

The Message of Galatians

nature, of what *we* can do by ourselves without any special intervention of God. But the religion of Isaac is a religion of *grace*, of what *God* has done and does, a religion of divine initiative and divine intervention, for Isaac was born supernaturally through a divine promise. And this is what Christianity is: not 'natural' religion but 'supernatural'. The Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves that they are righteous; the Isaacs trust only in God through Jesus Christ. The Ishmaels are in bondage, because this is what self-reliance always leads to; the Isaacs enjoy freedom, because it is through faith in Christ that people are set free.

So we must seek to be like Isaac, not like Ishmael. We must put our trust in God through Jesus Christ. For only in Christ can we inherit the promises, receive the grace and enjoy the freedom of God.

Galatians 5:1–12

14. False and true religion

The epistle to the Galatians is an epistle in which Paul plunges headlong into controversy because of the introduction into the Galatian churches of erroneous teaching.

And these verses at the beginning of Galatians 5 are in keeping with the tone of the whole epistle. It is a paragraph of contrasts in which the apostle sets two opinions or outlooks, indeed virtually two religions, over against each other, one false and the other true. He draws the contrast twice, first (1–6) from the standpoint of those who practise these two religions, and then (7–12) from the standpoint of those who preach them.

1. Believers false and true (5:1–6)

The best manuscripts divide verse 1 into two separate sentences, so that there is first an assertion (*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free*), followed by a command based upon it (*Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery*).

a. The assertion

Our former state is portrayed as a slavery, Jesus Christ as a liberator, conversion as an act of emancipation and the Christian life as a life of freedom. This freedom, as the whole epistle and this context make plain, is not primarily a freedom from sin, but rather from the law. What Christ has done in liberating us, according to Paul's emphasis here, is not so much to set our *will* free from the bondage of sin as to set our *conscience* free from the guilt of sin. The Christian freedom he describes is freedom of

conscience, freedom from the tyranny of the law, the dreadful struggle to keep the law, with the aim of winning the favour of God. It is the freedom of acceptance with God and of access to God through Christ.

b. The command

Since *Christ has set us free* and that *for freedom*, we must *stand firm* in it and not *let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery*. In other words, we are to enjoy the glorious freedom of conscience which Christ has brought us by his forgiveness. We must not lapse into the idea that we have to win our acceptance with God by our own obedience. The picture seems to be of an ox bowed down by a heavy yoke.¹ Once it has been freed from this crushing yoke, it is able to stand up again (cf. Lev. 26:13).

It is just like this in the Christian life. At one time we were under the yoke of the law, weighed down by its demands which we could not meet and by its fearful condemnation because of our disobedience. But Christ met the demands of the law for us. He died for our disobedience and bore our condemnation in our place. He has 'redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (3:13). And now he has struck the yoke from our shoulder and set us free to stand upright. How then can we dream of putting ourselves under the law again and submitting to its cruel yoke?

This, then, is the theme of these verses. Christianity is freedom, not bondage. Christ has set us free; so we must stand firm in our freedom.

From the general theme we come to the precise issue in verses 2-4, which is that of circumcision. The false teachers in the Galatian churches, as we have already seen, were saying that Christian converts had to be circumcised. You might think this a very trivial matter. After all, circumcision is only a very minor surgical operation on the body. Why did Paul make so much fuss and bother about it? Because of its doctrinal implications. As the false teachers were pressing it, circumcision was neither a physical operation, nor a ceremonial rite, but a theological symbol. It stood for a particular type of religion, namely salvation by good works in obedience to the law. The slogan of the false teachers was: 'Unless you are circumcised and keep the law, you cannot be saved' (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). They were thus declaring that faith in Christ was insufficient for

¹ According to Arndt-Gingrich the verb 'do not submit' (cf. NRSV) is passive and means 'to be loaded down with'.

salvation. Circumcision and law-obedience must be added to it. This was to say, in effect, that Moses must be allowed to finish what Christ had begun.

See how Paul describes their position in these verses. They are those who let themselves be circumcised (2-3), who are therefore *required to obey the whole law* (3), since this is what their circumcision commits them to, and who are seeking to *be justified by the law* (4).

What does Paul say to them? He does not mince his words. On the contrary, he makes a most solemn assertion, beginning *Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you . . .* (2). He warns them in three sentences of the serious results of their being circumcised: *Christ will be of no value to you at all* (2); *you . . . have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace* (4). More simply, to add circumcision is to lose Christ; to seek to be justified by the law is to fall from grace. You cannot have it both ways. It is impossible to receive Christ, thereby acknowledging that you cannot save yourself, and then be circumcised, thereby claiming that you can. You have got to choose between a religion of law and a religion of grace, between Christ and circumcision. You cannot add circumcision (or anything else, for that matter) to Christ as necessary to salvation, because Christ is sufficient for salvation in himself. If you add anything to Christ, you lose Christ. Salvation is in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone.

Saving
? faith

In verses 5 and 6 the pronoun changes from 'you' to 'we'. Paul has been addressing his readers and warning them of the danger of falling from grace. But now he includes himself and describes true believers, evangelical believers, who stand in the gospel of grace: *For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love* (5-6). The emphasis in these verses is on faith. Two statements are made about it.

First, *we eagerly await by faith* (5). What we are waiting for is termed *the righteousness for which we hope, the expectation for the future which our justification brings, namely spending eternity with Christ in heaven.* For this future salvation we wait. We do not work for it; we wait for it by faith. We do not strive anxiously to secure it, or imagine that we have to earn it by good works. Final glorification in heaven is as free a gift as our initial justification. So by faith, trusting only in Christ crucified, we wait for it.

Second, in Christ Jesus . . . the only thing that counts is faith (6). Again Paul denies the false teaching. When a person is in Christ, nothing more is necessary. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision can improve our standing before God. All that is necessary in order to be accepted with God is to be in Christ, and we are in Christ by faith.

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A word of caution is needed here. Does this emphasis on faith in Christ mean that we can live and act as we please? Is the Christian life so completely a life of faith that good works and obedience to the law simply do not matter? No. Paul is very careful to avoid giving any such impression. Notice the phrases which I have so far omitted. Verse 5: 'For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.' That is to say, the Christian life is not only a life of faith; it is a life in the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in us produces good works of love, as the apostle goes on later to explain (22-23). Verse 6: 'faith expressing itself through love.' It is not that works of love are added to faith as a second and subsidiary ground of our acceptance with God, but that the faith which saves is a faith which works, a faith which is expressed in love.

the faith that saves is a faith which works

2. Teachers false and true (5:7-12)

believers
teachers
In verses 1-6 the contrast has been between the false believers who want to add circumcision to faith and the true believers who are content with Christ alone and with faith alone. Now the contrast is between the false teacher *who is throwing you into confusion* (10b) and the apostle Paul who is teaching the truth of God.

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? (7). Paul loved to liken the Christian life to a race in the arena. Notice that to run well in the Christian race is not just to believe the truth (as if Christianity were nothing but orthodoxy), nor just to behave well (as if it were just moral uprightness), but to 'obey the truth', applying belief to behaviour. Only those who obey the truth are integrated Christians. What we believe and how we behave are all of a piece. Our creed is expressed in our conduct; our conduct is derived from our creed.

Some one says you don't want to call them again

Now the Galatians had begun the Christian race, and at first they ran well. They believed the truth that Christ had set them free, and they obeyed it, enjoying the freedom which Christ had given them. But someone had hindered them; an obstacle had been thrown on the track to deviate them from the path. False teachers had contradicted the truth

they had first believed. As a result, they had abandoned Christ and fallen from grace.

Paul traces the full course of the false teaching: its origin, its effect and its end.

a. Its origin ✓

That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you (8). The false teachers had persuaded the Galatians to abandon the truth of the gospel, but this work of persuasion was not from the God who had called them. For God had called them in grace (Gal. 1:6), whereas the false teachers were spreading a doctrine of merit. This is Paul's first argument: the false teachers' message was inconsistent with the Galatians' call.

b. Its effect ✓

We have already seen that the heresy hindered the Galatians (7), as later Paul is to say that it 'threw them into confusion' (10) and 'agitated' them (12). But now (9) he uses the common proverb A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. That is, the error of the false teachers was spreading in the Christian community until the whole church was becoming contaminated. Paul uses the same proverb in 1 Corinthians 5:6. There he applies it to sin in the Christian community, here to false teaching. One of the most serious things about evil and error is that they both spread.

So because of the cause and effect of the false teaching, because it was not from God and because its influence was spreading, Paul was determined to resist it.

c. Its end ✓

I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty (10). Paul is quite sure that error is not going to triumph, but that the Galatians will come to a better mind and that the false teacher, however exalted that person's rank, will fall under the judgment of God. Indeed, so concerned is Paul about the damage which the false teachers are doing that he even expresses the wish that they would emasculate themselves (12) like the priests of the heathen goddess Cybele in Asia Minor. To our ears this way of putting it sounds both crude and malicious. We may be quite sure, however, that it was due neither to a short temper,

nor to a thirst for revenge, but to his deep love for the people of God and the gospel of God. I suggest that if we were as concerned for God's church and God's Word as Paul was, we too would wish that false teachers might disappear from the land.

With verse 11 (if I . . .) Paul turns from them (the false teachers hindering the Galatians) to himself (their true teacher sent from God). It seems that these teachers had dared even to claim Paul as holding their views. They were spreading the rumour that Paul also preached and advocated circumcision. The apostle flatly denies it, and goes on to give evidence of the inaccuracy of their claim: *Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case [i.e. if I were still preaching circumcision] the offence of the cross has been abolished.*

So Paul sets himself and the false teachers in stark contrast. They were preaching circumcision; he was preaching Christ and the cross. To preach circumcision is to tell sinners that they can save themselves by their own good works; to preach Christ crucified is to tell them that they cannot and that only Christ can save them through the cross. The message of circumcision is quite inoffensive, popular because flattering; the message of Christ crucified is, however, offensive to human pride, unpopular because unflattering. So to preach circumcision is to avoid persecution; to preach Christ crucified is to invite it. People hate to be told that they can be saved only at the foot of the cross, and they oppose the preacher who tells them so.

Now since he was being persecuted, Paul argues that he was not preaching circumcision. On the contrary, he was preaching Christ crucified, and the stumbling block of the cross had not been removed. It was the false teachers who were pressing the Galatians to be circumcised, in order to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ (see Gal. 6:12).

Persecution or opposition is a mark of every true Christian preacher. As we saw in Galatians 4:29, the Isaacs of this world are always persecuted by the Ishmaels. The Old Testament prophets found it so – men like Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. So did the New Testament apostles. And down the centuries of the Christian church, until and including today, Christian preachers who refuse to distort or dilute the gospel of grace have had to suffer for their faithfulness. The good news of Christ crucified is still a 'scandal' (Greek, skandalon, stumbling block), severely offensive to human pride. It tells people that they are sinners, rebels, under the wrath and condemnation of God, that they can do nothing to save themselves or

secure their salvation, and that only through Christ crucified can they be saved. If we preach this gospel, we shall provoke ridicule and opposition. Only if we 'preach circumcision', the merits and adequacy of human effort, shall we escape persecution and become popular.

3. Conclusion

We live in an age of tolerance. People love to have the best of both worlds and hate to be forced to choose. It is often said that it does not matter what people believe so long as they are sincere, and that it is unwise to clarify issues too plainly or to focus them too sharply.

But the religion of the New Testament is very different from this mental outlook. Christianity will not allow us to sit on the fence or live in a haze; it urges us to be definite and decisive, and in particular to choose between Christ and circumcision. 'Circumcision' stands for a religion of human achievement, of what we can do by our own good works; 'Christ' stands for a religion of divine achievement, of what God has done through the finished work of Christ. 'Circumcision' means law, works and bondage; 'Christ' means grace, faith and freedom. Everyone must choose. The one impossibility is what the Galatians were attempting, namely to add circumcision to Christ and have both. No. 'Circumcision' and 'Christ' are mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, this choice has to be made by both the people and the ministers of the church, by those who practise and those who spread religion. It is either Christ or circumcision that the people receive (2), and either Christ or circumcision that ministers 'preach' (11). In principle, there is no third alternative.

And behind our choice lurks our motive. It is when we are set on flattering ourselves and others that we choose circumcision. Before the cross we have to humble ourselves.

false doctrine
anti-christ