

One of the themes that runs throughout the letters of Paul to the churches is the all-sufficiency of Christ. It seems that wherever he had planted a church, a group would come in after he left to try and add something to the Gospel that Paul had preached and which they had originally believed. When Paul was addressing the elders of the large church in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, he warned of this happening. By this stage in his missionary work he had seen it so often he expected it. In Acts 20:28-29, Paul warned them in person, "Be on guard for yourselves and for the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." Why was this problem so widespread in the newly planted churches? It is part of the pride of man to add his own works to the means of salvation. People want to feel and experience a part in the salvation process. They want to do something that serves as penance for all the mistakes they have made, or they want to feel that they merit Christ's sacrifice by all the good deeds they have accomplished. It is also human nature to want to compare themselves to others, and feel that they have done more or lived a better life. I have even had people tell me to give them a yardstick or a formula to accomplish what is necessary so they can feel worthy. One preacher explained that if you ask people to climb a mountain, walk across a desert, or swim the English Channel, they will try to do it; but the free grace of God just doesn't register with them. In Romans 1:21-23, Paul wrote that mankind had gone off on its own and invented all the world religions because, "even though they knew God they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of God for an image in the form of corruptible man".

It is appealing to the nature of man in its fallen state to believe that we can be saved by works, or some religious formula that accomplishes salvation. This is what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. Only the followers of Christ taught and wrote that God has done all the work necessary by sending His Son into the world to live a perfect life and die on the cross as a substitutionary death for our sins. All other religions are man reaching out to God (or to become god) by their own works; but Christianity is God reaching out to man by the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

The Churches in Galatia

On Paul's first missionary journey, he planted multiple churches in the area in Asia Minor known as Galatia. No sooner had Paul arrived back at his home church in Antioch, Syria, that he received news that men had come in behind him and were adding their traditions and

religion to the Gospel he had preached which had saved them. Apparently, these men were claiming that in addition to believing in Jesus they also needed to eat kosher food and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. We know that early on, there was a strong following amongst Jewish Christians to do this. In fact the same problem occurred in Antioch, and it alarmed Paul and Barnabas so much that they traveled to Jerusalem and called a church council to settle this problem. The historical record of this can be found in Acts 15. The elders of the church and the Apostles were all there to hear the case, and it was unanimously decided that salvation is purely by the grace of God and it is received only by faith.

Paul wrote the churches in Galatia that he was “amazed” that they were so quickly deserting God who called them by the grace of Christ for a different gospel, which was not really the gospel at all, but a distortion of the Gospel of Christ. Paul felt so strongly about it that he told them that if anyone preached a different gospel, “let him be accursed.” Then for emphasis he repeated this warning. For the next three chapters, Paul proceeded to defend, explain, and prove that we are justified by the grace of God received by faith—apart from the law or the works of man. The atoning work of Jesus on the cross is sufficient to save us. That good works are expected and a necessary result of being saved is established in chapters 5 and 6, but they are a result of having Christ in us.

The Philippians

After Paul had been arrested and taken to Rome for trial, the church at Philippi sent Epaphroditus to see Paul and give aid to him. Paul sent a very encouraging letter back to them about his circumstances, but he also took the opportunity to warn them about false teachers in Philippians 3:2. Paul used very harsh language in describing these men, “Beware of the dogs, the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision”. I believe Paul called them the false circumcision because they were teaching that you need to be circumcised to be saved. Based on what he went on to say, I think these men were Jews who were professing Christ, but also teaching that Christians needed to adhere to all the Jewish laws and traditions. Paul said that the “true circumcision” were the believers in Christ who worship in the Spirit of God and glory only in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (all the external physical actions).

Paul used himself as the best illustration of the all sufficiency of Christ. Before his conversion, he put all his confidence in his heritage, his circumcision, his keeping of the law, his accomplishments as a Pharisee, and his great zeal for his religion. In fact, he worked so hard and accomplished so much that his fellow peers “found him blameless as to the righteousness which is in the Law.” Philippians 3:4-6, gives us the before picture of Paul, but

Paul gives us the after Christ picture of his life in verse 7-14. Paul said that all the stuff he had valued before he believed in Jesus, he now counted as worthless compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Then he took it to the next level by saying that all his previous religious and cultural values were but “rubbish” because in God’s eyes Paul had no righteousness of his own from all these things. How hard would that be to say that about the religion that your parents had taught you and you had spent so much time working toward? Paul actually felt very fortunate that he was no longer spinning his wheels trying to accomplish salvation himself, but now the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith had changed his life. All the stuff that the false teachers in Philippi were claiming they needed was but rubbish. All they needed was Jesus, He alone has accomplished our salvation by His atoning work on the cross, and any conditions that we try to add to that only distort the true Gospel and lead people astray.

The Colossians

When Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he also had a visit from Epaphras who came from the church at Colossae. Epaphras brought news that the believers there were doing well, but false teachers were also there trying to add conditions to the Gospel. There has been much speculation about exactly who these false teachers were and what their teaching was, but from Paul’s letter we can get a pretty good idea. A lot of the stuff Paul wrote about sounds like Greek philosophy mixed with elements of Judaism. Many believe they were the beginnings of Gnosticism, but regardless it is clear they were trying to entice the Colossians to add stuff to the true Gospel.

Paul wrote an awesome letter to the Church at Colossae with the theme of the all sufficiency of Christ. They don’t need the philosophies of man, the ascetic religious practices that appeal to people, the special food, or any of the religious practices that tend to puff us up about our own accomplishments. We must realize that we have no righteousness of our own, but we can have the righteousness of God which comes from a relationship with Christ. Paul did an awesome job of establishing the supremacy of Christ, the sufficiency of Christ, and the deity of Christ. What do we need to be saved? Christ accomplished it on the cross. How do we make it ours? We receive it by faith. How shall we now live? In Col.2:6, Paul said, “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him”. In other words we continue to live by faith in Jesus, and keep our focus on Him and what He has done. We live by faith trusting the Spirit of Christ to lead us and guide us in the Word of God “so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col.1:10).

Why should we entrust it all to Christ? “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority” (Col.2:9-10). Paul asked them the question that if they were in Christ, why would you submit to the decrees of men about what to eat or drink, handle or touch, self abasement, and other matters of religion that men use to justify themselves? Paul called the decrees things that had the appearance of wisdom, but were just self made religion (Col.2:20-23).

We need to do some self examination and see if there are things in our lives that we use to justify ourselves other than Christ. Is there penance that we do to feel forgiven, or is our forgiveness complete in Christ? Are we holding on to traditions of men that were taught to us (Paul called this self-made religion), which tend to divide the church? Do we swell up in pride discussing our good works and accomplishments, or do we give Christ all the glory? Are we focused on the world and the stuff in it, or as Paul said are we “seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” ?

CHARLIE TAYLOR