

Spiritual Dynamite

by Steve Zeisler

Mark Twain wrote on Puddinhead Wilson's calendar this thought:

Behold the fool saith, "Put not all shine eggs in one basket," . . . but the wise man saith, "Put all your eggs in the one basket and watch that basket."

Paul's letter to the Galatians is perhaps the outstanding example in Scripture of the same kind of thinking. As God's spokesman, the apostle insists that we take a stand, that we not hedge our bets, that we not diversify our investments theologically and spiritually, but that we place our hearts, our thinking, and our beliefs in one basket, as it were.

Commenting on the message of the book of Galatians, Alan Cole wrote:

The epistle to the Galatians is spiritual dynamite, and it is therefore almost impossible to handle it without explosions. It has often been so in the history of the Church. The great spiritual awakening of Martin Luther came as he expounded and studied this Epistle, while it was a sermon on Galatians that brought peace of heart to John Wesley. Small wonder that both of these men dearly loved the book; it spoke directly from Paul's experience to their own. But this letter is not one with a message simply for those of centuries earlier than ours, nor is it an Epistle that can be read in comfortable detachment, without personal involvement. At every point it challenges our present-day shallow, easy acceptances and provokes our opposition.

As we study together the message of this book we will be required to make choices in areas where we, perhaps, would rather not have to choose. We may be living the Christian life content to sample tidbits from the theological smorgasbord, and never having to narrow our choices and take a stand. If that is so, we will find, as Paul points out in this book, that the truth of God and life from him cannot come both by the law and by the promise (3:18). They have to come from one source or the other. We are required to stand on one side or the other, Paul declares; we cannot be both slaves and free men (5:1). We cannot live by both the Spirit and the flesh (5:16-17)-- these two realities stand in opposition to each other.

The antithesis most consistently pointed out by the apostle in this letter is the distinction between men and God: we either live to please men or to please God; we derive our sense of worth from what men say or from what God says; we will choose as the source of our power the benefits that men can produce, or we will choose what God can do for us.

The opening verses of the letter speak to this dichotomy:

Paul, an apostle [not sent from men, nor through the agency of men, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead], and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

The introductory lines of this letter contain the ordinary, everyday components of letters written in the first century. Letters written then began by declaring the identity of the writer, identifying the people to whom the letter was written, and then a word of greeting. Those three elements are found throughout New Testament letters. The first and third of those elements, i.e., the author and the greeting, are expanded upon by Paul. He gives certain information about himself, and then his greeting grows into a statement of blessing and praise to

God. We will spend most of our time this morning looking at those two elements.

The middle element-- the recipients ("the churches of Galatia")-- has received more scholarly attention and academic interest than the others. There has been a longstanding debate among Christian scholars as to where the churches of Galatia were located and who were the people who comprised those churches. This convoluted argument, however, has almost no bearing on the truth or the message of the book. Even a definitive answer to those questions will not help us interpret the book any better. I will tell you what I think the answer is, and if you want to examine it, you are free to do so. The churches of Galatia (a Roman province at the time), included the churches in the cities of Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and others, all of which Paul himself founded, as described in Acts 13 and 14. The letter was written by Paul, probably from the city of Antioch, in Syria, about 49 A.D.

The more important elements of the introduction to Galatians deserve some general comment, too, before we look at the author and greeting in detail. One general observation about these is to note the incidental, but beautiful, appeal to harmony, unity and oneness that is found throughout this paragraph. Paul, as an apostle, is writing a letter to the church he founded, yet he felt within his own heart the propriety of recognizing that when he wrote, he wrote with "all the brethren who are with me" (verse 2). Paul never viewed himself as a "Lone Ranger" Christian. His community joined with him in his ministry as part of a team. The sense of harmony that existed between Paul and his co-workers is evidence that the Spirit was at work. Where God's truth is held high, where men love the Lord there is unity, oneness, harmony and appreciation, one for another. Pride is broken down, competition is done away with, misunderstandings are cleared up. Thus, without drawing attention to it, Paul witnesses to this fact in the words, "all the brethren who are with me."

Another example of the importance of harmony is the way Paul describes the work of the Father and the Son. When he writes about certain actions by God (in both verses 1 and 3), he refers to the Son and the Father working in concert: ". . . through Jesus Christ, and God the Father (verse 1), and, ". . . from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 3). Thus we see the members of the Godhead acting in unity with each other. This is wonderful testimony to the fact that where God is present and his work is being carried forth we ought to expect and should find oneness.

Before we look at who Paul is and what his greeting is, a second general observation is that in this letter we are getting just the second half of Paul's ministry to the Galatian Christians. We know from verses 7, 8 and 9 that Paul went to Galatia and that he preached to them: (some) want to distort the gospel of Christ" (verse 7), which we have preached to you" (verse 8), "contrary to that (gospel) which you have received" (verse 9). The gospel message had been imparted in full to the Galatians prior to the writing of this letter, so we need to discuss that message in broad terms at least in order to be able to appreciate Paul's defense of it in the letter.

I suggest that the best place to become oriented as to just what is the gospel is by looking carefully at this opening paragraph, and in particular at two Greek prepositions, each of which consists of just three letters. These are the most common of prepositions, found throughout the New Testament, and they are translated by the English words, "from," and "through." If we look at the way Paul uses these two little words in this paragraph we will see a signpost, a witness, to what the gospel, the "good news" which God has enacted on our behalf actually is.

In verse 1 Paul writes that his apostleship was "through Jesus Christ, and God the Father"; it was not "through" men. In verse 3 he says that grace and peace from "From" God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the very same word he uses in verse 1, where he says apostleship is not "from" men. The perspective of identity, standing and power coming through and "From" God, not "through" and "from" men, is the clue that points us to the heart of the gospel. Paul says that his apostleship is through the agency, through the choice and accomplishment of God the Father and Son working together. We will see the importance of apostleship as this letter unfolds. Most of the first two chapters go on to highlight that statement, proving that we have a pure, unadulterated and trustworthy word from God.

But consider for a minute the broader implications of Paul's statement that it was directly through the choice and power of God that he became an apostle. Here Paul is reminding us that when God has dealings with us he always does so directly, sovereignly and without inter" mediaries. Nobody was smart enough to convince

Paul that he should follow Jesus Christ, win him to the cause, train him and then offer him to God as a likely spokesman. Paul was an enemy of the good news. Nobody could see in him the potential that God saw in him. Even after he had met the Lord and become a believer people ran away from him in fear. In an extremely dramatic fashion God spoke to Paul on the Damascus Road and won him to himself. God did not counsel with anybody about the action he was about to undertake. He did not wait until a degree had been granted, or until a committee had met and decided that Paul was a fit candidate for apostleship. God acted sovereignly and directly- "up close and personal," as the television sports show has it.

That perspective is a signpost to the heart of the gospel. When God acts with human beings he does not use intermediaries. Ultimately and finally, God seeks us out as individuals. His Spirit wins our spirits, one-- on-- one, bringing us into a love relationship with himself. We are born again into his family because of his inviting us, winning us and caring for us directly. I hope that is what you believe about your Christian faith, that you are not dependent on anybody else, that you are not who you are in Christ because any other person intervened and spoke mystically on your behalf. You are who you are in Christ through the direct agency, through the direct choice and involvement of God. Today, as in the first century, he gives gifts and opportunities- life itself, one-- on-- one, person-- to-- person, himself investing himself in us. Paul says, "I am not an apostle through the choice of men. No one chose me and presented me to God. I did not receive anyone else's blessing that I might become an apostle. I am an apostle through the direct agency of God." In the same way you and I are known by the Lord, supported by him and upheld by him through the direct agency, action, choice and accomplishment of God himself.

The recent celebration of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther brought to mind again the truth he preached that altered European history, and that is that no human priest is needed to stand between man and God. We are all of us priests. Each one of us has direct access to God. He knows us, sees us and cares for us as individuals. We have perfect access to him and he to us. Abraham was called by the voice of God while he was yet a pagan living in a pagan city in the Fertile Crescent. Moses heard the voice of God speak from a burning bush that was never consumed. Mary was overshadowed by the Spirit and became pregnant with the Baby who would be Messiah by the direct intervention of God himself, without an intermediary. Paul was an enemy of the gospel, a hater of Christians, yet the Lord knocked him flat and won him to himself.

Brian Morgan told me recently about a student at Stanford whose native tongue is Bengali. She came to Christ when a Russian tour-- guide spoke to her privately in Bengali about the Lord while leading a group of Americans through a museum in Leningrad. In a prison in Northern California earlier this month I met people whose lives had been marked by violence and fear and who yet, with hardly any contact, teaching, or other things which we consider critical to faith, had come to know the Lord. They were walking with Christ, growing and winning others to him.

You may have a much less dramatic story to tell about your conversion experience. You may have come from a loving family who taught you about the Lord, and in a gradual process your eyes were opened so that today you are a Christian. My own testimony is a little like that. It may seem to you that there was human counsel involved, that there were intermediaries, that someone was required to stand between you and your Lord so that you would come to know him. The Scriptures teach, however, that though God may use human beings as servants, and though he may use human institutions as instruments, he in fact deals with each of us directly. Any love that has been awakened in our hearts for him comes because he chose us. He did not need any counselor. No one is needed to intervene between him and us. That is a great truth.

Paul was an apostle through the direct choice and accomplishment of "Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead." That last phrase is very important as well. The God who acts in a one-- on-- one basis with individuals is a life-- giver, a raiser-- from-- the-- dead. The God who knows us, who found us and cared for us is the One who brings life out of death, destruction, horror and darkness.

The second important element of this letter's introduction is the greeting. "Grace and peace," Paul says, are "from" our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Here we have exactly the same word that is used in verse 1, where Paul says his apostleship was not "from" men. While these words "grace and peace" were commonly used to greet recipients of first century letters, as they flow from Paul's pen they are much more profound and deep. The chief characteristic of grace is that it is totally undeserved. Grace is the bounty which flows from the

heart of God, and is poured out on those who deserve wrath and condemnation. The words of the hymn are descriptive of grace,

Out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!

Peace, the second element in this greeting, is probably the deepest longing of the human heart. We call out for peace that we might be set free from the turmoil, the tension, anxiety and sense of failure that is both external to us in the world we live in and internal to us as well. That peace also comes from the heart of God, not from any human source. It flows to us, Paul says, "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." John Stott has written, "The nature of salvation is peace, or reconciliation- peace with God, peace with men, peace within."

In order to convey how the grace and peace of God are made possible for us, Paul brackets together an incredible depth and an incredible height. First, the depth, in the words of verse 4, "(the Lord Jesus Christ) gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us out of this present evil age." In that awful, awesome squeezing-down of Christ to enter this "evil age" to become, as Paul will say in chapter 3, verse 13, "a curse for us," is the depth to which God went for our sakes. Secondly, the height to which God has gone to redeem us is conveyed in the statement of praise and blessing to God: "according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore." How do grace and peace come to us? By what means are they made available to us? By both the depth and the height of God's activity on our behalf: God's glory forever; Christ's humiliation in this evil age.

Writing about "this present evil age," Eugene Peterson says,

We are born into a world that shows everywhere the sign of some great primordial catastrophe. There are vast beauties and breathtaking virtues in this present age, but nothing pristine. The sign of our birth is a scar. The world into which we are born is dangerous. The parents to whom we are born are flawed. The governments under which we are reared are corrupt. Are we free to live? Or are we only allowed a meager energy and a compromised space to cope?

Into this present evil age our Lord came on a rescue mission, as a sin-- bearer. In Corinthians we read that he became sin for our sakes so that we might know the righteousness of God. In Philippians the apostle describes the awful descent of the Lord, "Though he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant"-- from master to servant. "And being made in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself"-- from servant to human. "Becoming obedient to the point of death"-- from humanity to mortality. "Even death on a cross"-- not a glorious death but a humiliating death as a criminal. Jesus gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from this present evil age- an age which is so evil we cannot see even the smallest fraction of it as God sees it -- "according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore . . ."

At the end of this process is the glory of God, and we are allowed to participate in that glory. The word "age" in the phrase "evil age" is used again at the end of verse 5. My English translation has "to whom be the glory forevermore," but a better translation, perhaps, would be, "to whom be the glory for endless ages"-- age upon age. (It is the same word.) In the present evil age our Lord has come to rescue us, but what the future holds is age-- upon-- age, endless ages in which the creation will glorify its Creator, and we, as redeemed members of the creation, will participate in that glory. The present evil age is a small, time-- bound period in which rebellion against God has been allowed to continue. Our Lord has entered that time period to rescue us, and we look forward to age after age after age after endless age in the future in which God will be glorified and we will participate in his glory

Galatians 1:1-5 is a succinct witness to what Paul calls the "gospel of Christ." As we have seen this morning, one helpful way to grasp the apostle's witness to that gospel is to observe how he uses a couple of little prepositions. What is not from men and never could be, what is not through the agency of men and never could be, is, through the direct agency of God; from the very heart of God himself. God grants us power and identity through his knowing us "up close and personal." The peace we long for and the grace we could never

deserve pour forth, not from men, but from God.

This gospel is going to be defended tooth-- and-- nail throughout the rest of this book. Having succinctly witnessed to it, Paul spends much of the rest of the book in an aggressive defense of the gospel against distortions and substitutes.

I believe this book, which was written to the churches of Galatia 1900 years ago, was written for people like us too. This book is spiritual dynamite for Christians who would seek to combine concepts that God insists may not be combined, Christians who want life from God but also want the approval of men, who want the riches of the Spirit but also want the benefits of human association, who would rather hold together what must be set apart. If we hear the message of the book clearly we will be required to put our eggs in one basket. We will not have the option of serving men, pleasing men, being rewarded by men, and serving God. May God strengthen us to make the right choice.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the clarity and the emotion with which Paul wrote because these things mattered to him. We pray that they will matter to us, that we may become spiritual, not fleshly, men and women. Give us a sense of thankfulness this week as even the world we live in reminds us to be thankful. May our thanksgiving be to you and our love be for you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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