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—Dr. Joel R. Beeke  
President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan



# GALATIANS

AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY



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R.C. SPROUL



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

*Galatians: An Expository Commentary*

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## SERIES PREFACE

When God called me into full-time Christian ministry, He called me to the academy. I was trained and ordained to a ministry of teaching, and most of my adult life has been devoted to preparing young men for the Christian ministry and to trying to bridge the gap between seminary and Sunday school through various means under the aegis of Ligonier Ministries.

Then, in 1997, God did something I never anticipated: He placed me in the position of preaching weekly as a leader of a congregation of His people—St. Andrew’s in Sanford, Florida. Over the past twelve years, as I have opened the Word of God on a weekly basis for these dear saints, I have come to love the task of the local minister. Though my role as a teacher continues, I am eternally grateful to God that He saw fit to place me in this new ministry, the ministry of a preacher.

Very early in my tenure with St. Andrew’s, I determined that I should adopt the ancient Christian practice of *lectio continua*, “continuous expositions,” in my preaching. This method of preaching verse-by-verse through books of the Bible (rather than choosing a new topic each week) has been attested throughout church history as the one approach that ensures believers hear the full counsel of God. Therefore, I began preaching lengthy series of messages at St. Andrew’s, eventually working my way through several biblical books in a practice that continues to the present day.

Previously, I had taught through books of the Bible in various settings, including Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and audio and video teaching series for Ligonier Ministries. But now I found myself appealing not so much to the minds of my hearers but to both their minds and their hearts.

I knew that I was responsible as a preacher to clearly explain God’s Word *and* to show how we ought to live in light of it. I sought to fulfill both tasks as I ascended the St. Andrew’s pulpit each week.

What you hold in your hand, then, is a written record of my preaching labors amidst my beloved Sanford congregation. The dear saints who sit under

my preaching encouraged me to give my sermons a broader hearing. To that end, the chapters that follow were adapted from a sermon series I preached at St. Andrew's.

Please be aware that this book is part of a broader series of books containing adaptations of my St. Andrew's sermons. This book, like all the others in the series, will *not* give you the fullest possible insight into each and every verse in this biblical book. Though I sought to at least touch on each verse, I focused on the key themes and ideas that comprised the "big picture" of each passage I covered. Therefore, I urge you to use this book as an overview and introduction.

I pray that you will be as blessed in reading this material as I was in preaching it.

—R.C. Sproul  
Lake Mary, Florida  
April 2009

# 1

## APOSTOLIC GREETING

*Galatians 1:1–5*



Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

There are several questions, as there always are, that tend to matters of authorship, date, and destination of books in the Bible. Paul's letter to the Galatians is no exception. We don't know the exact order in which Paul's letters were written, but the majority report is that in all probability, this letter from the Apostle Paul was the first.

The audience is also a question. It is addressed **to the churches of Galatia** (v. 2), but that is a region, not a city. The region of Galatia was in central Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. We don't know whether the destination was the northern territory of Galatia, the southern province of Galatia, or possibly both, as it was a circular letter addressed to more than one church. We don't know for certain when Paul wrote the letter, but it could have been written as early as AD 48, just a few years after the ascension of our Lord into heaven.

We know, in any case, that regardless of which churches were intended to

receive the letter, they were having problems. Of all the epistles Paul wrote, this one is clearly the most fiery. In this respect, it is a unique letter. Paul, who we know had such a tender pastor's heart, wrote this epistle in a spirit of righteous indignation. As we begin to explore this letter, we will discover why he was so indignant.

It begins quite simply with an identification of the name of **Paul** (v. 1). I remember when my mentor, Dr. John Gerstner, spoke of the Apostle Paul. To describe his personality and his character, he used Paul's name as an acrostic, saying *P* stood for "polluted" because Paul understood that he was the chief of sinners, and the *A* referred to his "office" as an Apostle. But of most striking significance to me was that Dr. Gerstner said the *U* in Paul's name stood for "uncompromising" and the *L* stood for "loving." Dr. Gerstner explained that we normally think the quality of being uncompromising is not a virtue but a vice, a reflection of somebody who is rigid and stiff, unbending and relentless in his views. This is the exact contrast of what we expect from somebody who is loving. Then he went on to say that Paul was not only uncompromising, but he was loving. Dr. Gerstner wouldn't allow this to be understood in unethical terms; rather, he said Paul was uncompromising and *therefore* loving. The reason Paul refused to be compromising, as we clearly see in this letter to the Galatians, is that he was never ever willing to negotiate the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul would be patient, tender, and long-suffering about a host of debates and issues raised in the various churches that he founded and to whom he ministered, but when it came to the gospel, there was no wiggle room in Paul because he loved the gospel. More importantly, he loved the Lord of the gospel. His heart was filled to overflowing with affection for Jesus. Not only did he love the gospel of Jesus and love Jesus Himself, but he loved his congregations. He loved those people to whom he ministered. He had such a depth of affection and concern for them that he would never think of compromising the gospel to be popular with them or to be politically correct in their eyes. He loved them far too much for that.

He further identifies himself at the beginning of this epistle, as he often does on other occasions, as **an apostle** (v. 1). We've heard that term *Apostle* again and again, and in common jargon, we tend to see two words as synonyms: disciple and Apostle. However, they're not synonyms. They don't refer to the same thing, even though they represent the same people on certain occasions. The term *disciple* means a "learner" or a "student." The term Apostle means something far more than that in its literal meaning.

The Greek word *apostolos* means "someone who has been sent," but what is meant is not just an everyday messenger for an everyday task. When my mother

sent me to the grocery store to buy a loaf of bread, she did not thereby ordain me as an Apostle. Rather, Apostles were sent from a particular authoritative person and carried that person's particular authority. Jesus had many disciples, more than seventy, and He chose from among that group of disciples only twelve to whom He would confer the authority and the office of Apostleship. Who, though, is the greatest Apostle we meet in the New Testament? You may say Peter, or you may be inclined to say Paul. Wasn't Paul of singular importance as the Apostle to the gentiles?

Neither Peter nor Paul deserves the rank of chief Apostle in the New Testament. The supreme Apostle in the New Testament is Jesus Himself, who from all eternity was ordained by the Father and sent into the world by the Father's authority to fulfill a mission. The eternal second person of the Trinity took upon Himself a human nature to fulfill the task that the Father had given Him, and He was empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out that mission from the Father. As Jesus said, "I do not speak on my own authority" (John 14:10), and "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18).

An apostle in the ancient world was an emissary who had been confirmed by an authority or a ruler such as a king and who was authorized to speak in the name of that authority. By speaking in the name of that person, he carried with him the supreme authority of the one who sent him. Jesus was the supreme Apostle. The authority that the Father gave Him was then transferred by Him to a small group of men who spoke with the authority of Christ, who in turn spoke with the authority of God.

If you don't like what Paul says or what Peter says, you're rejecting the authority of Jesus. If you reject the authority of Jesus, you reject the authority of God the Father. When Paul identifies himself with his official title **Paul, an apostle**, he is claiming divine authority, and such authority can impose duties and obligations on anyone who hears his voice. Paul wastes no time in using this authority to respond to a very significant issue in the Galatian region.

A heresy had developed among the Galatians, and it threatened and denied the very gospel. It threatened the authority of Christ. This pernicious heresy is known as the Judaizing heresy, and it argued that to be a Christian, you must continue to practice the rituals and the ceremonies of the Old Testament law. This would, by implication, deny the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ. The group that promulgated this heresy, known as the Judaizers, denied that the Jewish ceremonial rules and rituals were perfectly and absolutely fulfilled by the finished work of Jesus Christ. For them to insist on the continuity of those former things was, by implication, to empty their fulfillment by Jesus Christ.

Those who were in effect denying the gospel and denying the Christ of the gospel were quick to argue that Paul, who had founded the churches in the region of Galatia, did not have the authority of an Apostle. In arguing against the gospel, they were also arguing against the credentials of Paul. At the very beginning of this epistle, with his writing instrument ready to explode in his hands, Paul says: “Now hear this: This is the Apostle Paul speaking. I’m not simply an itinerant missionary or the founder of the church among the Galatians, but I am an Apostle.”

In the early church, a controversial question concerned the authenticity of the Apostleship of Paul. There were criteria set forth in the book of Acts to select a replacement among the Apostles. To be an Apostle, one first had to have been a disciple of Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry. Second, one had to have been an eyewitness of the resurrection. Third, one had to have been called directly and immediately by Jesus to fill that role.

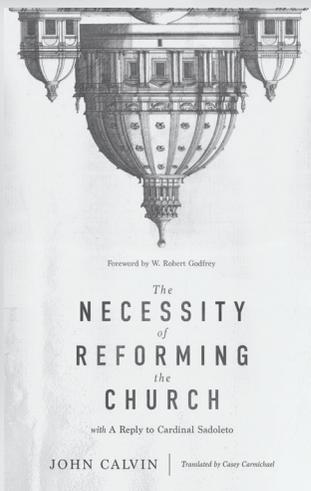
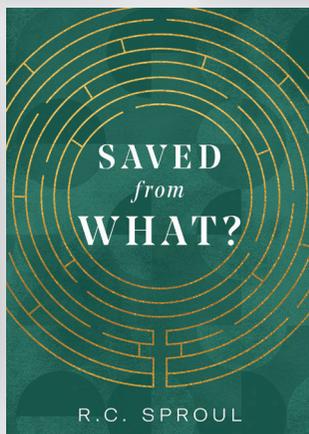
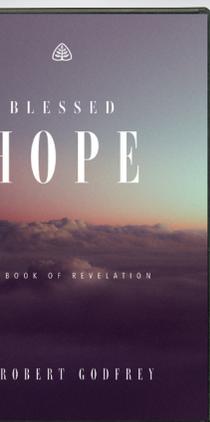
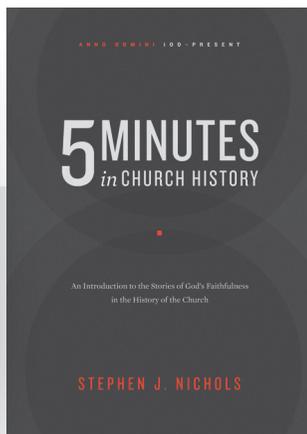
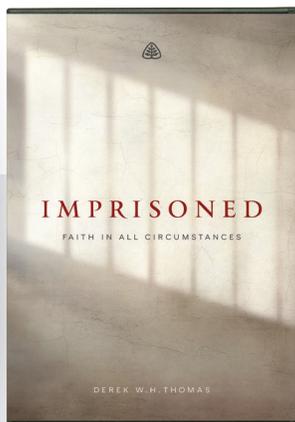
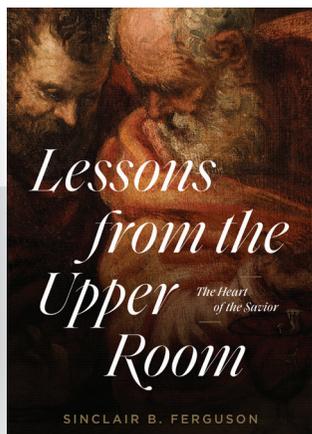
We look at the book of Acts and see that the Apostle Paul was not a disciple during the earthly ministry of Jesus. Paul says that he did not know Jesus according to the flesh and that he was not an eyewitness of the resurrection, at least not before the ascension. Indeed, Paul says that Christ appeared to him as “one untimely born” (1 Cor. 15:8) on the road to Damascus. The most critical and significant criterion to be an Apostle was to have a direct and immediate call from Jesus.

Some argue that one of the main reasons that Luke wrote the book of Acts was not only to give a history of the early church and the expansion from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth but also to defend the authenticity of Paul’s Apostolic authority. Three times in the book of Acts, Luke recounts the circumstances of Paul’s call by Christ to be an Apostle (chs. 9; 22; 26).

As we learn in Acts, Paul—then called Saul—was told after being commissioned by Jesus to be an Apostle that he was to return to Jerusalem to meet with some of the other elder statesmen among the young church so that his Apostolic authority could be confirmed (Acts 9:6, 10–19). The Apostle Paul, according to the first-century Christian community, was public enemy number one. He was the man who had been breathing out fire, who went from city to city dragging Christians from their homes, and who subjected them to severe persecution even unto death (Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–2). Here’s the man who stood on the sidelines holding the clothes of those who were throwing stones to kill Stephen (Acts 7:58).

Paul’s reputation was well known in Jerusalem; he was a Christian killer who hated the church and wanted to destroy it. After his conversion, he came to the church claiming to be an Apostle. There was great suspicion and great

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