

Commentary on Galatians 6:11-15 ...

- (Galatians 6:11 ESV) See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

It must have been a dramatic moment—the world premiere of an epistle. The Galatian church had gathered for the public reading of a letter from none other than the apostle Paul. As the letter drew to a close, they heard these words: “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand” (Galatians 6:11). Perhaps, for emphasis, the reader held up the papyrus to show everyone the large-print portion of Paul’s letter. [Ryken, P. G. (2005). *Galatians*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 269). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.]

What had probably happened was this: According to his usual custom (e.g., Romans 16:22), Paul had dictated most of this epistle to his amanuensis, or secretary. But he finished the document in his own handwriting, personally adding his autograph in order to give his letter to the Galatians the stamp of his apostolic authority. And he wrote his signature in large letters to underscore his conclusion.

The last section of Galatians, therefore, is more than a hastily written postscript, the afterthought of an apostle. Instead, these verses constitute a summary of the entire letter. They place circumcision over against the cross, showing that justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone means boasting in the cross alone. To understand this is to understand Galatians. More than that, it is to understand the gospel. [Ibid. (pp. 269–270).]

An amanuensis is a literary or artistic assistant, in particular one who takes dictation or copies manuscripts.

- (Galatians 6:12–13 ESV) It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

Paul indicts the motives of the opponents, saying that they promoted circumcision to avoid persecution. [Schreiner, T. R. (2010). *Galatians* (p. 377). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.]

Nor does Paul commend them for their good intentions and sincerity. He indicts their motives, claiming that they wanted to advertise the circumcision of the Galatians “to make a good showing in the flesh.” They longed for the praise and adulation of others according to Paul. At the same time the circumcision of the Galatians would protect the Judaizers from persecution. [Ibid. (p. 377).]

**There is a continual temptation for the church to turn the gospel into the cross plus something else. Whether that “something else” is a deed or a duty, a sacrament or a social cause, the problem is always the “plus.” For the gospel to be the gospel, the cross has to stand alone.

Since the Judaizers believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation, they naturally wanted to circumcise as many people as possible. When they came to Galatia, they pressured the Gentile Christians there to be circumcised. The problem was not so much circumcision as it was their compelling people to be circumcised. The Judaizers were demanding that the Galatians be circumcised in order to be saved. [Ryken, P. G. (2005). *Galatians*. (R. D.

Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 270). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.]

Why were they doing this? The Judaizers thought they were doing God’s work, but the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, discerned their real motive: “only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Gal. 6:12). They were trying to avoid persecution.

When we think of the sufferings of the early church, we often think of all the persecution that came from the Romans. However, the first attacks came from the Jews. Think of Stephen, who was stoned by the Sanhedrin (Acts 7), or of Paul before his conversion, dragging Christians out of their homes (Acts 9:1–2). Some of the most severe persecution that Christians faced came from Jewish people. ... **As the church spread through Asia Minor, Jewish persecution spread with it. But there was one easy way to avoid it, and this was to become circumcised. [Ibid. (pp. 270–271).]

**The Judaizers said that circumcision was necessary to belong to God’s covenant, but their real motivation was fear. They were afraid of what other Jews would say and do if they found out that they were worshiping with Gentiles. It would be much easier to defend their involvement with Christianity if they could say that the Gentiles in their house church kept the law of Moses. If only the Gentiles would agree to be circumcised like Jews, it would solve everything. Deep down, they were not willing to be persecuted for the cause of Christ. [Ibid. (p. 271).]

There was another reason ... “they also wanted to seem successful” ... the Judaizers urged the Galatians to get circumcised. Not only did they want to avoid persecution, but they also wanted to seem successful. [Ibid. (p. 272).]

Showing off is one of the differences between true and false religion. False religion gets caught up in externals, like attendance figures and worship

rituals. Outward religion is what cult leaders strive for when they pressure members to recruit new “converts.” It is what churches are after when they seek to entertain rather than to edify, or when they base salvation on what people do for God rather than on what God has done for them.

True religion is inward. Although it always works its way out, it starts within, where the Holy Spirit regenerates a sinner’s heart. The problem with making something like circumcision the essence of Christianity is that it is only an outward sign. It is merely external, something done to the body, to the flesh of sinful self-reliance. True religion is not based on outward works; it is based on inward faith. [Ibid. (pp. 272).]

BOASTING IN THE FLESH / Our religion tends “to generate a form of devotion, of ceremony, or rituals and rules, but which has no cross, or where it leads; the cross is marginalized and is not the heart of our message and devotion.” But why do we drift into cross-less religion time and again? Because the cross is a symbol of death—both death to self-interest, self-promotion, and self-atonement, and death by social or physical persecution. Galatians 6:12 is but one illustration: “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.” [Bush, D., & Due, N. (2015). *Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians* (p. 233). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.]

In these two verses Paul leveled a dual charge against his opponents, accusing them not only of dangerous doctrinal deviation but also of unscrupulous and unworthy motivation. Why had they sought so vigorously to “compel” (not by physical force, to be sure, but by such underhanded maneuvers as the denigration of Paul’s ministry and illicit appeals to apostolic authorities in Jerusalem) Paul’s Gentile converts to undergo circumcision? Paul answered this question by claiming that their

basic motive was spiritual self-aggrandizement: they wanted “to make a good impression outwardly”; “they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.” [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, p. 433). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

Whereas Paul was concerned about the Spirit’s inward work in his converts, so that Christ should be ‘formed’ in them (cf. 4:19), the Judaizers’ concern was for an external mark, a mark produced in the ‘flesh’ of those whom they could win over to their side. [Bruce, F. F. (1982). *The Epistle to the Galatians: a commentary on the Greek text* (p. 268). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.]

First of all the Judaizers were motivated by religious pride, a desire to make a good showing in the flesh. Here the flesh has reference to the works of their humanness and self-effort apart from the Spirit. They were not concerned about pleasing God by inward righteousness but about impressing other men by outward legalism. [MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1983). *Galatians* (p. 196). Chicago: Moody Press.]

The Judaizers not only were proud but cowardly. They advocated legalism to protect their lives and material welfare as well as to feed their fleshly egos. Simply that they may not be persecuted expresses their motive. They were not willing to pay the price of persecution in order to be identified with Jesus Christ. They would use His name and attend His church only if there was no offense to those around them. Most of such offense could be avoided if they denied the meaning of Christ’s death. [Ibid. (p. 197).]

- (Galatians 6:14 ESV) But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

We get his central principle right in the middle of the passage: “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14). That’s it. There is no other gospel. [Bush, D., & Due, N. (2015). *Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians* (p. 232). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.]

By contrast, to be serious about the gospel is to be serious about our dire need for the cross, to know our very beings in themselves are sinful. They cannot be educated, mollified, or reshaped into a different material. The rotten egg can’t make itself fresh. This is the truth behind “total depravity.” Corruption affects our minds, consciences, wills, and emotions. To put it differently, every aspect of who we are must be crucified. Hence legalism isn’t remotely radical enough to save and sanctify. [Ibid. (p. 235).]

The cross isn’t a gallant action for you to imitate, as if all you needed was motivation to be self-sacrificing. God sent his Son into the world to do something specific: to save us from the penalty of sin. If our problem was something else, the law would have sorted that.

The cross humbles us by telling us that we’re the problem. It confronts us not just with our attitudes and actions, but all that lies beneath, all we’d rather not see about ourselves. The cross contradicts us at every turn, negating all human religion and effort.

In opposing us in this way, grace becomes the truly radical means of life and hope. It alone is not of the flesh but is entirely of the Spirit. [Ibid. (p. 236).]

- (Galatians 6:15 ESV) For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Being circumcised contributes nothing toward being saved, nor does not being circumcised; neither

is it possible for either of these two states to assure us of salvation—or to make us effective witnesses for God. The one and only thing that really matters is “a new creation,” that is, the new life, the life of regeneration, which the Holy Spirit brings about in a person’s heart (John 3:3, 5; Rom. 2:29). That “creation” is “new,” as contrasted with man’s old, outworn nature. It is infinitely better than the old. It is God’s work, and is therefore what really counts. [Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). *Exposition of Galatians* (Vol. 8, p. 245). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.]

Here the irrelevance of circumcision/uncircumcision is contrasted with a more comprehensive expression of the life of faith effected through the cross of Christ, “a new creation.” [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, p. 438). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

Remarkably, in the midst of a great conflict over circumcision, Paul does not elevate uncircumcision either. Those who find significance in uncircumcision belong to the old world order as well. There is no particular virtue in uncircumcision, which explains why Paul was willing to circumcise Timothy (Acts 16:3). If circumcision is practiced for cultural reasons and not to achieve salvation, observing it is up to one’s individual conscience. [Schreiner, T. R. (2010). *Galatians* (p. 380). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.]

**Since the world has been crucified to Paul (and by extension to all Christians), whether one is circumcised or not is utterly irrelevant. What is remarkable is that circumcision is assigned to the old world order, to the old creation rather than the new creation. The law is part of the old age, while the cross inaugurates the new age. [Ibid. (p. 379).]

**It is striking that, for all the sternness of his warning against accepting circumcision as something required by God, Paul should twice in this letter emphasize that circumcision and uncircumcision

per se matter nothing at all. In the old order of the law, where the distinction between Jew and Gentile was of fundamental importance, it mattered greatly whether a man was circumcised or not; now it is totally irrelevant. [Bruce, F. F. (1982). *The Epistle to the Galatians: a commentary on the Greek text* (p. 273). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.]

***All “simply human” factors become meaningless in the face of God’s world-transforming work in his Son Jesus Christ. The old state of affairs is ended. [Moo, D. J. (2013). *Galatians* (p. 397). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.]

As far as salvation is concerned, the only thing that matters is whether this change has taken (and is taking) place. It matters not whether a person is a circumcised Jew or an uncircumcised Gentile; what matters is whether or not a person is a regenerated Christian, a new creature in Christ. Anyone who has not yet experienced this spiritual transformation should ask God to change him (or her) from the inside out. [Ryken, P. G. (2005). *Galatians*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 278). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.]

***As Paul had said before and would reiterate again in this closing passage (6:15), the issue at stake was not circumcision per se but rather the salvific significance the false teachers attached to this ceremony. Paul again revisited this debate and issued a final blistering attack against the agitators who were trying to compel the Galatians to accept circumcision. [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, pp. 432–433). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]