

Young People's Forum (III.3)

Dear Young People,

I want to continue in this letter our discussion about the antithesis in doctrine and thought that exists between the people of God and the church. When I finish the discussion on this point, we shall discuss the relationship with those who do not hold to the same truth as we do. But that must wait. There is another text in the Bible that I want to discuss briefly with you. It is found in Galatians 1:8, 9. Again, I hope you will read the whole chapter or even the whole book in your devotions. But I am especially interested in verses 1-10.

I have finished a commentary on the book of Galatians and the final touches are being put on it so that it can be published, the Lord willing, next autumn. Galatians is a powerful book with which I fell in love even before I was a minister. After a short series on John the Baptist, I preached my first real series on the book of Galatians. It has been an attraction to me ever since those days over fifty years ago. It was also Luther's best-loved book. He called it his "Katie" – the nickname of his wife Catherine Von Bora – "with whom I live in holy wedlock." Toward the end of his life, he said that he did not much care if all his books perished – except for two: his commentary on Galatians and his *Bondage of the Will*.

Galatians was written to the churches in central Asia Minor, churches that were established on Paul's first missionary journey: Antioch in Pisidia (not Syria), Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium, along with others in the surrounding country. It was written because in these churches were Jews who had been brought to faith in Christ, but who were teaching that it was necessary for a man to be circumcised if he was to be saved.

Now, that did not seem to be such a grave error and we might react to it by saying: Why get all upset about such a minor thing? But Paul was very upset and used some of the strongest language against them you will find in any of his letters. He correctly explained that if the Jews who professed faith in Jesus Christ taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation, they were guilty of teaching a conditional salvation. If they insisted on circumcision, they had to insist on the keeping of the law as a condition to salvation. By doing that they denied justification by faith alone and made salvation dependent on man.

Paul is talking about these teachers in Galatians 1:8, 9, and he condemns their teaching in fierce words: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you that that ye have received, let him be accursed."

Now, that is strong language. We would likely react against such strong language and accuse Paul of being too picky about things. "Are you going to make an issue of circumcision? How can you do that?" or maybe we would say, "But these people are such nice people. We know them. We have been in their homes and have had coffee with them" Or, "But they are so sincere, and perhaps their mistake is merely made because they do not understand very well all the fine points of the gospel."

Paul brushes all those things aside and insists that those who teach circumcision as necessary to salvation are destroying the gospel. They are preaching another gospel than the one he preached. It is not the gospel of Christ and salvation in him. It is in fact, a denial of the cross of Jesus Christ (3:1, 5:3 & 4). If they would object and claim to believe in Christ and to

confess that their salvation is only in Christ, Paul would deny that and say, "You have made the cross of Christ useless and in vain."

You see, young people, it is all or nothing. It is the truth of Scripture or it is another gospel. There are, in Paul's mind, no "in-betweens," partly gospel and partly not. I think we can understand that. If I have in my possession a photograph of my wife and someone takes it and draws a small beard on her face, then I have every right to say, "That's not my wife." And if the culprit said that it was only a small change that really didn't change the value of the picture, my response would be "That's not my wife. You have destroyed the picture of my wife." Is that not as true of the beautiful "picture" of Christ that God draws for us in Scripture? If man makes "minor" changes in the picture, do we still have a picture of Christ? I do not believe that.

And, notice, that on all those who preach another gospel than Paul preached is pronounced "anathema;" that is, accursed. We must not shrink from such strong language, for it is part of the infallibly inspired Scripture.

We may ask at this point: But how can we be sure that what we believe is the truth of Christ? The answer is: the truth of Christ is found in the Scriptures. But if our questioner goes on to say, "How can you be sure? Many give Scripture different interpretations and all claim to find their teaching in the Bible. What makes us think that our interpretation is the right one?"

There are two truths that are the answer to that and that help us in this respect. The first is the doctrine of Scripture itself. Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and teaches only one truth concerning God and Christ; and that truth is clear, for ever since the Reformation, the church has insisted that an attribute of Scripture is its clarity – that is, it is easy to understand. For this reason, those who teach that Scripture says that God loves only his people, and that God loves all men, are wrong. It would be like me saying, "I love my wife, and I also love this other lady who lives in a flat three stories down." Nor would it satisfy my wife to say to her: "But I love you more than the other lady."

And if we are still not sure what Scripture teaches, then we have the faith of the church for 2000 years to compare our belief with. The church from earliest times believed that salvation was only God's work, for example, and that, therefore, salvation was unconditional. That can be proved from their writings. They believed this when there were heretics around who denied it. And these truths have been incorporated into the confessions of the church. We who love the truth of God's absolute sovereignty that makes salvation unconditional stand in that noble and illustrious line of saints who taught the same thing. And, let us not forget it, they were ready to die for it – and many of them did, under terrible torture. They were, as Elijah was, jealous for the name of their God.

The question is, of course, are we? We must ask ourselves this question. We must not be wishy-washy about the contents of our faith and "hem and haw" about what we believe. We must not be willing to see the other picture, to adopt as our faith what "nice" people teach. If we live the antithesis, we must be jealous for our God and the honor of his name.

I am jealous about the name of my wife. As I said before, if some men were making derogatory remarks about her that were not true, I would go at them with fists flying. If they say, "We were only having fun; we didn't say anything really bad; don't get so excited about minor things," I would answer: "That's my wife! You lie about her. Quit."

Is not God more important than our earthly relationships? Will we defend the name of a friend who speaks wrongly about God? Are we unconcerned about any lie that is told about God? Then we have denied the antithesis. And we must remember that the antithesis in doctrine and faith is the ground of the antithesis in life. We can live holy lives only when we are convinced of the truth.

With love in the Lord,

Prof