

## Writing Letters

Galatians 1:1-3

I am very much a product of my own increasingly electronic generation. I didn't grow up with the internet or cell phones, but I have lived nearly all my adult life with them. I carry my phone with me wherever I go, all the time. I am always accessible, even with a bluetooth connection to my car audio system. If I'm at the Grand Canyon, as I was in January, I can still connect to the internet. My computer remains on throughout the day, automatically checking for email all of the time. I send and receive text messages on my phone wherever I am, and those texts arrive simultaneously on my desktop computer. I also use a laptop, whenever I am out of my office or away from home. From early in the morning until late at night, I am in immediate touch with the world.

But I fear something for myself, even as I fear it for many others. I fear the loss of the ability to write a letter. I write very few letters any more. Most of you probably write even less than I do. Sometimes, perhaps, an email correspondence is substantive enough to be called a letter, and they might also be quite personal, almost a personal letter. But seldom does our modern email reflect the sort of substantive letter writing characteristic of previous generations.

Even further, several years ago I realized that email had become outdated. I learned that if you are under 25, I had to send you a text if I wanted to get in touch with you. Millennials consider email obsolete. And leaving a voicemail is out of the question as well. It has to be texting, or some other form of social media.

Quite to the contrary, when Sharon and I were getting to know

each other, before we were married, we lived in different cities, hundreds of miles apart. For 3-1/2 years. And the medium that enabled us to get to know and grow to love one another was letter writing. We talked on the phone every week or so, though neither of us particularly enjoy that form of communication. And phones for us meant a landline, a wire attached to a machine that sat on a table or a desk in your house. No daily cell phone contact. No on-going, immediate interaction of email throughout the day. We wrote letters to each other. We got to know each other by exchanging letters over a long period of time, and the substance of that foundation was the basis for our marriage.

Yet as much as I fear for myself and my own generation, later generations have gone much farther than I have in abbreviating their communication and correspondence. A substantive letter is replaced by an abbreviated email. Short and to the point. Easily misunderstood. We express emotion with punctuation marks. And emojis. Often email now has no greeting or introduction. And you don't even have to sign your name—the computer does that for you automatically. And when you are too busy to read your own mail, the computer will send a response for you.

People who text don't even write out whole words anymore. Just initials as abbreviations. It has created a language of initials all its own, and I often have to look up those initials I receive in text messages. But even texting can become too cumbersome now, and the preferred form of communication for many is to tweet, and it was quite the news story a couple years ago when Twitter doubled the number of permitted characters in a tweet, from 140 to 280. I read on Google that only 1% of tweets actually reach that limit!

Today, instead of personal letters we write blogs for everyone to read everything about us. Instead of personal letters, we rely

on so-called social media. We count our friends by our Facebook accounts or Twitter followers. And that's where relationships are established, or ruined. In all of that, we have all but lost the ability and the commitment to write letters.

I say all of that to introduce the book we are beginning to study this afternoon, the book of Galatians. The letter, or epistle, of the Apostle Paul to the churches of Galatia. Paul didn't tweet the Galatians. This was no abbreviated text message. This isn't a Facebook posting. And Paul doesn't start with "Hey." He begins with a formal greeting. And he doesn't end with a pre-programmed computerized signature. He doesn't even allow his secretary who is recording his words to write the whole letter himself.

Gal. 6:11 "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand."

This letter is a comprehensive, substantive epistle in which matters of life and death were addressed. The overall subject which troubled the church then is still a source of great trouble today, and that subject is best identified in,

Gal. 2:16 "...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

That subject is the reason why I have chosen to preach on this book, since we are studying the book of Deuteronomy in the morning worship service. Deuteronomy literally means the second law, the repetition of the moral law given by God to Moses to the people of Israel just before they would enter the promised land. In the outworking of the covenant of grace, the book of Deuteronomy focuses upon the giving of God's law, and as

crucial as it is for us as Christians to understand a full and comprehensive exposition of God's moral law summarized in the ten commandments, it is absolutely vital that we never embrace the error which was so troubling the churches of Galatia, which we'll identify in detail as we come to it, but the error was an error regarding justification. It was attributed to a group of people called "Judaizers." The gist of the error was the idea that to be a Christian, you had to submit to the Jewish ceremonial system as a system of works. It was the false doctrine of justification by works. In response to that, we must maintain that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone. Paul makes that declaration so clear, "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ,...by works of the law no one will be justified."

So that is our subject this afternoon, not in contrast to the book of Deuteronomy, and certainly not in conflict. But in balance! The law and the gospel are not opposed to each other, but they both have to be understood correctly, and that's the reason for my emphasis now on the book of Galatians while we study Deuteronomy in the morning.

The ultimate question of life can be simply stated, "How can a sinful man be made right with God?" That is a very personal question. How can you be made right with God? That's the question I propose to you this afternoon. That's the question I want to be at the forefront of your mind as we study God's word. And all of the possible answers to that question can be put into two categories. Either you do something yourself. Or God does something for you. And, of course, the biblical gospel of the Christian faith requires that we understand and believe the second of those two answers. God does something for you. "A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."

In order to make that point to the church in Galatia, Paul is required to assert his own authority as a teacher. He is required not only to identify himself, but to identify the source of his authority. What is it that gives him the right to teach and instruct the Galatian churches the way that he does?

Simple answer, he is an apostle. And this letter, this epistle, is,

### **I. A WORD OF AUTHORITY.**

He speaks with authority right from the outset, defending himself with that simple and straightforward introduction, “Paul, an apostle.”

The word apostle messenger messenger, and Paul comes as a man with a message to deliver. There is nothing casual or informal about his approach. He is not trying to play the crowds, as our political candidates always seem to be doing. He is not trying to figure out how to connect with the people on a personal level, as if he were speaking at a town hall meeting. He asserts himself in the boldness way possible, by pointing to the origin of his apostolic authority. And,

#### **A. The origin of apostolic authority is not in man.**

Simple words. But a very important point. Paul is not an apostle because of a human decision. His office in the church is not from men. The origin does not begin with men. He doesn't gain his credibility from men. He didn't obtain his message from men.

This will be a big point for him.

1:11-12

He goes to great lengths to defend himself, because he was

not one of the original apostles. In fact, he was a persecutor of the church, and he never forgot that. And when he was converted, we read in,

1:16b-21

Then look at 2:1. Fourteen years later he returned. Don't miss that. It took 14 years for Paul's preparation to be complete. That was after 3 years in the Arabian desert. The origin of his authority was not in man. He was not an apostle “from men,” according to verse 1.

Nor “through man,” from verse 1. Another simple Greek preposition. The idea of that word is by means of man. By the working of man. In other words, it was not the action of a man that made him an apostle. We aren't told much in Scripture about how replacements were identified, except in the first case when Judas was replaced by Matthias.

Acts 1:21 “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” 23 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

The casting of lots was a method by which God's secret will would be made known. It was an act of direct, special revelation. So God chose Matthias. Directly. And God chose Paul. God

installed Paul as an apostle. God ordained Paul. And it was by Jesus' own, personal determination. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul refers to Jesus making post-resurrection appearances to the apostles. And he writes,

1 Cor. 15:8 "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain."

The point is that the origin of apostolic authority is not in man, but in God. So when the apostles wrote Scripture, when the apostles made decisions and determinations, the foundation of the church was being laid. And God was the responsible party.

## **B. The origin of apostolic authority rests with God the Trinity.**

v.1

Notice the emphasis upon two persons of the Trinity, God the Father and God the Son. Our God is a triune God, a God who became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ, in the flesh, was "raised from the dead." So much doctrine packed into this very little verse. Such a doctrinally full statement about God—the trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection. It is all here, as Paul's defense of himself and of his ministry. And it was all necessary, because he was seeking to correct and instruct this church that had entertained a very dangerous error.

Lots of people today don't like such a presentation of authority. Lots of people are uncomfortable with preaching that exhibits this sense of authority. It is uncomfortable, and we don't want that at all. Comfortable and casual is better, but not authoritative.

In that context, lots of people don't like to think about the origin of that authority as resting with God, because, you see, we want to be autonomous. Do you want to be our own authority? If you don't like something that's done, if you don't agree with those who exercise authority, do you feel the inherent right to assert your own independence? So you can reject or deny the exercise of authority simply by asserting your own will, as if the authority of those who lead the church actually does come from men and through men. Because you see, if it does, then you have every right to exercise your own authority in response, whenever you choose.

But Paul writes a word of authority. And I proclaim to you that word of authority. This is no ordinary letter. Now, having said all of that, let me emphasize what Paul does next. After asserting his authority, he immediately proceeds to give,

## **II. A WORD OF BLESSING TO THE CHURCHES.**

He speaks to the churches of Galatia, the churches gathered together in that one region; a group of churches we would identify today as a presbytery.

v.2b

And what is that blessing? The one and same blessing I often pronounce at the beginning of our worship services. I hope you don't see that as some mere formality or some sort of stilted element of liturgy. Rather, it is the very blessing of God himself, a blessing tied again to both the first and second persons of the Trinity.

v.3

This is marvelous! The one who exercises authority gives a blessing! The one who declares his right to rule with authority is the one who speaks to the very personal needs that each of us

have. The need for grace. And the need for peace.

### **A. Grace.**

The need for grace is obvious. Grace is a gift. Grace is receiving God's favor when you deserve his judgment, receiving his blessing when you deserve his wrath. So that is the first and foremost blessing to be given to God's people. That is the first and foremost blessing for you to receive as a body of God's people today. Grace to you. May God's grace be yours. Grace be with all of you.

That's where we begin. When you come to God, struggling with sin, grieving over your sins, that's where we begin. Grace to you. When you come feeling your own unworthiness, feeling your own weakness and frailty, your own imperfect faithfulness, the blessing is clear. Please, hear it. Receive it. Embrace it. Delight in it. People of God, grace to you. And,

### **B. Peace.**

The enmity is over. The alienation is put away. When Adam and Eve sinned, God banished them from his presence, from the Garden of Eden. When man fell into sin, God pronounced his curse of judgment upon them. By nature, therefore, we are children of wrath. By nature, by fallen nature, we are his enemies.

Rom. 5:8 "...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

So, peace to you. The blessing of reconciliation. Peace to all

of you who are in Christ.

2 Thes. 3:16 "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.

People of God, when the Paul asserts his apostolic authority in writing this letter to the Galatians, he begins with a word of blessing. Let that blessing be yours, let it encourage you. Let it strengthen you, motivate you. Let it rejoice your soul and renew you will. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

There is another example of this blessing, given to us in Romans 1. And as I read that blessing there, notice how it begins.

Rom. 1:7 "...to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

So this blessing is given to those who are loved by God, beloved of God. This blessing is given to those whom God, in his love, has chosen to be his people. This blessing is yours, in Christ Jesus.

What a marvelous way to describe who we are in Christ. Beloved of God. And the blessing comes to you for that very reason, because God has loved you. In that love, he blesses you with the gift of his grace, not dealing with you as your sins deserve, but removing them from you as far as the east is from the west.

And in that love, the relationship which sinned has destroyed, is restored. Reconciliation is accomplished. The blessing of peace.

And so with the authority bestowed upon me as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, an authority which is recognized by the laying on the hands of the presbytery, but an authority which ultimately does not come from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead, with that authority, let this blessing I read be the great encouragement of your soul.

v.3 “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”