

Article of the Month – August 2011

Missiological Observations in the NT (4) – Galatians

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Jewish opposition against Paul's law-free Gospel had been present since his earliest enterprises.¹ It remained his constant companion throughout his career.²

The main problem Paul addresses in Galatians was that the new believers had been told by Jewish Christians, that they could not be saved if they did not keep the law and were circumcised. In their eyes, the sacrifice that Jesus made for their sins was not sufficient. Being justified by faith alone they

considered as insufficient: works of the law had to be added. Paul uses the strongest possible language³ against such heresy.⁴

We should remember that not only most non-Christian religions are big on works to obtain 'salvation'; the same poison has effectively spread in large parts of Christianity as well. A return to pure biblical teaching is therefore of utmost importance.

Today we also look at criteria Paul used for personnel recruitment, issues of syncretism missionaries may face, the need to reach unreached people groups and reasons why missionaries may face persecution.

On his second visit to Jerusalem, Paul took Titus with him.⁵ The latter, a Greek, was not compelled by the leaders in Jerusalem to be circumcised. So why then, less than two years later, did Paul urge Timothy to be circumcised?⁶ Stein explains: 'For Paul circumcision was an irrelevant issue in itself,⁷ for it only involved the presence or absence of a piece of skin, unless one argued that the removal of this piece of skin was a *requirement for salvation*. Thus, when a theological issue was at stake, he refused to have Titus circumcised;⁸ but in the case of Timothy, when it did not involve a theological issue but permitted greater freedom in ministering among the Jews, he was willing to have him circumcised.⁹ To understand Paul's view of freedom we must recognize that he was so free that, unless a theological issue was at stake, he could ... surrender his freedom ... to facilitate the spread of the Gospel. This is seen most clearly in 1 Cor. 9:19-23. People are only truly free, when they can surrender their freedom out of love for the weak'.¹⁰

¹ Acts 13:45 and onward

² 28:25

³ Gal. 1:8,9

⁴ See also my articles 'The Other Gospel' (2008/10) and 'Double Conversion' (2008/11)

⁵ Gal. 2:1-3

⁶ Acts 16:3

⁷ Gal. 5:6; 6:15

⁸ 2:1-3

⁹ Acts 16:1-3

¹⁰ As in Hawthorne, Martin & Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, 1993:471 (italics mine)

Upon reading the first paragraph of Gal. 5 we notice a strong parallel between Paul's plea against reverting back to circumcision as an unnecessary addition to being saved by grace through faith, and the syncretistic forms of belief that we often see in the Developing World. The following parallels become visible:

Being saved through faith in Christ is the 'big prize' in life: the permanent delivery from spiritual poverty, the pearl of great value.¹¹ After obtaining His salvation, complete as it is, no addition is necessary. Nobody who has become a billionaire will want to earn a few more pennies through hard labor, to add to his tremendous wealth.

Even more strongly, Paul says that he who has himself circumcised as condition for salvation alienates himself from Christ to such an extent, that Christ is of no value to him at all and that he has even fallen away from grace.¹² In other words: by trying to bring in your own pennies, you lose your fortune.

The little yeast that works through the whole batch of dough,¹³ in this context means that mixing human works into the process of divine salvation will eventually spoil the latter. People who cause such confusion will pay the penalty for advocating lies.¹⁴

Therefore, any action that is undertaken to appease the gods, venerate ancestors, stem revenge or actions of evil spirits, seek protection from witch-doctors, seek healing or deliverance outside of Christ, gain power over people, obtain fertility, manipulate weather conditions and receive mediation between himself and God, falls under this chapter.

The indescribable gift of God¹⁵ contains the solution to all the above-listed practices which are merely pathetic man-made ways 'to help God along'. Adding 'help' to God's solution is an insult He will not tolerate. His only way of salvation is Christ. Either we have Christ alone or nothing at all.

In this letter we read one of the clearest NT references of God's promise to Abraham, that through him *all* the families of the earth will be blessed.¹⁶ Like Abraham walked in the faith that justified him, so will *all* Gentiles be justified by faith through the Seed of Abraham, that is Christ.¹⁷ The crux of the matter is that missionaries must go to the remaining unreached Gentiles to preach this Gospel.

The main reason for the persecution Paul faced, was his preaching the cross of Christ.¹⁸ Had he decided to leave that out in order to avoid further persecution, he would have fallen into a moralistic religion, consisting of rules and regulations that appealed to the flesh. In doing so he would not only lose his opponents but also the powerful signs the Holy Spirit did through his ministry. If Gospel preaching does not meet with fierce opposition, the question is whether a true Gospel was preached, or that it was a watered-down version.¹⁹ If Gospel preaching does not result in people who become new creations, it has missed its goal.²⁰ The only way to enter the Kingdom of God is through many hardships, as Paul had told the Galatians when he visited them.²¹

¹¹ Matt. 13:45,46

¹² Gal. 5:2,4

¹³ 5:9

¹⁴ 5:10b

¹⁵ 2 Cor. 9:15

¹⁶ Gal. 3:6-14; Gen. 12:1-3 (italics mine)

¹⁷ Gal. 5:16,22,26-29 (italics mine)

¹⁸ 5:11; 6:12

¹⁹ 2 Tim. 3:12

²⁰ Gal. 6:15

²¹ Acts 14:22