

THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

(Studies in Galatians)

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"The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle; I have betrothed myself to it; it is my wife." So said Martin Luther, the Catholic monk who created the set of lenses through which Galatians and Romans have been read in Protestant churches for nearly five-hundred years. The doctrine of grace, from the pen of Paul in Galatians and Romans, transformed Luther's life. Luther, in turn, forever changed the course of church history.

Speaking of church history, Galatians has, on more than one occasion, ignited the flames of spiritual reawakening, spiritual revival, and spiritual renewal. I do not believe that it is an overstatement to say that how we understand the issues and teaching of Galatians determines in large measure what kind of doctrine is proclaimed, what kind of message is preached, and what kind of lifestyle is practiced.

Galatians has been called the *Magna Carta* of Christian liberty because of Paul's stress on freedom from a performance-based approach to pleasing God. To rely on rules and rule-keeping, even if the rules are taken from the Mosaic Law, is to abandon the gospel's message of grace. "Those of you who try to be put right with God by obeying the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ. You are outside God's grace" (5:4).

Perhaps one of the first things to strike even the casual reader of Galatians is the incredible intensity with which Paul writes. His tone is brutally blunt and his polemic is personal, pointed, and passionate. So, what is the problem? Why is Paul so upset? He is deeply disturbed because the Galatian Christians' preoccupation with keeping the Mosaic Law is splitting their churches along racial lines, separating Jews from Gentiles. Their rule-keeping-gospel is a divisive gospel. As long as their center of attention is on what

they are doing, they will be blinded to what *God* is doing—for where there is no grace, there will be no unity.

Paul refers to some “agitators” or “trouble-makers” who have a selfish motive in advocating their rule-keeping-gospel. These teachers are more interested in making a good showing for themselves and in avoiding persecution than they are in the welfare of the Galatian Christians (1:7; 4:17; 5:10; 6:12-13). In Paul’s absence, these teachers have come along and they are saying something like this:

Paul taught you about Christ. We’re here to teach you some fundamentals of the faith that you need to incorporate into your belief system in order to complete your understanding. Jesus was a *Jew*, and to become like Jesus you need to take up the basic teachings of the Law. You men need to be circumcised, and all of you need to keep the commandments given by Moses. These rules have been the will of God for centuries!

After all, how are you suppose to live your lives? The only scripture you have is Jewish Scripture. And the only teaching you have received from Paul about living your new life has to do with the language of “Christ in you” or “life in the Spirit.” What does that mean? How much better to have more specific rules, some dos and don’ts, along with some oughts and shoulds!

Now, I ask you, what is so wrong with all of that? These teachers are simply going back to the Bible—the only Bible they had. Their message is based upon the Law of God. They are not proclaiming a doctrine of human origin nor are they promoting a lifestyle of immorality. So, what is the problem? Listen to Paul’s reaction.

I am surprised at you [churches of Galatia]! In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel. Actually, there is no “other gospel,” but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ. But 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! We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell! . . .

You foolish Galatians! Who put a spell on you? Before your very eyes you had a clear description of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross! Tell me this one thing: did you receive God’s Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the gospel and believing it? How can you be so foolish? You began by God’s Spirit; do you now want to finish by your own power? Did all your experience mean nothing at all? Surely it meant something! Does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you

because you do what the Law requires or because you hear the gospel and believe it? . . . I am worried about you? Can it be that all my work for you has been for nothing? . . . You were so happy! What has happened? . . .

Listen! I, Paul, tell you that if you allow yourselves to be circumcised, it means that Christ is of no use to you at all. Once more I warn any man who allows himself to be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the whole Law. Those of you who try to be put right with God by obeying the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ. You are outside God's grace. . . . You were doing so well! Who made you stop obeying the truth? How did he persuade you? (1:6-9; 3:1-5; 4:11, 15a; 5:2-4, 7, TEV).

For Paul, what is at stake is the very heart of the gospel: *the sufficiency of the cross*. Anything and everything must be rejected as heresy that seeks to remove the cross as the centerpiece of Christianity. The cross of Christ is sufficient or it is worthless. There are no other alternatives. In the words of Augustine, the fourth-and-fifth-century church father, "Christ is not valued at all unless he be valued above all." Listen again to Paul.

Yet we know that a person is put right with God only through faith in Jesus Christ, never by doing what the Law requires. We, too, have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be put right with God through our faith in Christ, and not by doing what the Law requires. For no one is put right with God by doing what the Law requires. . . . But if a person is put right with God through the Law, it means that Christ died for nothing! . . . As for me, however, I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . (2:16, 21b; 6:14a, TEV).

Among the Churches of Christ, there are those who fear that we are in the midst of disturbing and difficult times. The uncertainty of the future robs them of any certainty for the present. In our quest to be distinctive, we have lost our identity. In our quest to be non-denominational, we have lost our purpose. We are afflicted with anxiety because we know neither *who* we are nor *why* we are. In our quest to restore the church, we have lost sight of the cross. And where there is no cross, there will be no church—for it is the power of the cross that creates the church.

In his book, *The Core Gospel*, published in 1992, Bill Love traces the trends in the Restoration Movement regarding our preaching of the cross. He concludes as follows: "From Campbell and Stone to the mid-twentieth century the general trend was away from the cross toward a gospel of the church" (p. 305). In other words, our focus moved from the cross of Christ to the church of Christ. Although this shift was subtle, it was, nevertheless, profoundly destructive. Love offers this penetrating and painful analysis.

Without the gospels we lost touch with the source of our faith. Without the Suffering Servant we lost our will and reason to serve and suffer. Without the scandal of the cross we more and more sought respectability and popularity. Without a clearly focused central core gospel everything in the faith became equally important. Almost nothing was a matter of opinion, all was a matter of faith. Without the nutrition of the atonement we craved more and more the sweets of fads and methods. Without Jesus' death to unite human beings in a consciousness of sin and the joy of salvation we were powerless to bring about unity. Not only could we not unite Christendom, we could not even avoid division among ourselves. Without the cross of Christ there was nothing to check our pride, convict us of our sin, assure us of our salvation, infuse us with joy for evangelism, and steel us for Christian living in a harsh and cruel world. Without the resurrection there was no sure ground of hope for the peace that passes understanding (pp. 257-258).

But there is, as Love points out, good news! Since the mid-twentieth century, "more of our preachers have been moving back toward a Christ-centered gospel" (p. 305). It seems to me that the remedy for our disorientation regarding the church is a re-orientation to the cross.

Too many of us are weary and worn pilgrims seeking a church home that we cannot find. May I humbly suggest that the reason our searches are fruitless, and ultimately futile, is because we are looking for a fellowship that rightly keeps all of the rules. There is no such fellowship; and even if we could find it, we—ourselves—would fail, for we are unfaithful rule-keepers. And so we go on seeking and struggling, striving to find a fellowship that faithfully does what we as individuals have never been able to do.

These pilgrims often ask church leaders this question: Where do you stand on the issues? This, then, is followed by a litany of issues. My brothers and sisters, if I have correctly understood Galatians, and I certainly pray that I have, I believe Paul's answer to this question would be that "the issues" are *not* the issue; the issue is whether or not we will make "the issues" the gospel. There is not room on the cross for *both* Jesus and our list of issues. If the crucified Christ is sufficient, and I believe that He is, then any preaching or any practice that nullifies the sufficiency of the cross is "another gospel," which is really no gospel at all. We must not forsake the cross by focusing on what we do rather than on what God has done and is doing. We must not quench the Spirit by relying on our "getting it all right" rather than on His power to make us live right. And

we must not forfeit the liberty to love by judging one another's performance rather than loving others as Jesus loves us.

The thrust of Paul's argument in Galatians is this: by giving Himself up to death, Christ has set His people free. They are now summoned by God to live, by the power of the Spirit, in a free life of loving service. This life of loving service is "the law of Christ." Once again, listen to Paul.

As for you, my friends, you were called to be free. But do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires control you. Instead, let love make you serve one another. For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." But if you act like wild animals, hurting and harming each other, then watch out, or you will completely destroy one another. . . . Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ (5:13-14; 6:2, TEV).

To borrow again from the words of Martin Luther, "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."

I have a confession to make. For several months now, I have been studying the Epistle to the Galatians. My confession is this: on more than one occasion, I have wished that I was studying something else. Why? Because this little letter has shaken me. It has rocked me so hard that, at times, I have felt as if I had suffered a spiritual stoning. I have been forced to realize that the cross has not always been the focus of my preaching and the foundation of my practice. I have been forced to raise some challenging and convicting questions. Is my faith founded on the cross of Christ and on His cross alone? Is my fellowship with other Christians based upon the cross of Christ and on His cross alone? If the cross is sufficient to save the lost, why has it not been sufficient to unite the saved? If the cross is sufficient to draw us to God, why has it not been sufficient to draw us together? If God is so loving, why have His children been so unloving? From this point forward, I have decided and determined, by the strength of the Holy Spirit, that I will subject my words and my deeds to this threefold test: Does it exalt the crucified Christ? Does it draw people to the cross? Does it unite all those drawn to the cross?

But I must also confess that while I have experienced anxiety, I have also experienced assurance. I have felt peace, knowing that my salvation is not dependent on my rule-

keeping but is the gift of the grace of God. I have felt joy, knowing that the transformation of my life is not dependent on my strength but is the fruit of the Spirit of God. And I have felt the freedom to love, knowing that my love for others is not because of their works but because of their worth in the eyes of the One who died on the cross. I will share with you what has become my personal prayer: *I want no life but Christ, no law but the Spirit, no liberty but to love.*

And so, with Paul I say, “I have been put to death with Christ on his cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. This is the life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me. . . . As for me, . . . I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:19b-20; 6:14a).

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