

Further From the Truth  
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May 2, 2021 - Eastertide (5th)

Having finished my course on Galatians, my thought is to preach a sermon series on it. While one of the themes of this epistle is Christian Liberty, from the Reformation work of Luther forwards—a really great and wonder theme however, I am not sure that Christian Liberty is as central to the epistle as is Paul’s concern for the drift from truth. Paul is alarmed at the trajectory of the Galatians’ defection from the gospel and the abandonment of the Holy Spirit that entailed desertion. **I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him,** which is probably the Holy Spirit, **who called you in the grace of Christ . . . and are turning to another gospel.** So there is desertion and a defection in view. Clearly Paul must have in mind a *false gospel* because as he quickly clarifies his comment with **not that there is another gospel** (vv. 6-7). That alternative truth, that false gospel of “gospel plus,” is disaffecting the people of God and they are on the brink of apostasy.

The heart of Christian liberty, according to Paul, is first the truth of Jesus Christ who *self-identified as the Son of God—and so he truly was—*, or the Messiah promised in Scriptural prophecy and manifest in his flesh, in his very own body. Secondly, he backed his claims up with many signs and compelling proofs! He is supra-racist—that is, he has moved on, and is indifferent to the color of anyone’s skin! *We should be, too.* And, thirdly, his gospel is interventionist as opposed to progressive. Just because he is coming again, and will bring all things to completion does not make the plan of salvation a progressive one. That is the great presumption of our day! Christ’s salvation comes from heaven, from outside and above, *not from within!* No man saves himself, Jesus alone does that, by a miracle(!) to the glory of the Father, forever and ever. Amen. Paul’s astonishment is made sensible by this assertion that regeneration is a miracle from God. The Galatians experienced this, they knew this and yet they were being seduced by siren song of “gospel plus.”

Paul had taught that it is **the truth** of Jesus that sets us free. Paul preached that Christ was crucified, making atonement for the sins of the world and offering forgiveness to all who believe in Him, or, in His name. And, as a result of the *call of the Spirit*, they had come to believe, and *by the gift of faith*, they received the spiritual benefits offered. Meaning they received the Holy Spirit and they were indwelt by God the Father and the Son—such was the power of redemption!

As I have told you, **receiving the Holy Spirit was the defining mark of the first and second century Christians.** They received life, forgiveness, and freedom in Christ. They were renewed in every part of their being, as **new creatures in Christ.** They heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, believed and were saved and then the miracle took place. The question, “When did you invite Jesus into your heart?” would have puzzled them because they believed that salvation was of God and

came from God—**one is born again from above**. That is still the case. It is all of God and none of man.

And now they were being told, *something like*, “That while all of that Jesus stuff was fine and nice, but they really need to be circumcised to be truly saved!” They were being offered . . . *the gospel plus*! Become Jewish by circumcision and you’ll know you are saved.

The gospel-plus religion approach to Christianity is no stranger to our day! Like us, believers then were being enticed by “the interesting,” and, by their thirst for something novel, something newer, updated, improved, *something more*—all the things, gimmicks, that we are familiar with from the advertising of laundry detergents to the latest in electronic technology. Islam is promoted as an “improvement” on Christianity (so is the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons) just as Christianity was being promoted as an improvement on Judaism. There is no denying that in such books as Hebrews a better covenant and a superior priesthood were being set forth.

*And the newly converted Galatians were buying it! . . . they were falling for **the sales pitch** of these peddlers of gospel plus.* They were blind to how this invalidated the work of Christ on the cross—rendering it unnecessary, or redundant! Null and void! It is anything but those things! Buyer beware!

We may be familiar with some of the peddlers of cults and idolatry in our own day! The door knockers of Eastern religion, spiritualists, occultists along with many strange “pseudo-christian” religions already names . . . how very like busy carpet-cleaning demonstrators and vacuum salesmen they’ll appear—but as “purveyors of ‘half truths,’” cleverly devised lies subverting the gospel<sup>1</sup> and causing people to deviate from the truth. Un-truth never freed anybody! There’s not so much visiting these days, COVID 19 has put a damper on such in-home related activities—because people are afraid to admit strangers into their homes, they have to be reached other ways—like through social media.

In fairness, the radical nature of the Christian gospel did create a certain vulnerability, a bias towards things new, exciting and different. The apostles had to defend themselves from charges of innovation and novelty—they were accused of being a sect, cult followers, apostates . . . of being seditious and **disturbers of the peace**. And yet their love of lost sinners, considering their impoverished lives and prospective eternal damnation, and because like Jesus they were **friends of sinners** announcing a new day of divine favor, they persisted in preaching Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> They use the same words but have rewritten the definitions—and they supply no glossary! Jonathan Edwards famously exposed the Armenians of his day by demonstrating that what they mean by “free will” is absolute and sovereign free will (a property of the godhead) whereas “contingent free will” is what the rest of us mean. The debates pivots on this point.

And they did that because they believed that **Jesus is wisdom and knowledge** (Col 2:3), and **But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption** (1 Cor. 1:30) for us. They believed firmly in the **sufficiency** of Jesus, that he is all the truth mankind would ever need, manifest in person. They embraced that he was Lord, supreme, the name above all names and that, eventually, **every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!** To believe anything less about Jesus, would be to settle for less than the truth about who he was. **And** (therefore) ***who he was matters supremely***. **Who do you say that I am?** is the follow-up question to the opinion poll, posed by Jesus near Caesarea Philippi, that is recorded in Matthew 16:13-17 (with parallels in Mark 8 and Luke 9). And on your answer to that question is suspended both your entire life in the here and now and your eternal destiny!

Are we sure we want to desert the Holy Spirit and defect from the gospel? I am quite sure I do not wish to do that—let's explore this matters further. In the meantime, cling to the work of Christ and rejoice in the miracle of rebirth.

**Amen.**