

Paul's Authority *and* Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul, the Letter Writer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul's Calling

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul's Gospel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No Other Gospel

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Origin of Paul's Gospel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion Questions:

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

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

Rescue in the River: Part 1

Benjamin Murmu was crippled by polio, but he managed to get around with a cane. He was well-known in the hills of Bihar, India—as a witch doctor and later as a political leader. Then one day, God revealed Himself to Benjamin.

While riding his horse, Benjamin came to a river that he needed to cross. The river was swollen, and the current looked dangerous. Slowly Benjamin urged the horse into the swirling waters. The horse struggled to keep its head above water, but the swift current quickly swept horse and rider downstream.

Thrashing its legs, the horse tried to find a foothold, but the water was too deep. Benjamin couldn't swim; his only hope for survival was to cling to the horse. His heart beat wildly as he tried to guide his horse toward shore, but the animal was helpless against the current. Fearing certain death, Benjamin cried out to God for the first time in his life. "God! If You are there, please help me! Help me!"

Suddenly Benjamin saw two men beside him in the water. Without a word, they grabbed the horse and pulled both horse and rider to solid ground. Benjamin lay on the shore, trying to catch his breath. When he turned to thank the two men who had rescued him, they were gone. His eyes scanned the flat, treeless landscape in search of the men, but they had simply disappeared.

Slowly Benjamin realized that God had answered his prayer and sent angels to rescue him. That moment marked the turning point in his life. There on the riverbank, still shaking from his ordeal, Benjamin made up his mind to become a Christian.

Some time later, Seventh-day Adventist evangelists held meetings in Benjamin's village. Benjamin attended and accepted the truth that he learned there. He asked to be baptized at the end of the meetings.

But not everyone was happy to have the evangelists preach in their village. Several times people tried to disrupt the meetings, but their efforts were largely unsuccessful, and a number of new believers asked to be baptized.

On the day of the baptism, the pastors encountered a crowd of drunken men along the road that led from the meeting place to the baptismal site. The men allowed the pastors to pass by, but then they blocked the road and didn't allow the believers to pass.

Meanwhile the pastors waited for the new believers to arrive. But as time passed and no one came, the pastors grew concerned. They sang and prayed for some time, but still the new believers didn't come.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Galatians 1:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe how Paul defined the authenticity of his gospel call and teachings.

Feel: Empathize with the zealous passion and determination with which Paul defended the truth of the gospel and fought against erroneous teachings at Galatia.

Do: Determine to hold fast to the truths of the Scriptures and to strongly support their defense.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Paul's Defense

A How did Paul's first paragraphs of Galatians set forth his position regarding his calling and authority to address and correct doctrinal teachings?

B How did Paul's account of his personal history in the ministry bolster his claims to authority? How were these claims substantiated by others in church leadership?

II. Feel: Paul's Passion

A What phrases early in Paul's letter illustrate his strong feelings regarding wrong doctrine and its effects on church members? Why does Paul feel so strongly?

B How have doctrinal errors caused havoc in church history?

III. Do: The Call to Passionate Defense Today

A What are the unique doctrinal challenges facing the church today that call for a devout, determined, and daring defense on our part?

B What do we need to do to ensure that our championship of biblical truths works in cooperation with Christ and His body for the glory of the gospel?

► **Summary:** Paul opens his letter to the Galatians with an authoritative and succinct reference to the supremacy of God's gifts of grace and a determined denunciation of any contradictory doctrine.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The gospel preached by Paul is still the unshakable basis for the Christian faith today. Everything in our lives must be subject to its authority.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize the fact that as Paul defended his own authority to teach, he drew attention to the only true authority: Jesus Christ.

The Internet and other forms of modern technology have made it possible for the “tuned in” among us to gain access to an incredible amount of information. At the same time, this accessibility has made it more feasible than ever for us simply to “tune out” voices that we disagree with or that challenge us. As such, our view of the world is shaped by the authorities we choose to consider trustworthy.

The world in which Paul wrote Galatians was not so different. There were many people claiming to be authorities, with all sorts of plausible reasons that their opponents were not authorities at all. Paul’s opponents, advocating a gospel that was not a gospel, attacked Paul by undermining his claims to authority and by sowing confusion and suspicion within the church. Paul responded by basing his authority not on his own personal qualities but on the best grounds of all: his encounter with Jesus Christ and the message—the gospel—received.

Discuss With the Class: Paul placed all his trust and faith in the gospel that he had been called to preach and the One who had commissioned him to preach it. Where do you place your trust? In the final analysis, who or what is your authority?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In the early church, as today, the essence of the teaching was in a person—Jesus Christ, and His life and ministry. At that time the early church did not have the full collection of documents we know as the New Testament. But they did have living apostles, people who had known and walked with Jesus during His earthly existence. Necessarily, a significant amount of trust and authority attached itself to them. Emphasize the importance of Paul’s role as an apostle and the significance of efforts to question or minimize it.

Bible Commentary

I. “According to the Wisdom Given to Him . . .” (*Review 2 Peter 3:15, 16 with your class.*)

Most well-informed Bible students are aware that the earliest Christians knew no other Scriptures than the Old Testament and that the New Testament, as we know it, did not take shape until the second century at the earliest. Yet, 2 Peter refers to the letters of Paul as scriptures, or at least implies such status by equating them with “other scriptures.” Some scholars have, therefore, proposed a late date for 2 Peter, even denying Peter’s authorship. How could the author know, they ask, that the letters of Paul would be accorded the status of Scripture?

First, the early church very much recognized the presence of living inspiration in its midst. The apostles, including Paul, were not just charismatic, highly spiritual individuals who had some good ideas and snappy insights, as we might regard a given pastor or teacher today. Part of the esteem in which they were held was because they had known, walked with, and/or encountered the living Christ and been found worthy to represent Him to the world.

As such, what the apostles wrote or taught carried extra authority. Whether such writings or teachings were considered to be on the level with the Pentateuch or the prophets of the normative Old Testament canon is open to debate. But they were certainly regarded as containing plenty of authority.

This point brings us to the specific situation Paul addresses in Galatians. The major difference between Paul and his opponents was that Paul could and did claim to be an apostle, and his opponents could not and did not claim this status for themselves. One might guess that they might have made such a claim if they could have supported it, or even if the church members did not know enough to refute or question it. But clearly their (lack of) status was well known. All that was left for them to do was to say, “Hey, we may not be apostles, but Paul isn’t *really* that much of an apostle either.”

Consider This: How is the attitude shown toward Paul by his opponents seen in attempts to undermine the authority of the Scriptures today?

II. Paul’s Authority (*Review Galatians 1:11–24 with your class.*)

As we have seen, Paul’s opponents attacked him on the basis of his personal qualities and the soundness of his calling and teachings.

Superficially, their broadsides might have been appealing to people of the first-century, Greco-Roman milieu. Paul had never met Jesus in the flesh; even he admitted this. Thus, like it or not, he could not be viewed in the same way as, say, Peter.

Also, Paul's Judaizing opponents spoke for tradition. Respect for tradition was one thing that Jews, Romans, and Greeks agreed upon. Contrary to the modern belief in progress, people of that time believed that the (literal) Golden Age had been in the past and that things had been going downhill ever since. As such, things that could claim to have been passed down from an immemorial past were superior to things that had just come on the scene recently. Many Greeks and Romans scorned Jewish tradition as odd, disagreeable, or antithetical to common sense. But nearly as many looked on it with a sort of awe, as a revelation from an age when their own ancestors had just emerged from barbarism. Some of them even believed Hellenistic Jews, such as Philo of Alexandria, who claimed (among other things) that Plato got all his ideas from Moses. In short, innovation was not valued. And Paul was seen, rightly or wrongly, as an innovator.

Paul's response? His opponents were absolutely right. He had not received his doctrines from personal contact with the historical Jesus during His earthly ministry. He had received them from the risen, heavenly Jesus who now resided at the right hand of the Father in heaven. This revelation was so obviously powerful and authentic that even those who had walked with Jesus during His earthly ministry were compelled to acknowledge it and indeed "glorified God" because of it (*vs.* 24).

As for a background in Jewish traditions of scriptural interpretation and religious practice, Paul did have that, even more than his detractors did. And this knowledge had done him little good! It had set him on the wrong path, one that led him to the persecution of the very Jewish Christians who now claimed he was insufficiently rooted in Judaism. In fact, to become the apostle he was, he had to jettison many of the trappings that would have made him more credible in the eyes of his detractors.

Consider This: In his ministry Paul could not depend on many of the things that others could use to assure themselves of their own worth and self-sufficiency. Upon what do you base your assurance of your calling and the presence of God's grace in your life?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Use the following questions to challenge your students to base their lives on the authority of the same Jesus Christ upon whom Paul depended for his authority to teach and preach.

Thought Questions:

❶ Paul’s opponents based their teachings on what was essentially an appeal to tradition. What is the place of tradition in the life of the church and one’s own spiritual life?

❷ Paul’s apostleship was probably, at first, difficult for the “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem to accept. But we are told that eventually they praised God for it. And even Paul’s detractors in Galatia did not frontally attack Paul’s claims. What was it about Paul’s ministry that clearly showed its authenticity when opponents seemingly could have easily said he was imagining things?

Application Questions:

❶ How can our lives prove to skeptics the reality of God?

❷ Paul talks about a true gospel and false “other gospels.” Sometimes the difference is quite subtle. How can we know that we are guided by the true gospel, even when the false gospels sound plausible?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Galatians goes to the heart of why we believe what we believe, which is a question of authority. Emphasize that in the Christian life there is only one final authority: Jesus Christ and the gospel He lived and preached. We are drawn to it because of the way it manifests itself in our lives and experience, just as Paul’s claims to authority manifested themselves in his effective ministry and radically changed life. The following activity will challenge your students to evaluate the authorities they accept and to make God and His Word first in their lives.

Activity: Ask your students how they know what they know. Why do they believe in the existence of Antarctica, for example? How many have been there? Perhaps they know someone who has been there, but how do they know that person is trustworthy? After your students pile up evidences for the trustworthiness of the authorities they accept, compare them to the Scriptures.