

Bible Study Series: The Book of Galatians (Week One Notes)

February 25, 2015

Paul's letter to the Galatians is the *Declaration of Independence* for Christians. While it is a short document – 150 verses compared to 1,000 in Acts, 870 in the Gospel of John, and 303 in Hebrews – it is one of the most profound documents we have in explaining our faith.

This is clearly one of the writings of Paul, not disputed by any scholars. It was written to Galatians, originally Celts who migrated to Asia Minor around 285 B.C. We're not exactly certain where these people were that he was writing to, though we do know where the Roman province of Galatia was. Since it covered a broad territory in central Asia Minor, the letter could be to any or all of the churches in that area.

The congregation was predominately Gentile, but they have been taught by some Jewish Christians that they must first conform to the Jewish law if they are ever to be "real Christians." There were probably some dietary restrictions, but the primary area of conflict was over circumcision. Paul never says who these missionaries were, but he rails against their teachings. And that is the substance of the letter, that what these Jewish Christians were teaching was false. Paul attacks them with emotion and intensity not really seen anywhere else in his writings.

He is trying to remind the Galatians of the supreme authority of the gospel of grace. He tells them they don't need to add anything to grace – that, in fact, if they do try to add anything to it, they are demeaning it. He reminds them what that grace has bestowed upon them – heritage and freedom – and goes on to explain what both of those things mean.

The false teachers are not trying to demean grace; they are trying to prepare the people to receive that blessing through the discipline of Jewish law. Paul makes the point over and over that they don't need to do anything else to receive the grace of God once they have committed themselves to Christ. By accepting the teachings of the false prophets, they would be trying to substitute their works for the commitment of faith. That is the only response to the acceptance of grace, to have faith and allow that faith to guide you. Grace > Faith > Love. That's how it works.

1:1-5

Galatians is unique in the fact that it skips the usual pleasantries. The situation is distressing, and Paul wastes no time trying to set it straight. He starts right out by describing his amazement that the Galatians have fallen from faith so quickly.

Those must have been harsh words for the Galatians to hear. They'd been trying to do what they thought would make their community more special. Then Paul's letter arrives telling them that everything they were doing in an attempt to justify themselves to God was actually demeaning Christ's sacrifice. You are failing to grasp the fact, Paul tries to explain to them, that Christ died for their sins – thereby eliminating the need for us to do these other things in order to justify ourselves before God.

He realizes the Galatians are struggling simultaneously with the sins of their past and how to deal with their present and future sins. Christ's death was neither an accident nor a tragedy. It was a purposeful sacrifice on his part to take care of those worries for us. What the agitators were suggesting was that this death was not enough, that more things had to be done in order to "seal the deal."

1:6-10

Paul moves from that intro to the main body of the letter quickly. What seems to be a harmless addition is in truth a total distortion of the message. There can only be one Gospel, and that bears witness to the love of Christ. It is nothing but an invitation to experience the grace brought to us by his dedication. Christ died for us, as Paul says repeatedly. We don't have to do anything; in fact, we can't do anything that would make that more special than it already is. The Gospel is more

than a set of propositions; it is a description of the divine activity by which people are drawn into the realm of God's grace.

1:11-16

Paul gives a brief description of his background, probably not for the first time, and how he came to be an apostle. He talks about the conflicts he had on his way, including those with Peter and James. He does this to establish for them, once again, his authority to speak on this topic. Paul is not interested in comparing his office to that of Peter and James, because they don't have the power to grant that office. That comes from Christ Jesus alone. Paul is more concerned about the unity of the church than he is about who is a better apostle. The function of an apostle is not to interpret the doctrine of the church, but to preach the gospel. And that, above all, is what he is doing.

He makes the case that in his world, before he became a follower of Christ, he was a good upstanding man. We often tend to look at what he is doing now as atonement for his previous persecution of the early Christians. But Paul never sees it like that. He says that he had made serious progress in his previous life and was moved by his deep convictions to do what he did. But then Christ came into his life and showed him the error of his ways, not to heap guilt upon him but to help him to see that he was on the wrong path, and how to get on the right one.

It is that experience Paul is trying to share with the Galatians. It was not his decision to become an apostle, but God's decision made for him. God's voice called him and set him on a new path. It gave him direction and purpose and provided him with enormous support for doing what needed to be done. Over and over he tries to make the point that such decisions don't really belong to the person, but to God who calls that person.

Paul's conversion and his commission was not a two-step process; it was one event. His response to that calling can often be confused as *his* labor and *his* effort. It is not Paul's effort that shows forth; it is Christ's love shining through to the world. He says the love manifest in him is the love that comes from the one true God, the God of Israel, but the experience of that love has been eternally changed by the experience of Jesus.

2:1-10

Paul talks about his visit to Jerusalem for a specific purpose. He wants to establish that the apostles there did *not* grant him the authority to go preach the gospel. That came from Christ alone. That is the only place that it can come from. Hence, they have no authority to direct his mission or to tell him what to say.

Struggles with the Jewish/Gentile problem at the time were straining the church to the breaking point. Paul uses this section of the letter to outline the reasons for his trip – namely, that he was not called to justify himself to the leaders in Jerusalem and that his authority comes by revelation. That is why he makes so much of the conflicts with Peter; he is making the case for the authority of revelation.

Titus, his companion, does not need to be circumcised any more than do any of the Galatians in order to receive the blessings of grace. Paul's point is that the church is built on the gospel of grace, not on acts by man. In spite of anything the Jewish Christians are trying to teach the Galatians, everyone is acceptable in the sight of God. This is the great difference Between Paul's message and that coming from Jerusalem. The uniformity comes in a like perception of morals, styles of life, and conduct that comes in response to the gift of grace.

Grace pushes Christians towards unity, not away from it, because it joins people, not to each other, but to Christ. Yes, disagreements must be explored in order to find the path to walk. That's how Christians unify themselves, by exploring all those other approaches that seem so inviting but holding on to each other while they explore the excesses that they can lead to.

Unity is discovered in the context of mission. It involves mutuality and participation. You can't go do this on your own. It is not to be confused with tolerance of or indifference, to the absence of strife. It is about embracing the process that leads to a further understanding of how God works in the world.

It is important for us to see that even in the early church conflicts existed, and that through those conflicts the early Christians learned the mission that Christ would have them fulfill. That is true both for them in their time and for us in ours.

2:11-21

The Galatians have fallen into the trap of letting other people define for them who they are, and what they are to be. Paul says that to follow those who are insisting on circumcision would be “upokrisis,” usually translated as hypocrisy but which really means a “defiance of God.” What causes him the most concern is that these people, Peter among them, are sincere in their teachings. But in their sincerity, they are blind to the results of their teachings. The Galatians need to remember that, in the end, they are not accountable to the people in Jerusalem but to God. Paul would never agree to unity for the sake of unity. He would never compromise the Gospel just to have a nice, peaceful church. People need to be in a right relationship with Jesus Christ, which is the bottom line. Jesus’ death becomes the model of the life that Christians need to follow.

Paul holds before them the dichotomy of “works of the Law” and “faith in Christ.” Works of the law, he states, require no faith, just conformity and obedience. Faith in Christ requires a commitment to follow into places that are not clearly defined. A much harder thing to do. The only way to obtain salvation is through God’s grace, and that experience is only had through faith. Salvation through works is an insidious form of idolatry. It counts on the strength of the person, rather than dependence upon the strength of God. They become, in a strange sort of way, their own god.

Faith is the response of people to the gift of grace from God. It is not something that the person owns or can be seen as a means of status in the church. Faith is not a form of self-justification; it is a humble acceptance that you can’t do a darn thing to ensure your own salvation. Faith is not a reliance on one’s accomplishments or on one’s lack of accomplishments. It is an experience of trusting in the accomplishments of God.

How can I, a sinful person, find acceptance in the eyes of a holy God? Only through the experience of Christ Jesus. But that answer is a two-edged sword, because it extends His grace to all, even to those we don’t think should get it. Paul says that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female. We are all one in Christ Jesus – which also means this is never a solo performance. All of us are dependent upon each other to see our common dependence upon the Lord.

The gifts of righteousness can never be separated from the Giver. And in order to accept this gift, we must be willing to follow the path that Christ lays before us, a path that will inevitably lead towards the cross. There is no triumph in that, that is soteriology, how God saves us. We are saved not by our efforts, but through the kindness of God.