

# COMMENTARY

## I. LETTER OPENING (GALATIANS 1:1-9)

### A. Prescript (1:1-5)

#### BEHIND THE TEXT

1:1-5

Galatians begins, as do all ancient Greco-Roman letters, with a three-part prescript: senders, recipients, and greetings (see White 1986). Paul expands and adapts these, anticipating concerns to be further developed in each letter. Here he claimed that his call to be **an apostle** was

- not from men nor by man,
- but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Paul used similar antithetical constructions (**not x, but y**) throughout Galatians (→ 1:12, 17; 2:6-7; 4:7, 8-9, 14, 31; 5:6, 13; 6:13, 15). Such formulations reflect Jewish influences on his rhetoric. Speculation about supposed charges by his opponents is unhelpful (Witherington 1998a, 6 n. 6; Matera 1992, 41; → Introduction).

Paul's older Jewish contemporary Philo credits Moses with a similar claim: "I did not of my own free will choose to superintend and preside over public affairs, nor did I receive the office through appointment by some other of humankind, but when God by clear oracles . . . made evident his will to me . . ." (*Virtues* 63; translation by Witherington 1998a, 73; for Hellenistic parallels: see Boring, Berger, and Colpe 1995, 460).

Acts (7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1, 4; 13:9; 22:7, 13; 26:14) indicates that Paul's name in Hebrew was Saul. As a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25-28), **Paul** (*Paulos*: *little* or *small*) probably had a three-part name (*praenomen*, *nomen*, and *cognomen*). If Paul was not his nickname, it was likely his family name (*cognomen*). We are never told his full name (Witherington 1998a, 72). He may have borne both Greek and Hebrew names from birth.

**Paul** identified himself as **an apostle**. In Judaism after his time the Hebrew equivalent, *shaliach*, applied to a temporary envoy, who represented "in his own person the person and rights" of the one who commissioned him (Rengstorf 1964a, 415). Paul's use of **apostle** for a permanent, divinely appointed missionary may be its earliest instance in Greek (Witherington 1998a, 70).

It remains uncertain precisely where in Galatia the **churches** Paul addressed were situated (→ Introduction). Knowing the ethnic and geographic identities would not significantly affect our interpretation. Stereotypes being what they are, not all Gauls were foolish (→ 3:1), nor all Cretans liars (Titus 1:5-14).

Paul's familiar Christian greeting—**Grace and peace** (Gal 1:2)—co-opts and changes both Greco-Roman and Jewish conventions. Only a slight spelling difference distinguishes the customary Greco-Roman "Greetings" from Paul's **Grace**. But he invested the Greek word with a theological force it had acquired only in the LXX. In secular Greek it referred to the graciousness and charm of a beautiful woman as well as to the disposition to goodwill and generosity (Spicq 1994, 3:500).

**Jesus Christ** is the centerpiece of Paul's theology. The formulation **Lord Jesus Christ** presumes the early Christian confession, "Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11). In Greco-Roman practice, the title *kyrios*, **Lord**, was a term of respect for human masters, as well as a designation for divine beings. Paul and other early Christians consistently read *kyrios* in the LXX (in which it replaced *Yahweh*—the divine name of Israel's God) as references to Jesus (see Matt 3:3; 21:9; Mark 1:3; 11:9; Luke 1:17, 76; 3:4; John 1:23; Acts 2:21; 15:17; Rom 10:13; 15:11).

Paul described the salvation Christ brought as **rescue . . . from the present evil age** (Gal 1:4) based on assumptions adapted from the two-age doctrine of Jewish apocalyptic (see 2 Esd [= 4 Ezra] 6:7-10; 2 Bar. 15:7-8). This worldview contrasted the fading, present evil world-order with the new righteous order God was bringing (see Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 3:22).

### Further Reading on Apocalyptic

- Collins, John Joseph. 1998. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Rev. ed. Biblical Resource Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hanson, Paul D. 1979. *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*. Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Fortress.

- Reddish, Mitchell G., ed. 1990. *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Rowland, Christopher. 1982. *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*. New York: Crossroad.
- Russell, D. S. 1964. *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic: 200 BC—AD 100*. Philadelphia: Westminster.

## IN THE TEXT

### I. Senders (vv 1-2a)

■ **1-2a** Ancient letters always placed the name of their senders first—the opposite of modern convention. Eight of Paul’s letters mention co-senders (1 Corinthians; 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 Thessalonians; 2 Thessalonians; Philemon). In Galatians, they remain anonymous, called only **all the brothers with me**. In Phil 4:21-22, Paul distinguished “the brothers who are with me” from the other believers in the city from which he wrote. In Philippians he probably referred to missionary colleagues (e.g., Ellicott 1863, 3) as opposed to nearby Christians in general. And this may also have been the case in Galatians (Betz 1979, 40). But it is possible that Paul referred to delegates from Galatia who had come to him and were being sent back with the letter (Stirewalt 2003, 94-97).

We cannot know to what extent Paul’s co-senders played any role in the letter’s actual composition. In Galatians, he wrote almost entirely in the first person singular (“I”). In 1 Thessalonians, which names Silas and Timothy as co-senders (1:1), the first person plural (“we”) dominates. But this does not seem to indicate co-authorship (see 1 Thess 2:17—3:5).

In Gal 6:11-18, Paul mentioned writing in his “own hand.” In antiquity, professional scribes took dictation. Perhaps, one of the unnamed **brothers** served as Paul’s amanuensis, much as Tertius did in Romans (see 16:22). Undoubtedly, Paul discussed the problems in Galatia with his colleagues, even if he alone put their consensus into words.

In the prescript of most Pauline letters (except Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon), Paul further identified himself as **an apostle** (see Rengstorf 1964a; Lightfoot 1874, 92-101). The verbal noun **apostle** refers to one sent to represent another. Paul’s mission was taking the gospel to Gentiles (1:15-16; 2:8; Rom 11:13; 2 Cor 5:19; 1 Thess 2:4-9).

Paul claimed to have become **an apostle** through the call of the risen Christ (Gal 1:12, 16; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:9). Acts generally restricts the title to the Twelve (1:21-26; but see 14:4, 14). But Paul’s broader definition allowed him to apply the title not only to himself but also to others not among the Twelve, including:

- Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7),

- Barnabas (1 Cor 9:1-6),
- James (→ Gal 1:19; see 1 Cor 15:7), and
- perhaps others (see Phillips 2009, 146 n. 51).

At his call, Paul received the essential content of his gospel (Gal 1:12-13) and the obligation to preach it (1 Cor 9:16). Like an OT prophet (see Isa 6:8; 61:1), **an apostle** spoke in behalf of God (see Bühner 1990, 143-44), as an ambassador (2 Cor 5:18-20) representing “the foreign policy of God.”

Paul claimed that God called (see Gal 1:15; Rom 1:1) and **sent** him. If his use of the term **apostle** was unprecedented, it almost certainly called for clarification. He needed to explain that he was not merely the representative of the church in Antioch (Acts 13:2-3; Witherington 1998a, 71) or any other merely human agency. He represented only the Highest Authority.

Many commentators think Paul’s claim was controversial. They assume Paul’s antithetically formulated assertions defend his right to the title **apostle** against contrary claims by his opponents. Others question this reading: Why did he nowhere else in the letter explicitly apply the title **apostle** to himself? (Contrast Rom 1:1, 5; 11:13; 1 Cor 1:1, 17; 4:9; 9:1, 2, 5; 15:9.) And why in Gal 1:17, 19 and 2:8 (→) did he not assert his apostolic status explicitly when he had the opportunity? Instead, he omitted the term, when asserting it might have strengthened his claim, had he needed it.

Perhaps, like Philo’s Moses, Paul described his office both negatively and positively in the interests of clarity (see Bullinger 1898, 405). His repetitive style merely appropriated the parallelism common in the OT.

On either reading, Paul claimed his calling to be **an apostle** came neither **from** nor **by** any human, but **by** divine authorization. Grammatically, Paul’s antithetical repetition is an example of rhetorical pleonasm—redundancy in the interests of clarity (explained—and illustrated!). That is, he repeats his single point positively and negatively to be sure he was understood, and not misunderstood. If Paul made a single point, the variation between the plural **men** and singular **man** has no particular significance (so Arichea and Nida 1976, 4). He forcefully disallowed any human source for his apostolic call—direct or indirect.

Paul’s specific style of antithesis (*enantiosis*) is a kind of pleonasm that makes an “affirmation by contraries” involving opposites (Bullinger 1898, 718). That is, his point was in the positive half—his claim to a divine calling (see Rom 1:1). He frequently insisted upon the divine character of his apostolate and message (see Rom 15:15-19; 1 Cor 2:4, 13; 1 Thess 1:5; 2:4, 13). The human vs. divine antithesis is hardly unique to Galatians (see Rom 2:29; 3:4; 14:18; 1 Cor 1:25; 3:5; 13:1-3; 14:2; 15:47; 2 Cor 4:2; 5:11, 13; 8:21; Phil 2:5-7; 3:3; Col 2:7, 22; 3:23; 1 Thess 2:15; 4:8).

It is unnecessary to assume that Paul’s antithetical formulation implied, as those who read Galatians apologetically presume, that he denied everything his opponents affirmed, and affirmed everything they denied. There is no evi-

dence that his Galatian detractors tried to diminish his authority by claiming his apostleship was of merely human origin, apart from the assumptions of “mirror-reading” (→ Introduction).

Paul’s letters frequently refer to **God** as **Father**, especially in epistolary prescripts, praise, and prayer (see Gal 1:3, 4; Rom 1:7; 15:6; 1 Cor 1:3; 8:6; 15:24; 2 Cor 1:2, 3; 11:31; Eph 1:2, 3; 4:6; 5:20; 6:23; Phil 1:2; 2:11; 4:20; Col 1:2, 3; 3:17; 1 Thess 1:1, 3; 3:11, 13; 2 Thess 1:1, 2; 2:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; Phlm 3). Here he emphasized the Father-Son relationship between **God** and **Christ**.

In Gal 1:3 Paul emphasized that **God** is also **our Father**. His concern was not biological parentage in either v 1 or v 3. The title **Father** emphasized God’s sovereign power as Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer. This usage reflects widespread Christian confessional and liturgical practice and the example of Jesus (see Michel 1990; Schrenk 1967; → Gal 4:6).

“Appeal to the Father of Jesus Christ is always an occasion for the exposition of salvation and blessing” (Schrenk 1967, 1008) in Paul’s letters. That **God the Father . . . raised Christ from the dead** reflects widely attested early Christian confessions (see Acts 3:15; 4:10; 13:30; Rom 4:24; 6:4, 9; 7:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor 6:14; 15:12, 13, 15, 16, 20; 2 Cor 4:14; Eph 1:20; Col 2:12; 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 2:8; 1 Pet 1:21; Pol. *Phil.* 2.1, 2; 12.2). His resurrection is central to Christian faith.

This is the only mention Paul made of resurrection in Galatians. Elsewhere, he focused on the cross, which occasioned its necessity. Letter prescripts often (like rhetorical exordia) introduce central points of the correspondence. So we must ask why Paul brought up resurrection here. It is not a standard fixture of his letter openings (only in Rom 1:4; 2 Cor 1:9; Eph 1:20; 1 Thess 1:10). References to the second coming are as common (1 Cor 1:7; Phil 1:6; Col 1:12-13; 2 Thess 1:9-10).

Paul’s mention of resurrection emphasizes that the end times had dawned, giving urgency to the present. The “new creation” had begun (→ Gal 6:15). The resurrection confirmed that the crucified one was the long-awaited Messiah. The age of waiting “until” (3:19, 23; 4:2, 19) was over; “the time had fully come” (4:4). God had sent the promised Spirit to his people (3:5; 4:6). The time for Law was past. They were free!

## 2. Recipients (v 2b)

■ **2b** Paul’s letter addresses **the churches in Galatia**. His other community letters address a Christian community in a designated city (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). He greeted as a “church” only the communities in Corinth and Thessalonica (contrast Rom 1:7; [Eph 1:1b—the city name is textually suspect;] Phil 1:1b; Col 1:2). Galatians alone explicitly refers to **churches** in a geographical region (see 1 Cor 16:1; 2 Tim 4:10; 1 Pet 1:1).

1:1-2b

Paul shows no interest in the etymological derivation of *ekklēsia*, **church**. The term never means “called out ones” (see Barr 1961, 119-29), but an assembly of people (see Acts 19:32, 39 for secular uses), specifically a Christian congregation, the gathered people of God (see Roloff 1990).

Elsewhere in Galatians, Paul’s only other reference to **churches** refers to the Christian communities in Judea (→ 1:13 and 22). The nature or mission of the *church* is never discussed. But he addressed what it meant to be the people of God (see Martin 2007) as fully here as in 1 and 2 Corinthians, where the term “church” appears frequently. Galatians draws from a different repertoire of images than that of the body of Christ or the bride of Christ, which dominate Ephesians (see Lyons 2007).

### 3. Greetings (vv 3-5)

■3 The greeting **Grace and peace**, with only minor variations, appears in all of Paul’s community letters (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2). A slight spelling change allowed Paul to adapt the customary Greco-Roman “Greetings,” *chairein*, used in everyday encounters and in letters (see 1 Macc 12:6; Acts 15:23; 23:26; Jas 1:1), creating a distinctively Christian blessing, **Grace**, *charis* (→ Gal 1:6, 15; 2:9, 21; 5:4; 6:18).

For Paul, the abstract noun **grace** comprehends all of God’s gifts freely provided in Christ (see 1:6; 2:21). This implicit prayer is that God in Christ may deal favorably with his audience (Betz 1979, 40; Winger 1999, 153).

To **grace** Paul added a translation of the customary Jewish greeting, “*Shalom*,” **peace** (see Judg 19:20; 1 Sam 25:5-6; Dan 4:1; 10:19; Tob 12:17; Greek: *eirēnē*; → Gal 5:22; 6:16). Precedents occur in Num 6:24-26; 2 Macc 1:1; 2 Bar. 78.2; parallels in 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 1:2; 2 John 3; Rev 1:4). Christian experience could be characterized as **peace** with “the God of peace” (see Rom 5:1; 8:6; 15:33; 16:20; 1 Cor 7:15; 14:33; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:7, 9; 1 Thess 5:23).

**God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** were the source of both **Grace and peace**, as they were of Paul’s apostleship (Gal 1:1). The possessive pronoun **our** in vv 3 and 4 includes all Christians. Gentile believers could also claim **God** as their **Father** (Jervis 1999, 33-34).

Whenever Paul identified God as **our Father**, he always mentioned Jesus Christ as **Lord** (Schrenk 1967, 1007). The prepositions vary—“by” and **from** in vv 1 and 3, probably for stylistic reasons. But their meaning is identical. By joining **God** and **Christ** as objects of the same preposition, Paul emphasized the essential equality of Father and Son.

**Lord** identifies Jesus with the unutterable name of Israel’s God (Yahweh, in Phil 2:9-11 and Rom 14:9-11, both echoing Isa 45:23). The Greek OT facilitated the church’s high Christology, but it did not initiate it. The Aramaic prayer, *Marana tha*, “Come, O Lord!” (1 Cor 16:22), suggests that Jesus was first addressed as Lord among Jewish Christians. “The title implies

that the exalted Jesus is on a par with Yahweh, yet not identified with him” (Fitzmyer 1990, 330).

That Jesus is **Lord** entailed more than a theological affirmation. It had ethical implications, conceding his right to rule and our obligation to obey him. But it also implicitly denied the political claims of lesser allegiances, like those made for Caesar in Roman emperor worship (see 1 Cor 8:5-6).

■4 Paul elaborated on **Christ** (v 3), adding that he **gave himself for our sins** (see Mark 10:45; John 3:16; Rom 4:25; 8:32; Eph 5:2, 25; 1 Tim 2:6; Titus 2:14). This implicit reference to the crucifixion becomes explicit and personal in Gal 2:20 (with an intensified form of the Greek verb **gave**; → 2:20).

Paul’s language in both 1:4 and 2:20 emphasizes that Christ’s death for **our sins** (see 1 Cor 15:3; Rom 4:25; 5:6, 8, 10; 8:34; 2 Cor 5:14) was voluntary and gracious (→ 2:21). Christ was not coerced by the Father. And we were wholly undeserving of his gift. Paul took for granted that all humans are sinners (defended in Rom 1:18—3:23; 5:8), not only Gentiles (Gal 2:15, 17; see Mark 14:41).

Paul attached no particular theological significance to the preposition *hyper*, **for**, here (→ 3:13). It cannot support the doctrine of the vicarious, substitutionary atonement (demonstrated persuasively by Powers 2001, 54-58, 71-79; against Boice 1976, 427). This would seem to require the preposition *anti*, **instead of** (see Lightfoot 1874, 73). Rather, *hyper* describes Christ’s death as both for **our sins** (v 4) and for “me” (2:20; Rom 4:25 uses the preposition *dia*). He died **because we sinned**.

Christ’s death rescued us **according to the will of our God and Father**. Paul insisted that God chose **to rescue us**; but he did not explain why “God required such an atoning act for human sins in order that fallen humanity could be saved” (Witherington 1998a, 76).

The plural form of **sins** is uncharacteristic of Paul. The Greek *hamartia* appears sixty-four times in his letters, but only twelve times in the plural. Of these, two are in OT quotations (Rom 4:7; 11:27); one quotes a Christian confession (1 Cor 15:3); and five appear in letters of disputed Pauline authorship (Eph 2:1; Col 1:14; 1 Tim 5:22, 24; 2 Tim 3:6). That leaves Rom 7:5; 1 Cor 15:17; Gal 1:4; and 1 Thess 2:16.

Paul preferred to speak of Sin as a personified, almost “demonic” power (Grundmann 1964, 311). He treated Sin as more than “a failure to achieve a standard” or even than “becoming and being guilty before God and one’s peers” (Fiedler 1990, 66). Not only are sins bad choices, but they also identify humans as hopelessly trapped victims in a fallen world—as slaves to Sin.

The purpose for which Christ died was **to rescue us from the present evil age**. Only here in the NT is the expression translated **present . . . age** implicitly contrasted with the coming age (e.g., Matt 12:32; Mark 10:30; Eph 1:21). Thus, it has much the same force as “this age” (1 Cor 1:20) or “this world” (Rom 12:2).



By the gift of the Spirit, Christians already breathe the fresh air of the new age of fulfillment (see Gal 3:14; 4:4-6; 5:5, 16-25; Col 1:13). But the **evil age** continues as a **present** reality. With the “new creation” (Gal 6:15), Christ brought “the powers of the coming age” (Heb 6:5) into this world. The “kingdom of God” as “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” already exists (Rom 14:17). The last days, inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus, are now visible in the transformed lives of believers (Witherington 1998a, 77).

Paul’s reference to the **present** age as **evil** refers to “this secular human way of living, in which sin has made a home” (Theodoret, cited in Edwards 1999, 4). Thus, **rescue** does not mean escape from the material world, but deliverance from domination by the ungodly “world system” (Louw and Nida 1989, 1:507 §41.38; compare 1 Pet 1:18; John 17:13-19).

Christ’s mission of **rescue** was undertaken *in order that he might set us free*. Paul personified the Present Age as a sinister slave master holding humanity hostage. For now, the perverse “world system” persists, awaiting its end. But it no longer holds sway over believers. Thus, he could claim: Through the cross of Christ, “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

The verb *exaireō*, **rescue**, appears only here in Paul’s letters (150 times in the LXX; in the NT only in Acts 7:10, 34; 12:11; 23:27; 26:17). Christ voluntarily died to save us. But his death was **according to the will of our God and Father**. It was neither suicidal nor accidental. It was a well-contrived Trinitarian conspiracy to salvage humanity at great personal cost to God. The preposition *kata* indicates that Christ’s self-gift was “*in conformity with*” (BDAG, 512, s.v. B.5) what the Father wanted.

The conjunction **and** between the nouns **God** and **Father** does not distinguish them. Rather in this explicative use, it means “that is” (BDAG, 495, s.v. 1.c). **God** is **our Father** (emphasis added), not simply the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (→ Gal 1:1 and 3; compare Rom 15:6; 1 Cor 15:24; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; Eph 1:3; 4:6; 5:20; Phil 4:20; 1 Thess 1:3; 3:11, 13).

■5 The prescript closes with a doxological relative clause—to **whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen** (see Rom 16:27; Phil 4:20; 2 Tim 4:18; Heb 13:21; 1 Pet 4:11). The verb **be** is unexpressed but clearly assumed. The antecedent of **whom** is **God** (Gal 1:3).

The word *doxa*, **glory**, in the LXX translates the Hebrew *kabod*<sup>3</sup>, which metaphorically describes God as radiant and weighty. **Glory** refers to his obvious perfection in goodness, saving grace (Rom 1:23; 3:7, 23), and power (6:4). To give **glory** to God is not to bestow on him something he lacks. Glory is innately his by the reality of his presence. To give God **glory** is to acknowledge his existence and lordship (see Isa 1:3; 2 Bar. 48.40; 82.3-9).

English speakers still use the imagery of **glory**, although seldom the term itself outside religious settings. An unusually intelligent person is “bright,”



even “brilliant.” A job well done is a “shining” performance. Celebrities are “stars.” A student leader is a “big man on campus.” To wield power and influence is “to throw one’s weight around.” Glory expresses the language of honor and recognition. In honor-shame societies, like the ancient Mediterranean world, those who were important possessed glory and deserved honor. To fail to recognize this was to shame them (see Kittel 1964c, 232-55).

The expression *forever* translates a Greek idiom meaning (lit.) *to the ages of the ages*. The proximity of the word *age* in Gal 1:4 may hint that Paul urged his audience to praise God in this **present evil age**. They were not to wait for future **rescue** but were to acknowledge what God had already done.

The **Amen** at this early point in the letter is surprising (see 6:18). Within the worship setting in which it was first read, this was an invitation to the assembled Galatian congregations to give verbal affirmation: *May it be so!* Paul would provoke their consternation soon enough.

## FROM THE TEXT

*Conventions.* Back in “the good old days,” people actually wrote letters, instead of sending email, updating their Facebook status, or dispatching text messages. Everyone understood the conventions of letter-writing. We addressed total strangers as “Dear” but never closed business letters with “Love.”

A good deal of Gal 1:1-5 reflects conventions of Paul’s day. So, how seriously should we take what he wrote here. How much of what Paul said merely conformed to social expectations?

Because we have other letters from Paul, we know that they have similar beginnings. Convention dictated the basic three-part opening. But careful examination reveals subtle differences between them. For example, Galatians, like most of Paul’s community letters, mentions co-senders. But only in Philip-pians do Paul and his co-sender share the same title, “servants of Christ” (1:1). Not surprisingly, Philippians emphasizes equality and servanthood. What should the unique features of Galatians lead us to expect?

The differences between Paul’s letters and those of his contemporaries are also enlightening. Because we have read the rest of the NT, the greeting **Grace and peace** does not strike us as unexpected. But the Galatians had no NT. They would have noticed the unexpected variations from typical secular letters.

*Pastoral Care.* Paul considered himself a missionary, a church planter (Rom 15:20). But he gave pastoral care. Surprisingly, he wrote letters to congregations he had founded after he had moved on. Galatians shows that Paul was not interested in simply making converts. The obvious passion and pain he communicated suggest that he did not espouse a doctrine of once-saved-always-saved (→ 5:4). But neither did he give up easily on his wavering converts (see 4:19; 6:1-5).

*Inspiration and Canonization.* If it is remarkable that Paul wrote letters, it is even more so that the church saw fit to preserve and canonize them. The literary genres in the OT include books of law, narrative, poetry, wisdom, and prophecy. But no letters. Within a century after Paul wrote to churches in particular places, churches throughout the Roman Empire were reading them as they gathered for worship. By this repeated practice, the church came early to recognize them as Scripture alongside the OT, not merely as letters of Paul.

Paul's readers across the centuries share his certainty that his message was not simply a clever human invention. Wesleyans have always insisted that the inspiration of Scripture is twofold. God inspired writers. But just as surely, the Spirit inspires readers to recognize this inspiration.

*Theological Subtleties.* Paul's original audience probably heard rather than read the letter. Would they have noticed Paul's subtle use of prepositions that implied that **God the Father** and **the Lord Jesus Christ** were equally divine? For an audience of former pagans, narrowing the scope of the divine from many to just two gods would not have been a challenge. But for a Jewish monotheist like Paul to hint that Christ was divine, if they caught it, must have been surprising.

For those of us closely reading the letter this side of Nicea and the ecumenical creeds, the problem is the reverse. We may be troubled by Paul's apparent binitarianism. Where is the third person of the Trinity?

It took the church more than four centuries to reach the consensus we now recognize as Christian orthodoxy. Galatians is a preorthodox composition. Paul never imagined his letter would be scrutinized for Trinitarian precision. "Trinity? What's that?" Nonetheless, Galatians provided proto-orthodox believers with some of the data that compelled them to struggle to make sense of their apparently paradoxical convictions: God was one. But God had revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

*Reading Another's Mail.* As we read Paul's impassioned letter, we cannot escape the awareness that we are reading another's mail. And if he makes us squirm at times by the vigor with which he presses his case, we can only guess what it must have been like to have been among those first stunned and stung and stirred and silenced as they heard the letter read.

The opening lines of the letter, however, give few clues as to the tone the apostle will shortly take. It begins as most ancient letters do. It is tempting to skip over such preliminaries to get to the real meat. But if we do, we will miss the central point Paul wanted to impress upon his audience.

*Apostolic Authority.* From at least the second century, as the church became increasingly institutionalized, interpreters wrestled with the implications of Paul's claims to unmediated apostolic authority. Interest was piqued again as the Reformers appealed to the apostle in their struggle with hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church (see Riches 2008, 71-75).

Even if Paul's more generous (compared to Luke's) views of the qualifications necessary for apostleship are accepted, there are no living apostles today. Those with a divine call to preach the gospel, even to plant churches where Christ has not been proclaimed before, lack one essential qualification: a personal encounter with the risen Lord (1 Cor 9:1). Paul claimed these had ended (15:3-7).

Protestants generally consider the Bible (particularly the NT, the repository of the apostolic witness) to embody the authority that belonged to apostles before the biblical canon was settled. Catholics vest that authority in the Magisterium, the consensus teaching of the church across the ages. Protestants, reluctant to assign such authority to tradition, concede that early creeds and fathers of the church provide essential guidance as to how to resolve the ambiguities of Scripture in an orthodox manner.

A so-called high view of Scripture is often thought to emphasize words like "inerrancy" and "infallibility." But these are claims the Bible never makes for itself. Those who take seriously Galatians as an apostolic letter will submit to its authority. Wesleyans appropriately acknowledge the role of tradition, experience, and reason in the formulation and validation of Christian doctrine. But Scripture remains normative for Christian faith and practice.

Nonetheless, even apostles speaking for God must be interpreted. Paul acknowledged in 1 Cor 5:9-13 that what he had written the Corinthians in an earlier letter (now lost?) had been misunderstood. If his contemporaries needed assistance, our interpretations cannot claim infallibility. We must not presume that our reading of Paul speaks for God.

*Speaking for God.* Galatians is an apostolic letter. Paul spoke not for himself, but in behalf of the God who had called him to his mission. He spoke not to outsiders, but to those who knew that the story of the cross (Gal 1:4) preceded the wonder of the resurrection (v 1), despite the order in which he mentioned them. He could use terms like **grace** and **peace**, **sins** and **rescue**, and **glory** and **Amen**, confident that his readers knew what he meant. Are members of our churches as well instructed (see 6:6)?

Most preachers could learn from Paul to speak with greater clarity. Making the same point both positively and negatively helped assure that his aural audience would not misunderstand him. Rhetorical repetition can be overdone, of course. But who could miss the apostle's emphasis here?

Some contemporary preachers would do well to be more cautious about claiming to speak for God. If 1 Cor 15:8 is taken seriously, we must admit that no one since the first century speaks with anything like apostolic authority. All claims of latter-day revelations must be tested by their faithfulness to Scripture and to Christ (see 1 Thess 5:19-22; 1 Cor 12:1-3).

*Overcoming Evil.* Paul's description of salvation as **rescue . . . from the present evil age** (1:4) gave an unfortunate foothold within Christian theology to various forms of dualism. Proto-orthodox voices successfully resisted

gnostic explanations of evil. The ecumenical creeds begin by confessing God as the Creator in direct challenge to gnostic claims that creation was the unfortunate work of a misguided, if not evil, lesser deity. The church's efforts to resist dualism continued from the patristic period into the modern era (see Riches 2008, 77-82).

Dispensational premillennialism is perhaps the most virulent and insidious form of dualism threatening contemporary evangelical Christianity. Its novel eschatology first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. Early Christians expected the kingdom of God to invade and renew the present evil age. Dispensationalists, instead, hope for a secret rapture that will spirit believers out of this world (see MacPherson 2000).

*Gospel Diplomacy.* Paul knew that what he planned to write next would be difficult to take. So he attempted to get his audience to affirm the truth of his message from the outset. Imagine with me. Paul's designated reader in the various churches of Galatia has just intoned the familiar words, **to whom be glory for ever and ever**. Almost spontaneously, his Greek-speaking congregations must have found themselves repeating one of the few Hebrew words they knew: **Amen**. How long did it take for their **Amen** to become "ouch"?

Before Paul turned to the difficult task of calling his agitated audience back to "the truth of the gospel" (2:5, 14), he affirmed their Christian standing. He reminded them of what they shared. God was **our Father** (1:3, 4). Christ died **for our sins to rescue us** (v 4). Later in the letter, "we" and "you" will seem to stand at odds. But that is not where the letter begins or ends.

Before Paul pronounced a curse on anyone giving or receiving a false so-called gospel in 1:6-9, he pronounced a conditional blessing on those who would receive it: **Grace and peace to you** (v 3). And he would do much the same before he closed the letter (→ 6:16-18).

Most contemporary Christians seem oblivious to the power of such prayers. "These are just words." But Paul and his first audience knew that words did things. Some words resonate deep within us and empower us to be and do what we otherwise could not. And some words leave deep wounds. What could we learn from Paul's gospel diplomacy?

## B. Epistolary Rebuke (1:6-9)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

Following the opening salutation in every other Pauline community letter appears a thanksgiving / blessing. Its absence here would have been noticed by the letter's first hearers. Epistolary thanksgivings in ancient letters typically served as rhetorical exordia, introducing and anticipating key concerns of the letter. This "anti-thanksgiving" serves the same function.

Paul expressed astonishment at unfortunate changes that had occurred in the Galatian churches. He left these understated at first, presuming his

original audience knew well enough. He characterized them negatively, with emotionally charged language and imagery of desertion, conversion, confusion, perversion, and curses (→ Introduction).

“Desertion” applied to the Galatians might reflect military imagery. But in Greek literature, it more often refers to changing sides politically (Polybius 24.9.6) or philosophically (Diogenes Laertius 7.1.37; 4.166). Complete religious desertion involved apostasy (2 Macc 4:46; 7:24; 11:24; Sir 6:9; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.38; *Life* 195; see BDAG, 642; Dunn 1993, 39-40).

Paul was **astonished** by what the Galatians were doing. But he directed his anger toward the Agitators who were provoking their desertion. His double curse called upon God to bring judgment on them. Something that is *anathema* is **cursed**. The LXX uses the term to translate the Hebrew *harem*—something dedicated to God for destruction (Lev 27:28-29; Deut 7:26; 13:17; Josh 6:17-18; 7:1; Behm 1964a, 354-55).

The “entire ‘body’ of the letter is bracketed” by the “conditional curse” that introduces it (in 1:8-9; Betz 1979, 50) and the “conditional blessing” that concludes it (in Gal 6:16; Betz 1979, 321). Paul framed the central argument of the letter on this premise: The Galatians would be cursed or blessed depending on their future choices. Would they remain faithful to the gospel Paul preached or pursue the perversion **some people** (v 7) were urging them to accept? This kind of decision was called for in deliberative rhetoric (→ Introduction).

Curses were implicit prayers that God (or the gods) might visit disaster on certain enemies. By stating his twofold curse conditionally, Paul did not name names. The Galatians were free to choose whether to side with those subject to the curse or to align with Paul and his understanding of the Christian faith.

Paul prayed that those who were creating chaos in his Galatian churches would be punished for their wrongdoing. Paul believed that God was a just Judge who maintained moral order in the universe. Those who were destroying his churches would be destroyed (see 2 Thess 1:5-10; Käsemann 1969).

## IN THE TEXT

■ **6** *Thaumazō*, I am astonished, Paul’s first word in Greek conveyed amazement, bewilderment, or disappointment at an unexpected sight (Annen 1990, 134). Ancient letters used it to reprove negligence, misunderstanding, and inappropriate, uncharacteristic, or foolish behavior (Dahl 1973, 14-18, 31). Rhetoric recommended “an expression of amazement . . . as a means of regaining favor with one’s audience . . . won over by the opposition” (Witherington [1998a, 81], citing Cicero, *Inv.* 1.17.25; see LXX Lev 19:15; Deut 10:17; Job 22:8; *Pss. Sol.* 2:18; *T. Mos.* 5:5; and Jude 16).

Paul was amazed that the Galatians were **so quickly deserting and turning**. The adverb **quickly** could refer to *how soon* after their conversion (e.g.,

Burton 1920, 19; Arichea and Nida 1976, 11) or after Paul's departure from Galatia (e.g., Dunn 1993, 40) their desertion was occurring. It could refer to "how easily" (TM) they were being led astray (see Gal 1:7; e.g., Dunn 1993, 40).

The modifier **so** does not emphasize that their desertion was extremely soon or easy. Rather, it describes the *manner* of their desertion—**quickly** or **easily**. The word **quickly** may echo OT passages (Exod 32:8; Deut 9:16) that charge Israel with breaking their covenant with God even before it was ratified (Mussner 1977, 53; Wilson 2004). Paul compared the Galatians to traitors. They were abandoning their former allegiance for another. They were in danger of apostasy.

Paul addressed his audience using a second person plural—**you are . . . deserting**. He addressed them all similarly in Gal 1:6; 3:1-5; and 5:7 suggesting that the problem was pervasive (Jewett 1970, 209). Everyone was at risk. The present tense **are . . . deserting** indicates that their desertion was "as yet only in process" (Burton 1920, 19; see Longenecker 1990, 14).

The verb describing the Galatians' defection, *metatithes*, implies that the change underway was a reverse conversion, although they had not yet "become apostate" (despite Mauer 1972, 161). But Paul considered this a real possibility (→ 5:4). They were in danger, not merely of failing to live out their faith, but of abandoning it entirely.

The present tenses in 1:7; 3:2; 4:16-18; and 6:12-13 confirms that the Galatians were seriously at-risk believers. They were headed the wrong way, but they were not hopeless (e.g., Jewett 1970, 209; Betz 1979, 45 and nn. 19 and 47). Evidence of this may be found in:

- Paul's uncertainty as to the outcome of the situation expressed in 3:3-5 and 4:8-11
- the conditional nature of his blessing in 6:16 and curse in 1:8-9
- his expectation that his letter would encourage the intransigent troublemakers to leave (1:8-9; 4:30; 5:10, 12), restoring the unity (4:19-20, 30; 5:1, 10, 12; 6:1)

**You are turning from the one who called you . . . to another gospel.** The preposition **from** indicates who the Galatians had abandoned; and **to**, what they were embracing. Paul initially described their reverse conversion as from a person (**the one who called you**) to a message (**a different gospel**). But he corrected himself in v 7. "Some people" were responsible for perverting "the gospel of Christ." Thus, he acknowledged that both sides involved substantially different persons and messages.

Paul did not say what the Galatians were doing nor how he knew (→ Introduction). But he was bewildered: Why are you "converting" **from the one who called you by the grace of Christ**?

Based on Paul's normal usage (see Rom 8:30; 1 Cor 1:9; Gal 1:5; 1 Thess 2:12; 4:7; 5:24; 2 Thess 2:14), most interpreters assume **the one** refers to God. In six other Galatian passages, God is not named in Greek, but identified only

by what he has done (1:15 [twice]; 2:8; 3:5 [twice]; 5:8; Martyn 1997, 202). But **the one who called** the Galatians in 1:6 indirectly refers also to Paul. He was the preacher through whom God's call was mediated (see 3:1-5; 4:14; 5:7-12; see Dahl 1973, 47-48). "Some people" (v 7) were leading them astray from him, his gospel, and God.

Paul used the OT language of divine vocation (Isa 41:8-9; 42:6; 43:1; 45:3-4; 49:1; 51:2) as a reminder that God always takes the initiative in salvation (see Rom 1:7; 9:11-12; 1 Cor 1:26-31; 7:18; Col 3:15; 1 Thess 1:4-5; 2 Thess 2:13-15). He summons to conversion in the preaching of the gospel, the portrayal of Jesus Christ crucified (Gal 1:16; 2:2, 7, 16, 20-21; 3:1-5, 22-24; 4:13; see Rom 10:9-17). God's call is the indispensable means by which the process of salvation begins.

Galatians makes clear that salvation is all **by . . . grace**, regardless of the precise meaning here:

- the means or basis of God's call—**by . . . grace** (e.g., Dunn 1993, 40),
- the purpose for God's call: **to live in grace** (Burton 1920, 21),
- the manner in which God called: **graciously** (BDAG, 1080, s.v. *charis* 3.b), or
- the reason why God called: "because of his wonderful kindness" (CEV).

Grace is both the doorway into the Christian life (Rom 5:1-2) and God's empowering presence, enabling humans to be and do what they could not alone. The human response of faith to the preaching of "the gospel" (Gal 1:7) is merely receptivity to Christ's gift of the Spirit, experienced as justification.

The gospel is the good news of God's saving intervention in human history in Christ. It is God's saving power (Rom 1:16). The articulation of the story does not save. The events are saving; preaching merely witnesses to these events. But when the gospel is proclaimed in the power of the Spirit, God is powerfully at work (1 Thess 1:4-5; 2:13; see Rom 10:9-15).

■ **7** Paul self-corrected his description of the Galatians' reverse conversion "to a different [*heteron*] gospel" in v 6. Did Hellenistic Greek maintain the classical distinction between the terms *allos* and *heteros* (see Rendall 1903, 151; Robertson 1919, 747; BDF, 160-61)? If so, the first correction insisted that the Galatians were turning **to another** [*heteros*] **gospel of a different kind** (v 6), because there is really **not another** [*allos*] **gospel of the same kind** (v 7).

Paul's second self-correction is introduced with *ei mē*, which means "except that" (BDF, 191 §376; Louw and Nida 1989, 1:794 §89.131) or "*but*" (BDAG, 278, s.v. *ei* 6.i.β), not **Evidently**. The Galatians defected not simply to a different message, but to different personalities. **There are some people who are confusing you.**

The verb *tarassō* (**throwing . . . into confusion**) means "**cause inward turmoil, stir up, disturb, unsettle**" (BDAG, 990; see Matt 2:3; 14:26; Mark 6:50; Luke 1:12; 24:38; John 5:7; 11:33; 12:27; 13:21; 14:1, 27; 15:24; 17:8, 13; 1 Pet 3:14). The Agitators were terrifying the Galatians (Balz 1990c, 3:335-



36). Did Paul not know who they were (Mussner 1977, 57)? Or, did he merely diminish their importance by leaving them anonymous (Betz 1979, 49 n. 65)?

Several suggestions about what was the Agitators' agenda can be advanced. Had they, like the Pharisaic believers in Jerusalem, insisted that Gentile Christians "must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5)? Had they warned the Galatians, as Judean Christians did Gentiles in Antioch: "Unless you are circumcised . . . you cannot be saved" (v 1)? Were they intimidating the Galatians with threats of eternal damnation if they did not get circumcised (so Martyn 1997, 112; → 5:2-4)? Paul did not say.

Paul also characterized them as Perverters. They *want to pervert the gospel of Christ* (1:7). This could mean that they were **trying**, but not succeeding, to alter the Christian proclamation (so Jerome, cited in Edwards 1999, 7). But it could mean that their misrepresentation of the gospel was by deliberate design.

The present participle translated **are trying** is literally *wanting*. Paul did not hesitate (see 4:9, 17, 21; 5:17; and 6:12-13) to assign motives to the Agitators and to the Galatians they may not have identified themselves. "Paul's language is of course biased" (Betz 1979, 49). The goal of his rhetoric was not to be "fair," but persuasive.

Here (as in Rom [1:3, 9;] 15:19; 1 Cor 9:12; 2 Cor 2:12; [4:4;] 9:13; 10:14; Phil 1:27; 1 Thess 3:2; 2 Thess 1:8]), Paul characterized his message as **the gospel of Christ**. What force did the genitive **of Christ** have here?

- Objective: Christ was its central content. The gospel was all *about Christ* (see Rom 1:1-3).
- Subjective: Christ was its source. The gospel was the good news *Christ* revealed to Paul (see Gal 1:12).

Perhaps, it "is both objective and subjective" (Betz 1979, 50 n. 69). Elsewhere, Paul referred to his message as simply "the gospel" (see 1:8, 9, 11, 16; 2:2, 5, 14; 4:13) or the "gospel of God" (in Rom 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thess 2:2, 8, 9). In Gal 2:7 (→), he would call it remarkably *the gospel of the foreskin*.

As in v 6, Paul referred to an unfortunate change—a "turning of the Gospel into its opposite" (Bertram 1971, 729). In Gal 4:8-9, he described the Galatians' response to this perversion with the same verb. They were effectively "turning back" from the knowledge of God to idolatry (see Martin 1995).

■ **8-9** Paul issued a twofold conditional curse, stated first hypothetically (in the subjunctive mood in v 8) and then concretely (in the indicative mood in v 9). The grammar is complex but can be summarized as follows:

- *Hypothetical Curse*: Paul never seriously imagined that he and his associates or an angel from God would actually preach another gospel (see 1:11-12, 18; 2:1-10). But for the sake of the argument, he prayed that God would put anyone under a curse if they ever preached another gospel than the one first preached to the Galatians (1:8). The truth

of his message “was not simply a matter of who were the preachers” (Dunn 1993, 44).

- **Concrete Curse:** There actually were preachers of a perverted so-called gospel in Galatia (vv 6-7). Paul prayed that God’s curse would fall upon those preaching a gospel different from the one the Galatians first accepted (v 9).

The textual variants in the ancient manuscripts suggest that scribes struggled with Paul’s grammar in these verses as much as modern readers.

Unlike vv 6 and 7, Paul did not use the noun *euangelion*, **gospel**, in vv 8 and 9. Instead, he used a cognate verb, *euangelizō*, **evangelize**. Thus, the translations **should preach a gospel** (v 8) and **is preaching . . . a gospel** (v 9) are paraphrases.

Paul’s **we** could refer to him and his missionary colleagues in Galatia (Lightfoot 1874, 77; Dunn 1993, 44) and “the co-senders of the letter” (Betz 1979, 51). But **we** probably referred to him alone (see Lyons 1985, 10-16; Arichea and Nida 1976, 13). This explains the shift from the plural to the singular in v 9: **we have already said, so now I say again**.

The noun *angelos* can mean simply **messenger** (see Luke 7:24; 9:52; Jas 2:25). But the clause **from heaven** clearly identifies it as **an angel**. This was no fallen angel (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6), but one of the host of supernatural beings in the service of God (see 3:19; Kittel 1964b; Broer 1990).

The words **other than** mean “in contradistinction to” (BDF, 123; §236) or “contrary to” (Boice 1976, 430). This other gospel was a replacement for (Porter 1999, 167) the gospel Paul preached on his founding visit (see Gal 4:12-16). Neither he (we) nor **an angel from heaven** was likely to preach **against** the gospel he first preached (1:8). But “some people” (v 7; **someone**, v 9; see 5:7, 10) actually were preaching **against** it. Thus, we might paraphrase v 8: **But even if I or a heavenly angel were preaching a substitute gospel to you, may such a preacher be cursed by God**. Verse 9 might be paraphrased: **Let me repeat: If anyone is preaching a substitute gospel to you, may such a preacher be cursed by God**.

The verb in the conclusion (*apodosis*) clause in both curses is in the third person singular imperative. Koine Greek used the imperative mood for pronouncing curses (see Mark 11:14; Acts 8:20; 1 Cor 16:22; see Robertson 1919, 939; BDF, 194, §384). English has no equivalent to third person commands. **Let him be cursed!** (see Rom 9:3; 1 Cor 16:22) must suffice.

By including himself in Gal 1:8, Paul potentially pronounced a self-curse. Paul did not directly curse the Agitators.

- He probably prayed that God would do so: “let them be under God’s curse!” (NIV 2011).
- He offered a moral evaluation as to what should or would happen: “he is to be accursed” (NASB).

- His curse functioned as “a ban or excommunication” (Betz 1979, 54). That is, Paul may have urged the Galatians to expel the Agitators from their churches (→ 4:30; see 1 Cor 5:3-5; Ziesler 1992, 5). But if exclusion from the Christian community entailed exclusion from salvation (Betz 1979, 251), the threat of excommunication meant eternal damnation (→ Gal 5:7 and 12).

Paul described the Galatians’ reverse conversion as still in progress. Their defection was occasioned by Agitators, who preached a perverted gospel. Accepting it would make them subject to the curse of destruction.

While the word “hell” never appears in Paul’s letters, this conditional curse has the colloquial force: “may he be condemned to hell!” (GNT). This shocking wish was occasioned by the seriousness of the Agitators’ crime. They had perverted the gospel, preached a substitute nongospel, confused his converts, and led them to consider turning away from Christ (1:6-8; compare Matt 18:6 || Mark 9:42 || Luke 17:2).

■ **8** Paul’s strong adversative conjunction made it obvious that “the gospel of Christ” he preached (v 7) was antithetical to the message of the Agitators. And this was regardless of what the Galatians thought (Burton 1920, 25; Longenecker 1990, 16).

It is striking how comparatively nonchalant Paul was about rival preachers later in Philippians. They preached for the wrong reasons (Phil 1:15, 17) and for hurtful ends (v 18). But he was unwilling to write off preachers because they did not like him. He was almost indifferent to their hypocrisy (see v 18). Why such a different response compared to Galatians?

- Did the Galatian Agitators’ perverted “gospel” not have Christ as its central message?
- Were they calling the Galatians to non-Christian Judaism?
- Did their “gospel” proclaim a false understanding of Christ (compare 2 Cor 11:2-4)?
- Or, did Paul simply mellow with time and become more tolerant of false teachers as he grew older?

■ **9** Paul repeated himself: **As we have already said, so now I say again.** Some think his double curse in vv 8-9 repeated an oral warning made while he was still in Galatia (e.g., Rendall 1903, 152; BDAG, 704; Betz 1979, 53). It seems more likely that he merely reiterated what he had just written in v 8 (so von Campenhausen 1969, 37; Bruce 1982, 84). Whatever his specific meaning here, repetition enforced the seriousness of the matter.

He put those terrifying the Galatians on notice: Beware of divine judgment. And he warned the Galatians that surrender to the Agitators meant placing “themselves ‘under the curse’” (Betz 1979, 250). Perhaps this implicit threat would embolden the Galatians to resist the Agitators’ so-called gospel (1:7).

## FROM THE TEXT

*Intolerance.* Paul assumed that his converts would persevere as Christians. The gospel was just that good! Thus, he wrote with shock, dismay, consternation, and righteous indignation at what was happening in Galatia. Circumstances prevented him from addressing the matter in person (see 4:20). But he believed that the Christian future of his audience was in danger (see 3:4; 4:11; 5:2-3, 7). This explains why he prayed that divine judgment might be visited on the Agitators.

Modern Western people are put off by both the language and the mentality of curses in the ancient world (see Betz 1979, 50-52). Some Christians are put off by Paul's calls for eternal damnation. "Is such vindictiveness consistent with the love of God emphasized in the teaching of gentle Jesus, meek and mild?" But this reads the Gospels selectively, through tinted glasses. The Synoptic Gospels (especially Matthew) mention hell and always place it on the lips of Jesus, far more than the rest of the Bible combined.

But how could Paul be so confident he was right and the Agitators wrong? Christians who emphasize tolerance of diversity and inclusive communities may be troubled by the intensity of Paul's alarm. "Why was he so exercised about petty theological differences? Why can't we just get along? Why consign those who disagree to hell?" Postmodern relativism has led some to dismiss the claim that there is just one gospel. Paul was intolerant of such tolerance.

But Paul was especially intolerant of Christians, however well-meaning, who were so convinced that theirs was the only way that they shook the faith of simple believers. Some evangelists seem to take pride in their ability to terrify people into coming to the altar. Would Paul's conditional curse apply to them?

Calvinists affirm Paul's insistence that salvation is by invitation only. But so do Wesleyans. Apart from God's gracious gift of salvation, no one can be saved. Nothing anyone can do earns salvation. Faith is simply receptivity to God's gift. We cannot save ourselves. Wesleyans misunderstand the biblical doctrine of election if they imagine we simply volunteer to become believers. God always takes the initiative. We are "called . . . by the grace of Christ" (v 6).

Those who also think the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints means "once saved always saved" have difficulty explaining Paul's concern. "Can genuinely converted Christians actually lose their salvation?" Paul thinks so. Believers can surrender their salvation by deserting the God who called them. Perseverance is not simply God's doing. We must cooperate with God's saving purposes. That salvation was by grace alone did not make human faithfulness a matter of indifference.

How do we negotiate theological differences among Christians? Several well-known Christians (Augustine, John Wesley, P. F. Bresee) have been credited with the saying, "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things,

charity.” How do we separate matters of indifference from the indispensable? Why is one version of the gospel true and another false? Paul holds up the christological test—“the gospel of Christ” (v 7) with “the grace of Christ” (v 6) at its center.

*Inspiration.* Paul was confident enough to insist, at the risk of pronouncing a curse on himself, that the gospel he “preached” (v 8) and the Galatians **accepted** was the only true gospel. The church’s canonization of Paul’s letter to the Galatians reminds us that believers for nearly two millennia have sensed the confirming witness of the Spirit that this letter was more than a timely response to a crisis long ago and far away. It is God’s timeless gift of the good and gracious message of the cross of Christ Paul emphasized in this letter.

This authority applies to the rest of the canon as well. To listen to Galatians alone creates the potential to distort the truth. Faith in the plenary inspiration of Scripture means that biblical authority is to be found in the wholeness of the canonical witness, not in our favorite books alone.

The diversity of Scripture is not simply the result of the difficult political task of reaching ecumenical compromise. The canon defines the limits of Christian orthodoxy. Emphasizing any of the diverse strands within the canonical collection to the neglect of the rest risks heretical extremes.

There are times when a church threatened by legalistic excess needs to breathe deep from the fresh breeze of freedom blowing briskly throughout Galatians. But a morally complacent church must listen carefully and repentantly to James’ reminder that faith without works is dead (McKnight 1995, 34-46, 52-60).