

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	2		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

We are experiencing in our culture a crisis of authority. Much of the Western world is in a vise grip of antiauthoritarianism. People are cynical about authority figures and, in some ways, it is easy to see why. They have lost confidence in the politicians and in the political system. Scandal and corruption are commonplace in the halls of power. When we turn our attention to the public perception of the church, things are no better. A recent poll revealed that of the least respected professions, the TV evangelist was listed right along with used car salesmen! The present-day attitude toward authority is another aspect of secularism (from the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning age or period, which signifies a capitulation to what in German is called *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age). Witness how this rebellion against authority has eroded the Christian ethic and the authority of the Bible. The moral foundations are crumbling. Abortion on demand, increase of divorce, growing acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle, value-free sex education in our public schools, and the breakup of the family are all symptoms of the deterioration of the moral fabric that has held Western civilization together through the years. Having cast off the shackles of our authoritarian forefathers, we are now emancipated. We are autonomous to the core of our being. We are free to follow our own personal light, to pursue primarily individual goals. And where does this lead? We are fascinated with feelings and experiences.¹ We rely on intuition as our moral compass. "It is especially disconcerting to see the church ally itself with some current ideology in hope of gaining relevance or credibility. Ideological alignments accelerate rather than counter the secularization of the Church."² Evangelicalism is increasingly taking its cue from the culture. To be sure, there is what Michael Scott Horton calls "orthotalksy -- a litany of the right words, but emptied of the usual meaning . . . when truth has been defined in such terms as *the Lord spoke to my heart* . . . and *the Lord revealed to me* . . . ; the objective authority of Scripture loses its importance."³ This note of divine authority runs through the Epistles of Paul. He writes as an apostle, and as J. Gresham Machen has observed: "Unless we recognize the consciousness of authority which runs through these epistles from beginning to end, all the detailed learning in the world will give us nothing but a superficial knowledge of Paul."⁴ Today we have people who call themselves *Progressive Christians*. The Emergent movement that was all the rage a few years ago still has a following today. In Rob Bell's book, *What Is The Bible, How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel About Everything* (Harper One, 2017). He writes: "They were taught by their pastor or parents or authority figures to submit to the authority of the Bible, but *that's impossible to do without submitting first to whoever is deciding what the Bible is even saying*. . . . The problem, of course, is that the folks who talk the most about the authority of the Bible also seem to talk the most about things like objective and absolute truth, truth that exists *independent of relational realities*."⁵ This mindset is at odds with the claims of the Apostle Paul.

- I. **THE MESSENGER.** The late Leon Morris, one of the greatest Biblical scholars of all time, points out that: "Paul generally follows the usual pattern, but he makes his own modifications. Thus in the present letter he opens in the first person (*Paul . . . and all the brothers who are with me*), whereas normally correspondents used the third person. As a Roman citizen, Paul would have had three names, but he never uses the other two and we do not know what they were. Longenecker points

out that this use of one name *would have been acceptable to both Greeks and Romans without bringing in any nuance as to status*. His Hebrew name was Saul (Acts 13:9), but in his letters he always has the form Paul.”⁶ Paul identifies himself as an apostle. The word refers to a “special messenger with a special status, enjoying an authority and commission that came from a body higher than himself.”⁷ One of the ploys of Paul's opponents, the Judaizers, was to undermine Paul's authority. They would not have been able to gain an audience with the Galatians so long as the authority of Paul remained beyond dispute. The Judaizers told the Galatians that Paul was at best a second-class apostle. He was not one of the original twelve—he had not been with the Lord Jesus in Galilee. Therefore, whatever authority he possessed, he derived only through the twelve. How would Paul respond to this charge?

- A. ***His Commission.*** The “not” of verse one is directed against this reasoning. He is defending not only his apostolic authority but his gospel. “He is not interested in his apostolic prerogatives for their own sake, but only for the sake of the message which those prerogatives had been given him to proclaim.”⁸ Philip Ryken, a classmate of mine in seminary, notes, “What was at stake, therefore, was not simply Paul’s reputation, but our salvation. The great New Testament scholar J. B. Lightfoot (1828-1889) began his commentary on Galatians by saying, *The two threads which run through this epistle – the defence of the Apostle’s own authority, and the maintenance of the doctrine of grace – are knotted together in the opening salutation*. Paul was not defending himself as much as he was defending the independence of his apostleship in order to defend the gospel. When it came to the good news about salvation by grace through faith, he refused to budge so much as a single micron.”⁹
- B. ***Its Source.*** Paul’s apostleship was not the result of a body of men (cf. Acts 9:2). Rather, it was “by Jesus Christ and God the Father.” Please note how this is constructed. He does not say that it was “by Jesus Christ and *from* God the Father,” referring to the instrument and the source of his apostleship. Had Paul worded it that way, we could conclude that in Paul's mind Jesus is inferior to the Father. Only one preposition is used (*dia*, translated either “by” or “through”) of both Jesus Christ and God the Father, affirming the co-equality of the Son with the Father.¹⁰ Note the indirect reference to Paul's conversion in the words “by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead.” Paul's commission was made by the *risen* Christ on the Damascus road.
- C. ***The Fact of the Matter.*** Paul’s authority is God-given and therefore his message is God’s message. There are many today (even in evangelical circles) who feel free to disagree with Paul saying that on this or that particular subject the Apostle is simply reflecting his Jewish background as seen in one particular rabbinical tradition.¹¹ No -- the Apostle claimed that he wrote for God, his authority as an apostle was directly from God, “the authority of the person commissioned is that of the person who commissions him.”¹² **Note** the words *grace* and *peace*. These two words, Longenecker points out, “have their origin in God and Christ. In fact, throughout Paul’s letters God and Christ are presented as completely at one in mankind’s salvation. In Galatians, for example, the grace which under girds salvation is called indiscriminately both *the grace of God* (2:21; cf. 1:15) and *the grace of Christ* (1:6), while elsewhere in Paul’s writings the peace which grace effects is called both *the peace of God* (Phil. 4:7) and *the peace of Christ* (Col. 3:15). Such a joining of Christ with God is a reflection of the exalted place that the risen Christ had in Paul’s thought. And while this almost unconscious association of Christ with God is here principally functional in nature, it very soon begins to assume a more elevated and Christocentric focus in Paul’s other letters (cf. esp. the bipartite reference of 1 Thess. 1:12 and the tripartite reference of 2 Cor. 13:14) – which, of course, furnished important data for the Church’s later trinitarian creeds.”¹³

CONCLUSION: One of the major reasons for the sad condition of present-day evangelicalism, with its preoccupation with psychology and marketing techniques, etc., is traceable biblical and doctrinal illiteracy. This condition is a direct result of the failure of the pulpit to preach and teach the whole counsel of God

(Acts 20:27). David Wells perceptively wrote: "There was a time when American evangelicals prized and cultivated biblically chaste Christian thought and an incisive analysis of the culture from a perspective apart from it. But the past few decades have seen an erosion of the old distinctions, a gradual descent into the *self* movement, a psychologizing of faith, and an adaptation of Christian belief to a therapeutic culture. Distracted by the blandishments of modern culture, we have lost our focus on transcendent biblical truth. We have been beguiled by the efficiency of our culture's technique, the sheer effectiveness of its strategies, and we have begun to play by these rules. We now blithely speak of marketing the gospel like any other commodity, oblivious to the fact that such rhetoric betrays a vast intrusion of worldliness into the church."¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ We have lost the biblical perspective which is stated by A.W. Tozer: "God is more concerned with the state of people's heart than with the state of their feelings." *Of God and Men* (Christian Publications, 1960), p. 45.

² Donald G. Bloesch, *Crumbling Foundations: Death & Rebirth In An Age of Upheaval* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 39.

³ M.S. Horton, *Made in America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism* (Baker, 1991), p. 151.

⁴ *Machen's Notes On Galatians*, ed. by J. H. Skilton (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), p. 5.

⁵ As cited by Alisa Childers in *Another Gospel: A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (Tyndale, 2020), p. 161.

⁶ Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (IVP, 1996), p. 31.

⁷ A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 31.

⁸ Machen, op. cit., p. 11.

⁹ P. G. Ryken, *Galatians: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P&R, 2005), p. 6.

¹⁰ "... the governing of both substantives by the one preposition but once expressed, showing that Jesus Christ and God the Father are not separated in his mind as sustaining different relations to his apostleship, but are conceived of jointly and as sustaining one relation." E. D. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary On the Epistle to the Galatians* (T&T Clark, 1977), p. 5.

¹¹ It is fairly common for those who argue in favor of the ordination of women to accuse the Apostle of being culturally blinded by his rabbinic background, cf. P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View*, (Eerdmans, 1975).

¹² F. F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 79.

¹³ R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1990), p. 7.

¹⁴ D. F. Wells, *God In The Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 58.