

First Baptist Church Sermon of the Week
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THE WRITING OF AN APOSTLE

Galatians 1:1

Few documents have influenced human history more than this letter to the Galatians. This little letter set a fire to burning in the heart of Martin Luther that started the revolutionary movement that we call the Protestant Reformation. It has been received as life transforming word from God by so many across the ages. How do you explain the remarkable influence of this little document?

Actually it is just a letter written by A Christian missionary named Paul to some churches scattered across a section of Asia Minor called Galatia. The letter was written about twenty years after the ascension of Jesus back to heaven. It was prompted by the infiltration of some teachers into the churches who were undermining the work of Paul. These teachers were Jewish in background, and were really more Jewish than Christian. They were attempting to change the whole character of the Christian movement. Instead of a salvation based upon faith in the finished work of Christ, they were offering a salvation based upon Christ plus Jewish ceremonialism. They were requiring Gentile Christians to become Jewish in their life style in order to be sure of their salvation. They were also calling into question the credentials of Paul as a Christian worker. This letter is the stinging response of Paul to these teachers and their influence.

Like all such letters it begins by identifying the writer and providing his office. The writer is Paul in company with some other Christian companions. His office is that of an Apostle. This is his primary credential for writing this little letter. The letter is to be received as the writing of an Apostle of Jesus Christ. Since most of the New Testament books are the writings of an Apostle, it should prove to be helpful if we understood the significance of this office. It should affect the way we would read this little letter, and the importance that we would give to it. There are three primary things that we should realize about the writings of an Apostle. Each of them are especially true of this little letter.

I. THE WRITINGS OF AN APOSTLE ARE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.

How did a man get to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ? According to the understanding of the early Christians he had to be one who had personally accompanied the Lord Jesus in his earthly ministry. (Acts 1:21-21) This was the requirement that they established before they selected Matthais. In fact, he had to have been with him from the ministry of John the Baptist. The Twelve then were understood to be a very special group of men. They were eye-witnesses to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

But Paul did not accompany Jesus during the days of his ministry. How could he qualify to bear the title Apostle? Paul was the recipient of a special revelation from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in order to qualify Him for this office. The first part of the revelation took place on the Damascus road, and led to the great turn around in the life of Paul. He was enabled to personally see the risen Christ just as the others had seen Him after His resurrection.

Because of this qualification, the Apostles were able to say, "We have seen", "We have heard", "We have handled". They did not come saying, "I read", or "It was reported to me", or "It seems to me." So when you read the writing of an Apostle, there is behind the writing a personal encounter with the revelation of God in Christ. You have an eye-witness, first-hand report. You are studying a primary source.

At this point, we should also understand that in that way that generation of Christians was unique. These men were eye-witnesses for our sake. Our God let them see that they might write down a record of the revelation for us. We receive our knowledge of Him as the Holy Spirit illumines to us the written report that has been left for us by the Apostles. We have their autobiographical account so that we might know what they were privileged to know.

We need to beware of those who come in our day with reported revelations from the Lord. This was the only group of men who will ever be privileged to write such a report. God is not making any more revelations of this kind, but is illuminating the record of that revelation to our understanding so that we too might know personally the living God. Only the writings of the Apostles is so autobiographical.

II. THE WRITINGS OF AN APOSTLE ARE AUTHORIZED.

Apostles are "called men". They have been made apostles by another. In this letter Paul is careful to indicate that he is an apostle by the choice of Jesus Christ and by God the Father. He denies that he owes his apostleship to any group of men---possibly a denial that he is an apostle due to a decision of a group in Jerusalem, and that he received it from any man. God had appointed him to this office.

This was true of the first twelve as well. We need to distinguish between a disciple and an apostle. All of the apostles are disciples, but not all of the disciples were apostles. The word disciples means to be a student, but the word Apostle means to be sent as an ambassador. An apostle is authorized to speak for the one who sent him. Matthew reports that Jesus chose twelve disciples, and "gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease. Now the names of the twelve apostles are these." (Matthew 10:1,2a)

Paul received his appointment at his conversion. After the Damascus road experience, the Lord directed Ananias to pay the blinded Paul a visit in Damascus. He was given a special message to deliver to Paul. "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." (Acts 9:15-16) In this same chapter Paul reports, "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach among the heathen." (Galatians 1:15,16)

What implication does this have for us as we read and study this letter? Much! This is an authorized letter! Not one authorized by Paul or King James, but one authorized by King Jesus, the Lord of Heaven. The man who wrote this was sent by our Lord in a special way to deliver a special message to the world. We have a written report of that message for our spiritual benefit.

III. THE WRITINGS OF AN APOSTLE ARE AUTHORITATIVE.

Our God is a God of order. When he established His church in the world, He established a pattern of authority for the church. Jesus delegated to the Apostles this special authority for the critical and early days of the churches. This authority involved doctrine, order, and duty. They were the official teachers of the churches. They set spiritual leaders into their places of responsibility. They instructed the disciples in the duties of their daily walk with the Lord. It is reported of them that they "continued steadfastly in the Apostles doctrine." (Acts 2:42) Acts of the Apostles provides us with an accurate account of how the Apostles exercised this God-given authority for the benefit of the churches. They were careful to use this authority lovingly and faithfully.

This confronts with a special question. Where they able to pass this authority on to their successors? This is the question that divides many of us from the Roman church. It is our conviction that this authority was not passed on to other men, but rather that this authority now rests upon the writings of the Apostles. When we have questions concerning order, doctrine, or duty, we do not turn to some authoritative man, but rather we turn to these writings and trust the Holy Spirit to guide us through their writings.

Do you not catch this sense of authority when you read the literature of the New Testament? You might just begin to look for the imperatives in the New Testament. There are so many. They are scattered throughout. These men did not counsel and suggest, they commanded.

While many of us do sense that we have been commissioned and sent by the Lord God, we do not sense that we have apostolic authority over others. There is a

certain spiritual authority that enjoyed by all believers, but it is not apostolic authority over others. You must beware of those who come claiming that kind of authority over your life. You should not submit your life in that manner to any except the Lord Jesus. He will guide you into all truth through the inspired writings that he has left behind for us as they are illumined to our understanding by the Holy Spirit. It is true however that He may be pleased to use godly teachers in imparting to us this spiritual truth from time to time, as I trust he is using me even now to be of aid to your understanding. However it should warn us from making the mistake of attributing to the writings of men today the authority that we would give to the writings of the Apostles. These New Testament documents are unique in their authority, they have their delegated authority of God resting upon them.

This is what makes this Galatian letter such an important document for each of us. In the weeks ahead we want to study this letter with an open mind, knowing full well that we are handling nothing less than a writing that has the authority of heaven upon it. Whatever it says, we need to believe. Whatever it commands, we need to do. Wherever it leads, we need to go. Whatever it forbids, we need to avoid. It is the word of God to us.

CONCLUSION

Do you see the implications of this for you? If you are not a Christian, you can find in this document a trustworthy, authoritative word about how you can become a Christian. Here it is, "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, the just shall live by faith." There then is only one way for a man to be right before God, to be justified. It is not by keeping ceremonies or observing religious rules. Rather it is by faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This the authoritative word of God. You can stake your hope of eternal life upon it.

If you have made such a commitment of faith, this book has a word for you. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." (Galatians 5:1) Freedom in Christ is the word. You are not to become burdened down with the rules of religion, but to walk by faith in Christ and in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Thank God for the writings of the Apostles. They are better than gold and sweeter than honey. You and I should take them into our lives daily, we should feed our spirits on them.