



CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

SWINDOLL'S
LIVING
INSIGHTS

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

GALATIANS • EPHESIANS



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CONTENTS

Author's Preface	v
The Strong's Numbering System	vii
Introduction: Galatians	3
Confirming the Truth of the Gospel (Galatians 1:1–2:21)	12
Another Gospel Is Not <i>the</i> Gospel (Galatians 1:1-10)	13
Radical Transformation (Galatians 1:11-24)	25
A Gospel worth Accepting and Affirming (Galatians 2:1-10)	34
Going Head-to-Head with Hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11-21)	44
Defending the Superiority of the Gospel (Galatians 3:1–4:31)	58
Backsliding into Legalism (Galatians 3:1-14)	60
A Promise You Can Count On (Galatians 3:15-22)	74
From Law to Faith: Our New Status in Christ (Galatians 3:23–4:11)	83
Caring Enough to Tell the Truth (Galatians 4:12-20)	94
To Those Who Want to Be under the Law (Galatians 4:21-31)	100
Living the Freedom of the Gospel (Galatians 5:1–6:18)	109
Freedom, Faith, Love, and Truth (Galatians 5:1-12)	112
Learning to Walk in Freedom (Galatians 5:13-25)	119
Living Together in the Spirit (Galatians 5:26–6:10)	132
A Brief Reprise and a Blunt Reproof (Galatians 6:11-18)	141
Introduction: Ephesians	151
Sovereignty and Grace: The Foundations of Our Faith (Ephesians 1:1–2:10)	160
Unloading the Theological Truck (Ephesians 1:1-14)	161
Our Prayers and Christ's Position (Ephesians 1:15-23)	173
You Were Dead, but God . . . (Ephesians 2:1-10)	183
Reconciliation and Peace: The Results of God's Grace (Ephesians 2:11–3:21)	195
Destroying the Wall to Build the Temple (Ephesians 2:11-22)	196
The Mystery, the Ministry, and Me (Ephesians 3:1-13)	210
Paul on His Knees . . . Again (Ephesians 3:14-21)	218
Walking and Growing: The Believer's Lifestyle (Ephesians 4:1–32) . . .	227
A Worthy Walk (Ephesians 4:1-6)	228
Embracing a Full-Bodied Ministry (Ephesians 4:7-16)	235
Off with the Old, On with the New (Ephesians 4:17-32)	250
Following and Submitting: The Imitator's Path (Ephesians 5:1–6:9) . . .	261
From Walking in Darkness to Living in Light (Ephesians 5:1-14)	263
Christian Living 101 (Ephesians 5:15-21)	273
Solving the Mystery of Marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33)	280
Who's the Boss? Honoring God at Home and at Work (Ephesians 6:1-9)	289

Clashing and Conquering: The Warrior's Strategy (Ephesians 6:10-24)	298
Standing Strong against Satanic Schemes (Ephesians 6:10-13)	299
Ample Armor for Weak Warriors (Ephesians 6:14-20)	307
Wrapping Up Well (Ephesians 6:21-24)	317
Endnotes	323

List of Features and Images

Timeline of Galatians	2
Map of Paul's First Missionary Journey	2
The Book of Galatians at a Glance	4
Quick Facts on Galatians	9
North or South?	16
Map of Galatia	16
Paul's Arabian Nights	30
Map of Paul's Early Travels	31
Barnabas and Titus	38
Grace, Legalism, Law	49
<i>Agora</i>	72
Excursus: The Covenant-Keeping God	77
Pedagogue	86
The Fullness of Time	90
Allegorical Interpretation	103
Legalism, Liberty, License	123
Deeds of the Flesh vs. Fruit of the Spirit	125
Weeds of the Flesh	140
Picking Up the Pen to Make a Point	143
Timeline of Ephesians	150
Map of Paul's Third Missionary Journey	150
The Book of Ephesians at a Glance	152
Ephesus in Paul's Day	156
Quick Facts on Ephesians	159
To the Saints "at Ephesus" . . . or Wherever	165
Paul's "Top Ten" Reasons to Give God Praise in Ephesians 1:3-14	172
The Great Divide	201
Excursus: Are There Apostles and Prophets Today?	207
The Parthenon in Athens	208
Stepping Stones from Humility to Love	230
The Descent and Ascent in the Work of Christ	239
Spiritual Gifts Listed in Scripture	241
Three Purposes for God's Gifts	245
Petrified Wood	253
Slavery in Paul's Day	294
Roman Soldier	302

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For more than sixty years I have loved the Bible. It was that love for the Scriptures, mixed with a clear call into the gospel ministry during my tour of duty in the Marine Corps, that resulted in my going to Dallas Theological Seminary to prepare for a lifetime of ministry. During those four great years I had the privilege of studying under outstanding men of God, who also loved God's Word. They not only held the inerrant Word of God in high esteem, they taught it carefully, preached it passionately, and modeled it consistently. A week never passes without my giving thanks to God for the grand heritage that has been mine to claim! I am forever indebted to those fine theologians and mentors, who cultivated in me a strong commitment to the understanding, exposition, and application of God's truth.

For more than fifty years I have been engaged in doing just that—and *how I love it!* I confess without hesitation that I am addicted to the examination and the proclamation of the Scriptures. Because of this, books have played a major role in my life for as long as I have been in ministry—especially those volumes that explain the truths and enhance my understanding of what God has written. Through these many years I have collected a large personal library, which has proven invaluable as I have sought to remain a faithful student of the Bible. To the end of my days, my major goal in life is to communicate the Word with accuracy, insight, clarity, and practicality. Without informative and reliable books to turn to, I would have “run dry” decades ago.

Among my favorite and most well-worn volumes are those that have enabled me to get a better grasp of the biblical text. Like most expositors, I am forever searching for literary tools that I can use to hone my gifts and sharpen my skills. For me, that means finding resources that make the complicated simple and easy to understand, that offer insightful comments and word pictures that enable me to see the relevance of sacred truth in light of my twenty-first-century world, and that drive those truths home to my heart in ways I do not easily forget. When I come across such books, they wind up in my hands as I devour them and then place them in my library for further reference . . . and, believe me, I often return to them. What a relief it is to have these resources to turn to when I lack fresh insight, or when I need just the right story or illustration, or when I get stuck in the tangled text and cannot find my way out. For the serious expositor, a library is essential. As a mentor of mine once said, “Where else can you have ten thousand professors at your fingertips?”

In recent years I have discovered there are not nearly enough resources like those I just described. It was such a discovery that prompted me to consider

becoming a part of the answer instead of lamenting the problem. But the solution would result in a huge undertaking. A writing project that covers all of the books and letters of the New Testament seemed overwhelming and intimidating. A rush of relief came when I realized that during the past fifty-plus years I've taught and preached through most of the New Testament. In my files were folders filled with notes from those messages that were just lying there, waiting to be brought out of hiding, given a fresh and relevant touch in light of today's needs, and applied to fit into the lives of men and women who long for a fresh word from the Lord. *That did it!* I began to work on plans to turn all of those notes into this commentary on the New Testament.

I must express my gratitude to both Mark Gaither and Mike Svingel for their tireless and devoted efforts, serving as my hands-on, day-to-day editors. They have done superb work as we have walked our way through the verses and chapters of all twenty-seven New Testament books. It has been a pleasure to see how they have taken my original material and helped me shape it into a style that remains true to the text of the Scriptures, at the same time interestingly and creatively developed, and all the while allowing my voice to come through in a natural and easy-to-read manner.

I need to add sincere words of appreciation to the congregations I have served in various parts of these United States for more than five decades. It has been my good fortune to be the recipient of their love, support, encouragement, patience, and frequent words of affirmation as I have fulfilled my calling to stand and deliver God's message year after year. The sheep from all those flocks have endeared themselves to this shepherd in more ways than I can put into words . . . and none more than those I currently serve with delight at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Cynthia, for her understanding of my addiction to studying, to preaching, and to writing. Never has she discouraged me from staying at it. Never has she failed to urge me in the pursuit of doing my very best. On the contrary, her affectionate support personally, and her own commitment to excellence in leading Insight for Living for more than three and a half decades, have combined to keep me faithful to my calling "in season and out of season." Without her devotion to me and apart from our mutual partnership throughout our lifetime of ministry together, Swindoll's Living Insights would never have been undertaken.

I am grateful that it has now found its way into your hands and, ultimately, onto the shelves of your library. My continued hope and prayer is that you will find these volumes helpful in your own study and personal application of the Bible. May they help you come to realize, as I have over these many years, that God's Word is as timeless as it is true.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:8)

Chuck Swindoll
Frisco, Texas

THE STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

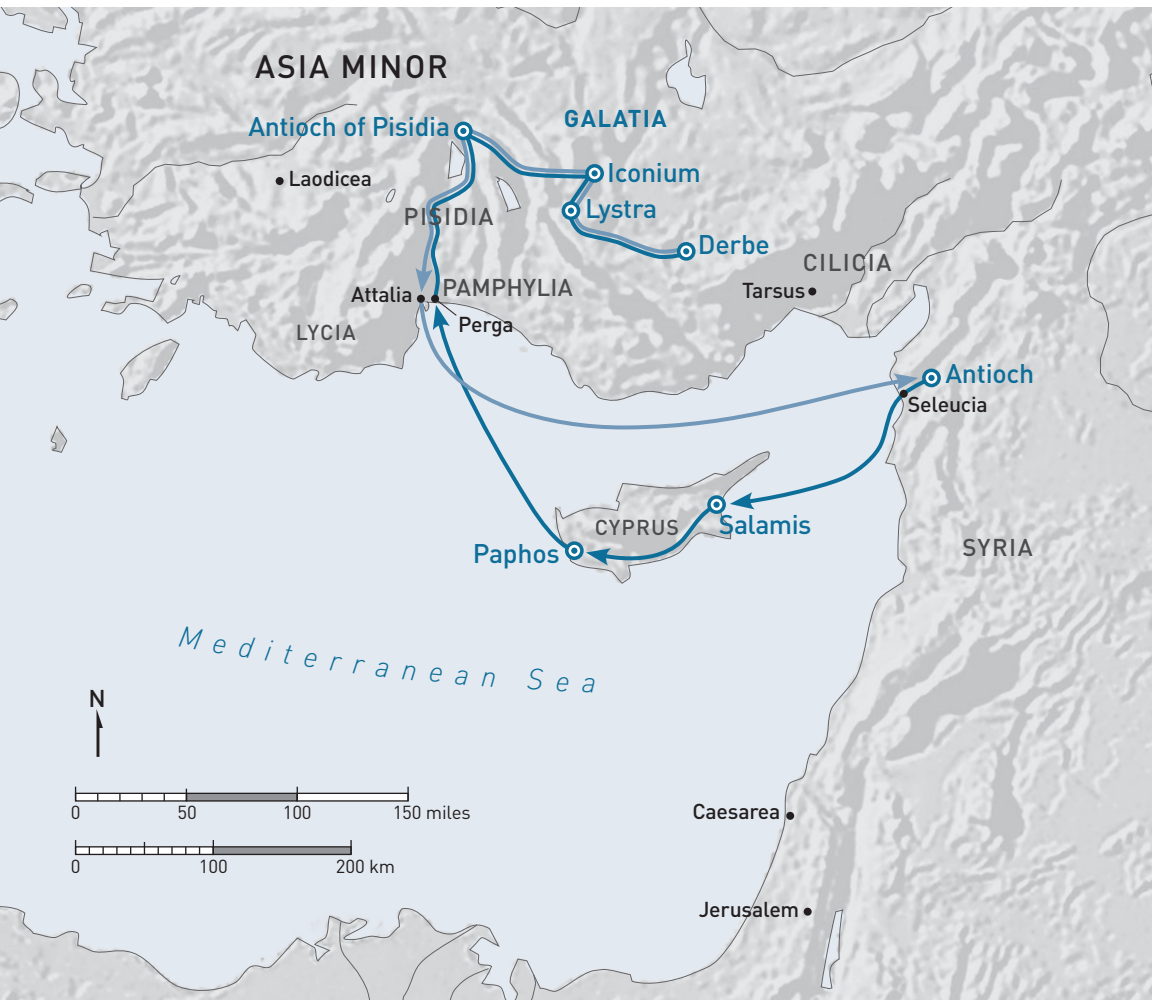
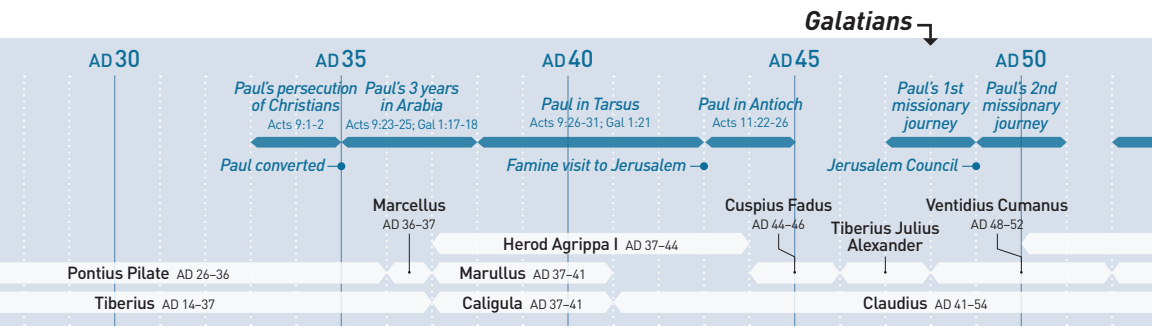
Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary uses the Strong's word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). The Strong's numbering system, made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, is used with the majority of biblical Greek and Hebrew reference works. Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

When a Greek word is mentioned in the text, the Strong's number is included in square brackets after the Greek word. So in the example of the Greek word *agapē* [26], "love," the number is used with Greek tools keyed to the Strong's system.

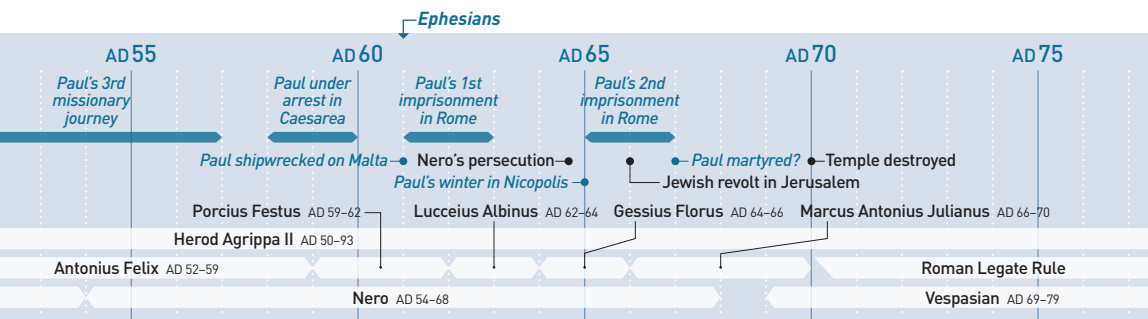
On occasion, a Hebrew word is mentioned in the text. The Strong's Hebrew numbers are completely separate from the Greek numbers, so Hebrew numbers are prefixed with a letter "H." So, for example, the Hebrew word *kapporet* [H3727], "mercy seat," comes from *kopher* [H3722], "to ransom," "to secure favor through a gift."

INSIGHTS ON GALATIANS

The gospel frees us from trying to earn or retain God's favor through rule keeping, but it also keeps us from running headlong to the other extreme—willfully sinning in the name of freedom. As people saved by grace, we have been sealed by the Spirit, who works in us to help us to love and obey Christ and to serve one another. We have been freed—not to do whatever we want, but to do what God wants.



Paul's first missionary journey began in Antioch in about AD 47 when the Holy Spirit revealed that he and his co-worker Barnabas were to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-3). After traveling across the island of Cyprus (13:4-12), they reached the southern coast of Asia Minor in the region of Pamphylia, then continued deeper into the mainland, visiting various cities in the southern half of the province of Galatia (13:13-14:18). On their journey home, they retraced their path, strengthening the new churches before returning to Antioch to report the results of their mission (14:19-28).



GALATIANS

INTRODUCTION

Though we have no record of the circumstances leading to the writing of Paul’s epistle to the Galatians, the abrupt tone and explosive content of the letter give us the impression that if we had visited Paul at the time, we would not have seen a calm, collected, and composed apostle. A frustrated, agitated, and determined one is more likely. If we allow ourselves a little “sanctified imagination,” we might relive the scene this way:

Paul paces the room, clearly agitated. He frowns, pauses, shakes his head, then pivots and strides across the room again. He glances out the window from the house on Mount Silpius, his gaze rising across the colonnaded street that dissects the city of Antioch from north to south. His weakened eyes prevent him from peering much farther than the palace jutting prominently from the island in the Orontes River, but he knows that beyond the hills descending to the sea, across the shore of Asia Minor, on the other side of the Taurus Mountains, the sprawling region of southern Galatia calls for his attention. “I would give anything to be there right now,” he whispers under his breath.

Paul notices Barnabas at the table in the corner, who is looking on in concern as the limp in Paul’s leg becomes more pronounced with each step. Paul grunts in discomfort, but the permanent injuries he suffered for the sake of the gospel at the hands of the rioters in the province of Galatia several weeks earlier feel like minor bruises compared to the deep emotional blow he just received from the messengers. “Foolish Galatians!” Paul mutters. He shakes his head again, thinking through his last visit to the cities of that region.

From Paul’s perspective, things had gone well on that first journey through the provinces of Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Galatia—what their house church here in Antioch now called the “first mission.” Gentiles,

THE BOOK OF GALATIANS AT A GLANCE

SECTION	CONFIRMING THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL	DEFENDING THE SUPERIORITY OF THE GOSPEL	LIVING THE FREEDOM OF THE GOSPEL
PASSAGE	1:1-2:21	3:1-4:31	5:1-6:18

THEMES	Grace is the way to life and the way of life.		
	Personal Narrative	Doctrinal Argument	Practical Application
	The authority of Paul's apostleship vs. the falsehood of the Judaizers	The sufficiency of faith in Christ vs. the uselessness of works of the Law	The power of the Spirit in the Christian life vs. the weakness of the sinful flesh
	Confusion	Works vs. Faith	Don't be enslaved.
	Clarification	Legalism vs. Justification	Serve through love.
	Correction	Bondage vs. Freedom	Walk in the Spirit.

KEY TERMS	Law . . . Gospel . . . Spirit		
	Evangelize	Faith	Freedom
	Anathema	Promise	Desire of the flesh
		Heir	Crucify

KEY TERMS IN GALATIANS

***euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον) [2098] “good news,” “gospel”**

The English term “gospel” comes from the Middle English compound “good-spell,” where “spell” means “tale.” The gospel is therefore the “good story.” The Greek term *euangelion* would have been used to describe a favorable report of a messenger from the battlefield or an official proclamation that an heir to the king had been born. The good news that Paul proclaimed concerned Jesus Christ’s death for sin and resurrection as well as salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Christ had conquered sin and death, and through Him God offers new life.

***nomos* (νόμος) [3551] “a law,” “the Mosaic Law”**

Paul uses *nomos* over thirty times in the book of Galatians to refer to the Mosaic Law, the code of conduct Moses received directly from God. It is clear in Galatians that Paul has a high view of the Law as an authentic revelation from God, but he argues that its function as a rule of life has come to an end with the coming of Christ (see 3:19; 5:18). The Law still reveals human sinfulness, however, driving guilty sinners to the grace and mercy of God for forgiveness.

***pneuma* (πνεῦμα) [4151] “spirit,” “Holy Spirit”**

Although *pneuma* is commonly used in secular Greek literature to speak of a person’s immaterial soul, Paul most often uses the term in reference to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Paul uses phrases such as “walk by the Spirit” (5:16) or “led by the Spirit” (5:18) to mark the difference between one who lives according to God’s power and one who lives according to one’s own strength. The Spirit also works miracles (3:5), grants believers adoption as sons of God (4:6), gives new hope (5:5), and imparts new desires in contrast to those of the flesh (5:16-17).

starving for hope, had received the good news of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection with great enthusiasm. The Holy Spirit had wrought miracles through Paul and Barnabas that astounded even them. On Cyprus the Spirit had prompted Paul to cast a meddlesome sorcerer into a state of blindness, opening the spiritual eyes of a Roman proconsul. In Iconium, the Lord confirmed their message concerning the grace of God with signs and wonders done through their hands. At Lystra the Spirit healed a man crippled from birth, drawing awestruck crowds from the city who insisted that Paul and Barnabas must be gods who had descended from heaven. But the fact that the Spirit had confirmed the apostles’ message of grace with such amazing power only made Paul all the more frustrated to receive the tragic news: *The new believers*

in the province of Galatia have abandoned the good news of the gift of salvation and have started depending on obedience to the Law!

“Remember, Barnabas?” Paul asks, pounding his fist into his open hand. “Remember what we told them in Pisidia? We told them that *through Christ* the forgiveness of sins was being proclaimed to them. *Through Him alone* believing sinners are freed from everything—*everything*—from which the Law of Moses was powerless to free them!”

“We were very clear, Paul,” Barnabas assures him, watching his companion wring his hands, “but the circumcision party has invaded their ranks and poisoned their minds against us.”

“You’re right,” Paul responds. “Those dogs were nipping at our heels the whole time. As soon as we sailed for Antioch, they returned to gnaw our young brothers and sisters to the bone!”

Paul again commences pacing as a growing tension fills the room. Finally he stops and stares out the window. The sun is beginning to set—that much he can tell even with his weakening eyesight. In fact, the brilliant sphere seems to hover over the distant region of Galatia itself, confirming Paul’s resolve to somehow pierce the darkness that is invading the world of those young believers. He turns to his companion and nods his head, the expression on his face transformed from dismay to determination. “Fetch me parchment and a pen, Brother Barnabas. Then ask Simeon or Lucius to find a messenger who can set off with a letter for the Galatians in the morning. I’ll pay the expenses myself.”

“What are we going to do?” Barnabas asks, rising from his seat.

Paul smiles for the first time since receiving the news of the Galatian crisis. “Since they have attacked our brothers and sisters in Galatia, we’re going to bite back!”



It stunned Paul to learn that the Galatians had abandoned the simple and pure gospel of grace and freedom in Christ for a complex and strenuous religion of works and human bondage. Why would a slave, once freed, go back to living in bondage? Why would a debtor forgiven of his debts free and clear continue making backbreaking payments to his creditor? Why would a criminal pardoned by a gracious judge walk himself to prison to do time behind bars? These implausible scenarios make as much sense to us as the Galatian crisis of faith made to Paul and Barnabas after their first missionary journey through southeastern Asia Minor.

In fact, Paul put it bluntly to the Galatians: “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of

Christ, for a different gospel” (1:6). Paul was shocked, astounded, dumbfounded—virtually at a loss for words! The “different gospel” they had received in exchange for the grace of Christ was no gospel at all, but a mixture of faith plus works—reasonable within the typical pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality of today and fashionable among the influential legalists then. This “different gospel” was so far from the truth of Christ that it could no longer be called “good news,” only “damnable doctrine.” So Paul set out to extinguish this smoldering heresy before it burst into full flame and reduced his fledgling churches to ashes.

Before working our way through Paul’s letter of liberation, let’s explore its background in order to get a better understanding of the world in which it was written and the situation it addressed. We will then be in a good position to appreciate an overview of the entire book.

THEM’S FIGHTIN’ WORDS!

Back in the 1980s Hollywood created what became a veritable film genre in which a bulked-up, heavily armed one-man fighting machine broke into prison camps and rescued hostages, POWs, or kidnap victims. Names like Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris, and Bruce Willis immediately come to mind. The plots and characters usually had as much depth as a North Texas winter snowfall, but when it came to shoot-’em-up action, those movies had no rivals. An obvious lesson jumped out of any one of those flicks: If you want to set the captives free, you need to go in with guns blazing.

This is the approach Paul took with the letter to the Galatians. Commentators have called it the “Magna Carta of Christian Liberty” or the “Christian’s Declaration of Independence.” Fair enough, but frankly, it reads more like a declaration of war! Clearly, Galatians is the most personal, in-your-face, no-holds-barred writing from Paul’s passionate pen. Let me give you just a few snippets to demonstrate how militant the letter is:

As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (1:9)

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? (3:1)

Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (3:3)

My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (4:19-20)

I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. (5:12)

These words come from a man unleashed, a man who places vital truth above courtesy and plain facts above civility. He assails the severe, faith-threatening spiritual problems of the Galatians with a three-pronged attack.

First, *he asserts a strong affirmation of freedom based on grace*. First and foremost, Galatians reminds us that Christ has already freed us from sin, death, and the Law. How have we been freed? By grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Why have we been freed? In order to live an unshackled life based not on an exhaustive list of dos and don'ts but on a grace-motivated, Spirit-empowered life of love for God and others. Over and over again Paul reminds his readers that grace has freed them (and us!) from the Law and its penalties.

Second, *he launches a bold assault on works-based legalism*. If Paul were alive today, he would be disappointed that so many Christians struggle under the bondage of legalism rather than thrive in the freedom of grace. What is legalism? Charles Ryrie defines it as “a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self.”¹ In the case of the Galatians, they were succumbing to the observance of the Law “to make a good showing in the flesh” and to avoid being “persecuted for the cross of Christ” (6:12). Legalism always involves man-made rules and regulations, enforced through guilt and shame. For legalists, God seems like a severe judge ready to pounce at every infraction, a stern teacher eager to point out every mistake, or a strict father whose standards we can never live up to.

Third, *he issues a courageous encouragement for those surrounded by legalists*. Legalists have been with the church throughout history, and they have pitched their tents among us today. At the same time, those who believe, live, and proclaim God's grace and fruitful life in the Spirit continually work at tearing down the base camps of their adversaries. Paul presents himself as a warrior for the cause of grace against the insurgency of legalism, encouraging us to step into the fray and take a stand against those who would seek to enslave us to their own standards of law.

THE GLORY OF GALATIANS

The book of Galatians sparkles like a multifaceted gem. It has at least four sides that each brilliantly reflect a vital aspect of the truth and reveal the shortcomings of opposing views.

First, *it warns against abandoning the true gospel for a cheap imitation.* After a brief greeting, Paul instantly dives into a veritable invective, calling down curses upon those who would tamper with the truth of the gospel (1:6-8). These aren't the words of a raving lunatic or a dogmatic heresy hunter. They reflect the passion of a patriot of grace who knows that adding to or taking from the one true gospel destroys the Christian faith itself.

Second, *it upholds the significance of grace.* Except for the book of Romans, Paul's letter to the Galatians presents the clearest and most succinct articulation of the doctrine of justification in Scripture. Salvation comes by grace through faith apart from works. This simple truth stands as the bedrock of our faith. Remove this foundation of grace, and the whole building will crumble.

Third, *it presents the true function of the Mosaic Law.* Obeying the Law of Moses can't save us. In fact, it has never saved anyone. Never has, never will. Nobody (except Jesus) can ever keep the Law perfectly, although legalists like to pretend they can. Paul acknowledges, however, that the Law serves a good and necessary purpose: It reveals our sin and need for grace, and it reminds us of God's nonnegotiable standards of righteousness.

Fourth, *it provides a needed balance so liberty is not abused.* The gospel frees us from trying to earn or retain God's favor through rule keeping, but it also keeps us from running headlong to the other extreme—willfully sinning in the name of freedom. As people saved by grace, we have been sealed by the Spirit, who works in us to help us to

QUICK FACTS ON GALATIANS

- *Who wrote it?* Paul the apostle (1:1), perhaps through a secretary (6:11).
- *Where was it written?* From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas's "home church" in Syria (Acts 14:26-28).
- *To whom was it written?* To newly established churches in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, including Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Gal. 1:2).
- *When was it written?* About AD 48, shortly after Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-14:28) and just before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35).
- *Why was it written?* Judaizers were trying to convince new Gentile converts that they had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved. Paul soundly rejects this message as a false gospel (Gal. 6:11-18).
- *What is its basic theme?* Grace—not law—is both the way to life and the way of life.

love and obey Christ and to serve one another. We have been freed—not to do whatever we want, but to do what God wants.

OVERVIEW OF THE LETTER

The basic message of Galatians can be summed up in three sentences: Paul had heard that the Galatian Christians were in danger of falling away from the true gospel of grace by turning to a legalistic approach to salvation and the Christian life. His passion for the truth compelled him to call them back to the freedom of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. In doing so, he argued that not only is the sinner *saved* by grace, but the saved sinner also *lives* by grace.

This simple but profound message can be expressed in a single line:

Grace is the way *to* life and the way *of* life.

Paul supports this basic truth in each of the three sections of his letter. Let's walk through them.

Confirming the Truth of the Gospel (1:1–2:21). After a brief greeting, Paul hits the ground running, declaring that any message from any source that does not agree with the gospel he had preached to the Galatians is a *false* gospel (1:1-10). Paul expected that some would ask, “What’s so special about Paul? Why is his message any better than somebody else’s?” To answer them, Paul tells the story of his own radical conversion from Judaism to faith in Christ and his call as an apostle (1:11-24). Although Peter and the apostles to the Jews had affirmed their agreement with the gospel of salvation by grace through faith (2:1-10), Paul recounts a run-in he had with Peter himself over the respected leader’s failure to live in conformity with the truth of the gospel (2:11-16). In this encounter with Peter, Paul made it clear that the believer is no longer bound by the Law and has been freed to live a new life of faith through Christ (2:17-21).

Defending the Superiority of the Gospel (3:1–4:31). Having established that his gospel is God’s gospel, Paul turns again to the Galatians’ defec-tion and draws a sharp distinction between law and grace. How can people saved by grace expect to grow by slipping into legalism? Having begun by faith, how could the Galatians now depend on their own works? Even Abraham, the father of the Jews, “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (3:6). The Law, rather than saving us, explains God’s standards and exposes sin (3:19). That is, it served as a “tutor” to bring us to faith in Christ (3:24). Christ’s grace, not the Law, made the Galatians part of the family of faith, where neither race,

nor gender, nor social status provides an advantage. We are all fellow heirs of the grace of God in Christ Jesus (3:28). Understandably, then, the Galatians' backsliding dumbfounded Paul, who found it incredible that they would "turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things" (4:9). Paul crowns his doctrinal section with an Old Testament illustration, contrasting children of slavery with children of freedom (4:21-31).

Living the Freedom of the Gospel (5:1–6:18). Having defended both his apostolic authority and the doctrine of justification by faith, Paul finally turns his attention to a defense of the life of Christian freedom. This answers the Judaizers' objection that living by grace promotes immorality. Having been set free in Christ, the Galatians are to "keep standing firm and . . . not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). The Judaizers' teaching—which says that circumcision and other rituals save us—is not of God (5:8). Like leaven (5:9), this heresy permeates the church and nullifies the doctrine of grace. In some of his strongest language, Paul even wishes the pro-circumcision crowd would fall victim to their own practices and mutilate themselves (5:12). No, the Galatians were not set free to fall back under the Law. Neither, however, were they liberated to live immoral lives. They were set free to love and serve one another (5:13-14) and to display true Christlike character (5:22-23). In this way, they would truly fulfill the deeper intention behind the written laws. Unlike the false teachers who wanted to boast in circumcision instead of the Cross (6:12-13), Paul desires to boast only "in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14).

In short, Christ has set us free! We are free from the shackles of legalism. We are free to love and live for Him. We are free to love and serve others. Are you ready to immerse yourself in the study of this liberating letter? I certainly am!

CONFIRMING THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL (GALATIANS 1:1–2:21)

Since the dawn of the church, the good news of God's grace has been threatened. When I think back over my fifty years of ministry, I recall the countless times I've had to personally take a stand for grace. Therefore, I'm not at all surprised that the first letter penned by Paul dealt with the same thing—confronting legalism and championing grace. That's why the words of one of my most respected Greek professors, written years ago, still reflect the condition of the church today:

One of the most serious problems facing the orthodox Christian church today is the problem of legalism. One of the most serious problems facing the church in Paul's day was the problem of legalism. In every day it is the same. Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes his power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, somber, dull and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy kill-joy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing.¹

Paul's letter to the Galatians sets us free. Its bold statement of liberating grace points us away from a false gospel of self-empowered works and toward the true gospel of faith and Spirit-empowered love. Its basic theme, to which we will return again and again, is that grace is the way to life and the way of life.

In this first major section of the letter (1:1–2:21), Paul confirms the truth of the gospel of grace. This includes Paul's defense of his own apostleship, guaranteeing that the gospel he preached to the Galatians was, in fact, the truth received from God and taught by his fellow apostles. In this section, which includes some of the most autobiographical elements of all his writings, Paul tells his own story of conversion in great detail. He also recounts a run-in he had with Peter over that great apostle's failure to live in line with grace. How easy it is to

KEY TERMS IN GALATIANS 1:1–2:21

***anathema* (ἀνάθεμα) [331]** “curse,” “condemnation,” “damnation”

Paul uses *anathema*, perhaps the strongest Greek word for absolute condemnation, to describe those who preach a false gospel (1:8-9). In Romans 9:3 Paul uses the term rhetorically, wishing himself “accursed” for the sake of his Jewish brethren, thus demonstrating the depth of the love he has for them. In 1 Corinthians 16:22 he uses the term to describe the utterly condemned state of those who have no love for Christ. Throughout church history the term continued to be applied to those who taught heresy concerning Jesus Christ’s person or work.

***euangelizō* (εὐαγγελίζω) [2097]** “to announce good news,” “to preach the gospel”

Paul uses this verb seven times in the book of Galatians, six of which are in chapter 1 alone. In Galatians 1:8, 9, and 11, Paul uses the term in reference to “preaching the gospel,” contrasting those who preach the *authentic* good news of Jesus Christ with those who preach a gospel *contrary* to the one preached by Paul. From this verb we derive our word “evangelism,” the ministry of sharing the gospel.

believe and preach one thing while caving in to the pressure to live in a way that pleases others! Through his personal testimony of receiving and preaching grace, Paul confirms that we believers have been freed from the Law and rescued from its condemnation. That means we’re empowered to live beyond its legalistic dos and don’ts.

Another Gospel Is Not *the* Gospel

GALATIANS 1:1-10

NASB

¹Paul, an apostle (not *sent* from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), ²and all the brethren who are with me,

NLT

¹This letter is from Paul, an apostle. I was not appointed by any group of people or any human authority, but by Jesus Christ himself and by God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead.

²All the brothers and sisters* here join me in sending this letter to the churches of Galatia.

To the churches of Galatia:
³Grace to you and peace from ^aGod our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil ^aage, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom *be the glory forevermore. Amen.*

⁶I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you ^bby the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; ⁷which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel ^acontrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be ^baccursed! ⁹As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel ^acontrary to what you received, he is to be ^baccursed!

¹⁰For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

1:3 ^aTwo early mss read *God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ* 1:4 ^aOr world 1:6 ^aLit in 1:8 ^aOr other than, more than ^bGr anathema 1:9 ^aOr other than, more than ^bGr anathema

³May God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ* give you grace and peace. ⁴Jesus gave his life for our sins, just as God our Father planned, in order to rescue us from this evil world in which we live. ⁵All glory to God forever and ever! Amen.

⁶I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ.* You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News ⁷but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ.

⁸Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. ⁹I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed.

¹⁰Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant.

1:2 Greek *brothers*; also in 1:11. 1:3 Some manuscripts read *God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. 1:6 Some manuscripts read *through loving mercy*.

Like a surgeon going after a malignant tumor that needs to be excised immediately, Paul preps his patients with a brief greeting in order to remind them of what's at stake: grace, peace, the gospel of Christ's redeeming death and miraculous resurrection, and the very glory of God. It means life or death for the churches in Galatia.

In this spiritual emergency, Paul wastes no time weighing treatment options, crafting a noninvasive procedure, preparing anesthetics, or soothing his patients with a pleasant and tactful bedside manner. Instead, he takes up his scalpel and starts cutting, declaring the main thrust of his case right up front: There is one and only one gospel of grace. Any addition to this gospel results in a corruption of the truth, leading to a cancerous plague on the Christian faith.

When it comes to this fundamental truth, Paul doesn't hem and haw. He deals with it boldly, firmly, and without fretting over the potential repercussions. The pure gospel Paul had preached was in danger of mutating into a monstrous beast that mixed Jesus and faith with the Law, works, and a number of other rude intrusions into the Christian life. The worst part of this Galatian plague was that they were embracing it voluntarily! Faith plus works sounded harmless, even helpful at first. After Paul preached his clear message of grace through faith plus nothing, the sin-sick Judaizers, carrying their viral heresy, came along and infected those new believers who had just been made well. So Paul wrote to the Galatians to cleanse them of their disease of legalism and restore them to spiritual health.

Let's take a look at the first ten verses of Galatians, where we'll discover that the legalists' improved "gospel" was really a deadly disease.

— 1:1-5 —

Paul begins his letter in the typical fashion of his day by naming the sender, declaring the recipients, and providing a blessing. Already in this greeting we see two main thrusts of his overall message that he will develop later: his God-given authority as a true apostle (1:1) and the simplicity of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-5).

Paul's self-identification as "Paul, an apostle," serves as more than the author's identification of his title. From the opening words of the letter, Paul clearly affirms what his opponents were disputing—that he was as much a true apostle as the original Twelve. Paul had learned that the Judaizers—those who had sown seeds of legalism after his departure—had first discredited Paul as an impostor. If they could instill distrust among the Galatians regarding the accuracy or completeness of Paul's message—or if they could drive a wedge between Paul and the other apostles—then the Galatians would readily listen to a more "Jewish" version that emphasized doing the works of the Law.

The early Christian use of the Greek word *apostolos* [652] (apostle) carries with it a distinct authority. It "refers to a person who has a right to speak for God as His representative or delegate."² The term, as commentator John Stott explains, "was not a general word which could be applied to every Christian like the words 'believer,' 'saint' or 'brother.' It was a special term reserved for the Twelve and for one or two others whom the risen Christ had personally appointed."³

To be an authentic apostle of Jesus Christ, a person had to measure up to certain criteria. First, apostles had to have been eyewitnesses

NORTH OR SOUTH?

GALATIANS 1-2

For the better part of the last century, scholars have disagreed about the destination of the letter to the Galatians.⁴ Was it written to the churches located in northern Galatia or southern Galatia? The destination of the epistle largely determines the date of its composition and is crucial for harmonizing the chronology in the book of Acts with Paul’s testimony in Galatians 2.

For the majority of church history, commentators have held that the phrase “churches of Galatia” (1:2) refers to the geographic region occupying northern Galatia. The inhabitants of northern Galatia were Gauls who referred to themselves as “Galatians.” In the book of Acts, Luke refers to places using geographic and ethnic names instead of Roman province titles. His references to Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia in Acts 13:13-14 and 14:6 demonstrate this. Therefore, when Luke mentions the “Galatian region” in Acts 16:6 and 18:23, he is referring to the geographic region inhabited by the Gauls in northern Galatia. Luke’s mention of Galatia comes after the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and during Paul’s second and third missionary journeys. This theory attempts to harmonize Paul’s account in Galatians 2:1-10 with the events of Acts by claiming that Paul is referring to the Jerusalem Council. The north Galatian theory requires Paul to have written Galatians around AD 57-58 at the earliest.



The Roman province of Galatia sprawled from far north to far south through the center of Asia Minor, making it difficult for scholars to determine to whom Paul wrote the letter.

The south Galatian theory came onto the scene in the late nineteenth century. It holds that “Galatia” refers to the southern portion of the Roman province, which contained churches founded by Paul during his first missionary journey (Acts 14:21), not the land occupied by the Gauls. This view takes into consideration that Paul had a tendency to use Roman province names (rather than ethnic regions) when referring to places (1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Cor. 1:1; 8:1). Paul’s use of “Galatia” in his letter would then most likely refer to the area of Galatia where he had established churches. Furthermore, if Galatians had been written later to the northern region, it would seem surprising that Paul didn’t explicitly mention the Jerusalem Council in his diatribe against the Judaizers (Gal. 2:1-10). The south Galatian theory makes more sense historically, because it means Paul wrote the book of Galatians prior to the Jerusalem Council, around AD 48.

of the resurrected Christ. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:1, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” Second, apostles confirmed their God-given office through miraculous signs and wonders, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:12: “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.” Finally, apostles had to have been hand selected for this unique office by the risen Lord (Acts 1:21-26). Paul had fulfilled all of these requirements because he had encountered the resurrected Christ on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6), Jesus had empowered Paul to perform amazing signs and wonders during his ministry (Acts 14:3), and the Lord had specifically chosen Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

Nevertheless, the false teachers insisted that Paul was not, in fact, an apostle. Hoping to discredit his message, they had pointed out some flaw or deficiency in his apostleship. Perhaps Paul was an easier target than others. Paul himself, noticing that his own selection as an apostle took an unusual route, marveled at his own calling: “He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:7-10).

In his introduction to Galatians, Paul reminds his readers of the simple truth: He is a true apostle, “not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). No mere human being had played even a minor role in his commission to this high office. Yes, it was true that the leadership in the church of

Antioch had laid hands on Paul and Barnabas and had sent them out on their first missionary journey, which included Galatia (Acts 13:1-3). In this general sense, Barnabas, too, was a “sent one” (*apostolos*; see Acts 14:14), though Barnabas was “sent” by the church of Antioch rather than directly by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. This was a particular ministry assignment different from Paul’s particular calling as an apostle. When God calls a person into the preaching ministry today, that general God-given calling will be worked out in a variety of specific settings throughout his life. Similarly, Paul was already identified as an apostle because of his direct calling from the Lord Jesus, which his fellow apostles had testified to and confirmed. Therefore Paul, not the legalists, had the authority to speak for the Lord. This apostolic title gave Paul the necessary authority and credentials he needed to perform radical spiritual surgery on the Galatian Christians and the legalists who were duping them.

Though Paul thought it important to assert his apostolic authority, his greeting to the Galatian believers centers mostly on the content of the gospel message itself. He wishes his readers “grace” and “peace” from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:3). Typically, letters in the Greek-speaking world began with the word *chairein* [5463], “greetings” (Acts 15:23; Jas. 1:1). Paul, however, began his letters with a unique greeting that sounded similar but had more profound theological significance: *charis . . . kai eirēnē* [5485, 2532, 1515](grace . . . and peace). Salvation comes purely by grace and results in peace with God. That’s the cause and effect of the gospel summed up in just two words.

Paul also includes the fundamental pillars of the gospel message in this opening greeting. He tells us that Christ “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). The gospel is God’s rescue operation, planned and executed to liberate believers from sin’s condemnation and slavery. Jesus Christ paid the full cost of this ransom on the cross. Then, because Jesus was both perfect man and perfect God, the Father “raised Him from the dead” (1:1). By placing our faith in Christ, we receive the unearned mercy of full payment for sin as well as the unmerited grace of victory over death through Christ’s resurrection. Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. That’s the core of the simple gospel message. No wonder Paul ends this brief but powerful introduction with a doxology to God the Father, “to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen” (1:5).

Now here’s the point of it all. God has provided salvation through the finished work of His Son, Jesus Christ. The moment a person accepts

by simple faith that Christ died for his or her sins and rose from the dead, God declares that person righteous and rescues that person from this present evil age. That's called the doctrine of *justification*, which is defined as the sovereign act of God whereby He declares a condemned sinner righteous while he or she is still in a sinning state. At the moment of our justification, our names are, as it were, removed from the roll of the lost and we are enrolled as citizens of heaven . . . never to be removed.

Pretty simple message, isn't it? So simple, in fact, that even a little child could understand and believe it. No wonder Paul marveled that the Galatians had exchanged his simple, clear message of grace for a complicated, spurious gospel of works.

— 1:6-9 —

Perhaps without even re-dipping his pen, Paul turned from glorifying the Father for His marvelous grace to chastising the Galatians for their amazing apostasy. The language indicates utter astonishment that anybody would do what the Galatians were doing. Paul found himself in a state of dumbfounded shock.

Look carefully at the word “deserting” in 1:6. It implies the complete transfer of allegiance from one thing to another. When the Galatians turned their backs on Paul's authentic message, they were walking away from Christ Himself. Not only had they defected from the gospel, but they had done it “so quickly” that it threw Paul for a loop. If Paul wrote Galatians sometime during his stay in Antioch after the first missionary journey (Acts 14:28), it may have taken only a matter of weeks before the Galatian Christians turned tail in the face of bullying from the Judaizers.

Please notice something practical in this example of the Galatians' quick desertion of the gospel. It doesn't take many years in ministry to discover that one of the characteristics of a new Christian is gullibility. If you're involved in escorting a person into the family of God, never forget how vulnerable that person remains for some time until he or she becomes grounded in the truth. Think of that new believer's spiritual life as a fragile seed freshly planted in the soil. It takes time for the faith to take firm root and grow a strong stock and bear fruit. As older, more mature believers, we need to help them during this critical time. Think about this: If people who had been under Paul's ministry turned away so quickly, don't think for a moment that it couldn't happen to those we lead to Christ.

The Galatians deserted the gospel of grace for a “different” gospel (Gal. 1:6), which, Paul asserts, was not simply “another” legitimate version of the truth but a perversion of it. Paul describes their gospel with the Greek word *heteros* [2087], which means “another of a different kind.”⁵ The Galatians considered the Judaizers’ brand of the gospel a legitimate choice, but it was nothing of the kind. By adding works of the Law to the gospel of grace, the Judaizers had changed the very DNA of the gospel. Their teaching was as different from the true gospel as night from day, fire from water, death from life.

These Judaizers were disturbing the Galatians and distorting the gospel (1:7). Once they added something to simple faith in Christ’s person and work—whether it be circumcision, holy days, ceremonial cleansing, or Sabbath observance—they destroyed the gospel. So how did Paul respond to the truth-twisting Judaizers? Did he schedule a collegial dialogue to let the Galatians weigh the merits of both sides in a free and open discussion of all the options? Did he publish an essay in a peer-reviewed journal to persuade his opponents by well-reasoned arguments? Or did he ignore the Judaizers’ madness—refusing to dignify it—and let it blow over like a harmless fad? No! Instead, he quite literally damned them to hell!

You rarely hear leaders in evangelical circles today come down on heresy like Paul did in his day. Paul calls down God’s eternal judgment on those false teachers (1:8-9). In our hypersensitive, politically correct culture, Paul’s words sound harsh, don’t they? Notice, however, that Paul includes even himself in the threatened curse: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed” (1:8). Paul includes heavenly angels and his own circle of apostles—whether “sent out” by Christ Himself or by missionary-sending churches—in order to highlight the fact that nobody is off the hook. The purity of the message takes precedence over the prestige of the person. This phrasing makes the curse universal—if *anyone* were to preach a gospel different from what Paul and Barnabas preached, he would deserve to be damned.

Notice, too, that Paul repeats the curse (1:9). He is deliberate and controlled in his rebuke. Paul’s curse is not a slip of the tongue, a brief fit of rage, or a regrettable exaggeration of an emotional preacher. Though he essentially damns false teachers, this language doesn’t fall under the category of vulgar cursing, either. Paul isn’t fiercely shaking his fist at his opponents and shouting, “Damn you!” Rather, he shakes his head and expresses a clear theological fact: Altering the gospel is

Driving Highway 1:10

GALATIANS 1:10

A number of years ago I found myself facing a dreadful dilemma. The church elders were divided over a matter that had less to do with clear biblical principles than with tradition. There was no clear scriptural precept that dictated what we should decide . . . and the final decision rested on my shoulders. Let me tell you, I was in turmoil. Not so much because I wanted to be sure I was making the right decision, but because I had a lot of friends on both sides of the issue, and I didn't want to alienate anybody. I didn't yet believe the old adage that "you can't please everybody." Young, energetic, and overly idealistic, I thought there had to be a solution that would make everybody happy—which really translates as "make everybody happy with me."

I needed to figure this out, so I said to Cynthia one afternoon, "I'm going to take a drive. I may be gone overnight. I want to pray and think about this." I set out still thinking that somehow, some way, I would be able to conjure up an answer that would please both sides.

Now I know this is going to reveal something about the unforgivable driving habits of my younger years, but I'm just going to have to fess up to it. While I was driving down the highway, I actually had my Bible open on the steering wheel and was reading it, searching desperately for some key that would unlock this conundrum. I said, "Lord, I'm going to read all the way through the New Testament if I have to." Looking back, I'm sure that doing a personal Bible study while driving had to have been infinitely more dangerous than talking on a cell phone, but at that time safety was the last thing on my mind. Pleasing people meant far more to me than personal safety.

I don't know why, but I started with Galatians. I made it ten verses into that book when those inspired words in 1:10 suddenly stopped me in my place. I got an answer—not the solution I was seeking, but the freedom to make a decision free from fear. At that moment God opened my eyes to see that I had been living under the tarnished

(continued on next page)

Golden Rule of People Pleasing: "Do for others what they want you to do for them." In that moment the ancient words of the apostle Paul became my own as I applied them to my situation: Am I now seeking the favor of friends, or of God? Am I striving to please my friends or to please God? If I were still a people pleaser, I wouldn't be a Christ servant. That did it . . . I changed lanes and did a U-turn!

Though I didn't immediately get the answer about how I should approach the debated topic at the church, I was freed by God's Word to stop seeking a solution that would please everybody (an impossibility) and start seeking an answer that would please God. Although I thought I had already worked through this people-pleasing thing, that experience set me on a permanent course of driving "Highway 1:10." It's not always easy. People pleasing naturally tries to tug us to the right or left. But as I keep going back to Paul's principle of God pleasing, those words have continually kept me from driving my life or ministry into a ditch.

damnable doctrine. People's souls were at stake. The church's testimony in the region of Galatia was at stake. In fact, at this early stage in the preaching of the gospel, the very future of Christianity was at stake. With so much at stake, Paul couldn't afford to sweet-talk or beat around the bush.

— 1:10 —

Paul's final comments about pleasing God rather than men indicate that the Judaizers had likely accused Paul of currying favor with the Gentiles by teaching freedom from the Law. They probably charged Paul with presenting a "Christianity lite" in order to make the gospel easier for the Gentiles in Galatia to swallow. Along came the Judaizers in Paul's absence to "fill in the gaps" of Paul's gospel.

Paul’s sharp condemnation of the false teachers, however, would dispel any doubt about whether Paul had been the least bit interested in pleasing men rather than God. As one commentator notes, “Men-pleasers simply do not hurl *anathemas* against those who proclaim false gospels. Indeed, if the apostle had wanted to please men, he would have remained a zealous Pharisee and promoter of the Law rather than becoming a servant of Christ.”⁶

If relationships needed to be damaged or bridges needed to be burned, Paul was willing to pay that price. Why? Because he knew that the gospel is worth fighting for.

APPLICATION: GALATIANS 1:1-10

A Hill worth Dying On

I see a lot of battle-weary faces in the church today. People are tired of fighting for everything—fighting for a job; fighting for an education; fighting with neighbors; fighting to save their marriage, their family, or their school. They fight for their political parties, their family values, and their personal freedoms. With all this fighting, it’s no wonder many are calling for a time-out and wishing we could all just get along.

So what about fighting for the gospel? Sounds a bit contradictory, doesn’t it? Doesn’t Ephesians 6:15 call it the “gospel of peace”? Christians are called to speak “the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15), not to clobber people over the head with it. Doesn’t this demand a gentle, tolerant, agreeable, and passive approach to proclaiming the gospel?

Galatians 1:1-10 gives us at least one example of drawing a clear line in the sand and saying, “This far and no farther!” And not only does Paul refuse to yield any ground, he retaliates against the Judaizers’ aggressions, striking decisive blows against a primary target—the rejection of the central claims of the gospel. The church’s two-thousand-year history is filled with examples of people taking a stand for the fundamental truths of the Christian faith, regardless of the personal cost. In the early church, Christians refused to worship any god or king as Lord except Jesus Christ—their one true God and King. Saint Athanasius was exiled repeatedly for refusing to fudge on the full deity of Christ. Saint Augustine took a stand against those who believed that grace wasn’t necessary for salvation and that we could actually work our way

into favor with God. And how about the Reformation? Strong-hearted leaders like Luther and Calvin recovered the doctrine of justification by faith alone, infuriating the established church powers and putting their own lives at risk. There wasn't a passive bone in their bodies.

True, we must choose wisely which hills we're willing to die on. The problem with evangelical Christianity today, however, isn't that we have a shortage of defended hills but that the one hill we should all be willing to die on—the gospel—is left open to attack. Part of the reason is that our churches no longer make grounding believers in a clear understanding of the gospel and teaching them the foundational doctrine of grace their highest priorities. We have countless programs, numerous activities, and overwhelming busyness, but not nearly enough people who can expound and defend the gospel.

How about you? Take a moment to reflect on your own knowledge of the gospel. If somebody were to ask you, "What is this 'gospel' you keep talking about?" what would you say? Are you able to keep the crucial aspects of this message central in your thinking? Try jotting down a definition of "the gospel" in about twenty-five words or less. Do it right now.

Now look up the following passages from Paul's writings, noting what they teach us about certain vital elements of the gospel:

- The person of Christ: Rom. 1:1-4; 2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:8
- The work of Christ: Rom. 2:15-16; 1 Cor. 15:1-5; 2 Tim. 2:8
- Our response to Christ: Rom. 1:16-17; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9

After examining these passages, return to your description of the gospel. Do you need to change, remove, or add anything to keep it in line with Scripture? If so, do it. Then examine your definition carefully. *This is the truth upon which Christianity stands or falls.* If that's not worth taking a stand for, then nothing is. Being a Christian doesn't mean we spend our days looking for a fight—especially a physical fight. But when perversions of the gospel appear in our midst, we should be willing not only to teach the truth but also to expose falsehood. You can be sure of this: Those who despise the message of the gospel may attack us. So be it. The gospel is a hill worth dying on.