

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THERE IS ONLY ONE GOSPEL!

Many who claim the Evangelical label today operate as if the content and substance of the gospel are incidental. As long as you are zealous in soul winning (it should be noted that groups like the Mormons and the Moonies—to mention only two of the better known sects—are also involved in soul-winning) and evangelistic in ministry, what does it matter if the content of the gospel varies from church to church or ministry to ministry? We have frequently referenced the growing confusion in Evangelical circles over the doctrine of justification created by *The New Perspective on Paul* (especially the influence of N.T. Wright) and the so-called *Federal Vision*. “Within the FV movement, a number of writers have also revised the Reformed understanding of justification. In this revisionist view of justification, the verdict of justification is merely the declaration of the forgiveness of sins, and does not include a positive declaration of the believer’s righteousness in Christ and entitlement to eternal life. The basis of the justifying verdict is also diminished, since the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers consists only in what orthodox Reformed theologians termed the ‘passive’ obedience of Christ and does not include Christ’s ‘active’ obedience. Moreover, considerable ambiguity is introduced among FV writers regarding the nature of faith as the ‘instrument’ of justification. Rather than emphasize the ‘receptivity’ of faith in justification, FV authors tend to emphasize the ‘obedience’ of faith/faithfulness as the way to justification and its maintenance. These revisions of the historic Reformed view of justification have serious consequences for the church’s testimony to the gospel and salvation by grace alone. They diminish the fullness of Christ’s work as the sole basis for justification, while at the same time suggesting that the works faith produces are instrumental to the believer’s acceptance with God.”¹ Note carefully the FV insistence that justification has to be *maintained* by continual faithfulness. Steve Wilkins of the FV boldly declares: “The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are not longer elect—they are cut off from the Elect One and thus, lose their elect standing. But their falling away doesn’t negate the reality of their standing prior to their apostasy. They were really and truly the elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.”² Another FV zealot, Rich Lusk writes (with reference to the reclothing of the high priest Joshua in Zech 3): “The initial clothing in white is received by faith alone. This is the beginning of Joshua’s justification. But if Joshua is to remain justified—that is, if the garments he has received are not to become re-soiled with his iniquity—he must be faithful. Thus, initial justification is by faith alone; subsequent justifications include obedience.”³ In other words justification is by perseverance, and as such it can be lost. The FV loudly claims to be Reformed, but their take on doctrine of justification is *NOT* Reformed. It is cut from the same cloth as Arminianism and Roman Catholicism. How one understands the gospel is critically important. “The gospel is not some trivial and inane topic. It is the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of the souls of men. To hold false views about the gospel is to hold false views about the deepest question of all human-life, the relation of a man to his God.”⁴ It is only in this light that we can understand the unyielding and forceful language that Paul uses in this epistle. Josh Moody has recently written a very helpful book on Galatians which he declares “is a book of fire and ice. It reminds me of the story of the young man who was first being set aside for the ministry. He was asked whether he was zealous. He said that he was but that he was not the kind of person who set the Thames River on fire. The man interviewing him said, ‘I don’t want you to set the river on fire. What I want to know is, when I throw you in will there be steam?’ Despite all the complexities in which Galatians has been tied up throughout the years of human interpretation, it still sets up steam whenever it is read. It, of course, was the book that really kicked off the Reformation. Martin Luther called it the love of his life; it was ‘Katherina Von Bara,’ his wife. He studied it repeatedly and found in it the release of the gospel to free him from his legalism. It has done that to many another since. It was John Wesley who, through the reading of Luther’s preface to the book of Galatians, found that ‘his heart was strangely warmed.’ In fact, I think we may take it as a rule that Galatians is one of those books of the Bible that the Devil loves to try to blunt. It is a sharp sword, and my suspicion is that today as never before it needs to be unleashed to our world and to our church, yet scholars know that there are many head-scratching moments that it produces and that people ponder over.”⁵

I. PAUL'S ASTONISHMENT

The Apostle could hardly comprehend the attitude of the Galatians. He was astonished (*thaumazō*, a very strong word that expresses not only amazement, but indignation).⁶

A. Where the Galatians had been.

The Apostle was personally responsible for their conversion, but his bewilderment is not over any personal sense of rejection. Notice his words: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you." Their defection was, in fact, a defection from God Himself! How could Paul make that assertion? The Galatians were simply adding the keeping of the law of God to their understanding of the gospel. How is that a defection? By transferring their allegiance to a "different gospel" they were demonstrating their defection. They accepted a gospel which took their focus off the cross of Christ and on to something else. Likewise when the FV redefines faith in terms of covenantal faithfulness and suggest that in the final analysis perseverance is what secures justification they are *adding* an additional stipulation to the gospel. As in the case with the Galatians. The fact that this took place so quickly made it worse.⁷ To turn from Paul's gospel is to turn from God. He had called them "into the grace of Christ." This is the operative phrase. God deals with believers in the gospel of Christ, not as they deserve, but on the basis of what Christ has done for them (Acts 20:24).

B. Where the Galatians were going.

Away from God and unto a different Gospel—which, in fact, is no gospel at all! Two different Greek words are used to translate the word *another* in the KJV. *Heteros* is the word translated *another* (KJV), *different* (NIV). The words heterosexual or heterodoxy, as you can see, contain this Greek word, and in each case they underscore its root meaning: distinctly different, a difference in kind. The other word translated *another* in the KJV ("which is not another") is *allos*. It denotes numerical distinctness and refers to sameness, i.e., another of the same kind. Thus, what Paul is saying is this: "I am astounded that you are turning so quickly from God to a different kind of Gospel, one that is entirely different in substance, which is not another of the same kind as I preached to you."⁸

NOTE: The *facts* of the Gospel were the same for both the Apostle and the Judaizers. They differed over the *terms* with which salvation was conferred. Paul taught that justification was by faith *alone*, while his opponents said that while faith was necessary, it needed to be supplemented by circumcision and observance of the law. In other words you must finish what Christ has begun; you must finish Christ's unfinished work.

II. PAUL'S ANALYSIS

The Gospel of the Judaizers has only one aim: to distort or pervert the true Gospel.

A. The Judaizers were troubling the churches.

The verb translated "trouble" (KJV) is rendered "throwing you into confusion" by the NIV. The word is actually the opposite of peace. In other words, the activity of the Judaizers only produced *turbulence* in the churches.

B. They were perverting the gospel.

This was intentional. The message was calculated to do this. This was by design. They themselves *wanted* (*thelontes*, present active participle that expresses desire) to create this situation. The word for *pervert*, *metastrephō* means to transfer to a different opinion, hence to change the essential character of a thing.⁹ Grace and works cannot be mixed. The old Puritan master William Perkins long ago correctly noted, "Here it must be observed, that they which make an union of grace and works in the cause of justification, are separated from the grace of God. Grace admits no partner, or fellow. Grace must be freely given every way, or it is no way grace."¹⁰ Whenever the *content* of the *terms* of the gospel are altered, it is *corrupted*. The message of the cross was diluted of its real character by the Judaizers.

III. PAUL'S RESPONSE

What is the Apostle's reaction to these things? Does he say, as so many say today, "Well, good men differ on these matters and, please, let us not argue. The Judaizers are sincere. They are evangelistic. They want to see people come to Christ."

A. His indignation.

Astonishment gives way to Apostolic anger, and (mark this well), his strong language of verses 8 and 9 reveals God's hatred against all attempts to change the Apostolic gospel. It does not matter who it is, regardless of his status. The message, not the messenger, is the issue. Neither angels nor apostles can change this message. *Any* variation from the biblical gospel brings one under the divine curse: *anathema*! This word is translated "eternally condemned" (NIV) and "accursed" (NASB). This is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *hērem*. "In a holy war the *hērem* involved in practice the destruction of everyone and everything that fell under it"¹¹ (cf. Deuteronomy 4:2; 29:19; Joshua 7:1, 20). Those, like Robert Schuller,¹² who think Paul's words intemperate, should turn to Matthew 23:13 - 39 and read the words of Jesus. His language in that passage is even more severe than that of the Apostle's.

B. His justification for his indignation.

The Judaizers accused Paul of tailoring his message to please men. Well, does this sound like a man-pleaser? If the Apostle's intention had been to please his listeners, he would have never abandoned Judaism and become the bond-servant of Christ.

CONCLUSION: The noted Southern Presbyterian theologian John Girardeau wrote a magnificent book over a hundred years ago that addressed in some detail the errors of an Arminian understanding of justification (the same kind of errors that are embedded in the Federal Vision). He observed: "In the first place, there is a confusion of the condition of faith with the condition of justification.

Conviction of sin and misery is ordinarily a condition precedent to faith, but it is in no sense or degree an instrument whereby Christ is received and rested upon. It does not enter into or qualify the instrumental office of faith. In the second place, a quality of inherent righteousness is represented as entering into faith, adapting it to secure the moral interests of the divine government. Faith, as justifying, is not *nuda fides*—naked, simple, mere faith. But if it be not, it is not suited to be, what justification requires, a bare receiver of Christ. To the extent to which, as justifying, it embraces or exhibits any extraneous quality, to that extent Christ is displaced. Holiness is in its place indispensable, but faith, so far as it is the instrument of justification, has nothing to do with it; it has no eye, no ear for anything but a justifying Saviour: it reaches out both empty palms to him.”¹³ Note how Girardeau stresses that personal holiness (i.e. faithful obedience or covenantal faithfulness) does *NOT* contribute to our justification. Another of our great Reformed theologians of the 19th century was Thomas Scott who wrote in a similar vein. “*The justification of a sinner* must imply something distinct from a total and final remission of the deserved punishment; namely a renewed title to the reward of righteousness, as complete and effective as he would have had if he had never sinned, but had perfectly performed, during the term of his probation, all the demands of the divine law. The remission of sins would indeed place him in such a state, that no charge would lie against him; but then he would have no title to the reward of righteousness, till he had obtained it by performing, for the appointed time, the whole obedience required of him; for he would merely be re-admitted to a state of probation, and his justification or condemnation could not be decided till that were terminated. But the *justification* of the pardoned sinner gives him a *present* title to the reward of righteousness, independent of his *future* conduct, as well as without respect to his *past* actions. This is evidently the scriptural idea of justification: it is uniformly represented as immediate and complete, when the sinner believes in the Lord Jesus Christ; and not as a contingent advantage to be waited for till death or judgment: and the arguments, which some learned men have adduced, to prove that *justification* means nothing else than *forgiveness of sins*, only show that the two distinct blessings are never separately conferred.”¹⁴ Again, note how Scott underscores the fact of the finality of our justification—it is *not* something that is conditional on *future* stipulation (as the Federal Vision teaches). The doctrine of justification being advanced by the likes of N.T. Wright, Norman Shepherd and The Federal Vision constitutes *another* Gospel.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Cornelius Venema, “Integration, Disintegration, and Regeneration: A Preliminary History of the United Reformed Churches In North America” in *Always Reformed: Essays in Honor of W. Robert Godfrey* eds. R.S. Clark and J.E. Kim (Westminster Seminary California, 2010), p.242.
- ² Steve Wilkins in *The Federal Vision* ed. S. Wilkins and D. Garner (Athanasius Press, 2004), p. 60.
- ³ Rich Lusk, “Future Justification to the Doers of the Law,” http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/future_justification_to_the_doers_of_the_law.htm. See also the similar stress on the centrality of our faithfulness in Steve M. Schissel, “A Response to Covenant and Salvation,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (ed. E. Calvin Beisner; Fort Lauderdale, FL.: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 89 - 92. As cited in D. VanDrunen, *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry* ed. R.S. Clark (P & R, 2007), p. 62.
- ⁴ S.L. Johnson, *Galatians: Believers Bible Bulletin* (Believers Chapel, 1978), Lesson 2, p. 2.
- ⁵ Josh Moody, *No Other Gospel: 31 Reasons from Galatians Why Justification by Faith Alone is The Only Gospel* (Crossway, 2011), p. 14.
- ⁶ The expression occurs often in classical writers as a complaint. It always carries the connotation of extreme dissatisfaction. cf. Hans Deiter Betz, *Galatians: Hermeneia* (Fortress, 1979), p. 47.
- ⁷ It is also possible that the word translated “quickly” (*tacheōs*) has the sense of “easily” (cf. II Thessalonians 2:2; 1 Timothy 5:22), in which case the thought is the Galatians were easy prey for the Judaizers.
- ⁸ Moises Silva has some cautionary comments on this semantic distinction cf. his *Interpreting Galatians: Exploration in Exegetical Method* (Baker, 2001), p. 55.
- ⁹ The word appears in Acts 2:20 (the sun will be *turned* to darkness) and James 4:9 (change your laughter to mourning).
- ¹⁰ William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians: With Introductory Essays*, ed. G.T. Sheppard (rpt. Pilgram, 1989), p. 18. I have modernized Perkins’ Old English spelling.
- ¹¹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Commentary: Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 83.
- ¹² Schuller’s perfectly dreadfully book *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word, 1982) is a classic example of the old Liberalism’s motto “Back to Jesus and Away From Paul!” Schuller says, “Luther and Calvin, we know, looked to the Book of Romans in the Bible for their primary inspiration. Were they, unknowingly, possessed more by the spirit of St. Paul than by the Spirit of Jesus Christ? Are we not on safer grounds if we look to our Lord’s words to launch our reformation?” (p. 39)
- ¹³ John Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1984), p. 540.
- ¹⁴ As cited by Wm. Plumer, *The Grace of Christ* (rpt. Odom Publications, 1989), p. 210.