

2. Paul's Authority and Gospel (4Q 2011—Galatians)

Biblical material: 2 Pet. 3:15, 16; Galatians 1; Phil. 1:1; Gal. 5:12.

Quotes

- Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth. *Albert Einstein*
- Everyone ought to worship God according to his own inclinations, and not to be constrained by force. *Flavius Josephus*
- The wisest have the most authority. *Plato*
- The ultimate authority must always rest with the individual's own reason and critical analysis. *Dalai Lama*
- Moral authority is never retained by any attempt to hold on to it. It comes without seeking and is retained without effort. *Mohandas Gandhi*

Questions

Why did Paul have to repeatedly stress his authority? What is the real issue here? How does Paul identify the gospel, and what are the implications? Why is he horrified about the "other gospel"? Why does Paul spend time on explaining his own experience? Why does he reference his Jewish background? How does this passage help us today?

Bible summary

Galatians 1 has two primary message points. The first is Paul addressing the issue of his position and authority, since his "apostleship" has clearly been questioned by some. He wants to make it clear that God has called him and the authority is not in his person, but in the message he shares from God.

The second, and far more important issue, is that some among the churches in Galatia are turning away from God and his gospel to a different message altogether. "I'm stunned at how quickly you're abandoning the One who in Christ's grace called you, turning to a different idea of the good news that isn't good news at all! Some people there are confusing you, and are trying to pervert the good news of Christ." Gal. 1:6, 7 FBV.

What could this be? The major point of this letter is on this theme, which as we shall see, is over what is the gospel? Is it the good news that Jesus came to bear about God? Or do the old Jewish rules and regulations still apply—is law-keeping essential in the way the Jewish people saw it? Is it Jesus "plus"? As Paul makes clear this is to deny the free and full message of the gospel and is really not good news at all!

In 2 Pet. 3:15, 16 Peter mentions Paul and how people twist Paul's words to the detriment of themselves and others. Peter asserts: "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him." 2 Pet. 3:15 NIV.

In Galatians 5:12, added as part of the Biblical material for this time, Paul emphatically rejects the Jewish ceremonial requirements in a colorful way!

Comment

It is rather sad that Paul has to so often defend himself and make the point he is truly an apostle. In fact many of his epistles begin this way since he is aware of the negative attitude towards him in some quarters, apparently.

For this reason he spends some time recounting his conversion experience, making it clear he does not “owe” anybody his position or authority, and that it comes from God. This is especially important here as he has to take the Galatians to task for turning away after a “false gospel.”

As we apply this criticism to ourselves, the terrible danger is not that we may have an imperfect and incomplete awareness of truth, and especially of salvation, but that we seek to make our faulty and even totally wrong concepts the definition of truth. False ideas of God, his character and nature, and the way in which he saves, led the religious systematizers to kill Jesus. The risk for us is that we do the same. Doing evil in the name of good is the ultimate blasphemy.

The “Judaizing party” there in Galatia was insisting on the rites and regulations they believed were essential to please God. What they failed to understand was that this denied the good news Jesus came to share, the good news he came to *be*. To reduce God’s wonderful offer of free and full salvation to a set of mechanical concepts, to make a loving relationship into a legal contract, to turn truth into error—all of this is as easy as setting up a system based on human concepts of appeasement, satisfaction, penalties, payments, retribution, justification, punishment, and reparation.

Those who reject the “legal satisfaction” system are easily denounced as heretics, and as easily disposed of, since “right” is on the side of such a system—and as “justified” as Shylock wanting to collect on his pound of flesh.

The preoccupation with legality and systematized “justice” led to Jesus’ death on the cross, since it was “better” that one man should die than the whole system be compromised. The demonic hatred of the scribes and Pharisees that led to their conspiracy to kill Jesus came from their commitment to a false idea of God and his saving methods. Could it be that we share some of these feelings and purposes that come from our own false ideas about God and salvation?

The “Galatian heresy” is still very much with us. We want the gospel, but we want to add to it our own ideas of what is necessary before we can come to God. The truth is that God takes us just as we are, accepts us back, and then the process of healing transformation begins. We don’t need to prove to him, through any ritual or regulation, our acceptability—how foolish! But in seeing God as he truly is, revealed by Jesus, we are won back to wondering trust in our trustworthy, saving Lord.

Ellen White Comments

Through the influence of false teachers who had arisen among the believers in Jerusalem, division, heresy, and sensualism were rapidly gaining ground among the believers in Galatia. These false teachers were mingling Jewish traditions with the truths of the gospel. Ignoring the decision of the general council at Jerusalem, they urged upon the Gentile converts the observance of the ceremonial law. The situation was critical. The evils that had been introduced threatened speedily to destroy the Galatian churches.

Paul was cut to the heart, and his soul was stirred by this open apostasy on the part of those to whom he had faithfully taught the principles of the gospel. He immediately wrote to the deluded believers, exposing the false theories that they had accepted and with great severity rebuking those who were departing from the faith. {AA 383-4}