

Galatians 1 - Introduction - "Why was this Letter Written?"

It seems that when people think of the early church there is this romantic idea that in those days the church and the people involved in it were of a more pure heart with pure motives and a pure love toward the Lord and others.

And who could argue with such a notion when we look at the account of Luke who records in the book of Acts where we see at the outset of the church a number of exciting things happening to it to where people are getting saved and lives are being changed and the unity and the peace of the church seems to be unshakable.

On the day of Pentecost, shortly after the ascension of Jesus Christ back to the right hand of the Father, there is a tremendous move of the Spirit as Peter preaches to a host of people from around the known world who were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate this special holy day.

He explains to his mostly Jewish listeners how the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the Scriptures as the Messiah who came to take away the sins of the world. After expounding on the Scriptures and challenging this large crowd we see their response.

ACT 2:36-38- "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

It was on this day that some 3,000 people repented of their sins and embraced this Messiah Jesus who was crucified and rose from the dead to ensure our salvation.

But what is fascinating is what follows this account in the book of Acts because it gives us a glimpse into the attitude and certainly the changed hearts of these people who, only days before, were staunch Jews, and Gentiles who were converts to Judaism, and who had no intention of following any belief system outside of their understanding of the O.T. Scriptures wherein they adhered exclusively to the law and the prophets.

Essentially overnight we see a move toward embracing a Messiah and His messengers who were teaching strange and new things

about what it meant to come into a personal relationship with the living God.

Imagine yourselves, after following Christ and the N.T. Scriptures most of your life, all of sudden being told that there is a new way and a better way. And in the span of a day you leave it all behind to follow this new way.

Their heads must have been spinning. And yet, what we clearly see in the account of Acts concerning this mass conversion to Christ on the day of Pentecost, is that it was nothing short of the work of the Spirit of God.

To suggest that Peter convinced these people, who spent their lives dedicated to the law and the prophets, by simply swaying them with his words about an alleged Messiah who was nailed to a cross as a common criminal, is to make Peter into a sort of Pied Piper who hypnotized people into blindly following him.

This could not be further from the truth. Peter had no sway over this crowd. Something deeper touched them. What touched them was the love and mercy of God as the Spirit opened their hearts and minds to see their need for this Messiah who did in fact fulfill their very Scriptures that Peter was expounding that day.

Their choice of Jesus Christ was genuine. And therefore their love for the Lord and each other was genuine. And so, Luke continues to convey this wave of love and peace which swept over these people as the Lord was coming upon them and opening up their lives to accept this new life in Christ.

ACT 2:42-47 - "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Isn't this what we long for? Isn't this what we dream of; to be part of a movement of the Spirit of God whereby all different types of people come together in the bond of love and the motivation of the Spirit? What Christian wouldn't love to be part of a group where

they see people daily being saved and added to the church, daily seeing many wonders and miraculous signs, and being filled with awe at such things?

It's a taste of heaven, if you will. Excitement begets excitement. And you can be sure that the excitement of this time in Jerusalem was contagious. But there's something about this time in Church history which must not go unnoticed, and that is that it was not Peter, it was not the apostles, nor even the 3,000 who were added to the church on the day of Pentecost, which was the impetus of this movement and excitement.

Again, it was nothing short of the Holy Spirit of God touching lives as only He could. To place the success of that day on the shoulders of any man is to make the foundation of the beginning of the church a man-made phenomenon.

Mere excitement will only take us so far in our walk with Christ, even the excitement of witnessing the move of the Spirit of God. The early church would learn this as well as reality began to kick in.

When the numbers of people being added began to dwindle, as the amount of miracles there in Jerusalem were no longer as common place as they were, these Christians were forced to look to something other than their experience to carry them through.

And this is my point. Simply because the early church had many of these advantages it did not preclude them from living by faith and faithfully adhering to the word of God as their standard by which they must live unto the Lord to His glory.

If they thought that life as a Christian was going to be a continual high where only exciting things were a part of their experience they would soon learn that the Lord expected them to understand that the enemy would see to it that that high would sink to new depths.

Satan was not going to sit idly by and let these new converts to Christ think they were living at some sort of spiritual Disney World where the thrill rides never stop. They would soon learn what it meant to be sold out to Christ as opposition from the world and their own sinful natures would begin to challenge their dedication to Christ and each other.

This is the reason we should never think that returning to a by-gone era is our only hope of regaining that sense of awe and

wonder at what it means to be a Christian. It was only a matter of a short time when the Christians in Jerusalem began to grumble and complain and find fault with each other over something as silly as who was being fed and who was being neglected at the table, as is recorded in Act 6:1.

Why didn't their excitement carry them through that incident? Why didn't the miracles and wonders which they witnessed help them to overcome any feelings of anger and jealousy? Because real life includes real disappointments. But it's what we do with real life which separates the men from the boys as it relates to our walk and witness for Christ.

It's easy to be a Christian when you're living at spiritual Disney World, but when you leave the park is where the rubber meets the road. And this is where the Lord wants all of us. It doesn't mean He doesn't give us those special times, or that we shouldn't appreciate those special experiences, but to depend on them for our motivation to love and serve Christ will only create an environment for wanting to leave the cause.

It didn't make any difference that these early Christians were only separated from Christ's earthly ministry by only a few weeks or months or years. Some of these people actually had the privilege to personally follow the Lord as He taught and moved among them.

But it would not be exclusively those former times of fellowship which kept them going. It would be their devotion to following Christ as the Spirit led them through this world, according to the word of God.

To lose sight of this truth is to place ourselves in a very precarious position. Because to lose sight of this as we try and depend on some sort of a man made "psyching of ourselves out" approach to life, is to make our walk with Christ a fleshly venture instead of a walking in the Spirit.

And yes, believe it or not, all of this is what Paul is going to be addressing in this letter to the Galatians. These Galatian Christians were only separated from the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ by some 20 years. And yet, in that short span of time they would find themselves tempted to actually embrace a gospel which was entirely different from the one Paul preached to them.

To suggest that the early church had an advantage of being so close to the ministry of Christ is to miss the problems all human beings

contend with and that is the sinful nature we all possess and the temptation to give up when the least bit of resistance is encountered.

You'll remember that it was the church in Jerusalem, primarily those 3,000 original converts, together with the many who came to Christ after the day of Pentecost, who found themselves on the receiving end of persecution which was led, in no small part, by the man who is writing this letter to the Galatians, then called Saul.

"The thrill ride," if we can call it that, was over and the church in Jerusalem was about to be tested in a way that you and I can only imagine. How many of us have ever considered being forced out of our homes by angry people who want to destroy us simply because of our faith in Christ?

How many of us could dream of not being able to get a job in town because the merchants have all been told we are vermin who will only bring this community down? How many of us have considered what it would be like to be forced to pack everything up and leave the area hoping to find work elsewhere, knowing that people like Saul and others will not be content to let us get away so easily as they follow us to other areas, making life as miserable as possible?

How many of us could conceive of our friends being killed in our very presence because we embrace and promote the Lord Jesus Christ? And yet the friends of Stephen could never have imagined that his life would come to such a brutal end as stoning simply because people disagreed with his understanding of the one true Messiah.

It's during these times when we, either depend on Christ and move forward in the truth, or we slip back into our own understanding and begin changing the rules midstream where we jeopardize the truth and very character of God who has loved us with an everlasting love.

How is it possible that the Galatians could have embraced Christ and yet be accused by Paul of now seemingly to welcome a false teaching regarding their very eternal futures?

This is what amazed Paul as well when he wrote at the beginning of this letter, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all." (GAL 1:6-7)

Much of what Paul writes to these Galatians in this letter deals with this specific problem, but it goes beyond this to question their understanding, or maybe we should say their misunderstanding of the grace of God and what it means to be justified before our Lord through His grace.

We need to keep in mind, from an historical context, that Paul is writing to these people around 49 AD. It came at a time when there were some Jews who had accepted this Messiah Jesus as the true Messiah, and yet they questioned whether or not they should leave behind their religious heritage as just so much extra baggage.

Many of these Jews would have been considered very important people in the community of believers as well as in the community of the general population. We know for example that there were Pharisees who eventually came to Christ and would have been respected by both believing and unbelieving Jews.

And so, their opinions would have carried a great deal of weight. In fact, it was this very thing which caused a great uproar in both Jerusalem and Antioch where these Jews began to question whether or not their Jewish heritage should be totally abandoned.

Their perspective was that the Jewish traditions could and should be melded with the teachings of this Jewish Messiah. They were not perceived as exclusively opposing ideas to these people at this time. It was during this time that many commentators believe the church at Galatia was also experiencing the very same questions. Here's what Luke records for us in Acts.

ACT 15:1-6 "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the

Law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question."

In Paul's mind there was no question, and as we'll learn later there was no question even among the rest of the apostles. But the fact that these prominent believers among the party of the Pharisees would raise this question brought some weight to their claims and was a potential dividing point on which the rest of the church could go either way.

It had to be dealt with, not only in Judea and Antioch, but also in the far flung reaches of Galatia where evidently this same sort of teaching had arrived.

Some suggest that this letter to the Galatians actually preceded this "adding of the law to the gospel" problem which came to Paul's attention in Antioch. And so, it would make sense that if this was a problem in Galatia, and was now a problem in Paul's own backyard in Antioch, it was time to go down to Jerusalem and meet with the other apostles and deal with it once and for all. But first a letter needed to be written to those believers in Galatia.

Now, when people study this letter to the Galatians there is the tendency to only look at this as a letter dealing with legalism. And it is true that legalism is at the heart of what was taking place in the church at Galatia. It's hard to escape the fact that when you begin requiring people to be circumcised to be saved that there is a definite move toward legalism.

The problem is figuring out what this legalism is really all about and the motivation for this legalism. It is very easy for us to place our cultural understanding of legalism on this situation and conclude that these Jews were only trying to place unnecessary requirements on other Christians as some sort of power play or intimidation.

But upon closer examination this does not seem to be the case. What was happening in Galatia and in other parts of the Near East at this time was a desire from, for the most part, earnest and sincere people who confessed faith in Christ, to be the best Christians they could be.

For these Pharisees, for example, to leave all of their past behind, by cutting themselves off from much of their former ways, was no insignificant thing. And so, to suggest that their only motivation

was to divide the body of Christ, or to create a new religion is not quite accurate.

It doesn't mean they were any less culpable for teaching such heresy, but it's important to keep in mind the times in which this letter was written and some of the events surrounding such problems which included adding the law to the grace of God as a means of gaining and holding onto salvation.

Scott McKnight in his commentary on Galatians makes an excellent point when he says that "the Judaizers Paul faced were not (or did not see themselves) as opponents of Christianity."

Rather, as Paul points out in Gal.3:3, they were trying to perfect or make complete their faith in Christ by adding the law. For these Judaizers it wasn't Christ versus the law, it was Christ and the law.

But as McKnight points out it wasn't just a matter of the law being added to the gospel to complete their salvation. Again, we need to understand the mindset of the Jews at this time in history.

Keep in mind that the Jews have been taught all of their lives that they are a chosen people by God. They are a people who are to be separate from the world. They were the only people as a nation who were given special revelation from God which is the Old Testament Scriptures.

They believed this and they lived it as though they were the only ones deserving such special attention from God. But it wasn't just a religious thing for them, it was a national feeling they had, not unlike the nationalism people in this country felt during the Second World War.

People of every religious and ethnic background were proud to be Americans during those days. They felt special, they felt united under a common cause and they felt God was on their side.

Well, this is part of what it meant to be a Jew in the days of Paul. And in those days many Jews came to faith in Christ and they brought their Old Testament Scriptures to bear on their new identity in Christ. They realize that their Messiah was spoken of through these Scriptures. They realize that Jesus Himself said, "salvation is from the Jews." (JOH 4:22)

And so, in their own minds, they begin to come to the conclusion that salvation is really meant to be more of a Jewish thing, a

national identity, that is also to be accepted by the Gentile believers, for their own spiritual good.

Even Paul acknowledges the fact that the Jewish nation is a special people with special privileges the rest of the world didn't experience.

ROM 9:4-5 "..... Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."

Imagine being a Jew and realizing that Jesus Christ Himself had ordained from eternity past that through your nation, Israel, would come the Messiah. But here's where the breakdown came. They took this truth and began to reason that since God chose them to be the ancestral line for the Son of Man that everything related to their heritage, including the law, must be important enough to include in this salvation found in Christ.

Becoming a Christian therefore, for many of these Jews, was not just receiving forgiveness of sins, it was a new order of nationalism. It was an extension or an advancement of their former glory as Israel. And so, "we are looking at a form of cultural imperialism." (McKnight)

The Jews who were promoting the adding of the law to their new found faith in Christ were actually trying to impose more than just the law as an identification to a nationalistic icon. In many cases, they were sincerely trying to bring a moralism, or a holiness which they felt Gentiles couldn't achieve on their own since Gentiles didn't have the advantage of growing up with the law.

For example, when we look at the dietary laws of Israel we see them as a rigid way of trying to please God, or maybe just a way to eat better. But for a Jew, it wasn't just a dietary issue, "they saw it as piety." (McKnight) They saw it as a means of expressing their love for the Lord.

In an odd sort of way there were Jews who felt that to exclude the law as a way to help former pagans grow in Christ was to hamstring the ability of these Gentile believers to mature in the faith. Now, most certainly the law can point to moral goals, which in themselves are not bad, but to wrongly force those laws that were fulfilled in Christ on people, is Paul's point of contention.

His contention is that a law will never be a substitute for the Holy Spirit. You can't take the law and make someone moral or holy with it. At best you might use it as an example, but even there unless the Spirit of God indwells you it only becomes a mechanical way of trying to attain righteousness. That is what we call walking in the flesh, being performance oriented.

Paul wants them walking in the Spirit as they rely upon Christ. And this is what he points out in this letter.

GAL 3:2-5 "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing - if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?"

As we'll see as we study through this letter, Paul is not putting down the law. After all it was given by God for the good of Israel. But the way in which the Jews were trying to use the law is really at the crux of the matter.

Some of these Jews felt that to be a good Christian you really need to be a good Jew, you need to be identified with the national and moral norms of the nation of Israel. Thus you actually become complete as a Christian only as you submit to the law of God.

Can you begin to see how Paul was very concerned with this? They were not just advocating their own desire to observe certain aspects of the law. I mean, even Paul did this.

On a variety of occasions we see Paul observing the Jewish feast of Passover, or Pentecost. On occasion he took certain Jewish vows and participated in certain Jewish events. But he did so, not because it made him a better Christian, but because it allowed him to use those things to better identify with his Jewish brethren so he could bring them the gospel. Thus he became all things to all men in that respect.

But he never advocated that what he was doing with these Jewish practices that other believers should do as a way to be a better Christian. He would abhor such a notion. And this is why he takes such a hard line here in this letter.

To add anything to the grace and mercy of God found in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross is to essentially say that

what Christ accomplished on that cross was not sufficient. Like vitamins, you need to supplement your salvation experience with the law to make it effectual and dynamic.

If you really want to be a strong Christian you owe it to yourself to become circumcised, you need to change your diet back to that prescribed in the law, and you need to start observing the Jewish calendar of events which God laid down in the law. If you fail to do these things you prove yourself not a true believer.

If God has given us these things how could they be bad? Again, it's not a matter of being bad or good. It's a matter of being true or false as it pertains to our salvation and the way we attain it.

How does this apply to us today? How do Christians today find themselves adding to the gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that they blur the true meaning of the gospel of grace? And if certain segments of what we call the church of Christ on earth today are promoting such additions do they also come under the curse Paul speaks to these Galatians?

Are any of us in danger of possibly perverting the one true gospel of grace? Are there movements within the church-at-large that we should be careful to understand as not preaching a true gospel? And by that I mean movements even within what some might call Protestant and Evangelical, and maybe even fundamental groups.

And if so, how did they become bewitched as Paul puts it in Gal. 3:1? These are questions we are going to pursue in this study. We will look at the issues of legalism in the church. We will examine what it means to have liberties in Christ. We will study Paul's perspective on how the law should be used.

But above all we will always come back to Paul's major point which is to effect all these issues and more. It's found in this very letter.

GAL 5:13-16 "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

