Editorial:
Reflections on the Importance of Galatians for Today

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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
why we neglect it to our spiritual impoverishment
and peril.

First, Galatians reminds us that every genera-
tion 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 pro-
claimed 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 los-
ing 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, pro-
claiming, 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 obedi-
ergie 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 improve-
ment. 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 receiv-
ing 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 pre-
cise 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 accom-
plished for us as he stood in our place, bore our
curse, and thus achieved everything necessary to
redeem, reconcile, and justify us before our majes-
tic 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 progres-
sively unfolds and develops across redemptive his-
tory 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 incred-
ibly instructive in how to put together the story-
line 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.