

# In the Letter to the Galatians

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Letter to the Galatians is a call to defend the true nature of Christianity against the threat of mixture and to experience the inward revelation of God's Son.*

**Scripture:** Galatians 1:8

**Topics:** "True Nature of Christianity", "Inward Revelation of Christ"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the revolutionary nature of the Letter to the Galatians, arguing that it addresses the true essence of Christianity amidst confusion and distortion. He draws parallels between biblical events and the current state of Christianity, highlighting the Apostle Paul's fierce defense against those who misrepresent the Gospel. Sparks asserts that true Christianity is rooted in the inward revelation of Christ, which transforms believers and emphasizes justification by faith. He warns against the dangers of mixing old traditions with the new covenant, urging a return to the purity of the Gospel. Ultimately, he calls for a deep, personal knowledge of Christ that transcends mere doctrine.

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## Transcript

Familiarity with this part of the New Testament, as it does with so many things, has resulted in the loss of the tremendous impact which it had when first written, read, and circulated. In its nature, its purpose, and its necessity there is nothing in the Bible more contemporary, and suited to Christianity's need. It has been boxed up in a doctrine, although a fundamental doctrine, and a phrase now describes it: whereas it is really an earthquake, a revolution, a cataclysm. As I have meditated with it some vivid pictures have lighted upon my mental screen.

I have seen a man named Shammah standing in a plot of ground full of lentils and, singlehanded, mowing down the Philistines with his sword until none were left to challenge him. I have seen the hordes of Philistines menacing Israel and taking cover behind the giant Goliath, who, day after day, struck terror into the hearts of the men of Israel. Then the youth David resolving that this had gone on too long and too much and must come to a settlement; which settlement he made to the discomfiture of the whole Philistine army.

Then to come to much later history in this country, I see that meeting of barons at Runnymede with King John sitting, pen in hand, at the table, with a fierce and rebellious look upon his face as the barons have decided that a long regime of injustice must cease and a new charter of equity must be signed for all time. There is no way of escape for the monarch.

These episodes and epochs fit so well into the Letter before us. A campaign of misconstruction of Christianity has been following the Apostle Paul from city to city wherever he has gone. He, the most patient and tolerant of servants of Jesus Christ, has borne long and humbly with the assaults upon himself; his character and his credentials; his integrity; but it had reached the point where the very true and right nature of Christianity itself was being changed. At this point toleration reached its limit and this New Testament Shammah drew his sword and said: 'The day of reckoning has come. This has gone far enough.' The fire in his bones had reached white heat. Flaming words leaped from his lips: "If we, or an angel from heaven preach any other Gospel, let him be accursed; I repeat, let him be accursed." His sword clave to his hand that day and he defied to the death the uncircumcised-in-heart Judaizers of all time.

But when we have said all that, and we could say much more like it, we have yet to come to the real and positive issue in question and battle. We have to ask what really was, and is, at stake? Many related questions have to be answered, but the inclusive statement, which governs all those questions, is nothing less or other than

#### THE TRUE NATURE OF CHRISTIANITY

That was, and has repeatedly been, the real and true nature of the Mission, Meaning and Message of Jesus Christ. What REALLY did He come for? What did His Person mean? And what actually is His message?

May I here insert a brief parenthesis? While this ministry is to ALL the Lord's people, I know that many of its readers are servants of God in positions of responsibility and influence. To them I do address this message in a particularly earnest way. My brethren, you are surely aware that there is a very serious and vicious invasion of this world by spirits of confusion. NOTHING is escaping this. While it is true of nations and internations, it is particularly so in Christianity. From the general realm of Christendom in ever-narrowing circles to evangelical Christianity and then still inward to the most sincere believers, and to any servant of God who counts for God, there is involvement in complications and perplexity almost to a paralysing degree. New, exotic, fantastic, extreme, peculiar, odd, unbalanced, and singular movements, teachings and practices are following rapidly upon the stage; and many dear people of God are being caught in these, only to end in disillusionment and cynicism. Bewilderment fills the air, and because of this, Christianity is growingly in disrepute. It does, therefore, become imperative that all in responsibility and who have influence shall know where they are and be committed to making clear to God's people what Christianity really is. We are here seeking to make some small contribution to such a ministry.

Coming back to our Galatian Letter, we seek to see what it has to tell us by way of answering our main question: What IS Christianity? There are subsidiary questions which lead to the answer. Is Christianity a take-over and continuation or adaptation of the Old Testament system and economy of ritual sacramentarianism, ceremonialism, ordinances, vestments? Is Christianity the reproduction of the Old Testament system in a mystical form? That is, the keeping of the ritual and ceremonial but attributing to it a spiritual or mystical meaning, so that it can be said: 'Well, of course, it is not the thing itself, but what it implies'? This is what sacramentarians say and teach, and many evangelicals. But a virtue is attached to the actual means employed. Further, is Christianity an ideology, that is, a system of ideas, the result of the mental and intellectual activity of religious minds? In other words, is it a philosophy regarding God, man, human destiny, good and evil, and human conduct? Is it a system of regulations, laws, precepts, rules, technicalities, statutes, nice points? Is it another system of: 'Thou shalt', and 'thou shalt not'? Is Christianity

a tradition, a HISTORICAL succession, an inheritance or hereditary?

To all of these, and more, the Letter to the Galatians, and the whole New Testament say - or thunder - a positive and categorical 'NO!' Any one, or all of these, would make what the Apostle here calls "another gospel", and he says of such, even if (supposing such a thing might be) "an angel from heaven" should preach it, let that angel be accursed! There is no compromise here. The sword is drawn and these "Philistines" (above mentioned and defined) are to be mown down without mercy. Paul is, after all, no more vehement and implacable than was His Divine Master when confronting those who would mislead and distort the truth of God and confuse the would-be seekers after the truth.

What, then, IS THE answer? This Letter before us has rightly been called 'The Magna Carta of Christianity' and that in a brief statement of doctrine: 'Justification by Faith.' Yes, true; that is fundamental to Christianity, but we cannot stay there. With every bit of our being we believe that, but when we have said it, have we really defined that which has composed and constituted faith? Justification by faith can be theology, doctrine, creed, a wonderful concept. Look into this Letter and see what it was that led this apostle to his position. He based everything in HIS Christianity, his salvation, his life, his ministry, his endurance, and his eternal hope, upon one thing. It is stated as basic to the Letter itself: chapter 1, verse 15: "When it was the good pleasure of God, who separated me, even from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace, to reveal his Son in me..." Or in another translation: "When he who had chosen me and set me apart even before I was born, and had called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son within me..." What, then, is the answer?

#### THE INWARD REVELATION OF GOD'S SON

This is a strong line running through the Letter in various connections, as indeed it does through all his writings. He says: "Christ liveth in me." He emphasizes the change from the outward to the inward, the objective to the subjective in the matter of the Law, the covenant, the spirit of sonship, etc. Everything now emanates from the indwelling Christ by the Holy Spirit, and this is what he means by the great emphasis upon spiritual liberty. He has come into the meaning of the Lord's words: "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" - freed by the life and power of Christ WITHIN! The Spirit of sonship within makes Christianity, and nothing else does! God revealed His Son WITHIN. We then have to ask what Paul saw INITIALLY when that revelation came to him, and what was its effect?

Of course, all that we have from the pen of this Apostle was by revelation, but in this Letter there is that which was basic to all the rest. I must, however, pause for one emphasis. Paul takes pains to stress that this knowledge of God's Son which made Christianity for him was personal, direct, and independent. He says: "It was not after man. Neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11,12). This is true Christianity. Whatever God may use as a vessel or channel of instruction, such instrumentalities can NEVER impart Christ, put Christ into us, work the miracle of giving the faculty of sight to the blind. It just has to be something done by the almighty Spirit of God so that we exclaim in wonder: 'I see!' Apart from that, our Christianity at best is secondhand and objective. The emphasis of the true teacher must be upon this personal knowledge of the Holy Spirit as Lord WITHIN. Sooner or later Christianity will be put to the ultimate test on this all-inclusive ground and issue.

We can now ask what Paul saw on the occasion to which he refers? What did he see as to God's Son? The full answer would necessitate a going back to the Damascus Road epoch; but what does this

particular Letter show? The answer is summed up in one word: the Cross. His three references to the Cross in 'Galatians' have three connections. "I have been crucified with Christ" (2:20); "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the passions and lusts thereof" (5:24); "But far be it from me to glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (6:14).

The three relationships are: (1) The personal - "I have been crucified". (2) The life of the dominion of the flesh - "crucified the flesh" (that is the self-life; "flesh" is self-gratification). (3) The world - 'crucified to the world'. The standards, systems, and ambitions of this world.

The Cross in this threefold relationship is Christianity. We can never cease to be amazed that the man who would gladly and vehemently have hailed Jesus of Nazareth to crucifixion came to see that he was really going to be crucified HIMSELF; but now he is glorying in it for other reasons. No wonder he says, "called me BY HIS GRACE".

What is this saying to us? It is saying clearly and powerfully that TRUE Christianity issues from a devastating experience of the Cross. To SEE Christ, 'God's Son' crucified, is to see OURSELVES transfixed and desolated. SOONER OR LATER this must come to us if our Christianity is to be the expression of the indwelling Christ as crucified, risen and exalted.

The true Christian and the true Church is a crucified person and Body!

What was the effect of this 'revealing of God's Son' in him? It had the effect of giving Paul a new dimension and a new horizon. It was the end of one history and the inauguration of another. Formerly the Cross was an intolerable offense; later it was the power and wisdom of God. The Cross was the meeting-place of two histories: the one it closes; the other it commences. The former history has been proved false. The new begins the true. This Letter says that one Israel has come to an end, and a new 'Israel of God' has been born. That one Jerusalem 'below' is no longer the true (if ever it had been) and the "Jerusalem which is above" has taken its place. The old history was based upon a visualized new age centring in Israel's institutions, Jerusalem, the temple, the Law, the Sabbath. The new history is based upon the enmity of all that demonstrated in the Cross, now centred in a SPIRITUAL nation, a heavenly Jerusalem, a holy, heavenly temple, "not made with hands", a Law of "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus", and a "Sabbath Rest" reserved for the new people. This is Christianity according to the New Testament, and Paul's revelation of God's Son within.

Let us now sum up.

We fully recognize that the real occasion of this Letter was - and is - the true ground of man's right standing with God, and that that issue is here fought out conclusively. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with that!

But, when we have acknowledged that, we have not settled every relevant element of conflict. Why is it that, when evangelical Christianity has rooted and established that doctrine in its fundamental creed and faith, so much conflict still remains in the evangelical realm? This is more or less present in early Christianity even when that basic ground is accepted. Looking more closely into the controversy in this Letter, we find that it was not only the foundation that was being settled, but what was being PUT ON the foundation. All the Apostles, even Peter and James, were not quite transparent on that (see Chapter 2:11-14). There was controversy among the chief Apostles, NOT ON THE DOCTRINE, but as to their

INNERMOST position. Outwardly and doctrinally they assented, but deep down in their religious constitution a drastic "circumcision" - cutting round and between - had not as yet been consummated. There was still a carry-over of birth, upbringing, tradition, heredity, inheritance. In Paul, who had been more utterly rooted, and more vehemently absorbed in Judaism than any of them (1:11-14), this radical severance, this spiritual surgery, had been effected. The remnants and relics of historical Judaism and natural religion on the one side, and the thorough-going emancipation - by the Cross - on the other set up a conflict, and the real cause was the threat to change the true nature of Christianity - the Gospel. It was a subtle and dangerous insinuation of mixture; the Old Testament prohibition by God of ploughing with ox and ass together, or the wearing of a mixture of wool and cotton. Paul, because the Cross had ploughed so deeply into his very being, saw through this threat to the purity of Christianity, and was roused to "the defence of the gospel".

So we come to the age-abiding conflict, not only between Law and Grace, but the true nature of Christianity and the things which have been associated with it. People can be called Christians who have no experience of new birth, regeneration, or personal knowledge of or walk with the Lord, and there are many whose conduct, appearance, and associations are not only a denial of Christ, but a contradiction of common decency. The range is from traditional 'Religion' to downright worldliness, with varying shades and degrees.

So, we close by saying that the real battle is that for the true nature of Christianity. The call is for "men whose eyes have seen the King"; men who can truly say: "It pleased God to reveal his Son IN ME." Men who will be heart-burdened for the purity of the Gospel, and who will pay the heavy price of the testimony of Jesus. It will be in 'Christianity' itself that they will meet the forces that make it so costly. It has always been so.

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