

feel he was compromising the Gospel, but we can imagine that in a world where there were no completely trustworthy means of disseminating information other than writing it down, it would have been easy for some people to gain a complete misunderstanding of what the famous Paul said, did, or preached.

One thing was completely clear to Paul. Anyone who knew him or heard him speak would be in no doubt that he preached Jesus Christ to Gentiles as the unique and only way of salvation, by faith on the part of the hearers, and by the grace of God the Father. He would have had nothing to do with promoting circumcision amongst Gentile Christians. If we do not like Paul's explosive remark in verse 12, then we are reminded by this that the great St Paul was not a perfect man, even though he wrote many great letters of the New Testament. But neither was Moses perfect, who had written the Law, or David, from whose line came the Messiah, or any other great figure of the Bible. Only God is perfect, and His son Jesus Christ.

Application

It does us good to read about the lengths to which Paul and others went in order to make sure that the Gospel we have received today is the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, many others have had to fight hard to make sure, over thousands of years, that the faith we have received is true to the Christ who died for us and the Christ we read about in our Bibles. We should know that we may be called to fight vigorously for the truth of the Gospel, and argue about it not just with people in the world, but most painfully, with people within the church. The truth of the Gospel is centred upon salvation by faith, by the grace of God and through Jesus Christ alone is simply not negotiable. There are people within the church who feel that they can argue things differently, but it is my opinion that if they feel they can do this, then they are entitled to found their own religion, but it is not Christianity, and they should not use the Church of God as the seed bed for their own theological movements. There is only one theological 'movement' within the church, and by definition, it is the Gospel of Salvation alone.

I speak to many people who are studying theology today and find it hard not to ignore this problem. I have books on my shelves from notable churches, institutions and individuals within the church, and some of them suggest that sin, wrongdoing and evil do not exist and that Jesus did not die on Good Friday or rise on Easter Sunday; as if what they say can be more accurate about God and Jesus than the Gospels! They also suggest that God is a function of human psychological need and that Jesus was a religious figure used by God, but one amongst many. Every possible way of wiggling out of the truth of the Gospel is propagated on the bookshelves of theological seminaries the world over. However, what is really needed is literature which builds on two thousand years of human experience testifying to the power of the risen Christ, and which explains salvation by faith, by the grace of God, and through Jesus Christ alone. This is the rock from which we were hewn, the foundation upon which we were built, and the unchangeable message of God for broken humanity.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ added to by the church today, knowingly or unknowingly?
2. Discuss the importance of the laws of Moses, once they cease to be regarded as a means of salvation. What importance do they have for us today?
3. What confusions and false teaching disrupt the Gospel today? Does any of it depend upon misinterpretations of Scripture?

Discipleship

Have you ever had the feeling of having started the Christian race well and at a good pace, but begun to think that you have slowed down somewhat? In all truth, we should be careful lest the devil sells us a lie here, because truth may not equate with our feelings. However, with careful and prayerful discernment we should be able to understand whether this is true or not. It is lonely to try and deal with such issues by oneself, and we gain most help by talking about such things within fellowship groups, which can help us gain perspective and discover what God would have us do to 'run the race' of faith today.

Final Prayer

Come gently, Lord Jesus, in those difficult times when life feels numb and love seems far away. Bring a word, a touch, a sense of Your presence; and place within us the seeds of hope and renewal. Then, with every day that passes, may we increasingly know the power of Your love deep within, and rejoice in Your love and care. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN

Prayer

For every minute of this day when we have forgotten to live according to Your call, O Lord, please forgive us. Through others, through Your Word and through the voice by which You speak to us, remind us when we fall short of the high calling of Christian discipleship. May we always be humble enough to repent, so that we may be led back to Your side and the fulfilment of our call. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Local Shops

Pray and ask the Lord to bless your own local community and especially the shops and other local services which may be available; newspaper distribution, chemists, late night shops, service stations, take away food outlets, florists, and post offices. Everything available in your area is valuable to some, so ask the Lord to bless their proper and wholesome use.

Meditation

Renew our hearts, Friend and Comforter;
Let the fire of love burn brightly for ever.

Repair our bodies, Healer and Deliverer;
Let the joy of wholeness fill our lives.

Refill our minds, Master and Teacher;
Let the truths of knowledge not pass us by.

Remove our sins, Saviour and Redeemer;
Let the beauty of peace with God, ever reign.

Restore our zeal, Encourager and Guide;
Let the path of adventure be brightly lit.

Rebuild our strength, Great and Mighty Lord;
Let the challenge of action, thrill and excite us.

Revive our spirits, Counsellor and Lord;
Let the promise of our future, beckon us on.

Bible Study - Galatians 5:2-12

² Look; I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, then Christ will have no value to you. ³ I repeat my testimony to you that everyone who accepts circumcision is obliged to keep the whole Law. ⁴ You are cut off from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵ But we wait eagerly for the hope of righteousness, through the spirit and by faith. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision counts for anything, but only faith which works through love.

⁷ You were running well. Who prevented you from being obedient to the truth? ⁸ Such persuasion does not come from the One who calls you. ⁹ 'A small amount of yeast leavens the whole lump.' ¹⁰ I am convinced about you (in the Lord), that you will take no other view; but the one who is confusing you will pay the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, my friends, still preach circumcision, why am I then persecuted? In that case, the scandal of the Cross has been removed! ¹² How I wish that those who troubled you might castrate themselves!

Review

We are now moving towards the end of Paul's letter to the Galatians, though as we will find in the next few days, there are some quite stunningly powerful messages which Paul seeks to convey to the Galatians despite the weighty problems which had forced him to write in the first place. In this passage, Paul appears to go over the same ground which has dominated the letter, by arguing against circumcision. But it is the last time (bar one – 6:15) that circumcision is mentioned, and as

we study the passage we discover that it is a summary of the whole matter. In addition, Paul contrasts the teaching of circumcision in the church with the true teaching of the church which now stands increasingly clear and obvious. As John Stott puts it in his own devotional commentary on Galatians entitled 'Only One Way' (IVP); 'salvation is in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.' Such are the conclusions which Paul points us towards in this final onslaught against the 'teaching of circumcision'.

The quote above from John Stott is in fact his own summary of what Paul says in verses 1 to 5. Clearly, when you or I read these verses they sound like so many other verses we have read in Galatians. Yes, Paul is animated by the whole subject and begins, yet again, with a strong personal declaration (5:2); he openly accepts that he is repeating himself (5:3), he castigates the ineffective faith of those who compromise with the Judaisers (5:4) and he looks forward to the way that God will deal with the situation (5:5). But if we look more closely, we can see how John Stott obtained his far more inspiring account of the same verses. What Paul says in verse 2 comes directly from his belief that salvation is in Christ alone, and any other addition nullifies that uniquely focussed faith. Then, Paul's arguments about the ineffectiveness of the Law found in verses 3 and 4 arise simply because as far as he is concerned, we are saved not through circumcision or the law, but by God's grace, and God's grace alone; note Paul's comment that those who want to be justified by the law are 'cut off from Christ' and they have 'fallen from grace' (5:4). Consequently, the only human response to God's gracious work of salvation is therefore 'faith'; as Paul says in verse 5; 'But we wait eagerly for the hope of righteousness, through the spirit and by faith.' Now, the value of Stott's approach is to remind us that what we gain from Scripture will be a matter of what we expect. If our initial reading of this passage makes us feel 'oh well, it's all the same as the rest of Galatians' then we will gain little. As it is, Stott's more positive approach to lift out what lies behind Paul's words, has pointed us to a powerful threefold definition of salvation which is not found anywhere else!

The rest of the passage continues with a series of revealing comments from Paul about the situation in Galatia, which show more of his feelings about what was happening in the churches. He accepted that they had received the true Gospel from him in all sincerity but had been intentionally diverted, whether they had succumbed to the arguments to be circumcised or not. Paul was concerned that the teaching of Judaisers had put the Galatians at risk, and was even more concerned that others would be affected by the same teaching and practice of circumcision; which is what he meant by saying, 'A small amount of yeast leavens the whole lump.' Then, right at the end, Paul answers the strange charge made by some of the Judaisers that he preached the importance of circumcision himself (5:11)! His response to this is perhaps one of the most offensive of all Paul's comments in his letters, and some Bible translations have avoided the word 'castrate' (5:12), which is found in the Greek. We are left to debate whether such an outburst was mere forgivable petulance, or simply a sign of Paul's own human nature!

Going Deeper

The passage falls neatly into three sections which we will now study further; Paul's summary of the whole argument about circumcision and the Gospel of Jesus Christ (5:2-6), his appeals to the Galatian churches to return to the Gospel first preached to them (5:7-10), and his final riposte to the Judaisers (5:11-12). For Paul, the false teaching of the Judaisers was all intolerable rubbish, but he had to make his case clearly and persuasively if he really wanted to carry the church with him.

Paul's summary

It is fairly clear that Paul was summing up what he had to say when he began with the words; 'Look; I, Paul, say to you ...'. He appears to have been gathering all the authority he could muster to conclude the letter, though it has been suggested that Paul wrote this part of Galatians in his own hand to ensure that his readers knew it was indeed his own writing (although it cannot be proven because no-one possesses the original letter!). At the end of the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes 'see what large letters I make when I am writing with my own hand ...' (6:11). This, and other sections of Paul's letters (1 Cor 16:21, 2 Thess 3:17), indicate that Paul may have been in the habit not just of signing off his own letters at very the end, but writing sections himself by hand, and not dictating to a scribe all the time. Such was the possibility for the fraudulent copying of letters and claims of Apostolic authorship even in Paul's lifetime, that it is generally agreed he wrote sections himself in order to give authenticity to the various parchment sheets used to make up any one letter. Each section needed its own 'signature'!

It becomes clearer that Paul is summarising when he says; 'I repeat my testimony ...' (5:3) and insists (if anyone has not understood it so far in Galatians) that 'everyone who accepts circumcision is obliged to keep the whole Law.' This is because the 'Law' was a complete system for obedience to God, and circumcision was an essential part of it; failure in any one part of the Law meant complete failure, not just partial failure, before God. The Judaisers argued that a Gentile Christian had been saved by God, but consequently had to keep the whole of God's Law in its entirety. However, Paul said that a Gentile Christian was never subject to the Laws of Moses in the first place, and so the argument was irrelevant. He maintained that Gentiles never had the law, so they were not now breaking it by not being circumcised. Moreover, whatever the importance of God's law on moral grounds for Jew or Gentile (see chapters 3 and 4), its spiritual value had been replaced by the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ. Salvation and access to God the Father now had nothing to do with the Law, and everything to do with Jesus Christ

However, Paul went further. He explained that just as the Law was a total and complete religious system, the salvation God granted through Jesus Christ was also complete, and it was not possible to 'mix and match' between the two. Therefore, by accepting circumcision and the teaching of Judaisers, a person 'cut off Christ' and thence would fall from grace (5:4). With the Law and circumcision dismissed, Paul positively enthused about the benefits of faith. Phrases such as 'we wait eagerly for the hope of righteousness' (5:5) and 'faith which works through love' (5:6) read like expressions Paul had used many times before, possibly in preaching to the Galatians when he first went there. Did he speak in this way to tempt them back to the faith? Certainly, by using the word 'we', Paul sought to include them again amongst those who believed in the exclusive saving work of Christ. Not all was lost! The Galatians may have been led astray by false preachers, but Paul was determined to win them back.

Paul's appeals

The first of Paul's appeals was crisp and clear; circumcision was not the point (5:6), the only thing that mattered was 'Christ Jesus' and the 'faith which works through love'. This magnificent phrase is one which is worthy of committing to memory, because it expresses beautifully rather than aggressively all that Paul was wanting to say to the Galatians. Circumcision had been foisted upon them and they did not need it; true faith in Christ Jesus should work through love, not badgering. The quality of this advice never fails.

Paul continued; 'you were running well', and sought to throw the spotlight on the people who had led them away from the one true Light and failed the measure of faith and love which Paul expected of true Christians; 'who prevented you from being obedient to the truth,' he asked? Paul's appeal was clear; the Galatian churches had heard the truth of the Gospel of Christ's love when they were saved, and the methods of persuasion alluded to in verse 7 did not come from the God who loved them in Christ! The Gospel was the open and unfettered proclamation of God's love, but by comparison, those who sought to persuade the Galatians to accept Jewish Law and circumcision were secretive and subversive. Paul made his point by using a simple, probably well-known proverb; 'A small amount of yeast leavens the whole lump.' (see also 1 Cor 5:6).

Eventually, we realise that Paul had always been optimistic that the church would survive and the Judaisers turned away from the young Christian communities he had founded in Galatia (5:10). Almost certainly, Paul had been brought news about the churches by someone, and he had heard enough to know that there were people there who would stand for what was right and against what was wrong. He was confident that those he knew of would 'take no other view' (5:10) than what he explained so exhaustively in his letter. Indeed, it is most likely that Paul's letter was designed to strengthen the hand of the Christian loyalists against the Judaisers, and the letter probably did what it was intended to do.

A misunderstanding

The last two verses of our text are highly confusing, particularly on first reading. The only explanation of them is what I have said above which is that some of the Jewish Judaisers believed that Paul preached 'circumcision' and had made a case to the Galatian churches that what they said was in agreement with Paul's teaching! This sounds very odd, but it could in fact explain why the letter was written. Certainly, you can imagine that Paul, upon hearing that some of the Judaisers claimed to be speaking a message which was not at variance with his, would immediately wish to pen a letter to explain that this was not true! We can read in the Acts of the Apostles of occasions when Paul sought to 'do the right thing' as a Jew himself, so that his fellow Jews were not scandalised by his behaviour (see Acts 21:17-26). In such a setting, Paul did not