

Galatians

Paul's Authority and Gospel

Lesson #2 for October 8, 2011

Scriptures: 2 Peter 3:15,16; Galatians 1; Philippians 1:1; Galatians 5:12.

1. In our last lesson, we discussed the historical background of Paul. We discussed his conversion on the road to Damascus and what happened to Paul later. Where is Galatia? What do we know about the people of Galatia? What do we know about the writing of the letter to the Galatians? What motivated Paul to write this letter? To whom was it written? When was it written? Had Paul ever been in Galatia? What experience did Paul have with the churches in Galatia? It is likely that Paul started some of these churches while working in Ephesus.
2. The books of Galatians and Romans are very similar in many aspects. In *Acts of the Apostles* 383.1 and the *SDA Bible Commentary* on Galatians, Ellen White suggested that the book of Galatians was written at the same time as Romans was, and both were written from the city of Corinth probably in the winter of A.D. 57-58. Paul had been working for three years in Ephesus and during that time had written letters of advice and correction to the people in Corinth. After a short unpleasant visit to Corinth and, later, the writing to them of a very strong letter, they welcomed Paul back. On his way back, Paul may have traveled through northern Galatia. Or perhaps, he just heard about the problems that were there. During his time in Ephesus, undoubtedly, Paul traveled to several areas in Galatia to help start churches.
3. Galatia is located in the western, central part of Asia Minor. Today, that area is known as Turkey. The people that inhabited Galatia were originally from Europe, having come down through Macedonia and into Turkey several hundred years earlier.
4. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul believed that it was his mission to move from one major Gentile city to another starting churches which he hoped, in turn, would spread the gospel to surrounding areas. This meant that he could never spend too much time in any one place. He wrote a number of letters back to churches he had founded earlier; 13 of those letters form almost half of our New Testament. He encouraged churches to share their letters with other churches. (Colossians 4:16)
5. How did the earlier apostles/disciples and the people of these various churches feel about Paul's letters? Read 2 Peter 3:15,16. Peter seemed to be suggesting that Paul's letters were as authoritative as were the writings of the Old Testament. Was it because he recognized that the Source was the same? Did the disciples have greater authority than, for example, the deacons like Stephen? Does that mean that Acts 7 is a bit less inspired? Stephen seemed to impress Saul/Paul! Does the Holy Spirit "inspire" some less than others? Are some writings more generally applicable than others? God has to find ways to reach us where we are.
6. Was Paul an apostle? Couldn't God have arranged for Saul to meet Jesus at some point during his education in Jerusalem? Would that have given Paul greater authority? Who has authority in our day? Huldah was a prophetess, but she did not write. Is her authority less?
7. There were those who believed that Gentiles who became Christians should first follow all the Jewish practices, especially circumcision. They are called Judaizers. They were not at all comfortable with Paul's message of salvation by faith alone. (Acts 15:1-5) Thus, the Judaizers visited churches where Paul had started congregations, trying to convince the new members that they had to practice all the Jewish ceremonial rites including circumcision. They knew very well that this was completely against the message that Paul had taught. (Galatians 3:28,29; Colossians 3:11) So, they wanted to diminish Paul's authority.

The men who had attempted to lead them from their belief in the gospel were hypocrites, unholy in heart and corrupt in life. Their religion was made up of a round of ceremonies, through the performance of which they expected to gain the

favor of God. They had no desire for a gospel that called for obedience to the word, "Except a [387] man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." John 3:3. They felt that a religion based on such a doctrine, required too great a sacrifice, and they clung to their errors, deceiving themselves and others. *Acts of the Apostles* 386.2

8. How did Paul respond to these critics? Paul chose to write a letter—the one we are now studying—called Galatians. Read Galatians 1:1-5. As usual, Paul followed the standard format for letter-writing in his day. He gave his name; but, instead of mentioning to whom the letter was written, he immediately addressed the issue. He said that his gospel did not come from human beings; it came directly from God! Having made that statement, he went on to address the people of Galatia. He followed with a brief doxology and then did something quite out of the ordinary. Instead of praising the Galatians—as he did all of the other congregations to which he wrote—he immediately launched into an accusation. Read Galatians 1:6-9.
9. Apparently, the issue/question among the Galatians was a very fundamental one: What is the truth of the gospel? Is this still an issue today? Could you spell out in a few words your definition of the gospel?
10. In Romans 14:1-5, *GNB*, Paul tells us that we should be very generous and very considerate of other people's opinions. "We each should firmly make up our own minds." So, how could he be so bold as to say in Galatians 1:8, *GNB*: "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be condemned to hell!" Paul had been a legalistic Pharisee, and he knew about these Judaizers!
11. Does that sound like someone who wants to be respectful of other peoples' opinions? Clearly, Paul felt very strongly about this issue. Was Paul overstepping his bounds? Or, is it possible to be so certain about your version of the gospel? Do we know what those core issues were that Paul was so certain about? It would make matters considerably clearer if we had a careful explanation—written out—about what the Judaizers were teaching. But, we do not have that. All we have is Paul's response. So, we must theorize about what they were teaching. It is very clear from passages like Galatians 5:12 that the issue was circumcision and the practicing of other Jewish rites. The Judaizers believed that all of those things were required for salvation. Paul vehemently disagreed. This led to two additional questions arising: 1) Who has the authority to say what the gospel really is? 2) What is required for salvation?
12. Should Paul have sought the approval of the "brethren" and avoided preaching controversial matters? As a member of the Sanhedrin, he certainly had obtained human approval in the past. Even his family apparently rejected him because of his new beliefs. Does that sound like he was seeking human approval?
13. And what about us today? What authorities do we recognize? Do we even think about what authorities we are recognizing? Or, do we simply float with the crowd? To what extent are our standards and decisions determined by group pressure? Is that a reliable source? How do we value past evidence as compared to the latest thing? Do we carefully evaluate every new religious or theological idea against the Canon of Scripture? Can we give to anyone who asks us a reason for the faith/hope that is in us? (1 Peter 3:15,16)
14. Paul's opponents began by attacking Paul's authority. They probably suggested that he was not one of the original disciples and had never actually seen Jesus. Paul admitted this. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8; Galatians 1:15-19) But, he went on to point out that he had gotten his message directly from the risen Jesus seated at the right hand side of God's throne in heaven.
15. And, he was absolutely certain about his version of the gospel! Could we—or should we—be that certain? In *Testimonies to Ministers* p. 119, Ellen White states, "They must know that they do know what is truth." Don't those words sound like someone who is certain?
16. How do we know that Paul is telling us the truth? His encounter on the road to Damascus is well

documented. Is that all the evidence that we need? There is no way that everything Paul received from Christ about the gospel was received in that one moment of time! Where did the rest of Paul's information come from? (Acts 9:15,16)

17. What would lead Paul to say that anyone who disagreed with him should be condemned to hell? Was John the revelator also certain about the truth that had been revealed to him? Read Revelation 22:18,19.
18. But, if you cannot trust an angel, who can you trust? Who was it that started circulating misinformation and accusations against God right in the courts of heaven? Wasn't it an angel? In fact, wasn't it the number one angel? What did that angel—Lucifer and later, the Devil, or Satan—say that was so convincing that one-third of the angels, living in the very presence of God, began to trust him and distrust God?
19. Unfortunately, we have been told in no uncertain terms that the same deceiver is coming back in person at the end of time to practice his deceptive skills on us. (Matthew 24:24) Are we so clear about our version of the gospel that we cannot be deceived?
20. Right up front we should recognize that it is dangerous to accept mere claims. Claims, even stated with great authority, are not evidence. When someone makes an authoritative statement, the first question we should ask is, "Where is the evidence?" Lucifer must have made some incredible claims right in the courts of heaven. Did he provide any evidence? The evidence was/is not on his side. How should we approach those who are so sure they are right but cannot back up their claims with evidence?
21. Down through the centuries, an incredible number of different claims have been made by religious sources. How can we determine which of those claims we should believe? Perhaps the best clue was given by Jesus Himself. Late in the afternoon on resurrection Sunday, two of the lesser-known disciples were leaving Jerusalem and traveling back to Emmaus. Shortly after leaving Jerusalem, they were joined by another traveler. As we now know, it was Jesus Himself. Why didn't Jesus just tell them who He was and then answer their questions? They would have been completely satisfied. But instead, for a considerable period of time, Jesus maintained His disguised until He had interpreted the Scriptures to them. (Luke 24:25-27; 5BC 1125.12; 3SP 214.2; ST Oct. 6, 1909; 6Red 32.3)
22. Remember that the Scriptures in those days included only the Old Testament. And so, Jesus led those two disciples through the Old Testament, showing how His life had been a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and thus, providing unquestionable evidence of the truth. Then, when He was finished, having arrived at their destination and sitting at the table with them, He revealed who He was and then disappeared.
23. So, what is God trying to say to us? Do not believe it unless you have evidence that it is the truth! Satan has claimed that he is like God. He even wants to ascend above the throne of God. (Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezekiel 28:12-15) He wants to be worshiped, and he has made many false claims against God. So, who is telling us the truth? Can God be trusted? Can Satan be trusted? Where do we go for the evidence?
24. In Paul's day, they did not have the New Testament. What they had was several "apostles" traveling around to visit the different churches. Which would give you more confidence: 1) Having the Bible and all the evidence accumulated over the millennia? Or, 2) Having a living apostle among us to whom we could ask questions? Some churches claim they have one.
25. What percentage of the "truths" that you believe are solidly based on evidence from the Bible or the Spirit of Prophecy? Have you checked them out for yourself?
26. Coming back to the core issue: What is the gospel—the good news? Perhaps we should focus that question down a little bit: What did the gospel mean to Paul? What had he and others taught the Galatians? Is the gospel spelled out in Romans and Galatians? These two books were written

about the same time? And can we be very sure?

27. About what can we be sure? After reading the Bible, can we be sure of the kind of Person God is? Can we be sure that He is not as Satan has claimed He is?
28. In Galatians 1:4, *GNB*, Paul says: "In order to set us free from this present evil age, **Christ gave himself for our sins.**" How does this compare to Romans 8:3, *GNB*: "He condemned sin in human nature by sending his own Son, who came with a nature like our sinful human nature, **to do away with sin.**"
29. At least two quite different views have emerged as to what this means. 1) Does it mean that Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, remove our guilt, and forgive us—sometimes labeled justification—so that we can be saved and go to heaven? Or, 2) Does it mean that Jesus came to reveal the truth about God, all Three Members of the Godhead, so we can make an intelligent decision about whether They can be trusted? Would you even want to go to heaven if God is the kind of Person Satan has made Him out to be: arbitrary, exacting, vengeful, unforgiving, and severe?
30. Ideally, we should ask: What did the gospel mean to Paul and to the Galatians? Do we have any clues in the books of Romans and Galatians. Paul certainly made it clear that in God's eyes:

There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus.²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised. (Galatians 3:28,29, *GNB*)

31. He makes it very clear that we are all sinners, Jews and non-Jews alike. (Romans 1-3) He also makes it clear that the answer to the sin problem was God's demonstration of His Own righteousness so we can know the truth and become like Him. (Romans 1:16,17; 3:25,26, *GNB*) It is only after God has proven His Own righteousness that He can set and keep us right. Look at Ellen White's summary of this issue:

The only way in which he could set and keep men right was to make himself visible and familiar to their eyes.

Christ exalted the character of God, attributing to him the praise, and giving to him the credit, of **the whole purpose of his own mission on earth,—to set men right through the revelation of God.** In Christ was arrayed before men the paternal grace and the matchless perfections of the Father. In his prayer just before his crucifixion, he declared, "I have manifested thy name." "I have glorified thee on the earth; I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." When **the object of his mission was attained,—the revelation of God to the world,—the Son of God announced that his work was accomplished, and that the character of the Father was made manifest to men.**" *The Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1890 (2ST 351:2:0-3:1); compare ST December 4, 1893; *Manuscript Releases*, vol 18, 359; *RH* August 14, 1900; *YI* November 21, 1883

32. The essence of the gospel is that God is not the kind of Person His enemies have made Him out to be. He is, instead, just like His Son showed Him to be. (John 12:45; 14:9; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3)
33. If you were asked to spell out your definition of the gospel, what would you say?

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Last Modified: September 4, 2011

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