

CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL:  
FOLLOWING PAUL'S EXAMPLE IN THE EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

by

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## ABSTRACT

### Contending for the Gospel

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The gospel is the heart of the Bible. It is the message of God's gracious salvation to lost sinners. It centers upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is a message that is received by faith alone and never by merit or works. Yet throughout church history, including our own time, the gospel has been attacked by those who desire to change it from a gospel of grace in Christ to a man-centered gospel of merit or performance. Therefore, the gospel must be contended for by those who cherish it, understand it, and are willing to fight for it. All believers must contend for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God has given the church a clear example of how to contend for the gospel in the Apostle Paul. Particularly in his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses various methods to show the Galatians the centrality of the gospel, its message and focus, its only right reception by faith, and its reality as lived out in community. God also has providentially given the church leaders throughout history who have stood firm on the biblical gospel and contended for it against all who would corrupt it.

With the exposition of the gospel in Scripture, and the examples given by God, Christians today can and must confidently hold fast to the gospel in the presence of aberrants who continue to distort its message. By remembering God's truth, remaining faithful in Him, and reaching out to others with the good news of salvation, we can make an impact for and with the gospel of Christ. Let us contend earnestly for His glory!

## DEDICATION

To my gracious bride, Laura:  
For patiently and lovingly encouraging  
me throughout school and ministry.

I love you

To my Pastor, Ron Finch:  
For imparting into me a love  
for the Scriptures and a passion  
to know and teach it rightly.

God's blessing be upon  
you and Gwen

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The central message of the gospel has been expressed in various ways in our time. N.T. Wright, for example, claims that “‘The gospel’ is not ‘you can be saved, and here’s how;’ the gospel, for Paul, is ‘Jesus Christ is Lord.’”<sup>1</sup> When asked, “how would you present the gospel on Twitter,” Rob Bell responded:

I would say that history is headed somewhere. The thousands of little ways in which you are tempted to believe that hope might actually be a legitimate response to the insanity of the world actually can be trusted. And the Christian story is that a tomb is empty, and a movement has actually begun that has been present in a sense all along in creation. And all those times when your cynicism was at odds with an impulse within you that said that this little thing might be about something bigger—those tiny little slivers may in fact be connected to something really, really big.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, one might be sympathetic toward these definitions of the gospel. Certainly, there is some element of truth in each of them. In fact, the definitions cited come from popular teachers and scholars who would be considered evangelical Christians. They represent movements that have gained momentum among Protestant churches and believers in recent years. Yet, their definitions prompt the question: do they believe and propagate the true and complete biblical gospel according to the New Testament? I can state with a degree of certainty that each would answer that they do. Yet, N.T. Wright, while proposing that his concept of the gospel is based on reading Paul in the same manner as Martin Luther, does not

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” August, 2003; available from [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_New\\_Perspectives.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_New_Perspectives.htm); Internet; accessed 3 March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Galli, “The Giant Story,” April, 2009; available from [http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article\\_print.html?id=81195](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=81195); Internet; accessed 5 March 2011. This response is from Pastor Rob Bell of Mars Hill Bible Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

regard the gospel as the saving message of God's declarative and judicial act upon the sinner. Rob Bell, along with other emergent thinkers such as Brian McLaren, sees the gospel as central to God's kingdom work in history, but fails to acknowledge the need of the sinner to be justified by a God who is indeed a loving Creator, but who also executes judgment upon all who reject His Son's atoning work.

A greater question remains—can evangelicals identify the errors concerning the gospel inherent in these various representations and do they have the fervor to contend for the gospel which is at stake? By examining the above quotations and various writings and sermons that are prevalent today, it is clear that the gospel, as historically understood among Protestant evangelicals, is under siege, especially inside the church. This should be no surprise, for it has been so since the beginning of church history. But who will stand up for the truth of God's saving message and how will they do it?

Evangelical Christians must understand their responsibility to contend earnestly for the biblical gospel of Christ, specifically, the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. This is not optional, nor can it be relegated to the theologian or pastor alone. The glorification of God and the salvation of sinners are at stake, and the assumption can no longer be made that the heart of the biblical gospel—justification by faith alone—is clearly understood or fought for by churches and individual Christians today.

Therefore, there must be a purposeful, passionate, and concerted emphasis upon the biblical message of the gospel—that a person has right standing before God on the ground of Christ's person and work alone, and not by human effort or addition to that work. There can be no hedging in either substance or passion. If one is convinced of the gospel as understood by the biblical writers, and expounded supremely by Paul, they cannot sit by idly and either wish things to work out for the good or consign such matters to one's personal belief or preference. To do so would simply capitulate to the spirit of the age in which we live—that of tolerance or postmodern relativism.



The Apostle Paul clearly sets forth by his teaching and example how to contend for the gospel in his letter to the Galatian churches. In fact, the entire New Testament provides an accurate and passionate model for contemporary evangelicals to follow in contending for the gospel. This model has also proved effective throughout church history in those who have contended for the gospel in contexts of error and opposition.

The reader may think that the term “contend” is too strong and carries a negative connotation, but no other word will suffice. The basic meaning of contend is “to strive or vie in contest or rivalry or against difficulties; to maintain or assert.”<sup>3</sup> It is a word of force and action. To some, this term goes against attitude of *agape* love that Jesus promoted in His teaching, especially toward one’s enemies.<sup>4</sup> Yet, Jude instructed his readers to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”<sup>5</sup> As we will see in the example of Paul, the gospel message of justification is central to the faith; it is non-negotiable and must be addressed with great vigor. It entails conflict, but is to be done to the glory of God, the sake of the truth, and in love to see another in error put true faith in the God of the truth.

The present study will focus on the heart of the gospel—the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This will limit the discussion in the book of Galatians to Paul’s main emphasis. I am purposefully defining the topic more narrowly, since at times Paul uses the term gospel to refer to the entire Christian message and at other times, he refers to the historical events of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>6</sup> My main concern is to examine how a person comes to a right standing before a holy and righteous God and how this doctrine must be understood and contended for in a biblically effective way.

This study comes, first, from my own experience in preaching through the book of Galatians to the church congregation that I have pastored over the last seven years. It

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<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, “Contend,” available from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contend>; Internet; accessed 3 March 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:43. All Scripture quotes are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>5</sup> Jude 1:3.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 1:1, 2:16; 1 Corinthians 15:1-3

struck me how Paul, in teaching the Galatians concerning their salvation, was also directly combating the false teachers who were distorting his gospel message. I noticed that the methods Paul used in defending and advancing the gospel should and must be used by Christians in our own day.

Second, it grows out of understanding the postmodern/post-Christian culture in America. On one end of the spectrum, there are those such as the New Atheists who continue to combat Christianity as myth in the name of reason.<sup>7</sup> On the other end, there are those who preach tolerance and acceptance of all religions as equally valid, thus erasing the clear distinctives of the Christian faith. Our culture needs the firm reminder that Christianity is an exclusive faith, based on truth claims that are verified by historical and literary accuracy as well as Jesus' own resurrection and the apostolic witness of the New Testament, which all point to the validity of the biblical gospel.

Lastly, I am deeply concerned about the condition of the contemporary evangelical church in America. The truth of the historic gospel has taken a back seat to meeting felt needs, fulfilling one's dreams, preserving unity at cost of truth, and a general anti-intellectual attitude toward God and Scripture. My assessment is that every generation needs to be reminded of what makes Christianity distinct from all other religions—that the Christian gospel brings the only message from God which “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, because of the centrality of the gospel to the Christian faith, Christians must contend for the core truth of that gospel, namely justification by faith alone, by following the example of the Apostle Paul as reflected in his letter to the Galatians. They must do this by gaining an acute understanding of what the biblical gospel is (as

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<sup>7</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “The Plight of the New Atheism: A Critique,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (2008) : 814.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 1:16.

demonstrated in Paul's writing and throughout church history), and by addressing the ramifications of this contention in the contemporary evangelical Church.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHAT IS THE GOSPEL WORTH CONTENDING FOR? THE MESSAGE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

The term “gospel” simply means “good news.”<sup>1</sup> When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The good news of the gospel focuses upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Greg Gilbert contends that it “stands at the very center of Christianity.”<sup>3</sup> This is because, as the Apostle Paul would remind the Romans, “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”<sup>4</sup> It is even proper to go as far as John Piper does in declaring that “God is the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> He continues:

When I say that *God Is the Gospel* I mean that the highest, best, final, decisive good of the gospel, without which no other gifts would be good, is the glory of God in the face of Christ revealed for our everlasting enjoyment. The saving love of God is God’s commitment to do everything necessary to enthrall us with what is most deeply and durably satisfying, namely himself.

Thus, the heart of the gospel is that it is the message of good news in which God through Christ saves sinners that they might be brought to see and glorify Himself.<sup>6</sup>

As previously stated, the particular focus of this thesis is one aspect of the gospel that Paul brings out in his letter to the Galatians—the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. This doctrine is indeed good news for sinners and an important element of

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<sup>1</sup> From the Greek, ευαγγελιον.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:15.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 1:16.

<sup>5</sup> John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 13.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 3:18.

God's work in our salvation. Thus, it is a doctrine worth understanding that it might be contended for well.

Wayne Grudem defines justification by faith alone this way, "Justification is an *instantaneous legal act of God* in which He (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in His sight."<sup>7</sup> Thus, the focus is upon an act that God the judge makes on behalf of sinners on the ground of the righteousness of His Son.

Why make such a strong linkage between the message of the gospel and the doctrine of justification by faith? First, the Apostle Paul links the two in his thinking. This is evidenced in how he uses the two almost synonymously in his letters. In Galatians 1:6-8, Paul wrote to the Galatians as they were being presented with (and beginning to believe) a different gospel contrary to the true gospel he had preached to them. Then expounding upon this true gospel, he makes it clear that it centers upon the topic of how a person is justified before God (2:16). Therefore, in Paul's mind, the gospel contains the message of how a person is saved and is justified before God.

Second, the gospel has historically been tied to the teaching of justification by faith. John Calvin, in writing concerning justification, notes:

the best passage of all on this matter is the one in which [Paul] teaches that *the sum of the gospel embassy* is to reconcile us to God, since God is willing to receive us into grace through Christ, not counting our sins against us (II Cor. 5:18-20). Let my readers carefully ponder the whole passage. For a little later Paul adds by way of explanation: "Christ, who was without sin, was made sin for us" (II Cor. 5:21), to designate the means of reconciliation (cf. vs. 18-19). *Doubtless, he means by the word "reconciled" nothing but "justified."* And surely, what he teaches elsewhere—that "we are made righteous by Christ's

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<sup>7</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 723, emphasis added.

obedience” (Rom. 5:19 p.)—could not stand unless we are reckoned righteous before God in Christ and apart from ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin makes it clear in this statement that the doctrine of reconciliation to God through justification *is* the gospel. In other words, the doctrine of justification is the gospel. For Calvin, the good news of God’s gracious salvation meant that God graciously justifies the sinner on the basis of the righteousness of His Son. Thus the gospel and justification are inseparable.

As we consider how this ties into contending for the gospel of justification, Carl F. H. Henry wrote that the current desire to reconcile the differences between Catholics and Protestants has caused the doctrine of justification to be in danger once again.<sup>9</sup> The main reason for this danger is the current disregard for the definition and distinction of justification championed in the Reformation. The Reformation understanding of justification was countered in the Catholic response at the Council of Trent (1547) which essentially equated justification with sanctification.<sup>10</sup> That is, Catholic doctrine confuses the one time declarative act of justification with the continual process of sanctification in which God continually makes the Christian free from sin and more like Christ.<sup>11</sup> The failure to distinguish between justification and sanctification distorts the biblical teaching of justification being a complete act of God apart from human effort or merit. Thus, the gospel is corrupted.

Another area of danger is in the realm of current biblical scholarship. Some scholars debate the proper place of the doctrine of justification—whether it is “basic and central” to Paul’s teaching or a subsidiary doctrine.<sup>12</sup> Moving this doctrine to the periphery diminishes the importance and power Paul placed on it. Henry, citing many Scriptural texts,

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 729.

<sup>9</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, “Justification: A Doctrine in Crisis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (1995) : 58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Grudem, 746.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

insists that this orthodox doctrine must be contended for as much today as throughout church history for the sake of salvation in Christ through the gospel.

John Murray notes that the idea of justification has suffered through the failure to reckon what the biblical term means, wrongly supposing it speaks of making one righteous, good, or holy.<sup>13</sup> In this understanding, the doctrine of justification is again confused with sanctification. Murray uses Scripture and common experience to show that justification cannot mean to make one good, and must be forensic (that is, a legal declaration) in nature, thus showing the need of the gospel for all humanity.<sup>14</sup>

### The Condition of Man—Sin and Total Depravity

The importance of the teaching of justification by faith alone raises the question—why does a person need to be justified by God? What is the condition and position of sinful humanity that demands such a divine declaration to be made? Declaring one as righteous implies that by nature the human being is unrighteous before God. This is due to two factors: 1) the Adamic nature and condemnation inherited by all humanity in the Fall, and 2) the individual's repeated sinning and acts of unrighteousness that stem from a depraved heart.

### The Fall of Humanity

Louis Berkhof states that all humanity is born in a state of *peccatum originale*, or original sin.<sup>15</sup> The doctrine of original sin refers not to Adam's act of sin against God in the Garden of Eden, per se, but the reality that sin is inherent in all of Adam's race because of his sin as the representative head of all humanity. Thus it is a reality in every person without exception.

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<sup>13</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 118.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-121.

<sup>15</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 244.

One element of original sin is original guilt, which refers to the fact that when Adam as our federal head—the representative for the entire human race, sinned against God, his guilt was imputed to all his offspring. Paul stated in Romans 5:12-19 that condemnation spread to all humanity in Adam because of his trespass. This brought guilt and condemnation upon every individual as one of Adam’s offspring. This guilt demands holy punishment as a violation against God’s perfect person, will, and commandments. Thus, all are condemned by God, their judge, with no means of clearing their guilt on their own merit. Therefore, due to Adam’s sin, humanity rests under the wrath of God, pronounced guilty by nature. The penalty of this guilt is death.<sup>16</sup> Not just physical death but spiritual death is inherited in like fashion.<sup>17</sup> This consequence is manifested in both physical death (return to the dust) upon this planet as well as eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire, away from the presence of the Lord.

#### Individual Depravity

Another element of original sin is original pollution, which states that there is no inherent righteousness in the sinner and as a consequence, the person is filled with all evil.<sup>18</sup> Paul addressed this reality to the Romans when he claimed that all humanity is “filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.”<sup>19</sup> Charles Spurgeon explained this pollution using a vivid metaphor: “As the salt flavors every drop in the Atlantic, so does sin affect every atom of our nature.”<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, each individual chooses to commit sins in accordance with their nature. While this pollution is part of the human nature, this sinning is *volitional*. The sinner chooses to sin—he does what he pleases.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Romans 5:12, 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:22.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Berkhof, 246.

<sup>19</sup> Romans 1:29.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Honest Dealing with God,” 20 June 1875; available from <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1241.htm>; Internet; accessed 9 March 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Berkhof, 248.



No one may cry, “injustice!” How can God hold someone responsible for a sin occurring thousands of years ago? Paul addressed this concern in Romans 3:10-18 when he pronounced the willful activity upon the heart of every individual. Solomon accurately characterizes the human condition: “for there is no one who does not sin.”<sup>22</sup>

Because of this willful sin, affecting the whole person—mind, affections, and body, the sinner has no means to make himself righteous before God. Like the rich young ruler, he may even cling to his supposed obedience to the Law of God. Yet, in Jesus’ final analysis, the young man had broken the Law in every respect because he loved his money more than God, therefore violating the first commandment, which is the foundation of the other nine.<sup>23</sup>

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he showed the depth of sin by stating that everyone who does not do all that the Law requires is under a curse.<sup>24</sup> Paul’s point, of course, is that no one can completely obey all things written in the Law, and therefore, no one can be justified through keeping the Law. As Paul later states, the Law serves to condemn the sinner and point them to Christ, the only ground of justification.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, original sin has two aspects. The sinner is doubly condemned—first for being a child of Adam, inheriting his guilt and condemnation, and then for continually sinning against the Lord and His Law. He cannot declare himself guiltless before God, because everything he does is tainted by sin and every part of his being is corrupt before God. If there is any desire to appease the conscience through good works, it is futile. As Isaiah puts it, a sinner’s righteousness is as filthy rags, infinitely inferior and unsatisfactory to God, only inflaming His wrath more.<sup>26</sup> Unless there is a declaration from God on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, all are damned forever.

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<sup>22</sup> 2 Chronicles 6:36.

<sup>23</sup> Mark 10:17-22.

<sup>24</sup> Galatians 3:10.

<sup>25</sup> Galatians 3:24.

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah 64:6, Matthew 5:20, and 2 Peter 2:9.

## The Salvation of God—Gospel and Grace

Given the biblical description of the position and condition of mankind, the gospel truly is “good news,” and the good news is that God saves sinners. God declared of Himself to Moses, “The LORD, The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”<sup>27</sup> In spite of Adam’s sin, hurling all humanity into guilt and condemnation, and the open rebellion of every sinner, God’s gracious promise and provision for salvation broke through. Paul reminded Titus, to remind his listeners, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.”<sup>28</sup> Grace, God’s unmerited and undeserved favor, is the ground for the good news of the gospel.<sup>29</sup>

This declaration of good news came in two stages—promise and fulfillment. Each of these stages addresses the need, ground, and accomplishment of God’s justification of sinners. The promise shows that God must provide the ultimate ground of justification through faith through His Messiah, Abraham’s offspring, Jesus Christ, and what He accomplished through His life and redemptive work. Both promise and fulfillment are extensions of God’s perfect grace.

### The Promise

The promise of God to bring justification through faith finds its greatest expression in Abraham. God chose Abraham from all the inhabitants of the earth to continue the promise that He initiated in Genesis 3:15. The promise of salvation to Abraham begins in Genesis 12:1-3, where God promised to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him and make his name great, to bless and curse those who do likewise to Abraham, and through Abraham to bless all the families of the earth.

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<sup>27</sup> Exodus 34:6.

<sup>28</sup> Titus 2: 11.

<sup>29</sup> Piper, 34.

Later in Genesis 15:1-6, God appeared again to Abraham to reiterate the covenant. Abraham was at that time still childless and wondered if God would fulfill the promise through his servant. God clarified that the promise would be fulfilled through a miraculous work in Abraham and Sarah enabling them to produce a son, an heir. In fact, Abraham would not have only one son but as many descendants as the stars in the sky. The text tells us that upon hearing this sure word from God, “he [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”<sup>30</sup>

In response to Abraham’s faith, God reckoned or accounted something to him that was foreign to him. That act of faith was declared as righteousness. That is, faith was not on the ground of Abraham’s righteousness, but the instrument by which he received the gift of righteousness, which was grounded upon God’s character and promise alone.

Paul used this exact point to convince the Galatians and Romans that justification—and therefore, salvation—is through faith alone and never by works. If Abraham was justified by his works, or by circumcision, he could only boast in himself, but not in God or His grace.<sup>31</sup> Paul stated that Abraham was convinced that promise could have come only by believing that God would do what only God could do—produce a son in a barren couple.<sup>32</sup> As Abraham walked in obedience because of his trust in God’s promise, God provided the fulfillment to that promise in Isaac. Thus it is clear, Abraham’s justification—his right standing before God—was through faith alone.

Paul developed this further in Galatians 3. In the promise given to Abraham, God was preaching the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Jesus Christ was the ultimate fulfillment as the true recipient of that promise as the chosen offspring of Abraham.<sup>34</sup> So, justification comes through the promise, namely Jesus, not through works of the Law.

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<sup>30</sup> Genesis 15:6

<sup>31</sup> Romans 4:2.

<sup>32</sup> Romans 4:13, 20-23.

<sup>33</sup> Galatians 3:8.

<sup>34</sup> Galatians 3:16.

## The Fulfillment

Christ, of course, is the ultimate and complete fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham and his descendants, whether Jews or Gentiles. But this fulfillment comes at great cost. Paul reminded the Galatians that Jesus took our curse by hanging on a tree—dying on the cross so that the promises and blessing given to Abraham may come to the Gentiles as well.<sup>35</sup>

The gospel of salvation—justification by faith alone—centers upon the finished work of Christ. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, focusing their attention upon the message of gospel, that Christ died for sinners, was buried, and raised on the third day, all in accordance with the Scriptures (the Old Testament).<sup>36</sup> There is no justification without Christ’s saving work, as Paul states in Romans 4:25, that Jesus our Lord “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

The gospel that we must contend for is a gospel that explicitly contains this doctrinal truth. There is no justification, let alone no salvation, apart from the clear message of Christ as fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. Christ brings about salvation by His person, His substitutionary atonement, and His resurrection, and we receive this salvation through faith in Him. Any message of the gospel which is devoid of these simple truths or builds upon another foundation is a false gospel. It must be identified and called out as such. This includes any gospel which denies that justification is God’s legal declaration of righteousness, or any that requires works to attain grace, or any gospel that focuses upon anything but the sinner’s individual need to be right before a holy God.

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<sup>35</sup> Galatians 3:14-15

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

### The Declaration of God–Justification and Faith

Therefore, the gospel of justification by faith that Paul fought for in Galatians and for which we must contend is God’s declaration of righteousness, grounded upon Christ’s redemptive work, given by grace, and received through faith alone. It is a judgment made toward the sinner. John Murray writes, “It [justification] has to do with a judgment given, declared, pronounced; it is judicial or juridical or forensic.”<sup>37</sup> It is a declaration, a legal statement, that before the Judge of the universe sinful man, under the curse of the Law, stands righteous.<sup>38</sup>

### The Ground: The Righteousness of Christ

Justification depends not upon human merit or works, but as Murray states, is “an act which proceeds from God’s free grace. It is an act of God and of God alone. And the righteousness that supplies its ground or basis is the righteousness of God.”<sup>39</sup> That is, the righteousness of Christ, who is God.

To be declared righteous, sinners must be identified with God’s righteousness. It is not a blind declaration, but one that comes on account of Christ’s righteousness *imputed* (transferred, credited) to us.<sup>40</sup> This means that His righteousness is reckoned to our account as we receive the “free gift of righteousness.”<sup>41</sup> This comes about by what some have referred to as “the great exchange:” our guilt is imputed to Christ, and His righteousness is imputed to us. Or as Paul expresses it in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

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<sup>37</sup> Murray, 121.

<sup>38</sup> James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 93.

<sup>39</sup> Murray, 128.

<sup>40</sup> Grudem, 726.

<sup>41</sup> Romans 5:17

Even though it is Christ's alien (or foreign) righteousness, as it credited to the sinner and received by faith, it becomes the sinner's righteousness. The sinner is thus justified before God, not by inherent righteousness, but a righteousness that is indeed his from God. Therefore, he can stand righteous before God. Charles Hodge, the Princeton theologian, states:

So when righteousness is imputed to the believer, he does not thereby become subjectively righteous. If the righteousness be adequate, and if the imputation be made on adequate grounds and by competent authority, the person to whom the imputation is made has the right to be treated as righteous. And, therefore, in the forensic, although not in the moral or subjective sense, the imputation of the righteousness of Christ does make the sinner righteous. That is, it gives him a right to the full pardon of all his sins and claim in justice to eternal life.<sup>42</sup>

Why is this point vital in contending for the gospel? James White accurately notes, "if imputation involves a subjective change in the person (i.e., if it means that we are *made* righteous, and hence pleasing to God) rather than the crediting of the righteousness of another (Christ), the entire gospel message takes on a completely different meaning and nature."<sup>43</sup> It amounts to self-salvation. It amounts to a different gospel.

Paul contended with the Galatian believers concerning this very point. It was not as Paul's opponents were claiming—that what saves is Christ plus one's obedience to the Law, and particularly the requirement of circumcision. They agreed that one had to believe in Christ to be saved, yet they claimed that to receive the true benefits of salvation, given in the covenant made to Abraham and his descendants, one had to identify with the Jews through circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath keeping. The issue at stake was nothing other than how one has a standing before God.<sup>44</sup> Can Christ's righteousness be bettered or completed

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:145.

<sup>43</sup> White, 116.

<sup>44</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 466.

through one's own righteous law-keeping? Paul's emphatic answer was "no"! Paul's reason is simply that "if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."<sup>45</sup>

### The Instrument: Faith Alone

It is clear from the biblical text that salvation was never gained through personal righteousness or works of the Law. If this is true for Abraham, it is true for all people, regardless of whether they are Jew or Gentile. Abraham's faith was the instrument by which he was reckoned righteous before God.

The reason God justified Abraham in this way is far reaching. Paul's argument to the Romans was, "the purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well."<sup>46</sup> In other words, each one, Jew or Gentile, that would come to Christ would be justified by faith alone. This is how God dealt with Abraham and how he deals with all sinners.

But there is a deeper reason why justification must be by faith alone, communicated in a key verse in Galatians:

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.<sup>47</sup>

Law keeping was never intended to be God's way of justifying sinners. As Paul explained in Romans, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law come knowledge of sin."<sup>48</sup> The Law has no power to save; it only has power to demonstrate the holy character of God and the great depravity of the sinner. It was a guardian (pedagogue) until the coming of Christ.<sup>49</sup> The guardian was a slave entrusted with

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<sup>45</sup> Galatians 2:21.

<sup>46</sup> Romans 4:11

<sup>47</sup> Galatians 2:16.

<sup>48</sup> Romans 3:20.

<sup>49</sup> Galatians 3:24.

the task of disciplining a child for the parent. As a guardian, God's Law does not instruct a person how to be better so that God could accept them but rather, the Law reveals God's perfect righteousness and disciplines the sinner for failing to keep it perfectly, thus pointing them to Christ, the perfect satisfaction of God's demands.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the only way by which a person may receive the free gift of justification is by trusting God to do what only He can do—declare the sinner righteous and impart the gift of eternal life. Justification, therefore, is either entirely a work of God's grace received by faith in Christ's finished atonement or the sinner is not justified. It is a work pertaining to one's personal stance before God, dealing with sin, rescuing a sinner from real punishment in hell for eternity. The gospel is the call to be right with God through faith alone, not by man-centered works or Christ plus anything. Jesus Himself called people to repent and believe, for this is good news to sinners. It is not a striving to do good or be better, but to trust in God's unfailing love and grace, that we might enjoy Him forever.

### Conclusion

The gospel is indeed *good news*. It must be held in highest regard because it is the only message of salvation to those who believe. The purity of the gospel's core—that Christ's work alone is sufficient for justification—must be maintained for the sake of God's glory and man's salvation. When it is challenged in any form, even from within the camp of evangelicalism, it must be vigorously defended.

Because it is essential to salvation, the gospel cannot be simply thought of as a minor doctrinal difference or matter of personal opinion or emphasis. If this message is not upheld and proclaimed, no one can be saved from their sin, no one has right standing before a

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<sup>50</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005), 139-140.



holy God, no one has the joy of knowing God or being sanctified in God, and no one has the hope of future glory with God.

Paul knew this to be true in the very core of his being. He could not sidestep the issue or put it on the back burner. He could not withdraw from defending the gospel in fear of hurting someone's feelings. Paul knew that he must fight for the gospel and, by doing so, fight for the souls of the Galatian Christians and, ultimately, for the glory of God and the cross of Christ.

There is equal reason for us as believers today to contend for this great and precious gospel and the doctrine of justification. We cannot sit on the sidelines and claim indifference or let the theologians and Church leaders handle the fight. It begins with a battle in our own souls, preaching the gospel truth to ourselves every day, and continues as we encourage those around us to believe and cling to this truth, and culminates in being a voice in the Christian community at large for the sake of the gospel.

How might we defend the doctrine of justification by faith alone? As we discuss in the next chapter, we must prayerfully and seriously follow Paul's example to guide us and cause us to desire God's grace to be manifest in and through us.

### CHAPTER 3

#### HOW TO CONTEND FOR THE GOSPEL

#### PAUL'S EXAMPLE IN GALATIANS

The Epistle to the Galatians, the first New Testament letter Paul wrote, is his most direct and heated. It is evident from the very the beginning of the letter, as Paul jumps directly from the salutation to the body without a word of thanksgiving, that much is at stake. The Apostle had spent a good portion of his first missionary journey ministering to the churches in the southern Galatian territory.<sup>1</sup> He had risked even life itself in order to commit the message of the gospel to these believers.<sup>2</sup> His love for them and ultimately for the God who saved and called him compelled him to tell the truth at all cost. When that truth is threatened some time later, Paul can only respond in the fiery manner he does in his letter to these very same believers whose faith is being shaken.

I propose that Paul's method of response in his letter to the Galatians is not haphazard or arbitrary. The great mind of a man such as Paul would have a good reason for his methodical approach. His method hinges upon his message and it is out of this message that the Apostle must use several fronts in his attack against the opponents of the gospel.

In this chapter, I will discuss six distinct strategies of Paul's methodology. Each of these serves not only to heighten the message, but to spur our thinking in how we ought to contend for the gospel of justification by faith alone in our own day. These areas should not only stimulate thought, but should bring a passion that leads to decisive action. We can have confidence in Paul's example, for he wrote to the Corinthian Christians, "Be imitators of me,

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2005), 459.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 14:19-23.

as I am of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> This surely includes following Paul’s example in dealing with purveyors of a false gospel as an expression of love to the Galatian believers.

What specific examples of methodology can be drawn from Galatians? How did Paul contend for the gospel and justification by faith alone? What tools can be gained for the fight for the gospel today?

### Stressing the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone

One of Paul’s most powerful weapons in contending for the gospel is the truth of the gospel itself. The gospel is God’s truth backed by His unfailing devotion to Himself and the display of His glory. When one stands on the solid ground of God’s truth, he cannot fail. Any wavering or compromising of that truth will diminish the force of God’s character that stands behind it.

How does Paul stress the doctrine of justification by faith alone? He does this primarily by expressing its truth in a straight-forward fashion. Those who follow his example have to be thoroughly versed in the doctrine itself. We must exceed mental assent or the attaining of knowledge of certain facts. A good understanding of the gospel is essential but not sufficient. James writes that the demons believe in God and shudder, but they are also condemned to eternal judgment.<sup>4</sup> Theirs is not a saving knowledge that indicates a right relationship with God.

Paul’s deep knowledge of the gospel resulted from the transformation of his own life. He was a devout Jew and knew the Old Testament extremely well as a Pharisee. His fervor and blamelessness in keeping the Mosaic Law and its interpretations was unmatched.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Paul confessed to the Philippians that any boasting he might have had in his own

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:1.

<sup>4</sup> James 2:19.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 3:5-7.

righteousness was rubbish. Before his gospel transformation, he did not know God as God desired to be known.

Two dangers must be noted at this point. To contend for the gospel one must have a proper understanding of its message and particularly the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Yet, I fear too many Christians are weak in understanding the deep teachings of Scripture concerning salvation. The gospel is reduced to a person walking down an aisle, saying the “Sinner’s Prayer,” asking Jesus into his heart to forgive his sins, or signing a decision card, and being welcomed into the family of God. This is often in response to an invitation that mentions little about the core of the gospel and what it means. Often “gospel” preaching is reduced to proposing to the listeners that they can have a better life if they just receive Jesus.

Because of these types of feeble presentations of the gospel, along with weak teaching in discipleship, many Christians cannot biblically articulate doctrines such as justification, sanctification, reconciliation, or other vital doctrines pertaining to salvation. Therefore, to contend properly must involve a careful study of God’s Word concerning the doctrine of salvation and the gospel.

A second danger consists in having the necessary knowledge but using it wrongly in contending for the gospel. That is, truth may be used to batter and destroy people rather than leading them to the God of truth. Knowledge can be used to boost a person’s ego or to promote a pseudo-spiritual superiority. Or even worse, the proud possessor of knowledge thinks, as Paul did before his conversion, that he is doing God a favor and is even close to God although his heart is actually far away from Him.<sup>6</sup>

Knowledge of God’s truth must be tempered by love. Even biblical knowledge can puff up an individual if it is not understood in the light of God’s grace and love.<sup>7</sup> As

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 29:13.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:1.

strong as we must be in contending for the gospel, we are not seeking to win battles, show our argumentative prowess, or congratulate ourselves concerning how much we think we know. All things, even our knowledge and contending, must be brought under the lordship of God. Paul told the Corinthians that in whatever they do (and this includes gaining godly knowledge and contending), they were to do it to the glory of God.<sup>8</sup> Contending for the gospel in this way will convey the truth that our motive must be to magnify God's glorious character at all times.

Paul's knowledge was ever tempered by God's love, by which he was able to truly grasp the gospel and the God who is at the heart of the gospel. His contending was fueled by the knowledge that God had radically changed Him. He was right with God and desired more than anything that those he ministered to would be right with God as well.

Paul also knew the dangers of a false gospel. He had witnessed firsthand what this could do. It caused some of the Galatians to desert God, to be bewitched, to be enslaved once again, to consider Paul their enemy, to be disobedient to the truth, to be troubled and unsettled, and to use their supposed freedom to bite and devour each other in the flesh.<sup>9</sup> Their departure from the gospel had serious consequences in relation to their walk with God and each other as well as the freedom that was theirs in Christ.

So, Paul was compelled to remind the Galatian churches of the doctrine of justification by faith alone—a doctrine they should have been well acquainted with from the time they had spent with him and through their own study of the Old Testament. He did this several times in the letter, but there are two instances that elicit careful attention.

The first is found in Galatians 2:16, where Paul confronts Peter on his actions that were inconsistent with the gospel Peter preached:

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 1:6, 3:1, 4:8, 4:16, 5:7, 5:10, 5:12, and 5:15.

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul's rebuke of Peter in this text summarizes the key components of the doctrine of justification by faith alone that must be contended for:

- 1) Faith, not works, is the agency by which justification is received.
- 2) This faith must be grounded in a person, Jesus Christ.
- 3) Paul includes the believers in Galatia, as well as Peter and himself (there is some question as to whether Paul is still speaking Peter in this verse), as those who have believed in Christ Jesus, thus, by consequence, have already been justified by God.
- 4) The purpose for believing (Gk., *hina*) was to be justified by Christ and not by the works of the law.
- 5) The reason for seeking justification by Christ and not works of law is because no one will or can be justified by works.

Paul makes the point simple and clear to the Galatians. Notice he does not at this point go deep into imputed righteousness or total depravity. As Leon Morris writes, pointing to the word *know* at the beginning of the verse, "Paul is talking about basic knowledge."<sup>10</sup> Yet, this knowledge, though basic, is profound in addressing the issue at hand in Galatia succinctly. It is as if Paul was saying, "Stop trusting in works of the law and trust Christ, just as you did at the beginning when you saved, which is why you wanted to be saved in the first place."

Philip Ryken, in his commentary on Galatians, notes three specific ways Paul refers to the doctrine of justification in 2:16.<sup>11</sup> These serve as important tools in our contending for this precious doctrine. Paul refers to the doctrine in general terms (points 1 & 2 above), personal terms (point 3), and universal terms (points 4 & 5).

In our own thinking and in our discussions with others, we should focus on these same three perspectives on justification. First, in general terms, a person is saved and

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<sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, *Galatians* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005), 61-64.

justified only through faith in Christ and never through works. Ephesians 2:8-9 clearly bears witness to this as Paul states our salvation is by grace through faith and not through works. Second, in personal terms, we can appeal to our own experience of how God saved us through faith alone. I personally can relate to this, as I was one who grew up in a Christian church and thought my attempts at being good were commendable to God for my salvation. It was not until the age of 17 that God revealed my sin and hypocrisy for what it was and I believed in Christ alone to save me and was thus justified before God. And third, in universal terms, this doctrine applies to everyone. We all must be justified by grace alone by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone according to His word alone.

The second text in which Paul clearly stressed the doctrine of justification is Galatians 3:11:

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

In context, Paul is speaking of Christ’s work in redeeming us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Paul reiterated the point he made in 2:16, namely, that a person cannot be justified by the law and that salvation and justification are received by faith alone.

But Paul includes another piece of information that is helpful for our methodology. Paul states that this truth of justification is evident or clear from a particular Old Testament passage. He referred not to Abraham (as he did elsewhere in the letter), but to the book of Habakkuk. Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4, “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.” Ronald Fung discusses the various English and Septuagint translations of this verse, some focusing on the faith of the individual rather than God’s faithfulness, Fung concludes, “because Scripture says that it is he who is righteous (that is, justified) *by faith* that will live, it follows that no one is justified

by works of the law (irrespective of one's success or failure in keeping it)."<sup>12</sup> Paul uses this verse in Galatians to make the point that the ones who live before God are those who have been justified by faith alone, since the law only produces death.<sup>13</sup>

The methodological import is that Paul revealed that the whole of the Old Testament teaching on life in reference to God is predicated on a righteousness that is received by faith. In turn, the Old Testament taught that those who walk by faith are righteous and will continue to walk by faith because their righteousness is not a product of law-keeping but of trust in God for right standing and sanctification. Thus, following Paul's example in contending for the gospel shows the unity of the biblical message of life before God, not through legalism or self-effort, but by grace through faith as one who is justified by God alone.

This is the heart of the redemptive-historical focus of the Scriptures. One cannot fully appreciate Paul's means of contention unless one sees that there is one main story line of redemption from beginning to end. Salvation has always been by God's initiatory grace since Adam fell in the Garden of Eden. Once the theme of God's covenant redemption is appreciated, and the role of faith is clearly understood, then the defense of the doctrine of justification and the gospel will be all the more potent.

Paul contended for the gospel by describing that which is clear and evident (or should have been) to the believers in Galatia. This would have given them the fire power they needed to deal with the false preachers in their midst. The ground of this knowledge of the gospel of justification could be found in both the Old Testament and their conversion experience. Because Christ had died, taking the curse of the law upon Himself, they themselves could do nothing to remove this curse. Therefore, Paul contended for the gospel of justification by showing that it is received by faith, and has been so all along.

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 143-145.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 7:5.



### Emphasizing Paul's Own Reception of the Gospel

A personal side of Paul is evident in his letter to the Galatians. How could someone so radically changed by the gospel and clinging to justification by faith alone not take personally an attack against that same gospel? It was also personal because the false teachers were personally attacking Paul, claiming that his apostleship and message were not from God but from man.<sup>14</sup> Paul felt no need in this letter to uphold his ego; his motive was to uphold the nature of the calling he had received from God. As goes his calling, so goes the veracity of the message he preached.

Paul wasted no time dealing with the reality of his calling and message he had received from God. The first verse of his Galatian letter reads:

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.

The importance of Paul's personal experience will become clearer as it pertains to our contending for the gospel of justification. The message we are contending for was given to Paul directly by God; therefore, we also stand with great confidence on the origin of the gospel as well as the apostolic authority given to Paul by God.

Paul reinforced this point, firstly, by affirming that his apostolic calling is defined as not coming from a human source but from God directly. This is of great importance when the centrality of the apostolic role in the New Testament is brought into focus. According to Alan Askins, an *apostolos* was one sent forth as a delegate, ambassador, or envoy, given the responsibility not only to proclaim a message but to interpret and apply it.<sup>15</sup> This claim of Christian apostleship could only come to those who met certain criteria. Originally, they had

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy George, *Galatians* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Askins, "Paul's Defense of His Apostolic Authority in Galatians," *Conservative Theological Journal* 02 (1998) : 309.

to have walked with Jesus and have seen the resurrected Savior.<sup>16</sup> They also had to have been entrusted with the power to do many signs and wonders in order to authenticate the message they were preaching.<sup>17</sup>

Paul's apostolic credentials were special, since he had received a direct visitation from the risen Lord Himself.<sup>18</sup> At that time, Paul had received a very specific calling, mediated through Ananias—that he was to be a chosen instrument of God to bear witness of the gospel to Jews and Gentiles, and to suffer much for the sake of Christ.<sup>19</sup> Grace was granted him to know and declare the will of God and the gospel of the kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

Paul was invested with authority from the Lord Jesus Himself, the same authority as the original apostles. Although Paul considered himself the least of the apostles, he had authority over the churches to build them up on the ground of God's truth.<sup>21</sup> These apostles were to stand as the foundation of the church of Christ as primary witnesses to Jesus' life and ministry, as well as be proclaimers of His gospel.<sup>22</sup>

When Paul had first preached the gospel to the Galatian churches, he came as one having received the commission of apostleship. He taught them with authority the truth of the gospel of salvation, especially to the Gentiles, and this gospel came in the midst of much opposition.<sup>23</sup> Through Paul God had “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles,” and their reception of the gospel was genuine.<sup>24</sup> But as the false teachers had arrived, Paul had to reassert his authority, thereby reaffirming the authority of the gospel he preached against their false gospel.

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<sup>16</sup> Acts 1:21-22.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 14:3.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 9:1-9.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 9:15-16.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 22:14.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:9; 2 Corinthians 13:10

<sup>22</sup> Ephesians 2:20; Acts 16:10.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 14:27

<sup>24</sup> Galatians 3:1-3.

Paul stated his apostolic call negatively as it was not “from men or through man.”<sup>25</sup> It was not *from* (Greek *apo*) *men*. This preposition carries the idea of separation, pointing to an ultimate agent.<sup>26</sup> The apostleship was not of human origination. Its source and origination was God.

Nor was Paul’s apostleship *through* (Greek *dia*) *man*.<sup>27</sup> This preposition denotes an intermediate agent, as a position of authority given to a man from a king through a court mediator. There was no human agency involved by any means. Some might have thought his authority had come through Peter when Paul met him the first time, or even Ananias who prayed for and baptized Paul. But this was not the case. As F.F. Bruce notes in his commentary on Galatians:

We should probably be right in inferring from Paul’s emphatic language that his Galatian converts had been given a different account of his apostleship—an account which maintained that he had no commission apart from what he had received from men who had been Christian leaders before him whether the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church or the Christian leaders at Damascus or Antioch: even if his commission could be traced back ultimately to Christ, it was transmitted through these leaders. Paul denies this: his commission was received directly, without mediation, from the risen Christ.<sup>28</sup>

After this negative statement, Paul proceeded to give positive specifics of where his apostleship was derived from. It was of divine origination and it was the work of God the Father and Jesus Christ. The Godhead was both the origin and the means of Paul’s calling as an apostle. This all points to the fact that if the commission of apostle is from God, then the message the apostle is trusted to carry is also from God and Christ. Paul had every right and God-given authority to preach the gospel of justification by faith alone, despite what his detractors were propagating.

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<sup>25</sup> Galatians 1:1

<sup>26</sup> Askins, 312.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>28</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 72.

Later in the first chapter of Galatians, Paul again points to the origin of his message as it tied into his apostleship:

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup>

Though some of the Galatians had been receiving a false gospel that originated with man, Paul claimed the gospel he preached was of divine origin. It is not a gospel “according to man” (*kata anthropon*), that is, originating with humans. Joachim Jeremias makes it clear that this phrase “does not merely introduce the general analogy of human relations and considerations of human logic. . . . In the NT it almost always expresses as well the limited nature of human thinking and conduct in contrast to God and his revelation.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Paul’s point is that anything according to man, even something claiming to be a “gospel,” is inferior in every way to God’s gospel. So the emphasis is not only on origin, but on quality. That is, the quality of the gospel preached by Paul was far superior to what any man could invent.

Secondly, after substantiating the origin of his calling, Paul focused upon the means of his receiving the gospel. Just as he received his apostleship directly from God and Christ, so he received the gospel of Christ in the same manner. It came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. This phrase “revelation of Jesus Christ” can be taken as either a subjective or objective genitive.<sup>31</sup> That is, either Paul received the gospel *through* a revelation by Christ himself to Paul, or Paul received a message *about* (or concerning) Jesus Christ. Both are true in different senses: the gospel was revealed by Jesus Christ as He revealed Himself on the Damascus Road, and the central message of the gospel is about Christ’s person and work.

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<sup>29</sup> Galatians 1:11-12

<sup>30</sup> J. Jeremias, “ανθρωπος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 364.

<sup>31</sup> George, 111.

The key point for this study is that just as Paul did not stand merely on tradition or man's interpretations of the gospel, neither should we. Historically, aberrant gospels have arisen through the insertion of ideas or interpretations that are of human origination. The infusion of the wisdom of man into the wisdom of God corrupts its purity and truth. Although Paul's opponents did not change the gospel altogether, such as by eliminating Christ, they did alter it significantly by adding a place for works, thereby corrupting the message of grace completely.

As we contend for the gospel, our source is the same as Paul's source—God Himself. We have the assurance that the inerrant, infallible word of God is backed completely by God's authority—it is truth.<sup>32</sup> Modern preachers may seek to add to it, subtract from it, or reinterpret it to fit their own views or the opinions of the culture. But we cannot stand for this! We must not only clearly convey the truth of the gospel for which we are contending, but must expose every degree of falsity in any man-centered corruption of the true gospel of justification by faith alone.

I can remember dealing with this issue early in my Christian walk. I had a good friend in high school who belonged to a denomination that taught baptismal regeneration. He contended that a person was not truly saved until he was baptized. In fact, we had a mutual friend who had just received Christ and was scheduled to be baptized in that church. The week prior to the baptism, I simply asked my friend this question, "What if Tony died today before his baptism on Sunday?" He gave no clear response to my question but merely conjectured that God would not allow him to die before that time. My friend's answer left a crucial question hanging: is salvation entirely of Christ's work alone, or is it Christ plus baptism? According to the gospel Paul received, the clear answer is that salvation from

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<sup>32</sup> John 17:17.

beginning to end is of Christ's work alone. A person is not justified by Christ plus baptism, or anything else. For this gospel we must contend earnestly and personally, as Paul did.

### Calling Out the Purveyors of a False Gospel

As he contended with the false teaching in Galatians, Paul refused to keep his discussion in the realm of the abstract. The gospel itself was at stake, and those who claimed to be teachers purveyed a false gospel were wolves in sheep's clothing. If one is to contend for the gospel, he must also deal with those who peddle lies that twist the true gospel.

Some might feel uncomfortable calling out those who oppose the gospel. Yet we have excellent examples in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus confronted the Pharisees directly on several occasions, but especially in Matthew 23. He exposed them for what they were—hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, and murderers. He was not reducing Himself to name calling, but identified the true condition of the hearts of those He confronted—exposing their sin and danger to others.

On certain occasions, Paul even identified the enemies of the gospel by name. In 2 Timothy 4:14, he mentioned that Alexander the coppersmith had done him great harm, warning that the Lord would repay him for his deeds. In 1 Timothy 1:20, he identified Hymenaeus and Alexander, who he had handed over to Satan to stop their blasphemy. Paul also recognized in 2 Timothy 1:15 that Phygelus and Hermogenes had turned away from him.

I have been personally accused of stirring discord among the brethren and speaking out against the Lord's anointed for mentioning the names of false teachers in my sermons. Yet, as I have recoiled in fear of criticism, others have challenged me to name those individual false teachers so others can be aware of them and have nothing to do with their teachings and ministries. For whatever reason, Paul did not call out the names of the specific false teachers in Galatia, but he had strong words for them in response to their actions and

false doctrine. He did this to identify who they were and what they were doing, in order to protect the flock of God in the Galatian churches.

Paul minced no words when he penned in Galatians 1:6-9:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Who were these opponents of Paul and what was the false gospel they were preaching? According to James Dunn they were “*Christian-Jewish missionaries* who had come to Galatia to improve or correct Paul’s gospel and to ‘complete’ his converts by integrating them fully into the heirs of Abraham through circumcision and by thus bringing them ‘under the law.’”<sup>33</sup> Timothy George is in agreement with Dunn’s definition. After discussing several options that have been proposed and denying their relevance, he notes these teachers directly opposed Paul and his apostolate and spread the false doctrine that Gentiles must be circumcised to be true children of Abraham.<sup>34</sup> He states, “Whatever their precise message, these intruders were successful in their canvassing campaign among the Galatian churches, for many of the new believers there were thrown into confusion by this turn of events.”

Notice how Paul identified their actions. These false teachers were bringing the Galatians to the point of deserting God by abandoning the gospel of Christ. They were troubling the saints by contradicting Paul in teaching that justification before God is attained by works. Their actions were directly in line with their teaching.

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<sup>33</sup> James Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 11.

<sup>34</sup> George, 60.

But Paul's critique cut even deeper—not only were these teachers wrong, but they were to be *accursed by God* (Greek *anathema*).<sup>35</sup> This strong language is not to be taken lightly or casually. As S. Lewis Johnson explains, “The strong words of verses eight and nine affirm with all solemnity the hatred of God against all attempts to change the apostolic message. The apostle, it is plain, is in dead earnest about theology! He is concerned with the plan of salvation, in spite of what some modern theologians say.”<sup>36</sup> In light of the danger of distortion, the apostle must pronounce the severest judgment from God. These teachers were themselves to be damned—devoted to destruction—because they propagated what was hateful to God.<sup>37</sup>

Paul only reflects what God thinks of those who tamper with His gospel, leading His people into trouble and ruin. This is not a personal vendetta by Paul. He was only reflecting a judgment already pronounced by God. As an apostle, an ambassador for God, Paul must bear this dire warning to stir the Galatians from their doctrinal slumber.

These sentiments do not gel with our tolerant and politically correct culture, which would call such words bigoted and narrow-minded. But do we withhold from such judgments because of the fear of man? To shy away from taking a strong stance on the gospel would indicate that we fear man and do not love the gospel of grace or the God of the gospel in a way we ought. We would be capitulating to the spirit of the age and jeopardizing our effectiveness for the sake of Christ. Paul made it clear in Galatians 1:10 that he was not seeking the approval of man, but God. Paul was not a man pleaser. When it came to conviction, Paul stood firm or he would not be a servant (lit. bond-slave) of Christ. We must follow in his footsteps.

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<sup>35</sup> Galatians 1:8-9.

<sup>36</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “No Other Gospel! An Exposition of Galatians 1:6-10,” *Emmaus Journal* 10 (2001) : 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



As redeemed people, we are servants of Christ. Those who preach another gospel are not. They are charlatans and imposters and must be identified as such for the sake of the elect. This is not being cruel or mean, but necessary and most loving, for it draws the attention back to God as the final judge of those who reject Him, and His grace as the only means of salvation. To tolerate another message or false messenger is to remove our hearers from the hope of salvation altogether. As James White concludes, “To preach another gospel is to show the greatest hatred for those to whom you deliver this message of death. Why? Only the true gospel saves; only the gospel of Christ is the power of God.”<sup>38</sup>

Later in the letter, Paul heightened his language still further when he wrote, “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!”<sup>39</sup> Why, Paul argues, do they not go all the way? They have already corrupted the people through their message of Christ plus circumcision, so may their judgment fit the crime. Paul is not being cruel or glib, but directing the Galatians to the severity of the consequences to those who preach Christ plus circumcision.

What about Paul’s words of emasculation? What is the model for us? It is to know that God will repay those in kind according to what they have done against Him and His Word. Like David and the other writers of the Old Testament, we can understand that God will repay those who oppose Him and His people in the same way.<sup>40</sup> Those who wish to cut off the flesh might as well finish the job because God will do much worse to their whole bodies when he sends them to hell.

I am not advocating crude defamation of false teachers. Childish cheap shots have no place in kingdom work. I have heard pastors who seek a laugh by putting down false teacher in a mocking fashion. This is out of bounds and shows one to be a fool by definition,

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<sup>38</sup> James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 266.

<sup>39</sup> Galatians 5:12.

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 94:2.

lacking wisdom and the fear of God. The issue at hand is far too serious as souls are in the balance.

What should consume us is zeal for God, His gospel, and His people. This leads us to expose the error specifically of false preachers of a false gospel. When we expose the errors the false teachers are propagating, it is appropriate to reveal the specific judgment of God against those who tamper with the gospel and promote it as the truth. It is to say, “This is what so and so believes, this is how it violates God’s word, and here is what happens to those who do this willfully to the end of their own pride and flesh.”

Paul wrote with similar severity to the Thessalonians. God will repay those who afflict His people with that selfsame affliction at the coming of the Lord Jesus in vengeance.<sup>41</sup> We are not the agents of that vengeance for, as God says, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”<sup>42</sup> Yet, we do need to solemnly warn false preachers that they will be repaid for misrepresenting God and leading people away from the message of true salvation.

Do we love the gospel enough to stand up to those who oppose it? Do we value our justification enough to do all we can by God’s grace to ensure no one is led astray concerning their salvation? Are we willing to warn, by name if necessary, those who willingly oppose the gospel? Are we willing to inform them of the severity of the consequence of preaching a different one? If we wish to contend for the faith as Paul did, we must.

### Prompting Believers with Soul-Penetrating Questions

Questioning is a powerful tool in teaching and leading people to realize their current situation and bring them to the truth. Paul was a master of questioning and used it effectively to challenge the Galatian believers. Paul’s aim was not to belittle the Galatians,

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<sup>41</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:6.

<sup>42</sup> Romans 12:19.

but to shake them out of their denial of the gospel and encourage them to return to the truth and to God.

In Galatians 3:1-6, Paul began peppering them with questions concerning their present state, their initial reception of the gospel, and their current means of sanctification. In his first question, “Who has bewitched you?” (v. 1), Paul identifies their present condition as having been bewitched. Literally, the word “bewitched” means to be given an evil eye or to fall under a spell.<sup>43</sup> Its connotation here is that the Galatians had come under the evil, ungodly influence of the false teachers. This had come about because they were being foolish, resulting, according to Fung, from “Either an insufficient or mistaken use of mental powers or a deficiency in understanding itself.”<sup>44</sup> Most likely, it was that they knew the true gospel presented to them by Paul but were not using their complete faculties to apply that truth and thus were susceptible to false doctrine.

Paul knew who the false teachers were who had bewitched them. The questioning was a strategy to get the Galatians to recognize them for who they were. In reality, it is a “why” question rather than a “who” question. Why had they readily permitted these teachers such free access to come in and distort the truth and lead Christians astray? Why had they allowed this in light of Christ being publically crucified before them through Paul’s preaching of the gospel of truth? How had they settled for compromising the doctrine of justification by faith alone for an illegitimate gospel?

We can, like Paul, ask these “why” questions of those who seek to distort the gospel as well as of those who might believe their message. Why have you abandoned the clear truth of the inspired Scriptures for a man-centered, feel-good gospel? Why have you so easily turned from the truth to lead others astray to your distorted ideology? Why is the gospel of salvation through Christ by faith alone apart from any human merit or work

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<sup>43</sup> Ryken, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Fung, 129.

insufficient for you? These questions should be asked and those of whom they are asked should be brought understand their error.

Paul continued by asking the Galatians a series of “how” questions concerning their initial salvation experience (v.2). How did you initially receive the gospel? Was it by the Spirit or the flesh? In essence, how were you justified—by faith or by circumcision? Paul acknowledged that they were truly saved at the beginning because they had begun by the Spirit—a reference to the work of regeneration.

We should ask “how” questions as well. It is important for people to think biblically about their own conversion experience in light of God’s clear teaching. No one is saved apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>45</sup> Salvation is by faith alone and never by works or an addition to the work of Jesus of any sort.<sup>46</sup> It is a response to the conviction of the Spirit, who shows us the greatness of God, our depravity, the awful nature of our sin, and the glorious solution in Christ alone, and who leads us by His own power to God.<sup>47</sup> God breaks the chains of bondage to Satan and this present evil age and ushers us into a relationship with Himself as sons.<sup>48</sup> All of this is of His free grace through Christ alone and, at the moment of our conversion, we get the sense that it has nothing to do with us. Thus, bringing people back to how they were saved is of critical importance.

Finally, Paul confronted them concerning their present sanctification. Did they begin by the Spirit but now were being perfected by their own human efforts? As Paul presented later in Galatians 5, the flesh and the Spirit are at war with each other. To walk in the flesh is to not walk by the Spirit. What was the means of their sanctification?

Asking penetrating “what” questions effectively brings out what we believe concerning the gospel: What are the means by which a Christian is brought closer to God?

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<sup>45</sup> John 3:1-8; Titus 3:5.

<sup>46</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9.

<sup>47</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:3-6.

<sup>48</sup> Galatians 1:4, 4:7.

What is the ground for our salvation and further spiritual blessings? What truth must we cling to knowing that our sanctification is primarily God's work, with us following grace in faithful obedience? Some use the gospel today to make God out to be a genie who must respond to our fleshly wishes if we access the right formula for living or repeat the correct mantra. Yes, we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling, but we must also recognize that it is God who works in us to will and do His good pleasure.<sup>49</sup>

Each of Paul's questions (of which there are more in this section) is a laser pointer to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The use of such questions is purposeful in exalting God and His salvation over and above any human contribution. This is not to deny the role of human responsibility, which is highlighted in the commands of Scripture (which are found even in the book of Galatians). Paul used these questions as powerful reminders and thought provokers to cause the Galatians to denounce the false gospel they had accepted and embrace the truth they originally believed—that their conversion, justification, and sanctification were all of God and appropriated by faith alone in Christ alone.

Paul's questions were not only to challenge the Galatians' doctrinal thinking, but also their relationship with him. Paul does not divorce doctrine from relationship—with God and other believers. His questions in Galatians 4:12-20 reflected the heartfelt relationship he had with them which was threatened by the influence of the false teachers.

The most poignant question from the apostle's pen was, "Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?"<sup>50</sup> Speaking of Paul's friendship with the Galatians, Herman Ridderbos notes that because they had listened to the false teachers, "this intimate relationship has now given place to another. Paul can find no other explanation than that they apparently do not want to hear the truth from him anymore."<sup>51</sup> What a sad state! Not only had

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<sup>49</sup> Philippians 2:12-13.

<sup>50</sup> Galatians 4:16.

<sup>51</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 168.

the Galatian churches had cut themselves off from one of God's means of grace by rejecting Paul's instructions, but now they regarded him as an enemy. How ironic that the true enemies of the Cross are portraying themselves as friends, while their true friend—the truth-teller Paul—is rejected.

In our contending for the gospel, we must remember the significance of relationships. The axiom that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care rings true with clarity here. When contending for the gospel, we must have a genuine attitude of concern and care. This does not mean we sacrifice the truth in any way, but that we realize we are dealing with *people* who need to hear the truth. Granted, if they refuse to hear God's truth, we must separate from them. It is also true that they in their refusal to submit to God's gospel are enemies of Him. Great discernment is needed here, but the wisdom of Paul shows that His heart is for the truth *and* people. Indeed, our concern should also be for the souls of those who oppose the gospel as well as for those who have fallen prey to their lies.

Above all else, Paul wanted to see Christ formed to completion in the Galatians.<sup>52</sup> This should be our heart's desire as well. This is the glory of the gospel: that those justified by faith in Christ alone are being conformed to His image.<sup>53</sup> This should lead us to great unity with one another and the attitude to contend for this unity in the gospel of truth.

#### Seeking the Realization of the Gospel in the Unity of the Body of Christ and Its Leadership

One of the most prominent effects of the assault on the gospel in the churches in Galatia was the strained relationships between believers. One of Paul's means of contending for the gospel was in contending for its proper application, especially in the body of Christ.

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<sup>52</sup> Galatians 4:19.

<sup>53</sup> Romans 8:29.

This would prove a sensitive and difficult task for Paul, but a task well worth the pursuit for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

The book of Galatians is primarily concerned with how a person is justified before God. Yet, it is also concerned with the relationships in the church, especially between Jews and Gentiles. The error of some contemporary movements is that they reject the former while overemphasizing the latter. But, we cannot overcorrect and say that Galatians has nothing to do with how Christians should get along in light of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If we are given right standing before God on the ground of Christ's atonement through the instrument of faith, our lives should demonstrate our right standing with God in very real and practical ways.

The most prominent example of Paul's desire for unity in the church and its leadership is seen in his confrontation with Peter in Antioch. The report is found in Galatians 2:11-14. This was not the first meeting between Paul and Peter. Three years after his conversion, Paul went to Jerusalem and spent a brief time with Peter and James.<sup>54</sup> After fourteen years, Paul went again to Jerusalem to demonstrate the unity between the Jerusalem church leadership and Paul's gospel mission.<sup>55</sup> Paul recognized the unity of his and Peter's missions and although their primary audience was somewhat different (Peter to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles), the gospel they preached was the same true gospel.

However, this unity was disrupted when Peter ceased to behave in accordance with the gospel they both preached. Peter's failure resulted from the fact that Jews, in keeping with Old Testament food laws, separated themselves from table fellowship with Gentiles.<sup>56</sup> Concerning the significance of table fellowship, Jeremias notes, "In Judaism table-fellowship means fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by every who shares in the meal brings out the fact that they all have a share in the blessing which the

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<sup>54</sup> Galatians 1:18-19.

<sup>55</sup> Galatians 2:1-10.

<sup>56</sup> Ryken, 54.

master of the house has spoken over the unbroken bread.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, the church leadership in Jerusalem had already judged that Gentiles were true members of Christ’s church along with believing Jews.<sup>58</sup> What impact should this decision have on table fellowship when Gentiles began entering the church? Could Jews eat with Gentiles without defiling themselves? Should the Gentiles, then, be denied table fellowship?

The problem was well summarized by J. Gresham Machen:

The Gentile Christians, it will be remembered, had been released from the obligation of being circumcised and of undertaking to keep the Mosaic Law. The Jewish Christians, on the other hand, had not been required to give up their ancestral mode of life. But how could the Jewish Christians continue to live under the Law if they held companionship with Gentiles in a way which would render the strict observance of the Law impossible?<sup>59</sup>

God had given Peter spectacular revelation on this very issue in Acts 10. Peter saw a sheet lowered from heaven with ceremonial unclean animals, and God commanded him to kill and eat them. When Peter refused, in keeping with Old Testament law, God pronounced these animals clean and commanded Peter to no longer call them unclean. The lesson was simple: God now considered Gentiles clean in Christ, and Peter was to go and preach the good news to the Gentile Cornelius and his household. God also gave a visible sign of the Gentile inclusion—the Holy Spirit fell upon those gathered in Cornelius’s house and they spoke in tongues and exalted God.

Both in his personal testimony and in his agreement with Paul, Peter had indicated that he knew he could have free table fellowship with Gentiles because of their position in Christ. Being justified by faith alone, there were no barriers to enjoying a meal together to the glory of God. That is what Peter was doing in Antioch—enjoying meals openly and with a clean conscience with his Gentile brethren.

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<sup>57</sup> J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971), 115.

<sup>58</sup> Acts 15:1-21. I hold that the events in Galatians 2 occur after the Jerusalem Council.

<sup>59</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 100.



Peter withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentiles upon the arrival of certain men from James and ate only with the circumcised Jewish Christians. As Ryken describes, these were followers of James, the half-brother of Jesus, who “lacked the balance of their hero.”<sup>60</sup> They claimed to be Christians, but followed the rituals of the Law, especially circumcision, thus acquiring the title, “the circumcision party.”<sup>61</sup> They held that Jews must uphold the Jewish traditions when it came to table fellowship with Gentiles, which was to refrain from it altogether.

In the same fashion that Paul confronted head-on the opponents of the gospel, he is compelled to confront Peter to his face. Paul revealed why Peter stood condemned at that moment: his “conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel.”<sup>62</sup> Because of this, the actions of Peter and the others jeopardized the unity of the church, not only in Antioch, but universally as well.

A disruption in the truth will lead to disruption in the church. Paul had warned the Ephesians elders of this very fact while meeting with them at Miletus. He sternly warned them:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.<sup>63</sup>

In their attempt to steer followers away from Christ, false teachers would come in speaking “twisted things,” just as the false teachers were doing in Galatia. Desiring disciples of their own and in order to boast in the flesh, they brought in false teachings which led to the

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<sup>60</sup> Ryken, 56.

<sup>61</sup> Galatians 2:12.

<sup>62</sup> Galatians 2:14.

<sup>63</sup> Acts 20:28-30.

disruption of the church.<sup>64</sup> This might be expected from false teachers, but not from a pillar of the church as the Apostle Peter.

Two truths concerning doctrine and the unity of the church must be noted. First, without unity in doctrine there can be no unity of fellowship. Legitimate questions may arise as to which doctrines should unite us and which doctrines, though important, are not a reason for division. Traditionally, orthodox doctrines such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the triune nature of God, the deity of Christ, the physical resurrection, and the physical return of Christ have been watershed doctrines. Doctrines concerning the timing of end time events, the Sabbath, and the number of spiritual gifts in the church today have been disputed but are not a final test of fellowship. Paul's confrontation with Peter demonstrates that the doctrine of justification by faith alone must be among the essentials of faith that unite us. Therefore, if someone denies the biblical doctrine of justification, as the false teachers in Galatia did, there can be no true unity and fellowship because the very ground of our salvation is compromised.

Complete unity in the essentials, even in the presence of slight differences in non-essentials, provides for full and open fellowship, which is necessary. Paul assumed this unity in Ephesians 4, where he discussed how mature believers build up the church into Christ as they speak the truth to one another. It is the Holy Spirit who preserves the bond of unity and who shows that its members truly belong to Christ.

The second truth concerning doctrine and unity is that both need to be actively contended for in the church. Unless Spirit-led effort is exerted, doctrine will drift into error and unity will drift into disarray. Paul could not let the situation with Peter continue if the unity of the church was to be preserved. He could not take an indifferent approach. Fung writes, "From Paul's point of view, Peter's personal inconsistency carried an even more

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<sup>64</sup> Galatians 6:13.

sinister significance.”<sup>65</sup> The truth of the gospel was at stake, and thus the unity of the body was at stake.

Unless we are convinced that we must contend for both the gospel and its application, the church will fall into a state of doctrinal error and deep division. This is not to say that if we choose to contend we will stop every ounce of heresy concerning the gospel. The propensity for error has existed throughout church history and will continue until the coming of Christ. Yet, when those convinced of the gospel desire to see its application in the church, they can have a powerful anti-corrosive effect by loving the church to the degree in which Paul and Jesus did and by speaking the truth in love.

Anyone who loves Jesus will love His church, and anyone who loves His church will fight for its purity in doctrine and practice. This may involve confronting those closest to us or even those in leadership over us (with a humble and submissive heart). Our guide is the gospel, our goal is unity, our empowerment comes from the Holy Spirit, and our example is in the Apostle Paul.

Paul described the consequence of lack of unity in the church by giving the Galatian churches the warning, “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by another.”<sup>66</sup> The main danger of a false doctrine that moves away from justification by faith alone is that it produces pride, and pride leads to strife. When one has a role and significance to play in his salvation (like adding circumcision to faith), pride’s competitive nature arises, which manifests itself in self-superiority and the destruction of others. C.S. Lewis recognized that, “Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”<sup>67</sup> Once the Galatians had let a pride-filled alternative gospel take hold, it led to every expression of the works of the flesh.

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<sup>65</sup> Fung, 110.

<sup>66</sup> Galatians 5:15.

<sup>67</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 122.

The specifics Paul mentioned in Galatians 5:19-21 show the depth of the pride that had developed in some in the Galatian churches. George rightly notes, “The ‘works’ of the flesh are the products of fallen human beings in their devising, conniving, and manufacturing (in the sense of ‘made with one’s own hands’) efforts at self-actualization.”<sup>68</sup> The flesh manifests itself in “enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions” and the like.<sup>69</sup> Each of the vices that Paul mentioned erodes the unity of the church and the testimony of the gospel. Paul addressed these issues for what they were and are—sins against Christ and His body. Left unchecked, they work destruction within and harm the testimony of the gospel outside the church. The gospel of justification avoids these vices by stating that all who come to Christ by faith, regardless of racial and other distinctions, are first right before God and therefore should be right with each other.

The bottom line for Paul is that the church exists to bring glory to God.<sup>70</sup> It can only do this while contending for the gospel in the context of unity from the top down. The gospel is a message of freedom from the sins and division that characterize this present age. It is freedom from bondage to the one who came “to steal, kill, and destroy,” and freedom to walk by the Spirit and mutually exude His fruit.<sup>71</sup> Then the gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ is most beautifully displayed in His church.

When the gospel is powerfully at work, instead of destroying each other in self-righteous judgment, we will come quickly to the aid of another brother or sister to restore them.<sup>72</sup> In fact, we will be most law-abiding when we show love and serve one another.<sup>73</sup> Thus Paul’s contending for the gospel has positive benefits for the body of Christ. It is not

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<sup>68</sup> George, 390.

<sup>69</sup> Galatians 5:20-21.

<sup>70</sup> Galatians 1:5.

<sup>71</sup> John 10:10; Galatians 5:22-23.

<sup>72</sup> Galatians 6:1.

<sup>73</sup> Galatians 5:13-14.

only about contesting error and guarding the truth, but seeing the life of Christ manifest among those who are justified by faith.

### Battling for the Practical Nature of True Christian Liberty against Legalism

The book of Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty.<sup>74</sup> This is because the false teachers, in their attempt to bring the Galatian believers to the next level of Christian blessing through circumcision, had in fact brought them back into slavery. In his comparison of Sarah and Hagar, Paul demonstrated clearly that those who wish to come under the law are children of Hagar (representing Mount Sinai).<sup>75</sup> Sinai (representing law keeping as a means of salvation) bears children who are slaves.<sup>76</sup>

Justification by faith alone is the good news of freedom in Christ. The sinner is set free from the guilt of sin and declared righteous before God. In fact, the very reason why Christ came was to purchase our freedom from the penalty and curse of the Law.<sup>77</sup> Ryken lists three specific ways the Christian is free, according to the book of Galatians, and I add a fourth.<sup>78</sup>

1. They are free from sin and its curse (Galatians 3:13). No longer are we under wrath or guilt, but our justification is complete in reference to sin. Jesus took the curse of the law so that we could be released from its curse on us. Paul told the Romans, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”<sup>79</sup>
2. We are free from death and its consequences (Galatians 2:20). Being identified with Christ’s death, Paul died in order to gain the life of Christ by faith. Therefore, as believers, we have no need to fear death. Instead, we are given the gift of eternal life and called to live in that life every day we are on this earth.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ryken, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Galatians 4:24.

<sup>76</sup> Galatians 4:24.

<sup>77</sup> Galatians 5:1.

<sup>78</sup> Ryken, 194-195.

<sup>79</sup> Romans 6:14.

<sup>80</sup> Romans 6:23.

3. We are free from the devil and his agents (Galatians 1:4), including the “elementary principles” mentioned in Galatians 4:3, 9.<sup>81</sup> These principles would include the Satanic powers that rule this present age and exert dominion over the unsaved.<sup>82</sup> We are taken from Satan’s dominion and brought into the kingdom of Jesus.<sup>83</sup>
4. We are free from the world (Gal. 6:14). Paul had been crucified with Christ, and thus he no longer lived but Christ lived in him.<sup>84</sup> Paul also experienced death to the world and conversely the world to him. The world is a reference to the ungodly system of this present age that seeks to drive us from God and put value and worth upon that which is fading away.<sup>85</sup> Fung adds to this description of the world as “‘the epitome of unredeemed creation,’ that is, ‘of everything outside of Christ in which man seeks his glory and puts his trust.’”<sup>86</sup> The world beckons the believer to boast in himself and to find his identity only in the here and now instead of in the eternal. Paul would have none of this and neither should we. The world and its systems have no power over us as we anticipate glory in the world to come.<sup>87</sup>

As believers, we receive each of these four benefits because of God’s work in justifying the sinner through His Son. We pass from one condition to another. Our relationship with God is radically changed, thus by His grace we receive all the benefits that come in Christ. Unless our position before God was changed, we could not enjoy the benefits of His salvation through the gospel.

Not only is the sinner justified in Christ, but also he is also is adopted into the family of God. Therein, the Christian is not a slave who inherits nothing, but an heir who, in Christ, has inherited all things.<sup>88</sup> As heirs, we receive the promised Holy Spirit, through whom we walk, no longer under the Law, but freely empowered to fulfill the heart of the Law in Christ.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> See George, 298-299.

<sup>82</sup> Galatians 1:3.

<sup>83</sup> Colossians 1:13.

<sup>84</sup> Galatians 2:20.

<sup>85</sup> 1 John 2:15-17.

<sup>86</sup> Fung, 306-307.

<sup>87</sup> Revelation 21-22.

<sup>88</sup> Galatians 4:7.

<sup>89</sup> Galatians 4:6.

Yet, Paul did not want the Galatians to believe that because they were free they could live any way they want. The freedom of which he spoke of is not an antinomian freedom. As James Boice comments, “. . . the liberty into which believers are called is not a liberty that leads to license, as his opponents would charge, but rather a liberty that leads to mature responsibility and holiness before God through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.”<sup>90</sup> Paul’s opponents suggested that preaching liberty in the gospel would produce a plethora of sin, against which they proposed their legalism as a safeguard. Legalism might be a safeguard, but at what cost? Paul does not fearfully rely upon legalism as the guard against licentious living. Rather, he depends upon something (or rather Someone) greater—the Holy Spirit. The greatest guard against license is not legalism, but Spirit-led living. The same is true for us today. We must contend by first being led by the Spirit ourselves. We can do no work for the kingdom and for the sake of the gospel in our own strength and ways.

Our goal is not a mental conformity to the truth of the gospel only. The gospel can easily become another form of legalism. Through our contending for the gospel, we are seeking a true Spirit-empowered change of heart based on the truth of the gospel. It is tempting to turn the gospel into a weapon by which we force others to see things our way. When the Spirit is working through us, the fruit produced will be genuine and will magnify God’s grace and freedom, proving that “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”<sup>91</sup>

For Paul, this freedom was best exemplified when the Galatian Christians walked by the Spirit and not by the flesh. The “works of the flesh” are those which are destructive to the unity of the body and the good of the Christian. These works cannot please God; in fact, they are in direct opposition to God.<sup>92</sup> George, in showing the connection between works of the flesh and law-keeping, writes, “the works of the flesh inevitably recall Paul’s earlier

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<sup>90</sup> James M. Boice, *Galatians/Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 80.

<sup>91</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:17.

<sup>92</sup> Romans 8:8; Galatians 5:17.

polemic against the works of the law.”<sup>93</sup> The works of the flesh come forth in any who seek to live under any form of law, whether it is the Mosaic Law or any man-centered law. The more one focuses on law, the more one focuses upon self and the preservation of self at the expense of others.

True freedom that is in Christ is a freedom that allows every area of life to be controlled by the Holy Spirit who indwells the believer.<sup>94</sup> This freedom will manifest itself when the Christian is led by the Spirit and walking step-by-step under the control of the Spirit.<sup>95</sup> It is not the Christian who produces the fruit within himself. Rather, as believers submit to the leadership and power of the Spirit, He freely produces His fruit within them. When contrasting this fruit with the works of the flesh, George notes, “In stark contrast now, the character traits contained in the catalog of grace appear in beautiful harmony, balanced and symmetrical, corresponding to the purposeful design and equilibrium of a life filled with the Spirit and lived out in the beauty of holiness.”<sup>96</sup>

The fruit of the Spirit is familiar in its description. Love is mentioned at the outset, not simply as a first among equals, but rather as “the source and fountain from which all of the other graces flow.”<sup>97</sup> That is, each of the eight graces that follow is an extension of and qualified by love. Therefore, the free life in the Spirit through the gospel is first and foremost a life of love that reflects the very nature of God.<sup>98</sup>

Therefore, the justified life of love is filled with joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That is, it expresses itself in a joyful love, a kind love, a self-controlled love, etc. Or put another way, as a person loves, they will exude peace, patience and faithfulness. This love-filled life is what God expects and His

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<sup>93</sup> George, 391.

<sup>94</sup> Galatians 5:16 and Gk. Περιπατεω.

<sup>95</sup> Galatians 5:18, 25.

<sup>96</sup> George, 399.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 400.

<sup>98</sup> 1 John 4:7-8.



Spirit provides for in the one who has believed the gospel. It is the fullest expression of the life that is free in Christ.

How does freedom in the Spirit direct us in our contending for the gospel? Our contending must be fueled and guarded by love. To contend in the flesh is a grave sin. Our contending, like Paul, must be accurate and passionate. But it must also be driven by our love for God, for His gospel, and for His people. Paul contended for the gospel with the Galatians using the same definition of love he gave to the Corinthians:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.<sup>99</sup>

We ought not to interpret this to mean that love is inactive in standing up for the sake of the gospel. Rather, we must stand for the gospel with the right attitude of the heart. We must never seek our own agendas but rather that which most represents the love of God as displayed in the gospel. And it is this gospel that calls us to be changed to represent the love of God more fully. Piper explains, “As we behold the glory of the Lord in the gospel, the glory of his moral perfections more and more become our desire and our experience, especially the glory of his love for his enemies.”<sup>100</sup> This demonstration of love must be extended to the enemies of the gospel of justification by faith alone.

### Conclusion

We have examined six strategies that Paul used in contending for the gospel in Galatians. Each method worked to the same ends—that Christ be exalted as the sole ground of salvation, that faith is the only means to that salvation, that the Galatian believers would stand against the false teachers of a false gospel, and that they would exercise their freedom

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<sup>99</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

<sup>100</sup> Piper, 94.

in love and edification toward one another. There is no doubt that Paul's passion burns throughout his letter to the Galatians, but that fire is controlled by love. Paul's love does not negate the need to use strong language to counter those who would lead the Galatians astray through the promulgation of a man-centered gospel. Bringing free Christians back under law could not be tolerated and Paul did not waiver in his opposition. Like Paul, we must contend for the gospel, and there is no alternative course.

Paul's example gives us much to consider for our contemporary situation. As in Paul's day, so in ours the gospel is under siege and thus we have the same calling as Christians. Paul provides us with a powerful guide and example encouraging us to know and stress the doctrine of justification by faith alone, find our foundation in the apostolic authority of preaching the pure gospel, identify and call out those who preach a false, incomplete, or distorted gospel, ask the tough questions, seek the unity of the body of Christ, and battle for the practical nature of Christian liberty. And thus, we will stand in line with those after Paul throughout church history who also contended for the gospel of justification.

## CHAPTER 4

### WHO HAS CONTENDED FOR THE GOSPEL? EXAMPLES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

From the last chapter, one might get the impression that there is a great disconnect between Paul's time and our own era when it comes to contending for the gospel. The purpose of this chapter is to bridge that gap by demonstrating that there are those who have contended for the gospel in the same manner as Paul throughout church history. Actually, we stand in a long line of contenders.

The three figures studied in this chapter come from the early church period, the Reformation period, and the early twentieth century. These men will provide ample examples concerning the threat to the gospel in different generations, the contenders for the gospel, and the results of the contention. This chapter will provide examples of contending in the spirit of Paul and a challenge for us to consider how we might contend in our own situations.

#### Augustine vs. Pelagius

One of (if not) the greatest theologians of the patristic period (A.D. 100-451), and perhaps of all ages, was St. Augustine. The story of his conversion, chronicled in his *Confessions*, is a powerful testimony to the conviction and grace of God.<sup>1</sup> Despite having a deeply committed Christian mother, Augustine initially rejected the Bible and pursued the study of philosophy and rhetoric. Later, he adopted the beliefs of Manicheism, a dualistic Gnostic religion, for nine years. After great disillusionment, Augustine went to Rome and

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Dowley, ed., *Introduction to the History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 206-207.

indulged in the hedonistic lifestyle of Epicureanism, leading him to a deep conviction of his sin. He wrote in *Confessions*:

I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I gathered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears . . . For I felt that I was still enslaved by my sins, and in my misery I kept crying, ‘How long shall I go on saying “Tomorrow, tomorrow”? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?’<sup>2</sup>

It was the weight of this sin that caused Augustine to convert to Christianity in 386 while in the city of Milan.<sup>3</sup> There he heard the preaching of the Christian faith by Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, which opened his interests to the intellectual implications of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> There in a garden, he also heard children singing “take up and read.” Upon finding the nearest New Testament document, he turned to Romans 13:14, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Augustine was converted, and used every intellectual power he had for the rest of his life for the sake of the Christian faith.

To say that Augustine was a prolific writer is an understatement. It has been said that if someone claims to have read every work Augustine produced, they are simply not telling the truth. Some of Augustine’s most famous works are *On the Trinity*, *Confessions*, and *On the City of God*. Augustine also made major contributions to three areas of Christian theology—the sacraments, person of Christ, and grace and the gospel. It is this last area which is the concern of this study.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine’s view of God and salvation can be summed up in his phrase, “O God, command what you will, but give what you command.”<sup>6</sup> This arose out of his acute

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>3</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Christianity: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>6</sup> Erwin Lutzer, *Doctrines that Divide* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 154.

awareness of present sin and his absolute dependency upon the grace of God to do anything that would please Him. He acknowledged the idea of free will, but brought it under submission to Paul's teaching of sin and its limitations upon the human will.<sup>7</sup> In order for the will to be completely free, it had to be restored by divine grace.

Pelagius, a British monk, had a different theology of free will and salvation that brought him into direct conflict with Augustine's views. Pelagius particularly disagreed with the part of Augustine's prayer that requests that God would grant what He commands.<sup>8</sup> This disagreement stemmed from Pelagius's view of human will and freedom. He was convinced that human nature does not need special grace from God to obey Him. He did not deny grace entirely, but argued that it consisted in the innate ability to obey. Grace provided an "external enlightenment" by God revealing what He commands, but it was not a necessary component for actual obedience to those commands.<sup>9</sup>

Pelagius believed that Adam (as well as all humanity after him) had the innate ability to obey God at will. Furthermore, Adam's sin had affected no one but himself and free will was not lost. Therefore, there is no such thing as a sin nature.<sup>10</sup> People will to do good or choose to do evil, but any evil action can be totally avoided by one's own power.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, an individual can be sinless.

Augustine responded sharply in light of Paul's teaching on original sin. Granted, before he fell into sin, Adam was in a position where he had the ability to sin (Latin, *posse peccare*) or not to sin (*posse no peccare*).<sup>12</sup> But once Adam disobeyed God, by first desiring in his heart to do so, then acting upon that desire, he and all humanity was radically altered in their standing before God. Augustine contended that all persons are guilty and all have only

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<sup>7</sup> McGrath, 80.

<sup>8</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 34.

<sup>9</sup> McGrath, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Lutzer, 155.

<sup>11</sup> Sproul, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 52.

the ability to sin—they are not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). The human will was corrupted as a result of Adam's sin, the mind was saturated by the effects of sin (the so-called *noetic effects* of sin), and humanity lost paradise and fellowship with God. The most notable consequence of all was the reality of death both in humanity and throughout God's perfect creation.

This controversy concerning free will has important implications for this study of the gospel and justification by faith alone. Justification assumes the need for a sinner to be made right before God. It also assumes that a sinner cannot justify himself before God. Therefore, the correct understanding of human sin and depravity, as proposed by Augustine, is vital to our understanding of the nature of the gospel and justification. If Augustine was going to contend for the gospel and prevail, the doctrine of original sin had to be maintained.

Augustine went on to argue that justification is an act of God's grace and if any human does anything good, it is due to this grace working in the fallen nature. Mankind cannot earn or deserve grace or salvation; it is unmerited and free, a gift of love from God himself through the death and resurrection of Christ. Only on this ground can God avoid giving us what we deserve—wrath and eternal death—in order to give us what we cannot deserve—salvation.

Alister McGrath points out Augustine's use of the Parable of the laborers from Matthew 20:1-16 to counter Pelagius's view of salvation.<sup>13</sup> This is the familiar parable where a master hired workers for his vineyard at different times of the day. Yet, those who worked all day and those who worked for one hour received the same wage. Pelagius's interpretation of this parable was that salvation is on the basis of merits. If a person does good works out of their free will (as Pelagius understood free will), God will reward them accordingly. For Pelagius, justice demands that God commands and humans are able to autonomously

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<sup>13</sup> McGrath, 84.

respond. In fact, greater reward can be gained the more a person chooses to follow the example of Christ.

Augustine viewed this parable quite differently. He focused upon the promise given to each worker and held that the reward was based on that promise not their merits or labors. Thus the laborers were paid the same amount although they did not work the same period of time. The owner—referring to God—gives out only what He has promised. Therefore, justification is based on the promise of God, not the merits of man. This was the case with Abraham—he believed God and His promise, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Sinners have no claim to salvation on the ground of works, but only on God’s promise of salvation that was accomplished in Christ alone and received by faith alone.

McGrath concludes:

It will thus be clear that Pelagianism and Augustinianism represent two radically different outlooks, with very divergent understandings of the manner in which God and humanity relate to one another. Augustinianism would eventually gain the upper hand within the western theological tradition; nevertheless, Pelagianism continues to exercise influence over many Christian writers down the ages, not least those who felt that an emphasis upon the doctrine of grace could too easily lead to a devaluation of human freedom and moral responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

Augustinianism was able to gain the upper hand in the debate only because of his resolve to stand up to Pelagius and his followers and through his writing contend for the gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. John Piper agrees, noting the impact this contender had on subsequent church history:

From this platform in North Africa, and through his remarkable faithfulness in formulating and defending the Christian faith for his generation, Augustine shaped the history of the Christian church. His influence in the Western world is simply staggering. Adolf Harnack said that he was the greatest man the church has possessed between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer. Benjamin Warfield argued that through his writings Augustine “entered both the Church and the world as a revolutionary force, and not merely created an epoch in the history of the Church, but . . . determined the course of its history in the West up to the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

present day.” He had “a literary talent . . . second to none in the annals of the Church.” “The whole development of Western life, in all its phases, was powerfully affected by his teaching.” The publishers of *Christian History* magazine simply say, “After Jesus and Paul, Augustine of Hippo is the most influential figure in the history of Christianity.”<sup>15</sup>

Are we willing to contend in the same spirit as Augustine? We might shrug our shoulders and claim that we do not have the intelligence and foresight of Augustine. But we have the same Holy Spirit and the same sacred Scriptures in our hands. What we might lack is the passion to exert influence of this magnitude for Christ and His gospel—whether we shake the world as a “revolutionary force” or simply lead a new believer closer to the Savior by His grace. But we do not lack the wonderful provisions of God as we stand for His truth. I believe that Augustine’s fortitude came as a direct result, as with Paul, of understanding the depths of his own depravity and the marvels of God’s saving grace. If we have that same gravity in our hearts, we will contend with the insight and fire of Augustine. “Augustine was . . . a man of battle.”<sup>16</sup>

### Luther vs. Roman Catholic Theology

The link between Augustine and Luther is inescapable. R.C. Sproul rightly suggests:

The influence of Augustine’s thought on Luther is a matter of record. In Luther’s account of his famous “tower experience,” when he was awakened to the gospel of justification by faith alone, he said this experience was triggered by reading a comment Augustine had written centuries earlier regarding the righteousness of God in Romans 1.<sup>17</sup>

Not only were they linked theologically and in the dramatic manner of their conversions, they were united in their passion to contend for the gospel. It is no exaggeration to describe Luther as a bulldog for the gospel. His fire for God and His truth was evident in

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<sup>15</sup> John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 43.

<sup>16</sup> David Wesley Soper, “Augustine is With Us Still!” *Westminster Theological Journal* 06 (1944): 135.

<sup>17</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 50.



how strongly and boldly Luther contended for the faith—especially against the very Church he had pledged his life to serve.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany.<sup>18</sup> His father was a silver miner and desired his son to study law. By 1502, he had received his Bachelor's degree and in 1505 he earned a Master's degree from the University of Erfurt.<sup>19</sup> This training would give Luther a keen eye in studying the Scriptures and the skill to deal with the greatest legal issue of all time—the justification of the sinner.

The story of Luther's conversion is well known. While on his way home from school, he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm and feared for his life. After being thrown to the ground by lightening, he cried, "Help, St. Anne; I will become a monk." Against his father's wishes, Luther joined an Augustinian monastery because it was known for its rigor.

Luther described his search for the grace of God as *anfechtung*—angst, dread, or deep anxiety.<sup>20</sup> He became increasingly despondent over his spiritual condition and ever present sin. This pain and anxiety cut through Luther's entire being, giving him no rest, leaving every attempt to deal with his sin all the more exasperating. He wrote, "If I could believe that God was not angry at me, I would stand on my head for joy."<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, this led to a hatred of God's righteousness (justice). "I did not love, indeed I hated that God who punished sinners; and with a monstrous, silent, if not blasphemous, murmuring I fumed against God."<sup>22</sup> Yet, Luther did not give up his search for God and the remedy for his soul. After beating importunately upon the door of the Apostle Paul and his writings, Luther's eyes were opened. He explained:

I began to understand that "justice of God" meant that justice by which the just man lives through God's gift, namely by faith. This is what it means: the justice

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1988), 51.

<sup>19</sup> Piper, 83.

<sup>20</sup> George, 60.

<sup>21</sup> Piper, 84.

<sup>22</sup> George, 62.

of God is revealed by the gospel, a passive justice with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written:” He who through faith is just shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.<sup>23</sup>

This epiphany would become the cornerstone to Luther’s theology. Luther’s contribution to Christianity is remarkable—his translation of the German Bible, his 95 Theses, his challenge to Papal and Church authority, his contribution to academics at the university, and the list goes on. But what Luther will be most remembered for is his blood-earnest defense of the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works—a doctrine of “critical importance to the Reformation.”<sup>24</sup>

To understand why Luther’s clarification of this doctrine is of importance leads one to examine what the term *justification* had come to mean in his day. Instead of consisting of a legal declaration, justification signified being *made* righteous by God. It dealt with what a sinner *had to do* to be saved by God. This was Luther’s original conception of the doctrine—justification was a human work needed to be performed to satisfy God’s justice in order for God to save the sinner.<sup>25</sup>

By reading Augustine, a paradigm shift began to take place in Luther’s thinking. He realized that justification based on human merit was impossible. He came to understand that the righteousness God required had to be given by God Himself and received by faith if justification were to be possible. Luther grasped that humanity has no inherent righteousness to offer God because each person is completely depraved and devoid of any ability to contribute anything or any work to his justification. Righteousness is a free gift—a gift that Luther most gladly received and contended for.

Luther also helped define the nature of faith.<sup>26</sup> First, faith is not a simple acknowledgement of historical facts; a person must commit himself to the person of Christ

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> McGrath, 184.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 187.

and His finished work for his salvation. Second, faith is expressed as a person trusts God's promise of salvation in the gospel and acts upon that promise. Third, Luther stated the exercise of proper faith unites the person with Christ.

Faith, for Luther, was not the ground of justification, for this would reduce it to another work. Rather, the source of justification is God Himself and the means of receiving this grace is faith alone. Faith is a gift from God, bringing the sinner to receive the gift of salvation, at which time the sinner is reckoned righteous on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone (which Luther called an *alien righteousness*).

Luther proved to be a contender because his view of justification was diametrically opposed to that of the Roman Catholic Church. This put him at odds with the Church, making him an enemy. As Timothy George notes, he was described by those in his day as "a mad monk, a psychotic demoniac pulling down the pillars of Mother Church."<sup>27</sup> Luther did not want to destroy the church but to insure its practices be reformed to comply with Scripture rather than Papal opinion.

The Council of Trent, which formulated its decisions in 1547, sought to counter Luther's theology as well as solidify the beliefs of the Catholic Church. The council made four specific critiques against Luther's doctrine of justification. McGrath summarizes them as follows:<sup>28</sup>

1. Justification is not a one-time external legal declaration, but a process of both regeneration and internal and continual renewal. Justification is also closely related to baptism and penance, where the sinner is justified in baptism and that justification is renewed in penance.
2. Luther believed that righteousness was not inherent in the sinner but had to be imputed from an alien source—Christ, focusing again upon the external declaration. Rome taught that a person is justified by internal righteousness possessed by a person infused by God. The "single formal cause" of justification is internal righteousness from God that *makes* the sinner righteous.

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<sup>27</sup> George, 53.

<sup>28</sup> McGrath, 191-195.

3. Luther's view of justifying faith was rejected by Trent. They denied that Luther's view of faith was sufficient for justification. They added to faith the necessity of obedience and inner renewal because of their confusion between justification, regeneration, and sanctification.
4. Luther's view of justification gives great assurance to the believer concerning his salvation. If salvation depends not upon man's righteousness or obedience but upon God's faithfulness and declaration, the believer is secure in God, no longer troubled by doubt. Trent, with justification contingent upon human effort in conjunction with God's grace, believed that faith could be abandoned and needed to be reconfirmed through the sacraments. They believed no one could be ultimately certain of their salvation.

Luther was one of long line of Reformers that continued successfully (often at great cost) to contend for the gospel. Calvin and others continued to develop and formalize the doctrine of justification as the very cornerstone of Christian salvation. Today the Protestant (and biblical) view of justification stands against all other views that attempt to base standing before God on human merit, works, or performance.

In his essay on Martin Luther, Erroll Hulse aptly designates him as "God's man for the hour." He states:

Luther was God's choice instrument. He was colorful, and he was singular. His life helped end the old passing era, and it signaled and promoted a new epoch as well . . . . Conflict with the Papacy and its system was inevitable . . . . The battle was white hot and Luther's pen was moving with mercurial rapidity . . . . Let us thank God for what He did through this reformer who sought, simply, to be faithful to both the Word of God and his conscience.<sup>29</sup>

Do we see conflict for the sake of the gospel in our own day as inevitable? Do we rush to contend for the gospel with mercurial rapidity? Are we so convinced by the Word of God and our conscience before God that when the gospel is attacked, even from within the evangelical church, we are willing to speak up and give our lives to the battle? Are we willing to put it all on the line like Luther did for the sake of Christ? May God grant His true Church that zealous fire to speak and live the gospel with such boldness and efficacy!

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<sup>29</sup> Erroll Hulse, "Martin Luther—God's Man for the Hour," *Reformation and Revival* 01 (1992) : 40-53.

### Machen vs. Liberalism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was evident that the legacy of Augustine and Luther had not died but was being constantly rekindled by the Spirit of God in the name of truth and for God's glory. J. Gresham Machen was a man called by God to once again contend for the gospel in a powerful way. Born in 1881 in Baltimore, Maryland, Machen came from a well-off family which afforded him the opportunity to attend private schools and receive a classical education.<sup>30</sup> His parents were devout members of the Southern Presbyterian Church, giving Machen early exposure to the gospel of justification by faith alone.

A pivotal point in Machen's theological formation came when he spent a year after seminary studying in Germany. Here he was influenced by Wilhelm Herrmann, the liberal German theologian at Marburg. What struck Machen was Herrmann's devotion, passion, and joy in Christ, which stood in contrast to the lifeless Christianity he had seen at Princeton.<sup>31</sup> Even though he would contend against the very core beliefs those like Herrmann espoused, he would later contend with great understanding and respect for their positions.<sup>32</sup>

Machen's conviction was strengthened as he went on to become a professor of New Testament at Princeton, where he continued to grow into a strong contender for the Christian faith. Machen fought his battles on the battleground of the Reformed Faith, namely, Calvinism.<sup>33</sup> His theology focused on God's supremacy in every area of life, and for Machen this understanding of basic Christianity went hand in hand with the faith handed down through Augustine and Calvin. It was upon this battleground that Machen would fight

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<sup>30</sup> John Piper, *Contending for Our All* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 121.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-129.

for the inerrancy of Scripture, the supremacy of God, the deity of Christ, the true biblical church, and the doctrine of salvation.

Machen's main contention was against the theological liberalism that had crept into the evangelical church in America. Liberalism made headway in the nineteenth century up until World War I.<sup>34</sup> Earle Cairns explains:

Liberals had certain ideas in common. God, the loving Father, immanent in history and each person, would guarantee progress toward an ideal human order on earth. Perfectible man faced mainly the problem of an environment that would lead him to sin by choice rather than being sinful by depravity. With Christ as his example, however, he could improve himself and the social order. The Bible, according to liberals, *contained* only the subjective record of man's consciousness of God. Education and social action, sponsored by the church, would create an ideal social order to which Christ would return after the Millennium.<sup>35</sup>

Bruce Shelley, in his chronicle of church history, lists three "hallmarks" of liberal theology, summarized as:

- 1) Applying evolutionary philosophy to religion.
- 2) Having an optimistic conception of man, focusing on religious experience.
- 3) Having a moralistic view of God, who is easily discovered by man.<sup>36</sup>

Machen combatted these liberal notions through scholarly contributions such as *Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921), and *Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930).<sup>37</sup> His best known book, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) will be the focus of this study.

Machen attacked liberalism by analyzing the spirit of the age of modern culture.<sup>38</sup> He attempted to understand liberal modernism through the lens of modern society and its advances, never separating ideas from culture. He noted that Christians want the modern conveniences of their day but battle the ideas the modern age produces, namely ideas of human sufficiency apart from God, a naturalistic understanding of God who cannot work

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<sup>34</sup> Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 460.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 460-462.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 434.

<sup>37</sup> Cairns, 481.

<sup>38</sup> Piper, 130.

miraculously in the world, and the denial of the importance of significant events of the past. Each of these ideas runs diametrically opposed to biblical teaching.

Liberalism in some sense bridged the gap between the modernists understanding of the world and Christian religion. The religious focus was not whether one must believe in miracles such as the virgin birth or resurrection of Christ, but to realize God is a loving spirit of all mankind and to understand mankind's ability to live a moral life with a utilitarian view of truth as one follows the example of Christ. If humans can make the advances they have accomplished in a scientific and naturalistic age, there is little need for the supernatural except to fulfill a moral need. There is therefore no need for dogmatic doctrine but one should have instead an attitude of tolerance and accommodation to what is most useful and expedient for the moment.

To Machen, compromised Christianity was not Christianity at all. Christianity stood upon facts and doctrines that were non-negotiable. Interestingly, one of Machen's strongest arguments for contending for the doctrines of Christianity was Paul's example in Galatians.<sup>39</sup> Machen believed that Paul was not indifferent to doctrinal truth, but fought for and defended it on the ground of God's truth. Machen compared the Pauline view of the doctrine of justification to that of the false teachers in Galatia by noting that the latter would appear more practical to the modernist Christian, because it focused on man's ability to keep the law as the ground of justification. Against this affront against the gospel, Paul (and Machen like him) had to act, because this was no mere theological subtlety, but "concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ."<sup>40</sup>

Later in his book, Machen dealt more directly with the doctrine of salvation. In writing of regeneration and justification, he writes:

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<sup>39</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 19-21.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Regeneration means a new life; but there is also a new relation in which the believer stands toward God. That new relation is instituted by "justification"—the act of God by which a sinner is pronounced righteous in His sight because of the atoning death of Christ. It is not necessary to ask whether justification comes before regeneration or vice versa; in reality they are two aspects of one salvation. And they both stand at the very beginning of the Christian life. The Christian has not merely the promise of a new life, but he has already a new life. And he has not merely the promise of being pronounced righteous in God's sight (though the blessed pronouncement will be confirmed on the judgment day), but he is already pronounced righteous here and now. At the beginning of every Christian life there stands, not a process, but a definite act of God . . . . At the center of Christianity is the doctrine of "justification by faith."<sup>41</sup>

Machen contrasts this with the liberal view:

Very different is the conception of faith which prevails in the liberal Church. According to modern liberalism, faith is essentially the same as "making Christ Master" in one's life; at least it is by making Christ Master in the life that the welfare of men is sought. But that simply means that salvation is thought to be obtained by our own obedience to the commands of Christ. Such teaching is just a sublimated form of legalism. Not the sacrifice of Christ, on this view, but our own obedience to God's law, is the ground of hope.

Notice similarities between the references Machen makes to liberalism and the thought of Pelagius and Roman Catholic theology, particularly in the area of justification and salvation based on our own obedience. According to these false views, rather than viewing Christ as the ground of one's right standing before God, He is only Master, example *par excellence*, which people can obediently follow and thus be right with God. This should be expected in an optimistic view of man that not only denies original sin and depravity but also denies the biblical teaching of Paul, Augustine, and Luther. In fact, Machen considered this link:

In this way the whole achievement of the Reformation has been given up, and there has been a return to the religion of the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, God raised up a man who began to read the Epistle to the Galatians with his own eyes. The result was the rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith. Upon that rediscovery has been based the whole of our evangelical freedom. As expounded by Luther and Calvin the Epistle to the Galatians became the "Magna Charta of Christian liberty." But modern liberalism

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 118-119.



has returned to the old interpretation of Galatians which was urged against the Reformers. Thus Professor Burton's elaborate commentary on the Epistle, despite all its extremely valuable modern scholarship, is in one respect a medieval book; it has returned to an anti-Reformation exegesis, by which Paul is thought to be attacking in the Epistle only the piecemeal morality of the Pharisees. In reality, of course, the object of Paul's attack is the thought that in any way man can earn his acceptance with God. What Paul is primarily interested in is not spiritual religion over against ceremonialism, but the free grace of God over against human merit.<sup>42</sup>

Liberals deny that salvation comes through the grace of God—the very foundation of the Christian doctrine of justification. Like the false teaching in Galatia, liberalism is a system of slavery, and the only way out is to come to the God of the Bible in faith. Machen contended that liberal theology is a dead-end road and battled for the orthodox, Reformed understanding of salvation and justification to combat this false thinking which has no compatibility with true Christianity.

In this way, Machen did much to fight face-to-face with the rising popularity of liberalism in a modernist culture. He sought to preserve Christianity from the attacks arising outside of true evangelicalism. But Machen faced a similar battle on another front—from inside his own denomination and the seminary in which he taught. This would demonstrate that contending for the gospel is costly and life-altering.

First, Machen refused to support the mission board of the Presbyterian Church in the USA because of their support of missionaries “who represented the kind of evasive, non-committal attitude toward Christian truth that Machen though was destroying the church and its witness.”<sup>43</sup> Because of this refusal, based on the conviction of his heart concerning the fidelity of the gospel, Machen was charged with insubordination and removed from ministry. Yet, in God’s providence, Machen was instrumental in the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church which would continue preaching the unadulterated gospel.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>43</sup> Piper, 118.

Second, Princeton Seminary had begun to embrace liberal ideas, in contrast to the teaching of stalwarts such as Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield. Regarding the prestigious Princeton Seminary as dead concerning the true faith, Machen chose to leave the security of his teaching position.<sup>44</sup> Again, in God's grace, he was instrumental in the formation of a new institution, Westminster Theological Seminary, committed itself to training people in the Reformed gospel tradition.

Machen felt the pressure from within the evangelical movement as well as from outside it to contend for the veracity of the gospel, which is the heart of the Christian message and faith. But he stood strong, much like his gospel predecessors, in an unwavering commitment to Christ and His truth. Piper notes several lessons from Machen for our day, and I will focus on three that are pertinent to this study. First, "Machen alerts us to the doctrinal 'indifferentism' of our day and to the fact that we almost take it for granted that utilitarian thinking is the only hope for success and that preaching or teaching doctrine is a prescription for failure."<sup>45</sup> Second, "Machen's engagement in the debates of his day points us to the value and necessity of controversy."<sup>46</sup> Third, "We learn from Machen the inevitability and pain of criticism, even from our brother."<sup>47</sup>

For Machen, the road to upholding truth was costly and difficult. But there is no higher calling. Contending is a necessary road for all who take God and His Word seriously. It may involve alienation, being misunderstood or attacked, and being stripped of the securities and conveniences of one's position in this present age. But the call to contend for the gospel is vital not only in powerful intellectuals like Machen, but in every believer who is saved by grace.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 147.

## Conclusion

The three figures studied in this chapter show the ferocity with which the gospel, and particularly justification by faith alone, must be defended (contended for). Since the salvation of sinners is at stake, the error is too costly to overlook or compromise. Each one in their own right stood against the tide of their day, mostly within their own church context, to preserve the purity of doctrine and practice. Each one died having contended with their all. Each serves as an example to challenge us that by God's grace we might contend as well.

Augustine's view of human depravity and God's grace, Luther's discovery and preaching of Paul's doctrine of imputed righteousness, and Machen's charge against liberalism should fuel our passion to contend for the gospel. Although our background and circumstances may differ in relation to theirs, the heart of a contender must stand firm in any age. What is needed more than ever in the church is an Augustine, Luther, or Machen to boldly proclaim biblical salvation and contend against all who wish to distort it with their man-centered ideas and doctrines.

The lessons and the issues of these great men in their day are no different from ours. The same hideous heresies raise their insidious heads and threaten the biblical gospel. May we continue to stand on the shoulders of giants for the sake of His glory alone, especially against the aberrations of our day.

## CHAPTER 5 WHERE IS THE GOSPEL TODAY? MODERN IMPLICATIONS

The Preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes was right—there is nothing new under the sun.<sup>1</sup> As we have examined the history of the defense of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, it has become clear that the errors its historic defenders faced are directly related to what Paul had to fight against—a distortion of the gospel that adds something man-centered into the equation. Although the aberrant theological positions these men opposed did not deny Christ completely, they are in essence “Christian heresies.” Pelagianism, Catholicism, and Liberalism all have some place in their system for Christ and His life and work. Yet infiltrating each system is something non-biblical—an intrusion of man’s inherent goodness, human merit, or ability to please God apart from the atoning work of Christ. Thus, each is a “Christ plus” religion and thus in the end, a false religion.

What about the times in which we live, at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Are there any enemies of the Cross who must be contended today? Is the current evangelical church free from any aberrant systems who would seek to put man in the equation? The reality is that such systems exist today, and always will be until the end of the age.

This chapter will establish how Paul’s method of contending for the gospel, exemplified throughout church history, can be applied against the assaults upon the gospel of justification today. Such an application is imperative for us who are in the midst of the battle,

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9

for we must discern who is distorting the gospel of truth, and what strategies must be employed in our own battle to maintain the gospel truth of justification by faith alone.

### The Aberrations

An aberration is defined as something departing from what is right, usual, or normal. The gospel, as revealed in Scripture itself, is the standard of truth as revealed from God Himself, because it reveals the righteousness of God from faith to faith.<sup>2</sup> Any doctrinal formulation that deviates from this is error and leads not to life but to death. The two aberrations we will examine here focus on distortions of the gospel in academia and popular religion. Our approach will be to generally demonstrate how each, in essence, deviates from the gospel as expounded previously.

### The New Perspective on Paul

The view of the Reformers was that in Galatians Paul was combating a view of justification by merit and good works. In the same way, the Reformers were called to stand against the theology of human merit that predominated in the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> They believed Judaistic religion focused upon the ability of a person, by keeping the Law, to attain righteousness. Final judgment would depend upon a person's good merits deeds outweighing the bad deeds and disobedience to the Law. Paul and the Reformers had responded to the false systems of their day by asserting that justification never was nor could ever be on the basis of human merit but by faith in Christ alone.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:17.

<sup>3</sup> J. Knox Chamblin, "The Apostle in the Dock: A History of Pauline Studies," *Pauline Epistles Lecture Notes* (Jackson: Reformed Theological Seminary, 2003), 25.

<sup>4</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 374.

In 1977, E. P. Sanders published a book that argued Judaism was not based on works or merit but upon grace.<sup>5</sup> Sanders used the term “covenantal nomism” to refer to God’s gracious choice of Israel to be His covenant people. Against the Reformed view, Sanders was convinced that the Jews never believed that they could be saved by law-keeping, but were already saved on the basis of this covenant relationship. Law-keeping was important only to maintain covenant status (*staying in*), not to legalistically earn salvation (*getting in*). So what, in Sanders’ view, was Paul actually contending against in Galatians?

James Dunn answers that Paul was fighting the tendency of Judaizers to “confine salvation to their own nation.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Paul was contending not against doctrinal error per se (salvation by works of the Law) but against Jewish ethnic exclusivity. The Law, argues Dunn, became the means for Jews to keep their unique identity and status as God’s chosen people. Thus in Galatians, Paul is opposing not justification by works, but as D.A. Carson notes, “that a person is justified by maintenance of covenant status through adherence to Torah.”<sup>7</sup>

The upshot of this type of thinking is threefold. First, it takes Paul’s letter to the Galatians out of the realm of personal salvation and restricts his arguments to the realm of corporate experience, especially concerning Israel. Second, the Reformed opposition between faith and works as ways of salvation is eliminated altogether. Thus, Paul is not concerned how people are saved, but how Gentiles can join the Jews as God’s people and have fellowship with them. Third, the shift turns from humanity’s condition before God to their relationships with one another. The Jews can no longer claim covenant exclusivity, but the Gentiles and Jews must come together as God’s righteous or justified people.

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<sup>5</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 422.

<sup>6</sup> James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 334-89.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, 378.

One New Testament scholar who has brought the New Perspective to the forefront in the evangelical church is N. T. Wright. John Piper, in a balanced rebuttal to Wright's thinking, notes eight areas that must be challenged.<sup>8</sup> They may be summarized as follows:

- 1) The gospel is not a means for people to get saved but focuses on Christ as Lord.
- 2) Justification is not how a person becomes a Christian but shows they have already become one.
- 3) The doctrine of justification is *not* the gospel (showing a clear disconnect between terms).
- 4) A person is justified not by believing in justification by faith alone but only in the gospel (causing the reason why one believes the 'gospel' to be ambiguous).
- 5) The idea that righteousness is imputed to the sinner by God is denied.
- 6) In some "redefined sense," future justification is based on works.
- 7) Following Sander and Dunn, Wright believes the core issue addressed by Paul in Galatians was not Judaistic work-righteousness but ethnocentrism.
- 8) The *righteousness of God* is a phrase speaking of God's covenant faithfulness.

On one hand, what Wright and the others have done is provide a healthy balance to excesses in the traditional view of Paul. As Knox Chamblin points out, it had become common to interpret Paul by Luther, rather than the other way around.<sup>9</sup> It is true that not every Jew was a Pharisaical legalist (in fact, not all Pharisees were legalists) and not every Jew believed that complete law-keeping merited salvation with God. In fact, a close reading of Galatians indicates that the opponents of Paul were not full-blown work-righteousness adherents. They did believe Christ's work was necessary for salvation but added other Jewish "markers" for complete salvation and blessing, as well as for fellowship with Jewish believers.

On the other hand, what the NPP effectively does is completely shift the meaning of justification from a focus on the sinner's need to stand right before a holy God to a question of seeking to ease ethnic tensions. It radically redefines the gospel to focus on unity

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<sup>8</sup> John Piper, *The Future of Justification* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 18-23.

<sup>9</sup> Chamblin, 27.

with others instead of one's eternal destiny. This not only emasculates the heart of Pauline theology, but it proves a dangerous tool of deception for sinners needing salvation. It is true that Paul deals both with legalism (gaining favor with God through observing the law, Galatians 2:15-16) and nomism (living in accordance with the law as a response of faith to God, Galatians 2:17:20).<sup>10</sup> But his stance on the former is clear: "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."<sup>11</sup>

Our initial study established Paul's understanding of God's righteousness, our sinfulness, and Christ's work as means of personal salvation and fellowship with one another. Our exegesis of the various passages in Galatians related to these themes shows that the New Perspective does not fit all the evidence but is too narrow and mistaken in its scope. It distorts the true historical context of the letter and the heart, message, and motive of the false teachers in Galatia.

The New Perspective's greatest danger is to negate the biblical message of the gospel and particularly the centrality of justification by faith alone. The proneness of the human heart toward self-justification may provide the motivation people to deny that they are sinners needing to be given righteousness by Christ, and incline them to interpret Galatians as dealing only with unity and harmony. Such an interpretation shifts the focus from personal responsibility for sin against God to dealing with the sins in relationship to others. Thus, it can guarantee no significant heart change, spawn no true repentance, and leaves the availability open for a "Christ plus" religious experience.

### The Emergent Church

A second aberration contending against the gospel is the Emergent Church (EC) Movement. Far from being a formal, conjoined movement, Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>11</sup> Galatians 2:21.



state that pinning down the Emergent movement is “like nailing Jell-O to the wall.”<sup>12</sup> They note that while there are similar trends in Emergent writers, there is still an amorphous nature to the movement.

Yet, there is enough for the contender of the biblical gospel to give pause and consider what Emergent writers are saying. In their attempt to address the postmodern culture with the gospel, there is enough to get a picture on what they believe and do not believe. Thus, the focus will be upon the view of salvation and the gospel.

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger assert, concerning the EC:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.<sup>13</sup>

This description of the EC duly reflects the new covenant community life as expounded in the New Testament. As a pastor, I desire to see these qualities reflected in my own church. The EC provides a strong corrective against churches that are strong in orthodoxy (right doctrine), but weak in orthopraxy (right practice). The popularity of this movement is due to its emphasis on life together as Christians, as well as reaching the secular society with Christ in creative ways.

But there are serious concerns when it comes to the Emergent writers’ view of the gospel message. How do they answer the question, “How is a person saved?” In conducting a survey of the writings of various EC leaders, Robert Vacendak identifies four interrelated concerns that emerge in reference to the gospel message.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2008), 17.

<sup>13</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 44.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Vacendak, “The Evangelistic Message of the Emerging Church,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 22 (2009) : 61-66.

First, there is no clear emphasis upon the God's grace but rather an emphasis upon our ability to live Christ's way of life. DeYoung states, "Now, I'm sure that many in the emergent church would also talk about grace, but I don't read much about grace in their books."<sup>15</sup> Doug Pagitt, a leading EC pastor in Minneapolis, writes, "The good news is not informational . . . . Instead we have an invitation into a way of life—life we constantly realize is not ours alone."<sup>16</sup> But the good news of the gospel *is* informational. It describes particular facts concerning God's character and our condition, showing that it is only by God's grace, not our efforts, that a person is justified before God. What Pagitt and other writers portray is that *we* can follow the life of Jesus in ourselves apart from grace.

This deviation from the biblical gospel continues as original sin and total depravity are minimized or rejected altogether. One reads the material and senses the ghost of Pelagius. Salvation becomes more about being human or God-like than Jesus accomplishing anything on our behalf. There is no apparent need for biblical grace. DeYoung concludes, "If the good news is an invitation to a Jesus way of life and not information about somebody who accomplished something on my behalf, I'm sunk. This is law and no gospel."<sup>17</sup>

Vacendak identifies a second area of concern in the EC's emphasis on works as a means of salvation. The idea of works is not expressed in traditional terms of legalism, but rather through an emphasis upon right living as the basis of salvation. Rob Bell, in *Velvet Elvis*, writes:

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<sup>15</sup> DeYoung, 113-14.

<sup>16</sup> Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 103.

<sup>17</sup> DeYoung, 114.

Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all the other religions. That completely misses the point, the depth, and the truth. Rather, he was telling those who were following him that his way is the way to the depth of reality. This kind of life Jesus was living, perfectly and completely in connection and cooperation with God, is the best possible way for a person to live. It's about lining yourself up with how things are . . . . Perhaps a better question than who's right, is who's living rightly?<sup>18</sup>

Bell is simply reiterating the liberal view of the gospel that Machen contended so earnestly against in his day. Receiving the gospel becomes not so much about seeking God's grace to have right standing before God, but about having right standing by living rightly apart from religious or theological distinctions. We have seen the impossibility of this notion because the doctrine of justification states none of us can live rightly before God until He declares us to be right in Christ.

What does Christ actually accomplish according to EC teachers? Namely, instead of seeing the reality of penal substitution in the cross, the cross becomes a moral example.<sup>19</sup> In Brian McLaren's book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, he records what he believes concerning the substitutionary atonement of Christ in the form of a conversation between individuals:

If God wants to forgive us, why doesn't he just do it? How does punishing an innocent person make things better? That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?<sup>20</sup>

God wants to forgive, not seek revenge, and call people to make God's kingdom come not through force or coercion, but through "self-sacrifice and vulnerability."<sup>21</sup> If the way to salvation and justification is not the atoning work of Christ, then it is a way of salvation that is deeply man-centered—a salvation on the basis of works and human effort. It is not about what Christ has done, but what we must do ourselves.

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<sup>18</sup> Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 21.

<sup>19</sup> DeYoung, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*, Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series, no. 2, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 143.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 105-106.

A third concern is that the EC avoids a language of certainty in salvation, and champions an attitude of doubt in those who follow Jesus. McClaren and Tony Campolo suggest:

Drop any affair you may have with certainty, proof, argument—and replace it with dialogue, conversation, intrigue, and search. The ultimate Bible study or sermon in recent decades yielded clarity. That clarity, unfortunately, was often boring—and probably not that accurate, either, since reality is seldom clear, but usually fuzzy and mysterious; not black-and-white, but in living color.<sup>22</sup>

I assume that this statement would include sermons on the gospel of justification by faith. Is the reality of the gospel as expounded in Scripture unclear? Is the reality that a person is saved by faith in Christ's person and atoning work erroneous simply because it is black-and-white? The answer to these questions is no. The gospel of justification brings certainty into the believer's life—a certainty that says that they *are* in right standing with God on the basis of His judicial declaration on the ground of His Son's righteousness that has been received by faith and not works.

If salvation comes by one own ability to follow Jesus, then a great degree of uncertainty is introduced. Yet, Paul in Galatians expresses many statements of certainty in respect to the gospel because it is based on God's grace alone. Jesus *did* give Himself for our sins, Paul and every believer *has been* crucified with Christ, no one *is* justified by the law, and we are *commanded* to walk by the Spirit. There is no room for doubt in these declarations, and a person with true saving faith clings to these statements with absolute confidence and certainty.

The methodology of doubt in the EC leads to the fourth concern, which is their disdain for absolute truth claims. McClaren shows his contempt for what he calls “modern Christianity” by writing:

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<sup>22</sup> Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 84.

Compare modern Christianity's quest for the perfect belief system to medieval church architecture. Christians in the emerging culture may look back on our doctrinal structures (statements of faith, systematic theologies) as we look back on medieval cathedrals: possessing a real beauty that should be preserved, but now largely vacant, not inhabited or used much anymore, more tourist attractions than holy places.<sup>23</sup>

McLaren's attitude clearly assimilates into Christianity the penchant of postmodern culture to question the validity of such concepts as absolute truth, doctrine, and authority. This sentiment leads to a rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture as God's unchanging and authoritative truth for all humanity, especially Christians. There is no need for confessional Christianity in their minds, and thus, all of the historic statements that have been used to contend for the gospel are disregarded and stripped of their biblical significance. Therefore, because the gospel of justification is so clearly taught in Scripture and the confessions, there is a wholesale rejection of that very same gospel.

In summary, according to Derwin Gray, the EC redefines the doctrine of salvation because of frustrations in how church has become individualistic and too focused on getting to heaven and not touching the world with Jesus.<sup>24</sup> It is agreed that a corrective has been needed in the contemporary church. But McLaren and others go too far in trying to accommodate the gospel with the philosophies of the postmodern age. Much like the New Perspective on Paul, the Emergent movement focuses not upon the individual but on the community.<sup>25</sup> While much could be said concerning Paul's emphasis on Christ-like community life in Galatians, the fact remains that the heart of the epistle concerns one's individual standing before God, which in turn leads to life in the Spirit, which finally leads to stronger community of faith in the truth of the gospel.

In the same way Machen fought against the modernist gospel, so we must contend against the Emergent gospel. We see in the life of Paul the ability to bring the gospel to his

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<sup>23</sup> Brian McLaren, "Emerging Values," *Leadership* (Summer 2003), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Derwin L. Gray, "The Emergence of the Emerging Church," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 07 (2008) : 46-47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

culture (i.e., Acts 17), yet, we must realize like Machen that the culture itself holds to philosophies that are antithetical to the gospel. The wholesale adaptation of the gospel to the culture by the Emergent Movement cannot but result in a corruption of the gospel. Instead of declaring the truth of the gospel with boldness, we are reduced to having conversations about the kingdom because “coercing” someone to believe Jesus died for them is distasteful. And this perversion of the gospel should be equally distasteful to us.

### The Contenders

So the question lingers—is anyone standing up and contending for the gospel today? From pastors to theologians to committed Christians in the pews, the answer is a resounding yes! Several have stood up in our time to counter the aberrations of the gospel that have come into Christianity while using the same historical methods expounded in this thesis.

From a host of evangelical realms, whether academic theological institutions, pulpits and pews, books and articles, the blogosphere, church planting movements, or Christian homes, the gospel is being defended with utmost passion. Throughout this thesis, we have seen many examples of those who have contended for the gospel, and there are many more examples that could be listed. Today, the work continues because God is faithful to His truth. He is the One who continues to move in the lives of His people to believe, share, and contend for the gospel.

We must remember two important truths. First, we are not alone as we contend for the gospel. We stand with historical and contemporary Christians who are willing to rise up and let their voice be heard and hearts moved to true Christ-like action. Often in our sphere of influence, we can become discouraged and wonder if we are making a difference. We are making a difference as we stand as one body committed to seeing Christ glorified as the gospel is preached and lived.

The second truth is that we have examples to whom we can look in helping us contend for the gospel. Granted, no one but Christ is perfect. Great Christians of past and present (and future) have their flaws and shortcomings. But we can observe the lives of those who have truly sacrificed everything for the gospel to find joy in God. There are strong points we can imitate by God's grace to make a difference on those around us with the gospel. This, with deep study of our own of God's Word, can bolster our confidence to stand firm, even if we are standing alone. Whether we are moms, students, industry workers, professionals, or anything else, we can affect the lives of those around us as those not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

### Suggestions for Effective Contending

Jude commanded the saints to contend for the faith. This includes contending for the gospel and all that it entails, including that sinners are justified by faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone, for God's glory alone. John MacArthur, drawing from Jude's epistle, gives us three simple ways that we can contend for the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

First, we must remember our common salvation in which we came to believe in the life-saving message of the gospel.<sup>27</sup> Also, according to verse 17, we must remember the predictions of the apostles. Jude's readers, as well as believers today, must remember the preaching and writing of the apostles who declared the truth from the Holy Spirit and taught concerning the gospel and all its applications.

Second, we must remain faithful. This happens as we build each other up in the Christian faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep ourselves in God's love, and look for the mercy of Christ leading to eternal life.<sup>28</sup> We must mature in doctrine and grace, depending constantly on the Holy Spirit to lead us and keep us in truth, never neglecting the recognition

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<sup>26</sup> John MacArthur, *The Truth War* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 175-183.

<sup>27</sup> Jude 3.

<sup>28</sup> Jude 20-21.

of God's great love shown in Christ, and keeping ourselves pure until Christ returns and we spend eternity with Him. We cannot be faithful by ourselves, but God is faithful to Himself and His Word, and we can count on His faithfulness to keep us faithful in persevering and contending for the gospel.

Lastly, we must reach out. Jude states that we will encounter three groups of people in this life:

1. Those who are confused and doubt.<sup>29</sup> We can come with certainty (despite what the Emergent movement might believe) because God has clearly declared His truth in Scripture. We can boldly proclaim God and what He has done to save sinners by grace through faith.
2. Those who are convinced. Jude implies they are not convinced of truth, but convinced of error or false doctrine. Jude says they are caught in the fire—entrapped in sin.<sup>30</sup> We must actively snatch them out by giving them the truth with great urgency lest more damage occur. There cannot be any indecisiveness here; souls are at stake and we must act and contend quickly. This entails being prepared at all time with truth in our belt and an attitude of gentleness.
3. Those who are committed. This refers to those who contend for the gospel. As we engage in contending for the faith, we must take care lest we too be tempted to turn from the gospel for a false one. Contending for the gospel puts us at great risk as we become greater enemies of darkness. We must hate the garment that has been stained by fleshly contamination.<sup>31</sup> The battle is long and we can become weary, let our guard down, and be tempted to sin by compromising the truth for our own personal gain or betterment. Or, the sin of pride can enter in, producing an attitude of superiority over those who have succumbed to a false gospel or application of the gospel. We must preach the gospel to ourselves daily and place around us those who love the gospel and are willing in love to hold us accountable to it.

### Conclusion

We must contend for the gospel, but we must contend properly. This involves three closing suggestions. First, we must contend polemically. That is, we must be willing to

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<sup>29</sup> Jude 22.

<sup>30</sup> Jude 23.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



engage in the fight. Paul and others have served as examples that the truth of the gospel of justification is worth contending for. The army of God can never slumber or become seduced to inactivity. The material and the method are before us in the books of Scripture and history. We must engage for the sake of glory of God and the salvation of souls. We must be captivated by God and His truth and ready to share it when the time arises.

Second, we must contend irenically. While we are engaged, we must remember we are representing our Lord and must honor Him in everything. Christian love should flow from our lives because we love God, His gospel, and His people. It is improper to be contentious, rude, demeaning, overbearing, or hostile. Peter states that when we make a defense of the faith, we are to do it honoring Christ as holy and with gentleness and respect towards others.<sup>32</sup> We must have strength under the control of the Lordship of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Third, we must contend Christocentrically. It is not about us. It is about the Second Person of the Godhead who condescended and became a man, willingly obeyed the Father, laid down His life on the cross, was victoriously raised from the dead, and ascended on high. It is about His person and work which has the efficacy to save sinners, bring them to right standing before God, and keep them saved to the uttermost. It is for His glory and our joy—the joy of seeing Christ exalted through the sharing and contending for the gospel of grace.

John MacArthur so aptly writes:

I am convinced that the greatest danger facing Christians today has infiltrated the church already. Countless false teachers already have prominent platforms in the evangelical movement; evangelicals themselves are loath to practice discernment or question or challenge anything taught within their movement; and many evangelicals have concluded no doctrine or point of theology is worth contending for.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>33</sup> MacArthur, 170.

May we never be this kind of Christian.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

The gospel truly is the central heart and message of the Bible. The amazing fact is that God, through the message of the gospel, saves and transforms sinners in His Son, Jesus Christ. The emphasis of this paper has been to locate the core of the gospel in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This gospel, or good news, of God justifying the sinner (by a declared righteousness) on the grounds of the finished work of Christ (His death and resurrection) and received through the instrument of faith is to be thoroughly understood by all Christians at its deepest levels.

Yet, that message is being threatened on many fronts in contemporary evangelicalism. The main contention of this paper is to move the reader to action in contending for the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The “how” is supplied by Paul in his letter to the Galatian churches. Paul provides six key strategies by which he contended for the gospel of justification by faith alone, and these strategies must be employed by all who wish to contend for the gospel as Paul did. These methods are powerful means by which the Spirit of God can exalt the purpose and plan of God the Father and the person and work of Jesus Christ. They also clarify the issue that salvation is never by human merit, effort, or works. Nothing can be or should be added to the final completion of Christ’s saving work that is received by faith alone. Paul’s methods of contention are a viable means of contending for a doctrine as precious as this for the good and growth of God’s elect.

Not only were the strategies presented in this paper seen in the Apostle Paul's arsenal, but have served as a pivotal springboard for those throughout church history who have been compelled to contend for the gospel of justification. Augustine, Martin Luther, and J. Gresham Machen, along with countless others, have contended using the same methods and passion as Paul. Although the attacks against the gospel have taken various forms, they have centered upon denying the sufficiency of Christ's finished work and have sought to add human effort or morality as a condition of salvation. Each of those who has contended have stood on the same biblical understanding of the gospel, and this is the understanding we must have if we are going to successfully contend as they did.

This pressing need to contend is observed in modern aberrations of the biblical gospel such as in the New Perspective on Paul and the Emergent Church. Each presents a contemporary reformulation of the same ideas and attacks contended against throughout nineteen hundred years of church history. That is, they shift the focus away from the declaration of righteousness by God upon the sinner's expression of faith and corrupt the centrality of the gospel with human effort or acts of love apart from justification. While containing elements of truth, these current examples of veering away from the gospel are enough to warrant our contention.

As Christians in twenty-first century American evangelicalism, we must also stand together with contemporary contenders in the fight for the gospel of justification. God has always preserved a remnant who will love Him with all their heart and stand for His truth no matter the cost. Whether on the national or local level, a unity of doctrine and practice must be upheld. Only by the power of the Spirit, as we walk by the Spirit, can this unity be truly achieved for the glory of God.

As we consider this contending for the gospel, we must be polemic in the sense of not backing down or being fearful of man, but standing strong in the Spirit with the conviction of God's infallible truth. Yet, we must also have an irenic spirit, gently leading those who are caught in the lies of a false gospel to the great reality and hope of Christ and His finished work. And thus, the true aim of it all will be achieved—the eternal praise of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ by justified saints in the new home created where righteousness dwells forever.

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