatians. He addressed them as brothers throughout the letter. He did not reject them but rather viewed them as dangerously misled.

Paul's subject is *the gospel preached by me*. The words for *gospel* and *preached* are related in the original language, that is, they come from the same root word. The gospel is good news and the proclamation of it is also good news. A literal translation of the phrase might be "the gospel that was 'gospelled' by me."

Here we get to Paul's main point. The message that he proclaimed throughout the region was not based on a human point of view, literally "not according to man." This claim is a sharp contrast to the opponents who had decided, without Divine direction, that the gospel of grace was not sufficient. They preached a gospel contrary to what Paul had preached (Gal. 1:8-9), but the difference was not merely a different viewpoint or opinion. Their gospel was a human point of view.

Verse 12: *For I did not receive it from a human source and I was not taught it, but it came by a revelation from Jesus Christ.*

To emphasize his point, Paul added that he did not receive the gospel from a human source and he was not taught it. In Galatians Paul faced an opponent that challenged his right to address with authority issues related to how a person experiences a right relationship with God. These issues lay at the very heart of the Christian faith. Paul countered that his message came by a revelation from Jesus Christ. He had met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus in a dramatic way, and the Lord had called him to be an apostle.

The apostle's opponents, however, claimed Paul was not a real apostle because he had never met Jesus when He walked the earth. Paul's rejoinder is that his experience on the road to Damascus qualified him as an apostle, even though he would elsewhere identify himself as "the least of the apostles" and "unworthy to be called an apostle" (1 Cor. 15:9). His reason, however, for such humil-

ity was that he persecuted the church, not that his experience with the risen Christ was in any way deficient. Paul was a real apostle in every sense of the word for he had seen the risen Christ and had received the gospel directly from Him. The opponents could not make such a claim.

Verse 15: *But when God, who from my mother's womb set me apart and called me by His grace, was pleased*

Paul's conversion to Christianity was not the result merely of a human decision. It was part of God's plan. The phrase *from my mother's womb* is similar to wording we find in the record of Jeremiah's call experience (Jer. 1:5). God had Paul in mind before Paul had God in mind.

That God *set me apart and called me* brings us to the doctrine of election, about which we can either make too much or too little. We make too much of it if we press it to a hard determinism. To suggest that Paul did not exercise free will in accepting God's calling appears to counter the plain meaning of so many verses that invite hearers to respond to the gospel. On the other hand to make salvation merely a matter of human insight and will is to omit the essential work of the Holy Spirit in calling us to Christ. God's calling or election is consistent with the free agency of human beings.

The Greek word translated *set . . . apart* is derived from the basic verb *horizo*, which means "to set a boundary." We get our English word horizon from this Greek word, the line where earth and sky appear to meet, the limit of how far we can see. God set a boundary, defined by a person's acceptance or rejection of Christ. That boundary is fixed ahead of time. God set apart Paul by virtue of his acceptance of Jesus Christ.

The phrase *by His grace* is a key theological difference between Paul and his opponents. His message was founded on God's grace, the concept that humans can contribute no works to earn salvation. The opponents were committed to works as essential to salvation.

Verse 16: *to reveal His Son in me, so that I could preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.*

The phrase *God to reveal His Son in me* underscores Paul's intensely personal experience on the road to Damascus. Tradition did not save Paul. Nor did a message alone. He uniquely encountered Christ on the road to Damascus.

3. UNWAVERING COMMITMENT (GALATIANS 2:1-6)

Paul's autobiographical account continues in this section. His particular interest was to demonstrate he was indepen-

dent of the Jerusalem leaders' approval but at the same time had their approval. In other words, he did not need it, but he had it. As we will see, the Jerusalem church's support of Paul would undermine the claims of the apostle's opponents.

Verse 1: *Then after 14 years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.*

Bible scholars experience great challenges in matching the chronology in Acts with that in Galatians. However, the phrase *after 14 years* most likely refers to 14 years after Paul's conversion, not 14 years after his visit described in 1:18. This point is important in dating another significant event in the New Testament, namely, the Jerusalem Conference described in Acts 15. The issue involves whether or not the visit described by Paul here is the same event as recorded in Acts 15 or should be equated with the famine visit in Acts 11:27-30. Both options have found support among biblical scholars.

Paul's inclusion of Barnabas and Titus is important. Barnabas was a trusted colleague, but more importantly he had strong ties to the church in Jerusalem. If Paul was going to defend his gospel message as preached to the Gentiles, Barnabas would have been a great help in affirming Paul's message as accurate.

Titus served a different role. As we see in Galatians 2:3, he was a Gentile. Paul most likely included him as prime evidence that Gentiles could become faithful Christians without submitting to any of the regulations proposed by the Judaizers. People can argue theology, but it is hard to dispute a changed life. Titus was respected among the churches, though how much opportunity he had been given at this time to prove himself is uncertain. He would later distinguish himself as a man of sound diplomatic skills, having been sent by Paul to negotiate some of the difficulties in the Corinthian church (see 2 Cor. 7:13-15; 8:16-17). Titus, the Gentile, was indisputably Christian.

Verse 2: *I went up because of a revelation and presented to them the gospel I preach among the Gentiles—but privately to those recognized as leaders—so that I might not be running, or have run, in vain.*

Paul's motive for going up to Jerusalem was primarily because of *revelation*, the same word used to describe the manner he received the gospel (Gal. 1:12). Again, Paul's point is that he was not making up the gospel as he went along. Both his reception and defense of the gospel were divinely mandated.

Paul *presented* to the Jerusalem church leaders *the gospel* he preached *among the Gentiles*. The word translated *pre-*

sented means “to declare” or “to advocate.” Paul was not a disinterested presenter. He set forth and advocated powerfully the gospel he had received.

To *run in vain* should not be understood as indicating doubt on Paul's part. Nothing in Galatians indicates Paul questioned the validity of his message. His concern in going to the Jerusalem church was to clarify the gospel that all preached. He wanted, in a sense, to make sure they were all on the same page, so the early church would not have Jewish Christians embracing one message and Gentile Christians embracing another. It would be futile for the apostle to proclaim a message of grace if the Jerusalem church leaders were preaching a message of legalism.

However, if Paul did not need either the approval or the support of the Jerusalem church, why then did he present the gospel he preached to them? Paul's opponents in the Galatian churches were insisting on circumcision as necessary to salvation. Paul's recounting for the Galatians his communications with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would undercut the opponents' argument. Not only had Paul insisted that circumcision was not necessary, the Jerusalem church agreed, as is clear in the following verses.

Verse 3: *But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.*

If the opponents were right that circumcision was necessary for salvation, the Jerusalem Christians had a perfect opportunity to insist that Titus be circumcised. The fact that they did not require it completely isolates the Galatian opponents. The “most Jewish” Christians were not insisting on circumcision.

Verse 4: *This issue arose because of false brothers smuggled in, who came in secretly to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, in order to enslave us.*

The opponents were *false brothers*. Paul did not include them among the Galatian Christians. The words *smuggled*, *secretly*, and *spy* further indicate Paul's low regard for these troublemakers. The first two words describe entering by deception or to infiltrate. The third word has an additional meaning of destroying in an underhanded manner. The opponents may have thought they were defending the gospel. They were actually destroying the church by attempting to add to the gospel.

The terms *freedom* and *enslave* contrast the false gospel with the true gospel. Paul's message led to complete freedom from the law as a means of salvation. By insisting on any part of the law as necessary for salvation, the opponents were submitting to slavery. The difference between the opposing

views is not a matter of degree but of complete separation.

Why was the circumcision issue so important to the Judaizers? For the Jewish people it was a sign of the covenant between God and His people. The Judaizers viewed Paul's refusal to insist on it as heretical and as a repudiation of his heritage. Paul's did not ban circumcision, but simply insisted it was not a prerequisite for salvation (see 1 Cor. 7:18-19).

Verse 5: *But we did not yield in submission to these people for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain for you.*

No negotiation was possible on this issue, and Paul *did not yield* to them for *even an hour*. The line was drawn. Either the gospel was of grace or of works. Add one work to it and you have crossed the line from grace to works.

Verse 6: *But from those recognized as important (what they really were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism)—those recognized as important added nothing to me.*

The *recognized* leaders of the church in Jerusalem *added nothing* to Paul's message. The Judaizers were insisting on something that even the “founding” Jewish Christians did not require. In verses 7-10, Paul cited support by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem for his mission to the Gentiles. These leaders also recognized Paul's apostleship. Their only request concerned remembering the poor, and Paul did so by taking up an offering from the Gentile churches to support the poorer Christians in Jerusalem (see 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-6).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 14

GALATIANS 2:11–3:25

THE BACKGROUND

The early years of the Christian faith were times of defining and understanding the gospel. The fact that differences of opinion existed among Christians of goodwill is not surprising. That others tried specifically to corrupt the faith is also not surprising. In last week's lesson we discovered an example of some who were attempting to corrupt the faith (see Gal. 2:4). In this week's lesson we find an example of well-meaning Christians who were trying to understand fully the definition of the gospel. We also will see Paul's zeal to ensure that salvation by grace alone won the day.

Peter like Paul was zealously devoted to Christ. Peter's weakness, or perhaps his misunderstanding, revolved around the food laws that had been a part of his life ever since he could remember. A trip to see Gentile Christians became an occasion for him to try foods that previously had been forbidden under Jewish laws. Paul pointed out that Peter acted hypocritically by withdrawing from the Gentiles when Jewish Christians came to town.

What laws were necessary to follow in order to be saved? This question loomed large over the early Jewish church. Paul's response was simple: "None of them." Justification by faith through God's grace was an all or nothing proposition. To take any other view would be to set aside the grace of God (Gal. 2:21).

Paul, a trained rabbi, used the very Scriptures that outlined food laws to show that salvation had always been by faith and not by works. His example was Abraham, the man with whom God began the very religion to which the law became so important. Abraham's story, however, was actually one of grace by faith. The Mosaic law, which came later, served a "diagnostic function" of revealing sin and pointing to the need for grace (see Rom. 7:7). The background passage for this week's lesson clearly reveals Paul's inspired brilliance, and his answer to those who questioned his supposed abandonment of the Mosaic law.

1. I OBJECT! (GALATIANS 2:14-16)

After having established that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had added nothing to the gospel he proclaimed, Paul went on to detail a confrontation with Peter that illustrated his

ongoing challenge to define the relationship between the gospel and the law.

Antioch, located north of Judea in Syria, became a vibrant Christian center because the church there embraced the mission to the Gentiles (see Acts 12:19-26; 13:1-3). Peter, who had traveled to Antioch, had some time previously received a vision that convinced him Gentiles could become Christians apart from adhering to the law (see Acts 10:1-48). In Antioch Cephas or Peter had eaten with Gentiles, presumably partaking of formerly forbidden foods. The arrival of some from the "circumcision party," those who insisted on the necessity of circumcision for salvation, intimidated him, however.

The fact that the men are identified as coming from James is a bit puzzling (Gal. 2:12). Paul had earlier stated that the leaders of the Jerusalem church had not insisted on circumcision, and had, in fact, not added one thing to Paul's preaching (2:9-10). Surely, James was among these leaders. It is possible these men were sent by James but embraced a legalism that did not represent James's views. It is also possible that these men did not come at James's instigation, but rather the phrase "came from James" simply means they were part of the church in Jerusalem, of which James was a key leader. Whatever the case, even Barnabas was caught up in the hypocrisy of behaving one way with Gentiles and another way with Jewish believers.

In Paul's thinking, action and belief were closely related. Peter, Barnabas, and the others who withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentiles were, in fact, "deviating from the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). Paul's public confrontation with Peter, no doubt, was energetic and lively. Paul won, and so did the truth of the gospel.

Verse 15: *We are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners";*

This verse begins Paul's reflection on the events he had just narrated and appears to be some of the words used in the confrontation with Peter. Actually, the words of this verse seem to reflect Paul's former views as a Pharisee, when he would have embraced the traditional Jewish view of two groups of people in the world: *Jews by birth* and "*Gentile sinners*." Certainly, however, the apostle had changed his views after becoming a Christian.

Paul was here parroting the words of the circumcision party itself. They were *Jews by birth* (literally "by nature"), circumcised, and convinced that Gentiles needed circumcision also. As *Gentile sinners* they were, by birth,

outside the covenant and destined for destruction. It was inconceivable to Judaizers, therefore, to admit Gentiles to the family without circumcision because circumcision was a sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:10).

In this verse Paul also was stating a common ground from which he could make a more significant point. The Judaizers would have agreed that the world was divided into two groups: Jews and Gentiles. The apostle's departure from this point, and it was a radical one, comes in the next verse.

Verse 16: *yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified.*

The apostle first highlighted the condition that needed to be addressed. Regardless of whether a person is Jew or Gentile, *no one is justified by the works of the law*.

Three important words or phrases, repeated in this verse, illustrate the true gospel and the solution to the problem. The first word is *justified*. The word translated *justified* comes from a Greek word that literally means "to declare someone right." It is a judicial term that calls to mind a judge rendering a verdict of not guilty. Justification was the goal of a Jewish worshiper. A worshiper desires to be in a right standing before God. But how can a person be justified?

The typical Jewish response to this question was *by the works of the law*, and this phrase is the second important element in this verse. The term *law* designated all the requirements and commandments communicated by God to Moses and recorded in the first five books of the Old Testament. The law was good and holy, prescribing in detail the manner in which a worshiper was to live. Though the law was, and is, good, it was not intended as a means of salvation. Paul would delineate its purpose later, but for the moment we should focus on the fact that *by the works of the law* no one can be justified.

Consider how revolutionary this thinking was for Paul in contrast to the way he had been trained as a Pharisee. His exalted claims in Philippians 3:4-6 were not an exaggeration. Paul knew how to obey law. He was respected for it. He took pride in it. After meeting Christ on the road to Damascus, however, he came to regard his former way of life as "filth" (Phil. 3:8). Obeying the law in itself was not filth, but obeying the law as a means of attempting to gain a right standing before God was so useless, so beyond human ability, that

Paul described it as filth. The greatest shock in Paul's life was his realization that obeying the law was not sufficient for justification.

What then? That question brings us to the third important phrase: *by faith in Jesus Christ*. The word *faith* in the original Greek language is related to the verb we elsewhere translate "believe." The New Testament word *faith* has four important aspects to it: belief, trust, commitment, and reverence.

Galatians 2:16 sums up the stunning revelation Paul received on the road to Damascus. Paul the Pharisee certainly understood that he had sinned. No Pharisee would have pretended to be absolutely morally perfect his entire life, and God would rightly condemn his sin. The astounding revelation Paul received was that God also would reject his very best "goodness" as a means of salvation. Paul then recognized he was helpless, as we all are.

2. OBJECTION, OVERRULED (GALATIANS 2:17-21)

Verse 17: *But if, while seeking to be justified by Christ, we ourselves are also found to be sinners, is Christ then a promoter of sin? Absolutely not!*

One of the consistent charges against Paul by his opponents was that his insistence on faith and grace provided no motive for right behavior. As he often did, Paul here quoted his opponents' view and then refuted it.

The phrase *while seeking to be justified by Christ* is Paul's position. The phrase *found to be sinners* is part of the accusation of his opponents. Their case can be stated as follows: if a person believes his or her sins are covered by grace and forgiven already, then that person is going to engage in sin without fear instead of trying to live righteously. Thus the opponents' further charge was that in Paul's theology *Christ was a promoter of sin*. Again, if we are under grace, then what incentive do we have to behave? We can, in the opponents' view, "sin in order that grace may multiply" (Rom. 6:1). Paul's rebuke against this perverse thinking is strong: *Absolutely not!*

Verse 18: *If I rebuild those things that I tore down, I show myself to be a lawbreaker.*

Recall the situation that launched Paul into this discussion. Peter had table fellowship with Gentiles in Antioch and then had withdrawn from them when Jewish Christians arrived. Retreating to the former divisions that existed under the law was tantamount to rebuilding those things that had been torn down. To fall back on any work, no matter how good it

may be, as a prerequisite for salvation is to go back under the law itself and thus be revealed as a *lawbreaker* because no one except Christ can perfectly keep the law. Thus all human beings under the law are lawbreakers and incapable of securing salvation for themselves. Attempting to retreat to the law is inconceivably contradictory for anyone who has embraced God's grace.

Verse 19: *For through the law I have died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ;*

The phrase *through the law I have died to the law* means the law revealed the depth of the spiritual problem. To die to the law involved turning from it as a means of salvation. The law is diagnostic, but it cannot heal. The law reveals the sin problem that only God's grace can cure.

The result of embracing grace is to *live to God*. In his former life as a Pharisee, perhaps unknowingly, Paul lived to the law. The law was his focus, even though he might have claimed at the time that he was focused on God. The law had actually become his master.

To *live to God* is Paul's response to those who claim that his doctrine of grace has no ethical imperative. Grace brings us into God's presence, just as it brings God's presence into our lives. We live an honorable life out of gratitude because of God's gracious work on our behalf, not in order to earn salvation. We live rightly because we have been changed from the inside by God's presence. The ethical behavior of Paul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian might have appeared quite similar. The motive behind the behavior, however, was completely different. Grace is a more powerful incentive to right living than is legalism.

As a Christian, Paul had been *crucified with Christ*. This fact does not undermine the unique event of Christ's crucifixion. We were not mystically included in that event. Christ alone died a unique and unrepeatably death for our sins. It does mean that by accepting Christ we are breaking entirely with our past. Turning to Him demands a complete turning away from our former lives. The image of death, and particularly death on a cross, appears elsewhere in the New Testament to describe a Christian's turning from old ways to experience new life (see Luke 9:23-24; Rom. 6:4-6; Gal. 5:24). Paul described his Christian life as being totally different from his previous life because his new life in Christ was under Christ's control.

Verse 20: *and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who*

loved me and gave Himself for me.

A two-word summary of Paul's theology is "in Christ." This phrase or the related phrase *Christ . . . in me* is Paul's way of expressing the reality of the indwelling Christ in all believers. As Christ expresses His life through us, we become fully the sons and daughters God created us to be.

The phrase *the life I now live in the flesh* refers to daily living that is to be characterized by ethical behavior. Again, one of the main emphases of the passage is Paul's response to those who claim that grace invites misbehavior. The believer lives *by faith in the Son of God*. Christ's presence in us leads and empowers us to live the right kind of life, something the law could never do. The reference to the One *who loved me and gave Himself for me* provides the motive that should always draw us back to living in ways that honor Him.

Verse 21: *I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.*

Under no circumstances could Paul *set aside the grace of God*. This point was nonnegotiable. Add one law to the doctrine of salvation through grace and *Christ died for nothing*. By his tone in this section, we can see that how a Christian lived mattered enormously to Paul. He would later elaborate on the life in Christ by characterizing it as the fruit of the Spirit and contrasting it with the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-23).

3. VERDICT: NOT GUILTY (GALATIANS 3:1-5)

In this portion of his letter, Paul's response to the opponents who had confused and recruited the Galatians to their viewpoint was twofold. First, he pointed out that the spiritual benefits the Galatian believers enjoyed came not through works but through faith. Secondly, he demonstrated that Abraham was actually an illustration of justification by faith not by works.

Verse 1: *You foolish Galatians! Who has hypnotized you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified?*

Paul's address *you foolish Galatians* is direct and stern. The word translated *foolish* more literally means "without a mind" or "without understanding." Paul loved the Galatians, but he was undeniably perturbed by their folly.

The term translated *hypnotized* also means "fascinated" or "bewitched." The Galatians had been led astray by clever arguments. The opponents had been successful in taking

the Galatians believers' eyes off Christ who *was vividly portrayed as crucified*. Paul had put up for public notice—the literal meaning of *vividly portrayed*—Jesus' sacrifice. The apostle's message was that a person is justified before God through the cross of Christ.

The contrast is important and stark. The opponents preached a return to law. Paul preached Christ crucified as completely sufficient for salvation. That event of cosmic proportions could not be diluted by including a provision not to eat pork, to wash your hands in a particular manner, or even to be circumcised.

Verse 2: *I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by hearing with faith?*

Paul invited the Galatians to review their own experience as proof of the complete sufficiency of salvation by faith. He asked five questions.

First the apostle wanted to know how the Galatian believers had received the Spirit. The obvious answer is that they had received it not by being circumcised or by any *works of the law, but by hearing with faith*.

Verse 3: *Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now going to be made complete by the flesh?*

The second question reflects Paul's frustration. *Are you so foolish?* again employs the word for mindless used in verse 1. The opponents must have been clever, charismatic, and excellent speakers to have turned the Galatians from such an obvious truth.

The third question concerned whether they were *going to be made complete by the flesh*. How could the work of God Almighty be completed or added to by any puny work of human beings? Paul was not denying the importance of ethical behavior. His focus here, however, was salvation and the way a person is justified before God. Salvation is a work of the Spirit from beginning to end (see Phil. 1:6).

One of Paul's corollary points in this passage is that we receive the Spirit when we are justified by faith. This point is not a minor one. Remember that Paul consistently battled the accusation that his preaching was too heavy on grace. People have always had trouble trusting grace as a motivation to right behavior. Paul's response in part in this section was to affirm the presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer. The Spirit leads us to right behavior as we respond in obedience and gratitude.

Verse 4: *Did you suffer so much for nothing—if in fact it was for nothing?*

This verse records Paul's fourth question. When individuals became Christians in the first century, they were possibly subject to persecution, if not from government authorities at least from non-Christian neighbors and associates. Upright behavior often disturbs others who would prefer that all accept the same low standard so no one feels guilty.

Verse 5: *So then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law or by hearing with faith?*

The fifth and final question concerned *the Spirit*. As Christians we receive the Spirit when we receive salvation through faith. The Spirit is not a later addition. You receive the Spirit when you receive the Son. The presence of the Spirit, apart from works of the law, was proof in the first century and is proof today that the gospel is effective.

4. CLOSING ARGUMENTS (GALATIANS 3:6-9)

Paul's treatment of Abraham is a great illustration of his genius as a former rabbi. Remember the opponents advocated circumcision as necessary for salvation. The father of the Jewish faith was Abraham, and circumcision was for him a sign of being in covenant with God. It seemed natural for the opponents, therefore, to insist on circumcision for all believers.

Paul began to counter this argument by going back to the text itself, and this verse is a quotation from Genesis 15:6. *Abraham believed God*. The word translated *believed* is related to the word translated "faith" in verse 5. Abraham's faith *was credited to him as righteousness* before God. The word translated *righteousness* also can be translated "justification." Abraham had what everyone was arguing about, a right standing with God. But that right standing came by faith, not by circumcision.

Paul's opponents held that Abraham's circumcision was a key element in understanding Abraham's right standing with God. For these opponents Abraham's circumcision demonstrated his faithful obedience and worthiness before God. Thus according to the Judaizers, Gentiles must receive this sign or mark of the covenant if they wanted to experience the full blessing of being part of the people of God. The genius of Paul's argument is that Abraham's experience recorded in this quotation from Genesis 15:6 came prior to Abraham's circumcision (see Gen. 17:1-14). Thus Abraham was a prime example—not of salvation by works—but of salvation by faith.

Verse 7: *so understand that those who have faith are Abraham's sons.*

Jew and Gentile alike, by faith, *are Abraham's sons*. As Abraham was saved by faith, so are we.

Verse 8: *Now the Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and foretold the good news to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed in you.*

The opponents also would have accepted the statement that *all the nations will be blessed in Abraham* (see Gen. 12:3; 18:18). Paul found common ground with his opponents and showed where that common ground led them—to the truth *that God would justify the Gentiles by faith*.

Verse 9: *So those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.*

Abraham was not saved by works but by *faith* precisely as we are. When we receive Christ, we as Gentiles are experiencing the fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis that all nations will be blessed in Abraham.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 21

GALATIANS 3:26–4:31

THE BACKGROUND

The question of “what about the Gentiles” resonated throughout the early Jewish Christian churches. During Paul’s ministry the issue was one of the most important issues facing the church.

One residue of the Jewish heritage was the tendency to classify the entire world in one of two categories, Jew or Gentile. While the racial distinction is undeniable, the theological implications were huge. Gentiles were outside the covenant and thus destined for destruction. When Gentiles became Christians, were they completely accepted and on a par with Jewish Christians? In the previous chapter Paul insisted neither Jew nor Gentile was justified by works of the law (Gal. 2:15-16). Recognizing that all experienced the same dilemma (the problem of sin) also meant the solution was the same for all (faith in Christ), the resulting right standing before God would be the same for all who accepted Christ, and thus the mutual relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers was to be characterized by equality.

After this basic affirmation, Paul returned to the main theme of his letter: turning the Galatians back to the true gospel. We will see in the passage for this week’s lesson some of the particulars of the message that had swayed the Galatians from the truth. We will also hear again Paul’s strong words and experience his frustration with them. His final warning in this section is that to submit to the law is to embrace a futile substitute for the real gospel, and such submission is an obstacle to growth in Christ.

1. ERASING LABELS (GALATIANS 3:26-29)

In this section Paul began to explore more fully the implications of the common access all believers have to God through faith in Jesus Christ. The effects are both comforting and challenging, wide-ranging and specific.

Verse 26: *for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*

The beginning word *for* connects this verse to the previous affirmation that we as Christians are no longer under the leadership of the law. The *paidagogos* (from which we get the English word *pedagogue*), or guardian, has accomplished its task (see p. 29). We are ready to move forward.

Notice that Paul changed the pronouns from the former first person plural (“we,” Gal. 3:23-25) to the second person plural *you*. The apostle was applying a truth directly to the Galatians and attempting to alert them to the full implication of their freedom from attempting to gain salvation by works of the law.

That we are *sons of God* is breathtaking. The phrase refers to the special relationship that *all* believers have with the Heavenly Father, one similar to but not identical with the relationship of Jesus and God the Father. Of course, we should understand the fact that we are sons of God in the fuller adoption language Paul used elsewhere in his letters (see Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). We could render the phrase *sons of God* as “sons and daughters of God” and do no violence to Paul’s meaning. The emphasis is on every believer’s complete inclusion into God’s family. As Christians, we are no longer in need of the guidance of the law to salvation, for we have been fully accepted into God’s family *through faith in Christ Jesus*.

Verse 27: *For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*

Baptism is a symbol of the fact that as believers we *have put on Christ*. The verb translated *put on* literally means “clothe oneself.” This imagery is interesting in light of certain practices in the ancient world. In the Roman world, the entry into manhood was sometimes marked by the young man’s receiving a new robe that was markedly different from his childhood clothing. Also the mystery religions that were particularly popular during the first century included giving the initiate a new robe as part of the ritual.

For a Jewish audience, two images were possible. First, the Essenes provided a white robe for their initiates. Also, Jewish proselyte baptism was often practiced by stripping off one’s garments and putting on fresh clothing after coming up out of the water. Early Christians sometimes adopted this practice as a symbol of putting on Christ.

Additionally, baptism was and is a powerful symbol of radical personal commitment to Christ. It portrays the fact that we have become “sons of God” (Gal. 3:26). The symbolism underscores the ethical dimension of faith. To *put on Christ* means to subject every area of thought and behavior to Him. Paul’s call here is for believers to become what they are—children of God. Thus this verse underscores the need for spiritual growth.

Verse 28: *There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or*

female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Three fundamental barriers existed among the inhabitants of the ancient world: ethnicity, social standing, and gender. In each case, one of the two distinctions listed in each pair was viewed as an indication of inferiority. For example, a Jewish man thanked God he was not born a Gentile, a woman, or a slave. Similar preconceived judgments were also evident in Greek or Hellenistic culture. Paul would not tolerate such prejudice.

The specific context of this verse is salvation and its availability to all people regardless of their race, social standing, and gender. Just as Paul did not show favoritism to the leaders in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:6), and as God Himself shows no favoritism (2:6), salvation is not reserved for or preferred for any particular group or kind of person. We need to focus on each part of verse 28.

There is no Jew or Greek. This statement represents a huge step forward from Paul’s past life as a Pharisee. When he became a Christian, the apostle did not cease to conceive of himself as a Jew. Rather, he had found the prophesied Messiah, and in Him was freed from the countless laws that he had followed as a Pharisee. In this sense then, there were still Jew and Greek, but neither group had an advantage over the other when it came to the matter of experiencing salvation. All are invited to come to Him and all who come must come in the same way—through faith and repentance.

Slave or free. Both slaves and free people continued to exist after the advent of Christianity, and the abominable practice of slavery continued with tacit acceptance in Christianity for centuries. However, as early as the New Testament period, the Christian faith struck a mighty blow for the equality of all people that would later prompt Christians to lead the way in abolishing slavery.

Male or female. We must keep in mind the context here; it is undeniably salvation. In the Jewish world women were valued more than in surrounding cultures, but even then they had an undeniably lower standing than men. In God’s kingdom, however, women are not second-class citizens. In this way, Christianity was far advanced over all other ancient religions.

Verse 29: *And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise.*

In Galatians 3:16, Paul identified Jesus as Abraham’s seed. Paul’s use of the description of believers as *Abraham’s seed* in verse 29 affirms our close relationship to Jesus by faith in

Him. The phrase *heirs according to the promise* drives home our full inclusion in the family of faith.

2. THE HEART OF JOY (GALATIANS 4:8-14)

Galatians 4:1-7 introduces us to some important and perhaps puzzling concepts. The phrase “elemental forces” (Gal. 4:3) translates a single Greek word and is key to understanding one of Paul’s major points in this passage. The term refers to elementary ideas and was used in several ways in the ancient world. It could refer to the following: (1) elements of matter (To people in the ancient world, these elements were earth, water, fire, and air.); (2) elementary or basic principles of a discipline or system of thought; (3) heavenly bodies such as the stars and planets; or (4) elemental spirits, perhaps demonic, that influenced people.

In the context of Galatians 4:1-7, Paul may have been referring to the basic principles of the law. The former life under the law was only a preparatory phase and totally inadequate for mature Christian faith. The law might serve as the basic ABCs, but the believer needed to move beyond those elementary concepts to fuller knowledge and application. Paul was calling for believers to grow as Christians. No slave of the law had the kind of intimate relationship with God that His sons possess (see 4:6).

Verse 8: *But in the past, when you didn’t know God, you were enslaved to things that by nature are not gods.*

In the past the Galatians *didn’t know God*. This sentence provides more evidence that the Christians in Galatia were largely from pagan backgrounds although they had been besieged by the false teachings of the Judaizers. Jewish converts would have known about God. The Galatian believers, however, had been *enslaved to things that by nature are not gods*. In what kind of religions had they been involved?

Several major types of religions were common in that area at the time. The old Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were still in vogue, and major cities such as Ephesus had temples to one or more of the pantheon. By the first century, however, devotion to the old religions had faded for many people. Mystery religions filled the void and were popular with their elaborate rituals, initiations, and personal, internal focus. In addition the imperial cult or emperor worship had begun with Julius Caesar, and later emperors embraced it fully and required citizens to participate as a sign of fidelity. Others were caught up in astrological lore along with the worship of celestial bodies. Finally, superstition was rife and

became a kind of religion in its own right.

None of these things were worthy of worship, but to varying degrees the Galatian believers had embraced them in their former lives. Paul’s point is they had been dedicated to things that could not bring them salvation, and he drew that point of comparison in the next verse.

Verse 9: *But now, since you know God, or rather have become known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and bankrupt elemental forces? Do you want to be enslaved to them all over again?*

The phrase *but now* brings the readers back to their present situation and the contrast with their former lives. Now they *know God*. Knowledge was an important concept for both Hebrews and Greeks. The Greek word for *knowledge*, written in English as *gnosis* [NOH siss], referred to knowledge of a special kind. In the heresy that came to be known as Gnosticism [NAHS tuh SIH zuhm], knowledge designated some kind of special information available only to those who had been initiated into their group. In the mystery religions, *gnosis* referred to the insight into the particular god or goddess of that system.

However, it is from the Hebrew background that knowledge of God takes its full meaning for Paul. Knowledge in Hebrew thought was intensely personal and even intimate. It was not merely intellectual assent or insight. Rather, it constituted a personal relationship with God that enables us to call Him “*Abba, Father*” (4:6). The fact believers had *become known by God* highlights the fact that God had entered into a personal relationship with them and intensely cared for them. He had taken the initiative in providing salvation.

Paul again used a series of questions, as in 3:1-5, to help the Galatians see their situation. Would they *turn back again to the weak and bankrupt elemental forces*? In what sense were they in danger of turning back? First, we should not understand Paul’s words as indicating they could fall away from salvation. Paul was suggesting they were turning from the truth; but he was not suggesting they could lose their salvation. By including certain rituals, such as circumcision and observing other laws, as necessary for salvation they were returning to the old, useless “system.” They would again be *enslaved* just as they had been in the past. Who in their right minds would accept slavery over freedom?

Verse 10: *You observe special days, months, seasons, and years.*

We must recall the two groups involved in this letter. The

recipients were the Galatian Christians who came from a Greek background. Paul’s opponents were Judaizers, or Jewish Christians, who were attempting to import Jewish beliefs into the gospel of grace Paul had preached. We have seen that circumcision was one of their main points. In this verse we see other Jewish elements or religious observances they apparently had insisted on including. Paul listed four.

Special days—Paul probably meant weekly observances like the Sabbath or perhaps a one-day observance like the Day of Atonement.

Months—New moon festivals were part of Jewish life. Special offerings, cessation of business, and feasts were part of such monthly festivals.

Seasons—The three annual festivals were Passover or Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

Years—This designation probably refers to celebrations like Jubilee (every 50th year) and the Sabbatical Year (every 7th year).

Paul’s prohibition of these celebrations is connected only to their inclusion in the salvation equation. No one should demand observance of these holidays in order to earn or preserve salvation. In general, however, Paul was not trying to eliminate the observance of holy days (see Rom. 14:5-6).

Verse 11: *I am fearful for you, that perhaps my labor for you has been wasted.*

“*I am fearful for you*” is one of four personal statements Paul made in Galatians 4 that indicate his deep pastoral and personal concern for them (see Gal. 4:12,19,20). To include any of the previously mentioned observances as part of the salvation equation would nullify Paul’s work. His reference to his wasted labor indicates the inclusion of these works as necessary for salvation was not a small matter.

Verse 12: *I beg you, brothers: become like me, for I also became like you. You have not wronged me;*

The phrase *become like me* is easy enough to understand, for Paul had no hesitation in saying “I can show you the right way to live the Christian life.” This demonstration he did without pride and with an appropriate understanding of his duty as a Christian leader. Each of us in positions of responsibility should be able to humbly say, “Watch me.”

The statement “*I also became like you*” probably reflects Paul’s mission strategy of becoming “all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22). He had spent time with the Galatians, and they knew him and should trust him.

Verses 13-14: *you know that previously I preached the*

gospel to you in physical weakness, and though my physical condition was a trial for you, you did not despise or reject me. On the contrary, you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself.

The reference to *physical weakness* has occasioned a great deal of speculation about the nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). Malaria, epilepsy, eye problems (Gal. 6:11) are possibilities. I have always wondered if Paul might have had a back problem that complicated his long travels. The point is that Paul was simply reminding the Galatians that even though he was physically challenged, they *did not despise or reject* him. Their care for him *as an angel of God* should be a reminder of their close relationship with the apostle. They should continue to trust and follow him.

3. GRADING THE TEACHERS (GALATIANS 4:15-20)

Verses 15-16: *What happened to this blessedness of yours? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?*

When Paul first brought the gospel to the Galatians, they received it with joy. The word *blessedness* conveys this concept. Joy comes through grace and a right relationship with God. But something had *happened* to change this former joy and blessedness. The change was in part theological. The result of the Judaizers' demand for adherence to the law was a return to the slavery of the law and the ultimate frustration that comes from a salvation based on works.

The change was also relational. The phrase *torn out your eyes* may support the suggestion that Paul perhaps had an eye problem. The Galatian Christians would have been willing to donate eyes for a transplant! While we cannot be sure that such is the precise application, we can see clearly the early devotion Paul felt from the Galatians. He no longer felt that devotion.

Verse 17: *They are enthusiastic about you, but not for any good. Instead, they want to isolate you so you will be enthusiastic about them.*

From the Greek word rendered *enthusiastic* we get the English word *zeal*. Zeal or enthusiasm can be either good or bad, and in this case it definitely represents the selfish aspect. The opponents' zeal was *not for any good* for two reasons. First, they sought to *isolate* the Galatian Christians. They were trying to persuade the Galatian believers to abandon their devotion to Paul. The second reason their zeal was

impure was that they wanted the Galatians to *be enthusiastic about them*, that is, the opponents. This personality-driven mission was completely opposite Paul's efforts to urge the Galatians to focus on Christ.

Verse 18: *Now it is always good to be enthusiastic about good—and not just when I am with you.*

The Galatians were fickle. They would be *enthusiastic about good*, that is, Paul's message about Christ, when he was with them. After his departure, however, the false teachers would succeed in altering the Galatians' affections.

Verse 19: *My children, again I am in the pains of childbirth for you until Christ is formed in you.*

Throughout the letter Paul alternated between frustration and tenderness for his audience. Here Paul expressed compassion as he addressed his readers as *my children*. The apostle sounds like a parent when we are perplexed by the differences between the lofty potential of our children and the shallow behavior in which they have engaged. As *children* the Galatians simply had not matured as they should, and that was the real frustration Paul faced.

The key phrase in this section is *until Christ is formed in you*. Growth in Christ was Paul's aim for the Galatians, but instead they had succumbed to false teachers. Paul's central teaching is that Christ is in the believer and the believer is in Christ. This intense personal relationship cannot possibly be reduced to adherence to laws. Laws attempt to reform from the outside-in. But Christ in the believer reforms from the inside-out. The difference is huge, and that is why Paul was so upset with the Galatians' failure to mature.

Verse 20: *I'd like to be with you right now and change my tone of voice, because I don't know what to do about you.*

Again, any parent could echo the words and tone of this verse. Paul was frustrated: *"I don't know what to do about you."* Paul's great desire was for the Galatians to grow in Christ and be devoted to Him. Their fondness for the opponents was driven by the opponents' deceit and personality.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 28

GALATIANS 5:1-15

THE BACKGROUND

Paul's opponents certainly appeared credible. They did not suggest wild rituals or secret words to repeat in order to be saved. Instead they simply insisted a person had to obey certain laws in order to be saved. Perhaps a relatively new Christian, like one of the Galatians, could see no harm in such a requirement.

For Paul, however, the harm was immeasurable, for insisting on any laws as a requirement for salvation nullified grace. Salvation either was by grace or by law. It could not be both. Paul had tried the way of law, and he had been a first-class legalist. He knew, therefore, the frustration and the inadequacy of trying to earn one's way into heaven. Paul had met Christ and learned He had provided through the cross the gift of salvation. One could receive that gift by faith, and by faith alone.

Such is Paul's argument in the first four chapters of the Letter to the Galatians. The apostle had quoted from the Old Testament to bolster his arguments. That repository of laws actually bore witness to the necessity of salvation by God's grace through faith. Abraham had received salvation prior to the law. His own family served as an allegory of the freedom of salvation by faith as opposed to the slavery of law (Gal. 4:21-31).

For the remainder of the letter Paul emphasized the implications or consequences of salvation by faith. He desperately wanted the Galatians to accept fully the freedom that arises from salvation by faith and still was perplexed that they would submit to any legal system.

1. FREEDOM FROM CHAINS (GALATIANS 5:1A)

This half-verse summarizes Paul's major point in his letter thus far. The implications of salvation by faith through grace are so freeing that Paul simply could not understand why the Galatians would submit to any lesser and enslaving theology.

Verse 1a: *Christ has liberated us into freedom.*

There are five Greek words in this statement, and two of them deal with freedom. A somewhat awkward, but accurate translation could be "Christ freed us into freedom." The verse flows out of and concludes the preceding allegory

concerning Sarah and Hagar, the former a free woman who bore a son into freedom, the latter a slave who bore a son into slavery. Paul presented the Galatians with a clear choice: slavery or freedom.

Freedom was a cherished concept in Paul's time, for slavery in the Roman world was common. The Greek readers of this letter would have appreciated the possibility of freedom in Christ, for some of them likely were slaves. For the Jewish readers also this call to freedom was important. Their history was rife with stories of slavery and the struggle for freedom. Throughout the history of God's people, the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans were among the peoples who had put their heels to Jewish necks. However, in Christ they could all now be truly free. The apostle had been contrasting legalism and faith as means of experiencing salvation. Legalism cannot save; it can only produce slavery. In contrast, salvation by God's grace through faith leads to freedom.

In one sentence of five Greek words, Paul summarized his letter thus far, asserting Christians are free and Christ is the Source of their freedom. Christians are free from sin and death, and they are free for God's service, for growing more like Christ, for living as God's Word teaches, and for following the Spirit's leadership. We are free because of what Christ has done for us and given to us.

2. FREEDOM FROM THE LAW (GALATIANS 5:1B-6)

The preceding part of verse 1 presented a broad and breathtaking assertion. This section begins with an imperative based on that assertion. This format was common for Paul. He established a theological reality and then gave directions based on that truth.

Verse 1b: *Therefore stand firm and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

The instruction *stand firm* is obviously an imperative, but it deserves some attention because what Paul commands is so different from the way the Galatians had behaved. They had been hypnotized (Gal. 3:1) and were vacillating between law and grace, between fidelity to Paul and to his opponents. They needed to make up their minds and take a firm stand!

Freedom or *a yoke of slavery* was their choice. The decision could not be more clear-cut. The Galatians, or more likely the opponents themselves, may have claimed they were not forsaking grace but were merely insisting on some obvious benchmarks of obedience, such as circumcision.

Remember, the issue here is salvation, not simply the way a Christian should behave. Paul was clear in his letters about lifestyle, sin, and right conduct in a believer's life. He was equally clear that salvation is solely by faith and not one single requirement can be added to it. To do so would be to nullify the power of grace and the sufficiency of faith. The Galatians could not sit on the fence.

Verse 2: *Take note! I, Paul, tell you that if you get circumcised, Christ will not benefit you at all.*

Paul assumed the full authority of his apostleship in this verse in two ways. First, he used another imperative: *take note*. Second, he further emphasized his authority with the words: *I, Paul*. He had the right to address them and to correct them. He sounded much like a parent who has heard enough from a child, and simply says, "Because I said so." The language is also legal in tone, as if Paul were in a courtroom and stating clearly his position. He wanted it known that he had warned them forcefully.

One of the opponents' main issues was circumcision. From earlier in the letter we know they also enticed the Galatians to observe feasts connected to the Jewish calendar (Gal. 4:10). But circumcision was probably their major emphasis. After all, it was the earliest sign of the covenant and was required for a non-Jewish male to convert fully to Judaism.

The phrase *if you get circumcised* seems to indicate the Galatians had not yet done so. Paul warned the consequences of doing so would be dire, not simply because of the physical act of circumcision but because of what it represented. To submit to circumcision as a means of salvation meant: *Christ will not benefit you at all*. The Galatians might have responded they were still followers of Christ and still loved Him. Submitting to circumcision as a requirement for salvation, however, meant they were taking the path of law in trying to gain heaven. Again, they had to choose either to take the path of law and works or to take the path of grace and faith. They could not take both.

Verse 3: *Again I testify to every man who gets circumcised that he is obligated to keep the entire law.*

The legal tone continues with Paul's words: *I testify*. Paul was concerned the Galatians know fully what they were getting into if they chose to listen to the opponents. Here is the real issue with circumcision: if you cross the line and falsely claim that it is essential for salvation, then you have chosen the path of law. You, therefore, are *obligated to keep the entire law*. Again, the Galatians may have objected

they were not interested in keeping the whole law. In that case, however, the Galatians would have no choice if they embraced legalism. They would be *obligated* to take on the full consequences of their decision and that meant keeping the entire law. That obligation, of course, is impossible to fulfill. So grace is the only way of salvation.

Verse 4: *You who are trying to be justified by the law are alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace!*

That the central issue is salvation, not merely behavior, is clear from the phrase *trying to be justified by the law*. The phrase *to be justified* means to have a right standing with God. The desire to be in right relationship with God was prompting the Galatians to submit to circumcision, which in turn meant they would have to embrace the law in its entirety. The results of their decision were twofold and were an extension and further explanation of how “Christ will not benefit” (5:2).

First, to embrace the law as the means of salvation meant they were *alienated from Christ*. The word translated *alienated* literally means “to annul” or “to cut off.” The Galatians could not claim to be followers of Christ if they tried to follow the law for salvation.

The second result is they have *fallen from grace*. This phrase does not mean they had lost their salvation. If they were ever saved by grace, which is the only way they could have ever truly been saved, then they could not lose their salvation. Rather Paul meant the Galatians were abandoning the grace-way of salvation—which is the only way of salvation—if they pursued circumcision as a necessary addendum for salvation. Grace is either fully sufficient or it is not. One thing is clear, it cannot be diluted by any works and still remain grace.

Paul’s fervor here and throughout the letter is the result of his experiences. He was formerly a dedicated legalist and quite convinced he could obey any law and make up for any failure by his abundance of good works. After meeting Christ, however, he experienced grace and realized his former theology of salvation by works was as worthless as garbage (Phil. 3:8). Law-oriented salvation failed the test completely.

Verse 5: *For by the Spirit we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness from faith.*

The *Spirit* is an important theme in Galatians. Paul referred to the third Person of the Trinity in 3:1-5; 4:6; and 4:29. The Spirit gives the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is a

personal Guide in ways the written code is not. The Spirit is the antithesis of the law. As Paul would write elsewhere: “the letter kills, but the Spirit produces life” (2 Cor. 3:6). This reality is one of the great benefits and blessings of the Christian life.

Verse 6: *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; what matters is faith working through love.*

Returning to the specific example of *circumcision*, Paul indicated it was neither necessary, nor an impediment to salvation. If a person is *in Christ Jesus*, then circumcision accomplishes nothing. The phrase *in Christ* is the key, and that relationship has nothing to do with the condition of any part of our bodies.

Dissension threatened churches in Paul’s time; it threatens churches today. The cure is *faith working through love*. Occasionally I will hear someone claim that getting to heaven is simply a matter of loving your neighbor as yourself, and I agree that is certainly how Jesus summed up living in a pleasing manner to God (Matt. 19:16-19; Luke 10:25-28). We deceive ourselves, however, if we think we can accomplish it in our own strength. Pride is far too strong without the presence of Christ. *Faith* is “energized”—the English word is derived from the Greek word translated *working*—by *love*. Faith is manifested by works of love, a point particularly important to James (Jas. 1:22; 2:17). This behavior is possible by the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the life of the believer.

3. FREEDOM FROM THE EXTERNAL (GALATIANS 5:7-12)

This section represents one final direct appeal to the Galatians to return to correct teaching. Paul’s frustration and anxiety reached its apex here. From this point forward, he moved into more gentle and practical application of his teachings but not before one final expression of blistering anger.

Verse 7: *You were running well. Who prevented you from obeying the truth?*

Paul often employed athletic metaphors such as *you were running well* to describe the Christian life (see also 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 3:13-14; 2 Tim. 4:7). The image of discipline appealed to him. Furthermore, the Christian life must be characterized by perseverance. We do not finish a race in fits and starts but by steadily putting one foot in front of the other. The Galatians had been running well during

Paul’s time with them and for some undetermined time afterward.

The word *prevented* appropriately means to “cut off” as in one runner cutting in front of another during a race. This experience, of course, might lead to a runner stumbling or not running as fast as possible. The opponents had harmed the Galatians by preventing them from *obeying the truth*. The Galatians had swerved from the right path of faith and grace.

Verse 8: *This persuasion did not come from Him who called you.*

Their present *persuasion* was that obeying some law was necessary for salvation. This idea represented a complete about-face from what Paul had taught them. God, or *Him who called you*, does not change; therefore, this new *persuasion* must have come from human beings. It must be rejected.

Verse 9: *A little yeast leavens the whole lump of dough.*

Yeast and its effect in leavening a *lump of dough* was a common image in that first-century culture. Jesus used it to describe the presence of the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:33), and there the leaven is good, for the kingdom of God permeates the world and can influence every part of it. The negative connotation of leaven is more common (see Matt. 16:11-12). The idea is that evil influences can pervade a person or group. The persuasion of the opponents threatened not only the right theology of the churches in Galatia but also the right practices.

Verse 10: *In the Lord I have confidence in you that you will not accept any other view. But whoever it is who is troubling you will pay the penalty.*

Paul used the words *in the Lord I have confidence* to express a fixed assurance. Although we get the impression in the letter that the Galatians were on the knife-edge of a radical change and Paul was not sure which way they would go, here he attempted to persuade them by expressing confidence they would exercise sound thinking. When presented with the truth, surely they would see their error and turn from the ruinous teachings of the opponents.

Verse 11: *Now brothers, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.*

Based on our reading of the letter, who could possibly claim that part of Paul’s strategy was to *preach circumcision*, and why would he have done such a thing? This passage has been debated a great deal and the interpretive options are

varied. One possibility is that the opponents simply claimed Paul was not against circumcision, which he was not, and that he himself was circumcised, which he was (Phil. 3:4-5). Paul's own example bolstered the opponents' insistence on circumcision.

In any case the opponents had distorted Paul's teaching and example. The issue was never whether or not to be circumcised. Rather, the issue was whether circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul certainly never claimed it was essential to salvation. In fact, he vehemently argued the opposite.

The real focus of this verse is Paul's question: "*Why am I still persecuted?*" Without question the opponents were undermining Paul and belittling, or persecuting him, before the Galatians. But such persecution made no sense if they claimed he were actually on their side with regard to the issue of circumcision. The fact that he was *persecuted* proved that in no way did he condone the opponents' claims. He was not ever on their side.

Verse 12: *I wish those who are disturbing you might also get themselves castrated!*

In this verse Paul did not mean any literal harm to those disturbing the Galatians. Rather, the apostle believed the gospel itself was at stake. He felt frustrated and employed sarcasm. Although Paul affirmed the Galatians had started out well and expressed confidence they would not turn from what he had taught them, he also recognized the gospel itself was at stake and tackled the issue head-on in several statements that reveal how greatly this situation had upset him.

4. FREEDOM FROM OURSELVES (GALATIANS 5:13-15)

Verse 13: *For you are called to freedom, brothers; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.*

The opponents were enslaved by submitting to the law with its never-ending demands. Paul's caustic suggestion in verse 12 highlights the extreme difference between the two camps. The preposition *for* introduces this contrast.

The phrase *called to freedom* echoes the theme of 5:1. As *brothers* they were to stand with Paul, for they shared the same Lord. Again, this freedom is the hallmark of the letter. Throughout his ministry, one of the great challenges to Paul's teaching was that his insistence on grace would lead people to use it as *an opportunity for the flesh*. If we are going to be

forgiven anyway, then why not sin so that grace may abound is one way of phrasing the argument.

Two truths prevent us from going down that sorry path. First, Paul never undermined the importance of good behavior. He wrote extensively about it. The apostle simply denied any amount of works, or any work, contributes to salvation. Salvation is by faith alone. Second, those who do not trust Paul's theology to lead to a life of right behavior are underestimating the power of grace and the strength of a right relationship with God through faith. God's acceptance of me does not lead me to seek ways to abuse that relationship; rather, it motivates and frees me to serve Him in all that I think and do and say. Because of His great love for me, I want to use my freedom in positive ways.

Verse 14: *For the entire law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.*

This verse, from Leviticus 19:18, echoes Jesus' teaching. Again, we cannot create this love by our own act of will. We are conduits of God's love, agents of His grace. We cannot love as we should without the presence of Christ in our lives. Apart from Christ, such a lifestyle is beyond our strength.

Verse 15: *But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.*

The Galatians, by embracing a divisive and misleading theology, were in danger of extreme internal discord. The constraint was love founded in good theology. God has made Himself clear. Our task is to love and believe and live in the right way and to serve God in complete freedom.