

In Search of Truth

Purpose

To help us discern the message of God amidst conflicting opinions and interpretations



The Scripture for this lesson is Galatians 1. Selected verses are printed below.

Listen

Galatians 1:1-12

1 Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—

2 and all the members of God’s family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

4 who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!

9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

10 Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin;

12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Key Verse: For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin. (Galatians 1:11)

Look

The most outspoken member of my congregation drives an older model station wagon. Recently, while traveling behind her, I could not help reading her bumper sticker: "Question Authority!" The slogan signifies Holly's boldness and resistance to being controlled by anyone.

Holly expresses herself with a gleam in her eyes. She wins the respect and the affection of people who know her well. Many have said of her, "Her heart is in the right place, even if I don't agree with her." She often serves as a counterpoint in discussions and broadens the perspective of those who think they know what they believe.

Holly deliberately wears jeans to church on Sundays. She says she wants to relax after a hectic week of professional public relations work. More importantly, she sees her ministry as welcoming those who may not feel comfortable in a traditional church.

Outside of church, Holly deliberately associates with people who either reject the Christian faith or struggle with their beliefs. She drove a taxi in the city and befriended dozens of homeless men and women. She knows the grace of God firsthand. Much like the apostle Paul, the gospel she proclaims "is not of human origin" (Galatians 1:11).

Live

Like Holly, Paul was bold and nonconformist in his doctrine and methodology. He worked out of an inner assurance derived from divine revelation: He served as a messenger of the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, Paul's right to preach the Christian gospel had been authenticated by the apostles of the mother church at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1-9). Paul understood himself as sent by God to the non-Jewish world in order to make the saving grace of God available to people of all nations (Romans 1:1-6; Galatians 1:1; Acts 13:2).

When Paul referred to himself as an apostle, he meant that he was sent by God. The word, as used in the mid-50s, did not mean one of the original Twelve whom Jesus appointed. It was a more generic term, suggesting firsthand knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection (See 1 Corinthians 15:3-10.). Paul had gained his direct knowledge of Jesus by way of a divine disclosure while traveling to Damascus. Paul was convinced that his gospel came directly from God. It was his duty to proclaim and defend it.

On what basis do you determine the validity of someone's assertions?

Gospel Essentials

The apostle had trained numerous evangelists in Ephesus. These men, having completed their business in that port city and their training under their mentor, returned to their home territories to spread the gospel. By way of their work, converts were made and congregations formed in the north-central region of what is now Turkey, near Ankara.

Paul apparently visited the particular churches to which he addressed this letter and developed a close pastoral bond with them (Galatians 4:13-20). He felt a supervisory responsibility for them and a personal investment in defending them against heresy. The Book of Acts reports Paul's tour of the Roman province of Galatia in the southern part of Asia Minor (Acts 16:6; 18:23); but the Galatian congregations to which Paul addressed himself were probably located in the north.

Paul wrote on behalf of all those who worked with him as partners in the gospel as well as himself. He rarely served alone (See Romans 16:1-4, 9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; 4:21; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1.). Women and men, apparently not known by the churches in Asia Minor, gave their consent to his authoritative message and stood with him in the position he represented. By way of this apostolic letter, "all the members of God's family" who were with Paul greeted "the churches of Galatia" and their leaders (Galatians 1:2).

In the opening words of this letter, formally called a salutation or greeting, Paul asserted his authority to oversee the churches in Galatia. The letter, to be read throughout the region, was to be received as a message from the Lord. Paul expected the obedience of faith from those who would hear its message.

Moreover, the churches must recognize that Paul's guidance, unlike the teaching of false evangelists, offered the saving grace of God and a peace that faith alone can bring (Galatians 1:3). He gave his standard greeting, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3). Paul greeted them with a word from God, delivered through the mind and heart of a faithful man of God.

The gospel Paul preached had only a few essential elements. On these foundational beliefs, he would not compromise. First, Jesus is the Christ, God's Messiah, and the Savior of the world (Galatians 1:1). Second, Jesus died to make God's grace known and available to all. Third, Jesus "gave himself for our sins" (1:4a; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:5-6). Fourth, in so doing, he "set us free from the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4b). The long era in which evil dominated human affairs was coming to a close, as believers accepted the liberty that now belonged to them. Finally, God raised Jesus "from the dead" (1:2), demonstrating to the entire world that Christ is the supreme authority to whom all will be held accountable and by whom we will be saved.

On the basis of this gospel, Paul sought to convey the grace of God to the people of God in the churches of Galatia. He wrote to secure peace among missionary congregations at risk of losing their way and returning to spiritual bondage, if not to pagan ways.

In what ways do you agree or disagree with the essentials of the gospel as Paul defined them?

A Question of Authority

Leaders cannot always please the people they lead. Most folks want comfort and encouragement when, in reality, they need to be challenged. Many people would rather be confirmed in what they already believe than be confronted with the world-altering message of the gospel. Paul was a fearless leader (Galatians 1:10). He spoke, wrote, and ministered as a servant of Christ commissioned to spread the good news of the gospel, regardless of the cost to his own safety or reputation.

Things were clearly not going well for Paul or his work as the apostle to the Gentiles in Galatia at the time he wrote this letter. A comparison of the salutation found in Galatians 1:1-5 with the salutations in his other letters results in some obvious conclusions. (See the greetings in Romans, First and Second

Thessalonians, or Philippians.) Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians defensively. His brevity and passion indicate an urgency to correct something that deeply disturbed him. He felt a need to prove his authority both superior and prior to that of his unidentified opponents. Paul needed to clarify and preserve the core of his gospel.

Apparently, a faction of supposed missionaries had challenged Paul's gospel. They were undermining his authority as the spiritual mentor for the churches in that region. Worse, they were imposing their religious norms and expectations on a people who had previously received the gospel as a free gift from God. In the face of conflicting guidance, the believers were questioning Paul's authority.

On occasion, Holly can be so assertive that others find her hostile. When she feels the need to work for social justice, for instance, she does not stop to think about how her tone of voice or body language affects others. Moreover, she is not interested in enhancing her popularity. She says exactly what she thinks with a passion that some find intimidating and others find intolerable. More often than not, she speaks a truth that should be heard.

Paul, like Jesus and the great Hebrew prophets before him, was clearly capable of similar intensity. (Remember Jesus calling his adversaries whitewashed sepulchers and hypocrites or purging the Temple of greedy vendors and moneychangers.) Paul's tone in Galatians 1:6-9 offends the modern Christian ear. He is astonished (verse 6). He curses his adversaries (verses 8-9). He seems to have felt personally betrayed by the apostasy of the Galatians.

When have you found yourself having to confront adversaries and take a difficult stand? How do you know when your anger is justified and healthy and when it is destructive or arrogant?

A Maturing Faith

The term gospel was in general use in the Roman Empire at the time Paul wrote. It was used to refer to the reign of law under the emperor of Rome. The rule of Caesar was good news for a large geographic region.

As Paul used the term, however, it referred to God's good news in sending Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It referred to the preaching of the church about Jesus, his death, resurrection, and exaltation as Lord. Paul believed that the gospel he offered was that which he "received...through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:12); it was authoritative and must not be amended. Any additions or corrections would undermine its simplicity and its power.

Paul was so convinced of the correctness of the gospel he preached that he believed dissent would lead to division in the church. Doctrinal diversity would lead to moral and spiritual compromise. Converts, once filled with the Spirit, would become enslaved by a false religion.

Truth, including the truth made known in Jesus, is never simple. Adults who trust the truth revealed in Jesus often grow to love their Lord enough to explore the Christian faith in light of other faith traditions. People who compare Christianity with the other major world religions discover challenging similarities and differences. These insights force them to clarify their beliefs about human nature, salvation, the meaning and purpose of life, ethics, life beyond death, prayer, and the nature of God.

Serious theological study and open discussions among people of different backgrounds may result

in feelings of loss and uncertainty or rebellion and liberation. For this reason, some denominations discourage adult education. By limiting exposure to critical thinking, they hope to conserve the traditions they have established.

The United Methodist Church trusts the Wesleyan practice of Christian conferencing or faithful conversation and study. We believe that adult faith matures as we engage all our rational faculties, as well as our heart and soul, in discovering and responding to the truth of God. In this way we develop the skills by which to recognize the differences among various teachings. We learn to exercise discernment. Like Holly, we question voices of apparent authority.

What distinguishes healthy tolerance of religious diversity from unhealthy compromise in matters of Christian faith and practice? When has someone's challenge of your beliefs led you to a deeper faith in Jesus Christ?

Seductive Doctrines

The church today is as vulnerable to corrupt teaching as were the mid-first-century congregations of Galatia. If we do not grow in our discipleship, we too can be distracted by superficial and seductive doctrines. Leaders with impure or dark motives know that they can influence people who lack knowledge, need comfort, or feel insecure. Consider the many converts to the "gospel of prosperity," the millions who follow end-times preachers, or the impact of the New Age movement.

In Paul's day, many people believed that angels and demons were emissaries from the invisible domains where battles were fought and won and historic decisions made. People expected supernatural messengers to interact with human beings. Prophets and other spiritual leaders received knowledge directly from the heavenly realm.

The missionaries who opposed Paul's offer of salvation by faith probably did not represent themselves as angels or as having received their instructions from angels. In Galatians 1:8-9, however, when Paul refers to the possibility of an angelic messenger bearing another gospel, he compares the spiritual authority of his opponents with these heavenly beings. He implies that the false missionaries who were disturbing the churches were anything but angels and that their message did not come from God.

Paul believed that the truth revealed to him by the risen Christ is the perfect and final disclosure of God's saving work. Christ is the sufficient mediator between God and humankind. Ultimately, Paul hoped, the Galatians would allow the gospel they received to serve as the standard by which they would evaluate any preaching or instruction in faith.

On what basis do you discriminate between truth and falsehood or between attractive belief and divine revelation? How does your knowledge of psychology and history influence the way you evaluate your own and others' private or ecstatic religious experiences?

Spirit of God, so illumine our hearts and minds that we may never compromise our faithfulness. Guard our thoughts, and guide our conversations. As you make God known to us, help us model our inmost selves after the character of Jesus, our Lord. In his name we pray. Amen.