

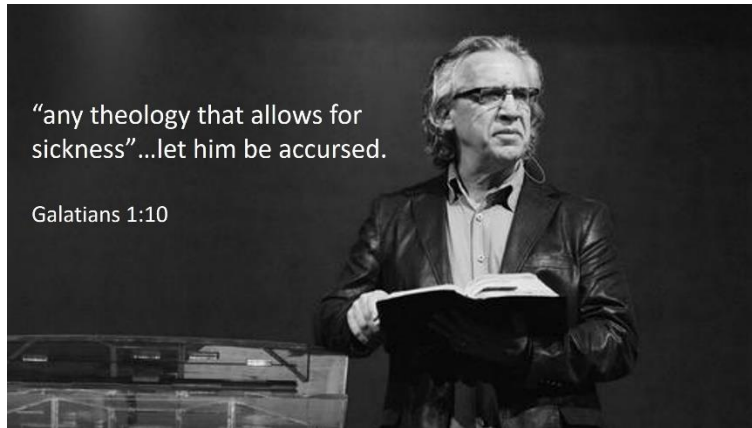


⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

¹⁰ For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Play [Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing](#). Isn't that a stunning rendition of an amazing hymn? As beautiful as it is, this very song caused me to be an unintentional heretic this week. Three sisters bring their stirring voices together in this song. They just so happen to all be Mormons. I knew that but I like the song anyway because it's a great hymn, right? And truth is truth no matter who speaks it or sings it. So I played the song for our men's study this past Wednesday and I also printed out the lyrics for the guys. As artists sometimes do, this hymn was layered into another song. Honestly, I never paid attention to those lyrics because it was also a beautiful work of music that accompanied the Christian hymn. But it wasn't until we read the lyrics as we listened that we discovered that the other song was a quote from the book of Abraham written by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church. Do you see what I did? I played a song that was a mixture of a classic hymn with false teaching from a Mormon book. I became an unintentional heretic. We all had a good laugh about it—and then I swore them to secrecy. 😊

That's a humorous example of accidental heresy. This next example is not funny at all. This is Bill Johnson from Bethel Church in Redding California teaching on [this very passage](#) in Galatians chapter one.



Here is Johnson's translation of Galatians 1:8. "If anyone preaches to you any theology that allows for sickness, let him be accursed." Do you see what he is doing here? He is taking Paul's stern warning against teaching a false gospel and applying it to his own false gospel!

The book of Galatians is a fight for the one true gospel. The errors taught against here are not a result

of unintentional or accidental heresy. The heresy found here is purposeful and deadly. And it's arguably one of the most common heresies that has the potential to wriggle its way into our way of thinking. Before we can join Paul in battling the heresy we must make sure we first understand it.

Let me remind you of the first two principles from last week.

1. False teaching brings eternal (and temporary) destruction on the souls of people.

There is no end to the temporary harm that can be done but by far the most significant harm is eternal judgment for those who were led astray.

2. False teaching is a rejection of Christ and his truth.

Verse six reads, *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.* A rejection of the one true gospel is not a mere rejection of words or beliefs. It is a rejection of Christ himself.

3. False teachers are sitting under the judgment of God.

Two out of the five verses we read this morning have a curse attached to them. *If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.*

I mentioned last week that the Greek word for "accursed" is the word anathema. Here are a couple of definitions of the word.




- a: one that is cursed by ecclesiastical authority.
- b: a person consigned to damnation or destruction

And here are how the various translations handle the word.

- ESV/NASB/KJV—let him be accursed
- NIV—let him be eternally condemned
- NLT—let that person be cursed

It sounds pretty serious, right? Why would Paul say such a thing? It seems incredibly callous un-Christlike to curse another person, wouldn't you agree? I don't think any of us would ever do such a thing. In order to understand this question we need to understand the power of grammar.

You all love grammar, don't you? I don't know about you, but I still get the chills thinking about my 6th grade grammar class. This particular teacher was so tough and not too many people actually care about the boring rules of grammar, right? In this case it makes a big difference.

 ACTIVE	 MIDDLE	 PASSIVE
<i>Subject is doing the acting.</i>	<i>Subject is doing the acting with reference to himself.</i>	<i>Subject is being acted upon, receiving the action.</i>

Call a curse upon him.

Let him be accursed

He will be cursed

This verse is written in the middle voice. In the active voice the subject is doing the action and would have been written as, "Call a curse upon him." In the passive voice the subject is being acted upon and would be written as "He will be cursed." But in the middle voice is this in between sort of thing and would be written as "Let him be accursed." The point is that Paul was not calling down a curse on false teachers and you and I are certainly not asked to do that either. It is something that is happening to the person, but they are responsible for it. Ultimately, this is God's judgment upon them and they are bringing it upon themselves through teaching a false gospel.

This is such a serious thing that Paul even included himself in this pronouncement, so it was no idle or callous comment. *But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.* So if Paul showed up one day and all of a sudden the gospel was different, he would be under judgment. If an angel appeared and preached anything different than grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, let that angel be accursed.

Cursing for sin goes all the way to the original sin in the garden.

Genesis 3:14

The Lord God said to the serpent,
 "Because you have done this,
 cursed are you above all livestock
 and above all beasts of the field;

Genesis 3:17

cursed is the ground because of you;
 in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

So Paul is not cursing anyone but he is making it clear that a curse of God's judgment will fall on teachers of a false gospel. But why such a strong curse? Remember that the Gospel itself was at stake. This was not a fringe doctrine or a debatable matter. This is the core of the eternal salvation message. To desert the gospel is to desert Christ himself. These false teachers were

troubling believers and leading them astray. Compare this curse of judgment to Jesus' statement: whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matt 18.6) Jesus was saying that

Now here's a really interesting use of the word anathema from romans 9. "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed (anathema) and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Paul has such love for his countrymen the Israelites that he was willing to be anathema to bring them to faith. He was willing to be "accursed and cut off from Christ" for them, if it were possible. Now of course he would not actually have given up his salvation but he's using this to describe how deeply he cares for them. But this is what anathema means—accursed and cut off from Christ. And in the case of false teachers, this is what they have done to themselves. Do you see, they have cut themselves off from Christ.

In 1976, the Great Thompson River flood took the lives of 143 people and became the deadliest flood in Colorado's history. I was in Estes Park as a chaperone for a youth trip about six years after this flood. As we drove up the road to Estes Park I'll never forget the bus driver telling us how a massive wall of water had roared down that very canyon road. Recently I was talking with a woman whose grandparents and baby sister were swept away in that terrible flood. People died because they could not get to high ground fast enough, but what if someone intentionally put themselves in harms ways? Of course in an actual flood no one would ever do that, but this is the picture Paul is painting of the false teachers. They have put themselves in the path of the flood. They have placed themselves in the path of judgment and Paul is simply saying, "Let the floodwaters of God's judgment come upon them." They have done this to themselves and will reap what they have sown. So he is not being vindictive. He is merely stating facts about the peril in which they have placed themselves.

Paul tends to balance out his toughness and tenderness. As I showed you before, we see the same contrast in the book of Galatians.

- Threatened them with a curse—*If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed (1:9).*
- Opposed Peter to his face—*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned (2:11)*
- Called them names—*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? (3:1)*
- Desired self-mutilation upon them—*I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! (5:12)*
- Yet, had tender love for them—*My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! (4:19)*

3. False teaching can spread extremely fast.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him

Usually it takes decades or even generations for churches and movements to stray from the gospel. Some movements and denominations last for hundreds of years. Harvard was founded as

a thoroughly Christian college in 1636. It retained its Christian foundation for over 150 years before it abandoned its foundation upon the word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is how it tends to go with institutions and movements. All of the mainline denomination were at one time solidly founded on the gospel. Anglican, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, some Presbyterians, some Lutherans and even some Baptists. Down the list it goes. Many lasted for a couple hundred years but then lost their mooring and deserted “him who called them in the grace of Christ.”

Our denomination has been very fortunate. The “Free Church” was based in Norway, Sweden and Denmark and broke free from the state-controlled Lutheran Church. Then they came to the US and the Free Church as a movement has been going strong for almost 200 years. As far as I know we have never had a major split of any kind. Certainly not every church has been equally healthy over the past two centuries, but the movement has remained founded on the gospel.

DATE	EVENT	GALATIANS	ACTS
30	Death & resurrection of Jesus/Pentecost		1-2
33	Conversion of Saul on road to Damascus (preached immediately after conv., tried to kill him)	1:15-16	9:1-19
33-35	Paul in Arabia & Damascus for 3 years (“received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ”)?	1:17	9:20-25
35	Paul in Jerusalem for 2 weeks (preached immediately, tried to kill him)	1:18-20	9:26-29
35-47	Paul in Syria & Cilicia (Tarsus) for 14 years	1:21-2:1	9:30
47-48	1 st Church Planting Journey		12:25-14:28
48	Paul wrote Galatians		
48	2 nd visit to Jerusalem (“I went up again to Jerusalem”)	2:1-14	12:25
49-52	2 nd Church Planting Journey		15:36-18:22
52-57	3 rd Church Planting Journey		18:23-21:17



But churches and movements do desert the gospel. It might take centuries or decades, but without the utmost vigilance and commitment to/ the gospel, it will happen. Do you know how quickly it happened for the churches in Galatia? This chart shows the events of the early church. A few weeks ago we looked at Saul’s conversion in Acts 9. That happened about AD 33. It would be a full fourteen years before Paul went off on his first church planting journey and then he wrote his first letter, which was to the churches in Galatia. But guess where he traveled on his first church planting journey? To Galatia. He traveled throughout Galatia

planting churches. He established them in the gospel of grace. They had a solid foundation. And then a year later he wrote a letter to these infant churches saying, *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.*

One year. That's all it took to go from a grace-based gospel to a works based false gospel. One year. John Stott has said that "The devil disturbs the church as much by error as by evil. When he cannot entice Christian people into sin, he deceives them with false doctrine."¹ It causes temporary and eternal destruction of souls and it can happen very quickly.

I've read this quote from DA Carson before, but it bears repeating. He is describing an observation from one of his seminary colleagues.

Dr. Paul Hiebert labored for years in India before returning to the United States to teach. He springs from Mennonite stock and analyzes his heritage in a fashion that he himself would acknowledge is something of a simplistic caricature, but a useful one nonetheless.

One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments.

The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments.

The following generation denied the gospel; the 'entailments' became everything.

Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.²

Dave Hart's story is very similar but instead of taking generations to happen, it happened in just a few years. Dave moved his family to Kentucky to pastor a church that grew out of a Christian medical clinic near the Appalachia. This clinic was firmly founded on the gospel. The gospel was the very purpose of the clinic itself. They were in step one on Carson's three steps. They believed the gospel and one of the entailments or results of the gospel was a medical clinic to serve the poor. So Dave happily became the pastor of these dedicated servants. But it only took a few short years for them to experience mission drift. Just that quickly they moved to step two. As the clinic grew larger, they began to assume the gospel but focus mostly on the medical clinic. The clinic outsized the gospel. A year or two later they lost the gospel altogether. That whole process took less than 10 years.

Last Sunday I mentioned the ministry I was trying to help. For 25 years their mission statement just dripped with the gospel. It was all over who they were and more importantly, what they did. When their new director took over, do you know how long it took for him to change their mission and vision? One month. It went from having Christ and the gospel all over it to a vague reference to God. One month. And there's been nothing but a downhill trajectory from there.

I hope you can see the vital need to retain a firm and unwavering foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is why doctrinal fences are so vital. If you cannot clearly define what you believe and why you believe it, you will start to let go of the most important beliefs and let different ones in. So we need a firm commitment to the core of the gospel but from the failure of the churches in Galatia all the way down to this day, do you see what else is necessary? It's not enough to have right doctrine. You need leaders who will teach and defend right doctrine. But even that is not enough. Do you see what is missing from the equation still? You need an army of

believers who will appoint good leaders so that they can teach and defend right doctrine. And this same army of believers needs to hold these leaders accountable.

Here's how it goes.

Step One—A false teaching infiltrates the church or the movement.

Step Two—The leaders in the movement allow or condone the false teaching.

Step Three—The rest of the believers in the church or movement do little to nothing about the false teaching permeating the group.

Based on this downward spiral, here are three questions for you all.

1. Could you identify the false teaching?

Do you know your Bible well enough that you can quickly discern truth from error?

2. Are you willing to hold your church accountable?

Discernment alone is not enough. You need discernment and courage. Courage is the missing ingredient in the ministry I am helping. One board member has always known the moral failings of the ministry director and has done or said nothing.

3. Are you able/willing to pass on the gospel to your children and grandchildren?

Even if our church and our denomination is never tempted to abandon the gospel foundation, everyone in this room is tasked with knowing the gospel and passing it on to the next generation.

Rich Maurer
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¹ Stott, J. R. W. (1986). [*The message of Galatians: Only one way*](#) (p. 24). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² D.A. Carson, Basics for Believers: The Core of Christian Faith and Life, Baker Books, 2018.