

# Paul's Authority *and* Gospel



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Pet. 3:15, 16; Galatians 1; Phil. 1:1; Gal. 5:12.*

**Memory Text:** “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (*Galatians 1:10, NKJV*).

Students at a university built a center on their campus where everyone—regardless of race, gender, social status, or religious beliefs—would be welcome. Imagine if years later these students returned to the campus only to discover that other students had redesigned the center. Instead of the large room with plenty of space for socializing—designed to bring a sense of unity to everyone there—the room had been subdivided into many smaller rooms with entrance restrictions based on race, gender, and so forth. The students responsible for the redesign might have argued that their authority to make these changes came from centuries-old established practice.

This is something like the situation that Paul faced when he wrote his letter to the churches in Galatia. His plan that Gentiles could join on the basis of faith alone was being challenged by false teachers who insisted that Gentiles must also be circumcised before they could become members.

This position, Paul saw, was an attack on the essence of the gospel itself; thus, he had to respond. The response is the letter to the Galatians.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 8.

## Paul, the Letter Writer

**Read 2** Peter 3:15, 16. What do these verses tell us about how the early church viewed Paul's writing? What does this teach us about how inspiration works?

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When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he was not trying to produce a literary masterpiece. Instead, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul was addressing specific situations that involved him and the believers in Galatia.

Letters like Galatians played an essential role in Paul's apostolic ministry. As the missionary to the Gentile world, Paul founded a number of churches scattered around the Mediterranean. Although he visited these churches whenever he could, he couldn't stay in one place too long. To compensate for his absence, Paul wrote letters to the churches in order to give them guidance. Over time, copies of Paul's letters were shared with other churches (*Col. 4:16*). Although some of Paul's letters have been lost, at least thirteen books in the New Testament bear his name. The above words from Peter show, too, that Paul's writings were viewed as Scripture even back then. This shows just how much authority his ministry eventually gained early on in the history of the church.

At one time some Christians believed that the format of Paul's letters was unique—a special format created by the Spirit in order to contain God's inspired Word. This view changed when two young scholars from Oxford, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, discovered in Egypt about five hundred thousand fragments of ancient papyri (documents written on papyrus, a popular writing material used several hundred years before and after Christ). In addition to finding some of the oldest copies of the New Testament, they found invoices, tax returns, receipts, and personal letters.

Much to everyone's surprise, the basic format of Paul's letters turned out to be common to all letter writers in his day. The format included (1) an opening salutation that mentioned the sender and the recipient, and then included a greeting; (2) a word of thanksgiving; (3) the main body of the letter; and, finally, (4) a closing remark.

In short, Paul was following the basic format of his time, speaking to his contemporaries through a medium and style with which they would be familiar.

**If the Bible were to be written today, what kind of medium, format, and style do you think the Lord would use to reach us now?**

## Paul's Calling

Though Paul's epistles generally follow the basic format of ancient letters, Galatians contains a number of unique features not found in Paul's other epistles. When recognized, these differences can help us better understand the situation Paul was addressing.

**Compare** Paul's opening salutation in Galatians 1:1, 2 with what he writes in Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, and 2 Thessalonians 1:1. In what ways is Paul's salutation in Galatians similar to and different from the others?

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Paul's opening salutation in Galatians is not only a bit longer than in his others, but he goes out of his way to describe the basis of his apostolic authority. Literally, the word *apostle* means "someone who is sent" or "a messenger." In the New Testament, in the strictest sense, it refers to the original twelve followers of Jesus and to others whom the risen Christ appeared to and commissioned to be His witnesses (*Gal. 1:19, 1 Cor. 15:7*). Paul declares that he belongs to this select group.

The fact that Paul so strongly denies that his apostleship rests on any human being suggests that there was an attempt by some in Galatia to undermine his apostolic authority. Why? As we have seen, some in the church were not happy with Paul's message that salvation was based on faith in Christ alone and not on works of the law. They felt that Paul's gospel was undermining obedience. These troublemakers were subtle. They knew that the foundation of Paul's gospel message was tied directly to the source of his apostolic authority (*John 3:34*), and they determined to launch a powerful attack against that authority.

Yet, they did not directly deny Paul's apostleship; they merely argued that it was not really too significant. They likely claimed that Paul was not one of Jesus' original followers; his authority, therefore, was not from God but from humans—perhaps from the church leaders from Antioch who commissioned Paul and Barnabas as missionaries (*Acts 13:1–3*). Or, perhaps, it came only from Ananias, who baptized Paul in the first place (*Acts 9:10–18*). Paul, in their opinion, was simply a messenger from Antioch or Damascus—nothing more! Consequently, they argued that his message was merely his own opinion, not the Word of God.

Paul recognized the danger these allegations posed, and so he immediately defends his God-given apostleship.

**In what ways, even subtly, is the authority of Scripture being challenged today within the confines of our church? How can we recognize these challenges? More important, how have they (perhaps) influenced your own thinking in regard to the authority of the Bible?**

## Paul's Gospel

**In addition to defending his apostleship, what else does Paul emphasize in his opening greeting to the Galatians?** (*Compare Gal. 1:3–5 with Eph. 1:2, Phil. 1:2, and Col. 1:2.*)

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One of the unique features of Paul's letters is the way he links the words *grace* and *peace* in his greetings. The combination of these two words is a modification of the most characteristic greetings in the Greek and Jewish world. Where a Greek author would write "Greetings" (*chairein*), Paul writes "Grace," a similar-sounding word in Greek (*charis*). To this Paul adds the typical Jewish greeting of "Peace."

The combination of these two words is not a mere pleasantry. On the contrary, the words basically describe his gospel message. (In fact, Paul uses these two words more than any other author in the New Testament.) And his message was that the grace and peace are not from Paul but from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**What aspects of the gospel does Paul include in Galatians 1:1–6?**

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Although Paul has little space in his opening greeting to develop the nature of the gospel, he masterfully describes the essence of the gospel in only a few short verses. What is the central truth upon which the gospel resides? According to Paul, it is not our conformity to the law—the point that Paul's opponents were trumpeting. On the contrary, the gospel rests fully on what Christ accomplished for us through His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Christ's death and resurrection did something that we never could do for ourselves. They broke the power of sin and death, freeing His followers from the power of evil, which holds so many in fear and bondage.

As Paul reflects on the wonderful news of the grace and peace that God created for us in Christ, he falls into a spontaneous doxology, which appears in verse 5.

**In about as many words as Paul used in Galatians 1:1–5, write down your understanding of what the gospel is all about. Bring your words to class on Sabbath.**

## No Other Gospel

**What** normally follows the opening greeting in Paul's letters? How is Galatians different? (Compare Gal. 1:6 with Rom. 1:8, 1 Cor. 1:4, Phil. 1:3, and 1 Thess. 1:2.)

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Although Paul addresses all kinds of local challenges and problems in his letters to the churches, he still makes it a practice to follow his opening greeting with a word of prayer or thanksgiving to God for the faith of his readers. He even does this in his letters to the Corinthians, who were struggling with all kinds of questionable behavior (compare 1 Cor. 1:4 and 5:1). The situation in Galatia is so upsetting, however, that Paul omits the thanksgiving entirely and gets right to the point.

**What** strong words does Paul use that demonstrate the degree of his concern about what was happening in Galatia? (Read Gal. 1:6–9, 5:12.)

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Paul does not hold back any words in his accusation against the Galatians. Simply put, he charges them with betraying their calling as Christians. In fact, the word *turning* (*NJKV*), which appears in verse 6, often was used to describe soldiers who gave up their loyalty to their country by deserting the army. Spiritually speaking, Paul is saying that the Galatians were turncoats who were turning their backs on God.

How were the Galatians deserting God? By turning to a different gospel. Paul is not saying that there is more than one gospel, though, but that there were some in the church who—by teaching that faith in Christ was not enough (*Acts 15:1–5*)—were acting as if there were another one. Paul is so upset by this distortion of the gospel that he desires that anyone who preaches a different gospel might fall under the curse of God! (*Gal. 1:8*). Paul is so emphatic about this point that he basically says the same thing twice (*Gal. 1:9*).

There is, today, a tendency, even in some of our churches, to emphasize experience over doctrine. What matters most (we are told) is our experience, our relationship with God. However important experience is, what does Paul's writing here teach us about the importance of correct doctrine?

## The Origin of Paul's Gospel

**The** troublemakers in Galatia were claiming that Paul's gospel was really driven by his desire to obtain the approval of others. What might Paul have done differently in his letter if he were merely seeking human approval? (*Consider Gal. 1:6–9, 11–24.*)

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Why did Paul not require Gentile converts to be circumcised? Paul's opponents claimed it was because Paul wanted conversions at any cost. Maybe they thought that because Paul knew Gentiles would have reservations about circumcision, he didn't require it. He was a people-pleaser! In response to such allegations, Paul points his opponents to the strong words he writes in Galatians 1:8, 9.

If all he wanted was approval, he would surely have answered otherwise.

**Why** does Paul say it is impossible to be a follower of Christ while trying to please people?

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**After** Paul's statement in Galatians 1:11, 12 that he received his gospel and authority directly from God, how do his words in Galatians 1:13–24 make his point?

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Galatians 1:13–24 provide an autobiographical account of Paul's situation before his conversion (*Gal. 1:13, 14*), at his conversion (*Gal. 1:15, 16*), and afterward (*Gal. 1:16–24*). Paul claims the circumstances that surrounded each of these events make it absolutely impossible for anyone to claim that he received his gospel from anyone but God. Paul was not going to sit by and allow anyone to disparage his message by questioning his calling. He knew what happened to him, he knew what he was called to teach, and he was going to do it, no matter the cost.

**How certain are you of your calling in Christ? How can you know for sure what God has called you to do? At the same time, even if you are sure of your calling, why must you learn to listen to the counsel of others?**

**Further Thought:** “In almost every church there were some members who were Jews by birth. To these converts the Jewish teachers found ready access, and through them gained a foot-hold in the churches. It was impossible, by scriptural arguments, to overthrow the doctrines taught by Paul; hence they resorted to the most unscrupulous measures to counteract his influence and weaken his authority. They declared that he had not been a disciple of Jesus, and had received no commission from him; yet he had presumed to teach doctrines directly opposed to those held by Peter, James, and the other apostles. . . .

“Paul’s soul was stirred as he saw the evils that threatened speedily to destroy these churches. He immediately wrote to the Galatians, exposing their false theories, and with great severity rebuking those who had departed from the faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, pp. 188, 189.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, read your explanations of what you understand the gospel to be. What can you learn from each other’s writings?
- 2 In Paul’s greeting to the Galatians, he declared that Jesus’ death occurred for a specific reason. What was that reason, and what meaning does that have for us today?
- 3 In Galatians 1:14 Paul says he was “extremely zealous of the traditions of my fathers.” By “traditions,” he probably means both the oral traditions of the Pharisees and the Old Testament itself. What place (if any) is there for traditions in our faith? What warning might Paul’s experience offer for us today in regard to the whole question of tradition?
- 4 Why was Paul so seemingly “intolerant” of those who believed differently from the way he did? Read again some of the things he wrote about those who had a different view of the gospel. How might someone holding such a strong, uncompromising stance be viewed in our church today?

**Summary:** The false teachers in Galatia were trying to undermine Paul’s ministry by claiming that his apostleship and gospel message were not God-given. Paul confronts both of these accusations in the opening verses of his letter to the Galatians. He boldly declares that there is only one way of salvation and describes how the events surrounding his conversion demonstrate that his calling and gospel only could be from God.