**PAUL’S REACTION TO HIS OPPONENTS**

***6I 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—7which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!***

**Galatians 1:6-9 (NIV)**

In the first sentence (1:6,7) Paul sets out the issue from his perspective. He begins with his own distress that the Galatians have so quickly and easily fallen for a false gospel. Because there is only one true gospel, what the agitators are doing is perverting the gospel of Christ. This is then followed by a repeated curse. In 1:8 the gospel is described as ‘*the one we preached to you’*and in 1:9 as the gospel ‘*you accepted*.’ Paul could see so clearly that in moving away from the gospel, they were in process of abandoning God Himself, since it was He ‘*who called you by the grace of Christ.’*

‘*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’*(1:6). The ‘*one who called you’* was not Paul but God Himself. In Paul’s other letters where he writes of being called to become a believer, ‘God’ is always the expressed or implied subject. Although it was through Paul’s preaching that God called them (1:8), Paul’s emphasis is on the fact that in responding to ‘our preaching’ they were responding to ‘God’s own calling’ them to Himself.

Paul says that the Galatians’ change of heart occurred ‘*so quickly*.’ This could mean ‘*so quickly’* after their conversion, or, ‘*so quickly’* after Paul and his companions had left them, or, ‘*so quickly’* after they heard the new message of the false gospel. Whichever, this left Paul ‘*astonished*.’ Not only were they abandoning the God who called them into relationship with Himself based on grace, but they were doing it ‘*so quickly*.’

‘*You are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ’* (1:6). Paul’s wording for this last phrase can be understood in either of two ways. He might have meant: God called you ‘by the grace of Christ’ (as here in the NIV) or God called you ‘into the grace of Christ.’ Elsewhere in Paul’s writings, the latter is usually meant: ‘into the grace of Christ.’ God had called them to live within the sphere of the grace that had come to them through Christ. When Paul wrote of grace as the ‘means’ of our calling, he consistently omitted the preposition *en* (Romans 11:6; 1 Corinthians 15:10; Ephesians 2:8) but here he includes it. Paul is reminding them that God had called them to an existence that was not only predicated on the grace of Christ (brought about by the grace of Christ), but was also the sphere of their very existence. They were to live their Christian lives in this grace. This radical new sphere od existence where all is of grace is what Paul sees them abandoning for an existence hemmed in by Torah observance.

‘*You are … turning to a different gospel’*(1:6). By abandoning the life that is to be lived as it began (completely within the framework of grace – grace that comes to them through Christ), the Galatians are turning to ‘*another* *gospel* *which is really no gospel at all*’ (1:6b,7a). The term ‘gospel’ referred both to the message itself as ‘good news’ and the content of the message – relating to the grace of Christ.

‘*Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ’* (1:7b). This is Paul’s first mention of the specific ‘troublemakers.’ They would have had much in common with the itinerants of 2 Corinthians 2:14–3:6 and Philippians 3:2,3. We meet them again in this letter in 4:17,18, in 5:7-12 and in 6:12,13. The last two passages specifically indicate the ultimate issue for the Galatian believers was the circumcision of men in the predominantly Gentile community. Because the rest of the letter indicates these agitators were on the verge of success which further suggests they presented their case in a way that on the surface appeared to be quite convincing. Paul saw it for what it was: ‘*some people … are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ’* (1:7b).

*‘But* *even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!’*(1:8). The agitators have apparently offered a persuasive case. The Galatian men would not easily have embraced circumcision – both from the point of view of its pain and from the Greek point of view, its shame – unless they found the argument for it both convincing and not all that different to what they understood of the gospel. To heighten the effect and dramatize the seriousness of the aberration being foisted on the Galatians, Paul begins with the most remote of hypothetical possibilities: ‘*even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you.’*

Paul’s point is that the gospel he preached to the Galatians was the only true one. It came to him directly from God through Christ’s own personal revelation. This means any deviation from the divinely given revelation can only come from a human source. This cannot be tolerated, even if the unthinkable was to happen – that he, his companions, or an angel were to come to them with a deviation from the original message. Those who would do such a thing are thereby turned over to God as subjects of His curse. They are themselves *anathema* (cursed [NIV = ‘*eternally condemned’*]). This word was used in the Greek Old Testament for the divine ban, the curse of God resting on anything or anyone devoted by Him to destruction. The Old Testament story of Achan is an example. God said that the spoil of the Canaanites was under His ban. It was devoted to destruction. Achan stole and kept for himself what should have been destroyed.

‘*As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!’* (1:9). Paul is well aware that he is repeating himself, though with some variation (‘*As we have already said, so now I say again’*).

Was Paul using such extreme language because the agitators disagreed with him? Was this a petulant outburst? Looking a little deeper, Paul’s wording is carefully thought through. Notice firstly that the curse Paul declares is universal. It rests on every teacher who distorts the essence of the gospel and teaches the distortion: ‘*If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted.’* There is no exception. In 1:8 he specifically applies it to angels as well as humans, and then adds ‘*even if we.’* Paul calls this curse on himself should he ever be guilty of perverting the gospel. He would not easily do this if he spoke out of spite or reactionary anger.

Notice secondly that this curse is uttered deliberately with a conscious responsibility to God. This comes out in the following verse: ‘*Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ’* (1:10). It seems that his detractors had accused him of being a man-pleaser who suited his message to his audience. But Paul saw himself as first and foremost a servant of Christ with the sole ambition of pleasing Christ and not men. It as a *‘servant of Christ’* that he measures his words carefully.

Paul wrote these words both impartially (whoever the teachers might be) and deliberately (in the presence of Christ his Lord).

Why did he use such strong language? Firstly, because the glory of Christ was at stake. To make any human works necessary to salvation, even as a supplement to the work of Christ, is derogatory to His finished work. It implies Christ’s work was in some sense unsatisfactory, and that we need to add to it to improve or complete it.

The second reason Paul uses such strong language was that the good of human souls was at stake. He was writing about something fundamental to the gospel. It should be noted too that Paul was not speaking to those who merely held false views but to those who taught them and in doing so, misled others by their teaching. Paul cared deeply for the souls of men. In Romans 9:5 he declared that he would be willing himself to be accursed (to be *anathema*) if it meant others could be saved. He knew that the gospel was the power of God for salvation. To corrupt the gospel was to destroy the way of salvation and so to send to ruin souls who might have been saved by it. Paul recognised far more clearly than his detractors that everything was at stake here – both the gospel of grace itself and the inclusion of the Gentiles as full and equal members of God’s household.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

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