

1-1-1995

For the Defense of the Gospel

James Walters

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walters, James (1995) "For the Defense of the Gospel," *Leaven*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol3/iss1/3>

This Sermon is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

For the Defense of the Gospel

by
James Walters

Galatians is an important letter because Paul's defense of the gospel requires a clarification of what is and is not gospel. This clarification challenges successive generations to continue to distinguish what is and is not gospel. Although the bulk of the letter to the Galatians consists of a defense of Paul and of the gospel he proclaimed we should remember that the apostle preferred preaching the gospel to defending the gospel. In Romans 15:20 Paul states plainly that his ambition was "to proclaim the gospel where Christ has not already been named." When he wrote those words, he was announcing his plans to expand the Christian mission westward to Spain. However, the defense of his gospel to the gentiles required that he first go to Jerusalem with the gentile churches' contribution for the poor saints in Jerusalem in hopes that this gift would silence his detractors.

The priority Paul placed on preaching the gospel is also indicated by the angry tone of the Galatian letter. Paul was frustrated that rival teachers were troubling his converts in Galatia. His efforts to expand the frontiers of the Christian mission were now hindered because he was forced to address the effects of these teachers. The predicament Paul faced in Galatia was a difficult one. Because he sought to

extend the missionary frontier, he inevitably was absent when immature, struggling churches needed him to be present. The intensity with which Paul felt this burden is reflected in his letters (cf. 1 Cor 5:3; Phil 2:12, 16; 1 Thess 2:17-20). Contemporary church planters often find themselves in a similar dilemma. At what point is it safe to leave a young church so that time and energy can be invested in a new planting. The letters that we have from the apostle Paul are themselves an indication of his anxiety over this dilemma. Because he could not be two places at once he wrote letters to the churches he had planted earlier while continuing to plant new ones. Therefore, Paul's letters are perhaps best described as surrogates for his own presence.

If the burden of these letters was only to provide continuing guidance to converts who were attempting to understand and cope with the life changes that their reception of the gospel involved, the task would not be a small one. However, in Galatia this nurturing aim was complicated by rival teachers who suggested to his converts that the message he proclaimed was deficient; it lacked something. We can scarcely imagine the confusion that the Galatian converts must have felt as these teachers dismantled Paul's authority and message while the Galatians were still

in the throes of fundamental life changes based on that message.

It is apparent from reading Galatians that the rival teachers had been successful in undermining Paul's authority and gaining the confidence of many of the Galatian converts. Paul refers to the Galatians as "deserters" (Gal 1:6) and as persons who formerly loved him (Gal 4:15,16). Paul's opponents were aided in their attempt to gain control of the Galatian churches by Paul's absence and by their Jerusalem credentials. Although absent, Paul responds to their claim of superior credentials by clarifying the source of his gospel (Gal 1:11-24) and by recounting his experiences with the Jerusalem pillars (Gal 2:1-10): He received his gospel not from men but by divine revelation; during a visit to Jerusalem not only was Titus not compelled to be circumcised but Peter, James and John acknowledged Paul's gospel as well as his special ministry to the gentiles. Apparently Paul's opponents had claimed special spiritual status by virtue of their Jerusalem connections, especially their relationships to the apostles who had personal contact with Jesus. Not surprisingly, these credentials had intimidated the Galatian converts leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. In Galatians 4:17 Paul warns the Galatians that the rival teachers wish to exclude them — by rejecting their spiritual status without circumcision and observance of the law — so that they can gain power over them. In order to dominate the Galatians it was necessary for the rival teachers to discredit Paul. Paul was portrayed as an interloper who had no personal experience with Jesus. Consequently his gospel was treated as secondary, a step removed from Jesus and the apostles who accompanied him.

Paul's Goals in Galatians

In order to reverse the losses in Galatia, Paul must accomplish three goals in this letter. First, he must regain the confidence of the Galatian Christians by answering the allegations that have been made against him and his message. This is his point of focus in Galatians 1:10-2:10. Second, he must quicken the resolve of the Galatian converts to resist the intimidation of the rival teachers. Paul's pursuit of

this goal can be seen in his admonition to "Stand firm" in Galatians 5:1, as well as in his warning to the Galatians not to accept a different gospel even if it is proclaimed by an angel (Gal 1:6-10). However, the

most compelling text supporting this aim is Galatians 2:11-14 where Paul uses himself as an example of one who stood firm. In Antioch he was not intimidated by the representatives from Jerusalem nor by Peter. He stood firm! In the third place, the apostle Paul must give the Galatian converts

The Galatian converts must have an introduction to the ideas that stand behind the Gentile mission, particularly how Paul's conduct of this mission is in continuity with the purposes of God

an introduction to the ideas that stand behind the Gentile mission, particularly how Paul's conduct of this mission is in continuity with the purposes of God. They must understand enough about Paul's gospel and its relation to the purposes of God to be able to deflect the arguments of the rival teachers.

The defense Paul offers for his gospel is especially connected to this third aim and it becomes the dominant concern of chapters three and four. Although Paul had stood firm in the face of the Jerusalem pillars, the Galatians' record was not so positive. In the opening paragraph of chapter three Paul notes that the Galatians were in fact "bewitched" by the rival teachers. However, he believes that the Galatian converts possess in their own experience of the Christian faith sufficient knowledge to resist the arguments of the rival teachers. Paul writes to the Galatians, "I only want to learn one thing from you, did you receive the spirit from the works of the law or from the hearing of faith?" Paul is obviously confident that he knows the answer to this question. If the Galatians received the spirit prior to the arrival of Paul's opponents — therefore prior to any submission to circumcision or keeping the law — the weakness of the rival teachers' claim that the Galatian Christians are spiritually deficient should be apparent.

Paul's key scriptural argument centers on the patriarch Abraham. The question Paul wants Abraham to answer is this, "what is the basis on which God's promise goes to the gentiles? Is it on the basis of the law or faith?" Paul knows that the Genesis narrative is clear on this matter. The promise to the nations was given to Abraham on the basis of faith prior to the circumcision covenant and obviously prior to the giving of the law.

Therefore, Paul's claim that the gospel of Jesus Christ is available to gentiles on the basis of faith without circumcision and observance of the law would seem well founded. The rival teachers, however, will

Paul's discussion of morality as "life in the spirit" in Galatians 5 is in direct response to morality as disciplined conformity to the yoke of the law.

not take this line of reasoning lying down. If you have been present at a jury trial you are aware of how compelling the defense's case can appear until the prosecution cross-examines. We must remember that whatever Paul says in this letter will be challenged by the rival teachers. It is not difficult to predict where Paul's opponents will challenge his reasoning. In fact Paul anticipates their counter-attack and addresses their objections in advance. Paul's detractors will counter that the connection to Abraham is not insignificant, however, the development of God's purposes did not cease with Abraham. Are the twenty centuries between Abraham and Christ irrelevant? Do we learn nothing about how human beings approach God during this expansive period? The argument of Paul's opponents depends on the continuity of God's dealings with Israel. As they see it God's actions follow a linear progression: Abraham, Moses, Christ. This progression reflects the way Jews had come to Christ. Why should gentiles be different?

Paul responds to this reasoning by challenging the linear progression they assume. He does this by keeping the focus on Abraham and arguing that the experience of the Mosaic law was a bracketed experience. It was bracketed by the promise given to Abraham four hundred and thirty years prior to the revelation of the law at Mt. Sinai and the fulfillment of that promise when Christ came. While the promise to Abraham was awaiting fulfillment its conditions could not be altered by a later covenant, not even the law of Moses. Therefore the law was only an interim arrangement.

Paul's claim that the law was not in continuity with the promise to Abraham but rather an interim arrangement inevitably raises the question, "Why

did God give the law?" The issue of the law was a crucial one because if the law was allowed to function in the gentile mission in the manner advocated by Paul's opponents, Christianity would be an ethnic, nationalistic religion as Judaism had been. Paul's mission was fundamentally different. He did not evangelize gentiles in order to extend Israel's boundaries in a nationalistic or ethnic sense.

It is important for us to realize that the rival teachers were not pushing the law on Gentiles simply because of theoretical differences with Paul over the plan of salvation. They were concerned about issues of morality. They were justifiably anxious about bringing gentiles who were raised on the stories of Homer and Hesiod into their religious communities. Such concerns could be reduced somewhat if the conversion of

gentiles included a commitment to keep the law — with circumcision as the sign of that commitment. Hence, requiring the observance of the law ensured an experience of community that was more comfortable to Jewish Christians. The law functioned as a disciplinarian.

An indication that the rival teachers were using the law in this fashion can be seen in Galatians 5:1. Here Paul uses the word "yoke" to refer to the law and calls on his Gentile converts to resist the curtailment of their freedom in Christ. The yoke metaphor suggests that the law was being used to force behavioral conformity. Therefore, Paul's discussion of morality as "life in the spirit" in Galatians 5 is in direct response to morality as disciplined conformity to the yoke of the law.

Paul did not deny that the law was intended to serve a disciplinarian role. However, he did deny that it was intended to serve this role after Christ came. This is stated most clearly in Galatians 3:19. However, this entire section of the letter is characterized by terms like governess, supervision, slavery, restraining, et al. These terms suggest that Paul is concerned with challenging this function of the law, one that must have been characteristic of the Galatian situation.

The Law as Paidagogos

A further indication that the rival teachers were using the law this way can be seen in a particular word that Paul uses to describe the law in Galatians 3:24. Paul says that the law was our *paidagogos*. The word is difficult to translate because it was drawn from a social situation in Paul's day that has no accurate parallel in ours. Tutor, schoolmaster and custodian have been the most common English

translations. However, I am convinced that **The New Revised Standard Version** is closer to the mark when it translates *paidagogos* as “disciplinarian” in this context. In the Greco-Roman world a *paidagogos* was characteristically a servant who played a key role in bringing up a child, sort of a nanny who did some home schooling. However, even this falls short because we are not familiar with nannies who are slaves (at least not technically). Because the *paidagogos* played a disciplinarian role the word provided Paul a useful analogy. This is especially the case since this disciplinarian role was a temporary one, precisely Paul’s view of the law.

Perhaps the force of Paul’s analogy can best be grasped by reading a text from the satirist Martial. In this passage Martial is expressing outrage that his *paidagogos* will not relinquish her disciplinarian role now that he is an adult. He writes:

You rocked my cradle, Charidemus, and were my guardian and constant companion when I was a boy. Now my beard dirties the barber’s towel with shavings, and my girlfriend complains about being hurt by my lips. But to you I have not grown up. My steward trembles before you, my butler, indeed my whole household staff, shiver with fear. You won’t allow me to amuse myself or make love. You want no freedom for me, but every freedom for yourself. You reproach me, you watch me like a hawk, you complain, you sigh, and you can scarcely keep your angry hand off the rod. If I put on Tyrian clothes or grease down my hair, you exclaim: “Your father never did that.” You wrinkle your forehead and count every glass of wine I drink, as if the bottle came from your own cellar. Stop it! I cannot stand a freedman who acts like Cato. My girlfriend will explain to you that I am now a man (**Epigrams** 11.39).

When Paul compares the role of the law to a *paidagogos* and stresses its temporary role, he is using an analogy that the Galatians would not have missed.

Paul’s Gospel and Today’s Morality

The rival teachers’ obsession with regulating the behavior of the Galatian converts altered the gospel they preached. In our well publicized era of moral decline it threatens to do the same today. The caning of Michael Faye in Singapore has become something

of a national symbol of the failure of our society to demand respect and discipline from its members, especially its young people. Instead of evoking the wrath of the American people on Singapore as many expected, the caning more commonly occasioned admiration for Singapore’s strict standards and their enforcement. The causes of moral drift in American society are complex and beyond the scope of our inquiry today. Whatever the cause, however, one consequence is easily predictable: There will be increasing calls for tougher laws, tougher penalties, stricter enforcement and these calls will be felt by churches as well as by governments. “Three strikes and you’re out” will not only affect prison sentencing but will also affect the attitudes of churches.

Increasingly churches are being asked by frustrated community leaders and politicians to assist in helping to stem the tide of moral decline in our society. I was at a meeting last week at Harvard University where the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Henry Cisneros, addressed a group of Black ministers and other church leaders associated with the Progressive National Baptist Conference. Because Black churches are sometimes the only stable, moral guiding force serving in the most difficult inner city housing projects the government is actively soliciting their help. At the meeting I mentioned above — “The Black Church’s Responsibility for a New Urban Agenda” — the HUD secretary

The rival teachers’ obsession with regulating the behavior of the Galatian converts altered the gospel they preached.

offered these Black churches an open door to public housing and even suggested ways they could organize their work so they could receive public funds. I want to suggest to you that this offer would not be made, it would not even be considered, if it were not for the frustration the government feels in addressing urban problems.

Before we celebrate too quickly the greater cooperation this climate may create between Church and State, let me mention a downside. When we are invited into neighborhoods and communities on these terms the framework for the proclamation of the gospel becomes a troublesome one. We are concerned

about the deterioration of values in our country. Our neighbors are concerned. The gospel in some sense is an answer to this problem, but let me underscore that it is an answer *in some sense*. When our primary concern becomes the regulation of human behavior then the proclamation of this message inevitably adjusts to that goal. If one accepts Paul's moral argument in Galatians 5, it becomes clear that the acceptance of this sort of disciplinarian role will encroach on territory that belongs to God. The creation of the new self by the spirit is the work of God.

God has been dealing with human behavior problems for a long time and is generally more patient than we are. Our impatience sometimes stems from our personal goals of achieving a quality of life that the undisciplined among us threaten. Consequently we devise all sorts of behavior management strategies purportedly to protect God's interests, but in reality they protect our own comfort and way of life.

I witnessed a variation on this theme while I was doing graduate work in Boston during the late 1980's. The Boston Church and other congregations of the Churches of Christ were still talking in those days. However, the small congregations in and around Boston were intimidated by the Boston Church with its aggressive outreach and its Sunday services in the Boston Garden (where the Celtics play). In 1987, Jim Woodroof set up a planned discussion or debate between myself and Al Baird, one of the elders of the Boston Church. Because Jim had worked with persons who had fallen through the cracks in the Boston Church for a number of years he was able to set the parameters of the discussion very specifically: "In the movement from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit is it necessary/permissible to move through the realm of the law?" Al Baird affirmed that it was. I affirmed that it was not. During the session I spent most of my allotted time in Galatians while Al emphasized the circumstances of their converts — they were unchurched persons in the grip of "life-dominating sins." Consequently, behavioral constraints and the close supervision of discipleship partners was both essential and proper.

I want to suggest to you that Al Baird's concerns and those of discipling ministries associated with the

Boston Church are not dissimilar to the concerns of Paul's opponents in Galatia. Obviously they are not identical. However, the points of contact should not be overlooked: Active evangelistic outreach; significant numbers of

"unchurched" converts; concern to socialize converts into a Christian/Jewish lifestyle as quickly as possible; use of set behavioral patterns and constraints to achieve re-socialization. In the Boston Church, the large number of con-

versions requires that converts be re-socialized as quickly and efficiently as possible. Otherwise the whole system bogs down under the weight of internal problems and limits the focus on outsiders.

Western business models and our preoccupation with efficiency lead churches in "high demand" situations to devise and adopt behavioral modification strategies that will meet output requirements while reducing stress on the system. However, because the variables of human life are much more difficult to isolate than those of a production unit this approach to human behavior is fraught with difficulties. Talented, high achievers are the ones who rise to positions of leadership. These persons set standards and expectation levels that inevitably fail to take into consideration the human variables converts bring — or attempt to bring — to the altar. Expectations that seem reasonable to talented, aggressive leaders may in fact be anything but reasonable to many or most converts. Crucial aspects of the lives of the converts — family, job, social relations, and self — are constricted or negated as they seek to measure up. The leaders may be able to accomplish the goals while balancing other demands but one must remember that they are the most talented and experienced at this style of life. Converts who can't keep up are written off as uncommitted or disloyal.

A preoccupation with efficient behavior modification, even if it ultimately serves evangelistic goals, conflicts with the proclamation of the gospel and its implications for human beings. Conversion is not a tidy business. It is not easily regulated. Even a cursory reading of Paul's letters — especially 1 Corinthians — should make this very clear. Churches must bring into one body folks who come from diverse backgrounds geographically, ethnically, socially, intellectually, economically, etc. It would be convenient

God has been dealing with human behavior problems for a long time and is generally more patient than we are.

if one could put a behavioral management system in place that would make this process tidy and efficient. It would be especially convenient for those whose conversions lie in the distant past, those who now happen to be the leaders. Whether or not they realized it, the Judaizers in Galatia resorted to yokes in part to protect a quality of life for themselves. Dining with gentiles, having your children marry gentiles and constantly dealing with behavior that offends Jewish sensibilities is not a pleasant path for Jews to tread. Not all of Paul's contemporaries were as open to "becoming all things to all people" as Paul was (1 Cor 9:19,20). With the Boston Church and discipling ministries in general, the greatest difficulty routinely lies in "becoming weak to those who are weak" (1 Cor 9:22). When the pace is so quick it is difficult to wait around for those who can't or won't keep up (a very difficult distinction to make by the way). Efficient behavior modification systems inevitably abuse the weak, the very ones the gospel — to be the gospel — must protect.

For Paul, the Christian life is not a yoked existence based on the continuing disciplinary role of the law, but an existence whose power and direction stems from the Cross. Paul and his converts have been crucified with Christ; consequently, they no longer live. Their lives are governed by their union with Christ (Gal 2:20; 4:19). Hence, for Paul, to continue to use the law as disciplinarian denies what happened on the cross. The disciplinary use of the law simply tries to check transgression, to limit the spread of sin. In contrast, Paul believes that the cross has dealt a blow of cosmic proportion to sin. Now the issue is not simply limiting sin but actually reclaiming

God's creation in the lives of people (Gal 6:15). The Christian's relationship to sin and to this world has changed because of the Cross. As Paul puts it, "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

It is noteworthy that after engaging in an elaborate debate over the role of the law and circumcision, Paul concludes the Galatian letter by emphasizing what is central: "Neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Unfortunately this new creation was messy in the gentile churches of Paul's day and it continues to be messy. Those who are serious about taking the gospel to the unchurched must face the question of whether the church is to be a safe-haven where the converted can experience the least tension possible, or a place where a diverse collection of God's creatures can be together in spite of the mess. Many of these children of God will require copious amounts of nurture and encouragement and those who minister to them will be tempted to resort to yokes. However, the temptation must be resisted. Yokes will produce dependent converts, status laden ministers and behavior patterns that are comfortable to the leaders. They are wrong whether they are carved from the Law of Moses, other religious traditions, or suburban middle-class templates. They still reflect a different Gospel!

An edited version of a keynote lecture given at the Pepperdine University Lectures, April, 1994.

James Walters works for Heartbeat and lives in Hanover, New Hampshire.