

Editorial: Reflections on the Importance of Galatians for Today

Stephen J. Wellum

EACH YEAR, SINCE the inception of *SBJT*, we have devoted the Fall issue to the biblical book that is the focus of LifeWay's upcoming January Bible Study. Our goal in doing so is, in some small way, to help our readers become better prepared to study the specific book of focus so that in the

words of Paul, "we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Eph 4:14-15, NIV).

Now it is certainly the case that every biblical book is worthy of our attention, study, thoughtful reflection, and obedience. Given the fact

that "all Scripture is God-breathed" and thus every biblical book "is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim

3:16), we are commanded to study every biblical book and to apply it to our lives. But it is also true that there are certain books which demand extra attention given their importance in the canon, their overall contribution to understanding the gospel, and their significance in church history. In this regard, without minimizing the importance of any book of Scripture, one can think of the unique contribution of Genesis, Isaiah, John's Gospel, Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews to name just a few. What these books have in common is that they have served as foundational to the church's understanding of who God is, what the gospel is all about, and grasping better the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.

It is safe to say that Paul's letter to the Galatians—the focus of this issue of *SBJT*—also fits into this category. Why do I put Galatians into this category? Why has it been so important in Christian theology and why is it crucial that we study it anew today? Let me give at least three reasons why I believe the message of Galatians is of absolute importance for this generation of Christians and

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why we neglect it to our spiritual impoverishment and peril.

First, Galatians reminds us that every generation must re-commit itself to standing for the gospel in the midst of the perennial danger of compromise and potential loss of the gospel. The context of Galatians is well known. Probably written to the church residing in South Galatia around A.D. 48, the apostle Paul begins his letter by reminding them of his status as an apostle “sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father” (1:1). He does so because he is astonished at how quickly the Galatians have departed from the gospel—the gospel which he as an apostle under the authority of Christ has proclaimed to them. For Paul, this is no minor issue since the “gospel” they have turned to “is really no gospel at all” (1:7). In fact, he unequivocally states that “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (1:8). Paul is convinced that what the Galatians have done is not merely added some new insights to the gospel and thus distorted it, instead they have substituted various Jewish teachings for it and thus denied its very heart and soul. Galatians, then, stands as a constant reminder for the church to beware of losing the gospel for a counterfeit, a challenge which we must take seriously today. As with this ancient church, we need to ask constantly, where are we in danger of substituting the truth of God’s Word for a lie and dressing it up as if it were the gospel itself? Galatians is incredibly helpful in this regard.

Second, and tied to the first point, Galatians reminds us of the importance of affirming, proclaiming, and living out the implications of the gospel centered in the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. In Christian theology and church history this letter has become a classic expression of the great Reformation emphasis on justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. At the heart of the Galatian’s substitute gospel is the attempt to attain a righteousness by works and not by faith, whether that was tied to Torah obedience or any other achievement of the sinner before

God. In this letter Paul clearly stresses that it is what our Triune God has done which brings about our salvation, not what sinners do. There can be no improvement on the finished work of Christ, either by ritual observance or moral improvement. Christ and his cross alone is the one way of salvation. Justification before the holy God of the universe is only found by the sinner receiving what our Lord has done by faith alone in that all-sufficient work. Today, this message takes on added significance especially in light of the new perspective on Paul which seeks to tweak the precise nature of the Galatian problem, and, as many of our articles demonstrate, is a current form of obscuring the great doctrine of justification and potentially robbing us of seeing anew the glories of Christ’s cross and his substitutionary work accomplished for us as he stood in our place, bore our curse, and thus achieved everything necessary to redeem, reconcile, and justify us before our majestic and glorious God.

Third, Galatians, like such books as Romans and Hebrews, also helps us put our Bibles together by unpacking how God’s eternal plan progressively unfolds and develops across redemptive history ultimately culminating in Christ. Christians are rightly concerned to know how the entire Bible and plan of God leads us to Christ, and this book, especially in chapter 3, helps us grasp how God’s promises are related to covenants and how all of this is now brought to fulfillment in the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In this way, Galatians is incredibly instructive in how to put together the storyline of Scripture properly.

Even though this letter is short, it clearly has an importance out of proportion to its size. It is my prayer that in studying Galatians we will re-commit ourselves to standing for the gospel today, realizing both its urgency and glory, and ultimately coming to know and trust our Savior more, which in truth, is what this letter is all about.