

## On Perverting the Gospel of Christ

John Calvin

*I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.—Gal. 1:6-8*

Now we will look more deeply into the subject I touched upon this morning. I said that whereas Paul does not spare the Galatians, neither does he wish to shut the gate of salvation to them completely. He intends to bring them to repentance, and for this reason he speaks of the grace of God into which they had all been called. Yet, he does not flatter them; rather, he rebukes them for their sins. In particular, he rebukes them for their fickleness, for they had listened to deceivers who came in among them distorting the pure doctrine of the gospel. In order to make them better perceive their treachery, Paul says he marvels that they have forsaken their heavenly calling so quickly and easily. He wonders how it is that they have been led astray so swiftly, and how it is that they have remained in that state, given that they had felt and experienced the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. Because he is seeking to restore them, he is not saying at the outset that they have completely turned away from the gospel, but rather that they have been overtaken by temptation through seducers, who sought no less than to pervert the truth of God. There is only one pure gospel, as also there is only one Jesus Christ on whom it is founded. It is not for us to create the gospel anew; indeed, if we seek to add anything to the pure seed which we have received from our Lord Jesus Christ, we are destroying what God has established. This, in sum, is what Paul is teaching us in this first verse.

It might seem that Paul is being overly harsh and severe in rebuking the Galatians' weakness, seeing they had never once thought of rejecting the gospel, nor Jesus Christ who had been preached to them. But Paul pays no attention to the way they viewed the situation; he sees it as it really is—in other words, that once people turn away from the truth of God, they are rejecting Jesus Christ and cutting themselves off from him. Some people may think this strange, for many would like to mix light with darkness. Indeed, the confusion that exists in Popery is an outstanding example of this. They make many wonderful claims to the effect that they are upholding the Christian faith into which they have been baptised. But, for all this, it is clear that they have turned everything upside-down. Superstitions reign, and they practise open idolatry of a worse kind than has ever been known, even among the pagans. Any reverence for God is destroyed, since each one sets himself up as a saviour in place of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, the Papists would respond by saying that they are not apostates, and that they have not abandoned Jesus Christ. But our Lord Jesus Christ is no ghost; he cannot change according to the whims of men. In short, he cannot be separated from his church. Thus, whatever the Papists may claim, they rob Jesus Christ of all his authority. 'If there is only one mediator,' [they say], 'what about the male saints, our patrons, and the female saints, our advocates?' If we speak to them of the sacrifice by which our Lord Jesus Christ has obtained perfect justification for all believers, once and for all, [they will say], 'Are we not supposed to say Mass every day and offer Jesus Christ again as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of God?' If we speak to them of free forgiveness of sins, [they will say], 'What about the ways in which we have made satisfaction for our own sins, and thus earned God's pity?' If we say that we can only be made good by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and that until God transforms us, we are full of sin and rebellion, [they will say], 'What? What about our free will?' In short, they will name the name of Jesus Christ often enough, and will still give him his title of Redeemer, but they will divide his office and put it on offer so that each man may claim a share in it for himself. They also imagine that the saints and angels in paradise are their patrons,

and that, therefore, they have infinite means of coming before God, for so it seems to them. Now, we may well conclude that the Holy Spirit has good reason to call them apostates; for they have forsaken Jesus Christ, and cut themselves off from him. They even misuse his name. But Jesus Christ never changes; we have seen that Paul says in 2 Corinthians that we will not find in him yes and no (2 Cor. 1:19), because he remains constant. Thus, whatever the Papists babble about Christianity, it is nothing but mere hypocrisy and lies. They falsely and wickedly use the name of the Son of God, either as a mask or as an idol.

This, then, is why Paul accuses the Galatians of having been led astray. If we ask what they had done, the answer is that they sought to observe the ceremonies of the law as if they were necessary. Yes, it is true that these ceremonies had been ordained by God. Of course; yet, they were a temporary condition for the people of old, for at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ all this had to cease. Because the Galatians were mixing old figures and the shadows of the law with the pure light of the gospel, Paul, unable to bear it, says that they have rebelled and turned away from God. But there was something worse: namely, that they were making the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ altogether void, by believing that man can merit and acquire his own justification before God, and make himself acceptable in God's service. When these deceivers introduced this particular error of keeping to the 'former shadows', it led the Galatians to believe that they were presenting God with meritorious service. Yet, our salvation must be free, or Jesus Christ is no longer anything. We call it free salvation simply because it is given to us by God, and we come to him to be fed, with nothing but a hungry desire for what we are lacking. We should approach God as miserable beggars, if we would be justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. For if we imagine that we have one drop of merit, we will not be motivated to come to him. One of the learned ancients said, and not without reason, that we cannot receive the salvation offered to us in our Lord Jesus Christ unless we can first erase the memory of all our merits, and acknowledge that we are only full of wretchedness. Paul, therefore, was completely justified in saying that the Galatians had fallen away from Jesus Christ and from God the Father.

However, there was another problem: they had been deluded into believing what others desired them to believe. They had been subjected to a slavish bondage, which robbed them of the peace of conscience that they ought to have had in the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, together with the reconciliation we have through his sacrificial death and passion, we must also be set free from the rigours of the law to which we were once in bondage. To explain this (as we will soon see more clearly; for here I am dismissing these matters, but we will see their wider implications shortly), you know that it says in the law that all those who do not fulfil what God commands to the last letter will be accursed (Deut. 27:26). Yet it is impossible for us to reach such perfection. Therefore, it was necessary for our Lord Jesus Christ to obtain our liberty, and to free us from the yoke of the law, which we are unable to bear, as it says in the fifteenth chapter of Acts (Acts 15:10).

We have now seen, in effect, why Paul accuses the Galatians of rebelling, and why he calls them traitors to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ: they had robbed him of the loyalty that they had promised. By this, we too are being admonished to keep to the pure and simple doctrine of the gospel, without straying in one direction or another. For it is not enough to have the name and title of Christians, or to bear the mark of baptism: we must continue steadfast in the doctrine of the gospel. As we have said before, our Lord Jesus Christ cannot deny himself. He can only be known in the way he has been revealed to us by God the Father, our own various conceptions of him being irrelevant. The gospel shows us why he came, his office, the benefits that we receive from him and the strength that he gives us. If we do not have the pure and simple doctrine which our Lord Jesus Christ has revealed, we have nothing at all, but if we have been taught it, let us hold on to it to the very end. If we draw back, even just a little, it is nothing short of unfaithfulness. Indeed, we must remember that terrible Fall, where we, together with others, fell and became entangled with so many errors, lies and deceits of Satan, that Jesus Christ was totally unknown to us. Since God has now, in his goodness, taken us from such an abyss, let us resolve to have firm and constant faith, so that we are no longer

shaken like reeds in the wind. Let us remain firmly rooted in the gospel, grounded upon the invincible power of our Lord Jesus Christ. In him all the promises of God are 'yes and amen' (2 Cor 1:20); their truth and their fulfilment is in him. Therefore, let our faith rest steadfast in these facts. This is what we must retain in our minds from Paul's teaching in this passage.

To make the Galatians even more ashamed of themselves, he speaks to them of the calling of grace. We can relate the words, 'from him that called you', as much to Jesus Christ as to God the Father, there being no great significance in this. We can, however, understand what Paul is saying. He is criticising the Galatians for their base behaviour; for they had even less excuse for going astray, considering they had experienced the goodness of God. For if God calls us, even if he summons us in order to put us to shame, we are still his creatures, and, therefore, owe him our obedience. We must always submit to his authority, whatever he decides to do with us. It is our duty to say to him: 'Here I am. What do you require of me?' Whereas, if we make excuses when God calls us, we are perverting the proper order of things. But God not only calls us to himself, he gives us all the treasures of his goodness in our Lord Jesus Christ. He gives himself willingly to us, asking of us only that we should be his own. Since God treats us with such kindness, and ravishes all our faculties with admiration for him, this should render us most unwilling to draw back. Nevertheless, if we do happen to wander to and fro after we have come to him, we will have much less excuse, and will therefore suffer a more severe and a more terrifying condemnation, as I have already suggested.

We see now why Paul mentions the grace into which the Galatians had been called. In fact, we are more guilty today than our fathers were under the law, if we fail to abide in the pure doctrine of the gospel, without swerving from it. For although God led our forefathers to salvation under the law, yet that calling was not accompanied by such open and abundant displays of the riches of his mercy as we now have in our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us examine ourselves. If God has already made his grace known to us, may this inspire and encourage us to have even greater boldness and invincible strength, so that we may continue in our calling, until we reach the place to which he is calling us. When we compare ourselves with wretched, ignorant unbelievers, our ingratitude is all the more apparent, in that we have had fuller and nobler grace shown to us. We know that many poor souls stray far and wide. They are, however, subject to condemnation: 'For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law' (Rom. 2:12). Now, as for us, God has declared his will to us in such familiar terms, and has given us the opportunity to learn the doctrines of the gospel (if we would only apply ourselves to them); therefore, our condemnation will be even greater than theirs, if we do not make every effort to devote ourselves entirely to God, as I have already said. This makes our responsibility all the greater.

Paul adds another point here: that all this had happened so quickly. Indeed, it is terrible that the Galatians, who had been taught from the lips of the apostle, had defiled themselves during his lifetime. This made them even more blameworthy, because just three days [as it were] after receiving the gospel, they fell away by mixing false teachings with God's truth. Had they kept the faith until a good while after the death of Paul, it does not follow that this would have excused them in God's sight, if they had subsequently fallen away. For as the truth on which our faith is grounded is everlasting, although the heavens and the earth are passing away, even so our faith must endure to the very end (Luke 21:33). Our faith should not depend on the life or death of men; it should be anchored in heaven. Therefore, if we change from one day to the next, we shall have the more to answer for, and our ungratefulness will be even more pronounced. In fact, what Paul says here about the Galatians is far too much in evidence today. Those who have been taught the gospel become discontented after three years [or so] if they do not have some novelty or other, for they have 'itching ears'. Many vain people backslide because they are not content with the truth in the gospel. They always want to be moving house [as it were], because they need some new thing to feed their foolish imaginations. Others grow dissatisfied when they see that the gospel has not brought them any of this world's goods. There are even some who turn away when they find that they may well be persecuted, and have many

enemies. They will have to suffer while others prosper (or so they think). Thus, you can see how many desert our Lord Jesus Christ, not just as one generation succeeds another, but even as those who appear to be his followers turn and rebel after three, or perhaps ten years.

How closely then do we need to hold on to this teaching, since it applies to us. Let us consider the grievance Jeremiah had against the Jews. He says, in effect, 'Go to distant lands, run to the isles, observe what is done by other people. Each one keeps to his own idols', adding, 'which are yet no gods' (Jer. 2:10-11). Satan had deceived them by calling this worship, and they were so set in their ways that they could not be moved. (I hope you are as steadfast as they were, since God has revealed himself to you, and you have a full and certain knowledge of his will.) Surely, however, the same could be said of us nowadays: for we have seen how unbending the Turks [Moslems are being referred to here as "Turks" - Ed.] are! And although the wretched Jews are no better than unclean dogs, yet they are very persistent in maintaining the authority of their law. As for the Papists, their foolishness is so apparent as to make them hideous; even children could judge them. Yet for all that, they burn with such mad zeal to maintain their blasphemous practices. As for ourselves, as soon as the devil beckons with his finger, we are enticed away. It seems as if each of us is on the lookout to see if there is anything new; the slightest thing will immediately weaken us and lead us astray. There is enough sin here without going any further. We must, therefore, take heed to the accusation which is made here by the mouth of Paul against the inconstancy of those who turn away from God, so soon after he has called them into the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At this point, Paul states that the cause behind all this is that, 'there be some that trouble you and would pervert the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Here, Paul is asserting that anything which we may add to the gospel is nothing but mere smoke. Eventually we will discover that it is the devil who has conceived such nonsense in order to deceive miserable fools who cannot adhere to God's truth at all. 'This is nothing other than some people troubling you,' he says. It is true that this expression 'nothing other' [The Authorised Version of 1611 renders this 'not another [gospel]', thus reflecting a view different from that given in Calvin's French translation. Trans.] seems to imply that the whole matter is of no importance. However, Paul is saying that the Galatians were wrong to be troubled by those from Jerusalem and Judaea, who told them they must not separate the law from the gospel. 'No, no,' he says, 'there is only one Jesus Christ. There is only one doctrine that will lead us to him, and give us faith, through which we may obtain salvation. If we wish to have and maintain a pure knowledge of the gospel, we must realise that this is where we find perfection; those who go further are simply trouble-makers throwing everything into disarray.' This text is well worth noting. We learn from it that if our Lord has given us the privilege of being taught in his school, we must no longer have weak faith which can be blown here and there. We must have resolute determination, so that we can say, 'Here is the faith by which we are going to live and die.' We meet many who do not openly oppose the teaching of the gospel, and who even suffer us to preach the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, if we were to ask such people what they disagree with in the gospel, [their answer would be] 'Nothing!' But then, if they were to see an altar adorned with grotesque statues, sure enough, they would flock to it! They would go and hear Mass and do all the other excesses of the Papists; it is all the same to them. And if all this is set before them as error, they still cannot see that it makes any difference. Take good note—such base behaviour reveals that they do not have faith. How? Well, this is how we can know, and even feel, if we ourselves are believers: when we have discernment about the gospel, and conclude that it is the infallible truth of God, and that it cannot lead us astray if we follow it. However, the Papists have invented a faith (as they call it) which is veiled; this suits them fine (even though the poor souls know nothing), as long as they continue to say, 'I rely on our Holy Mother Church; I hold to what she believes.' These people openly display that they have no faith, and do not know how to be saved. It is written that we can only obtain justification and salvation through faith, when we embrace Jesus Christ as the one who communicates all blessings. Therefore, if the Lord Jesus Christ is unknown, there can be no faith. Popish leaders and teachers have been bewitched by a most awful deception of Satan to speak as they do, which proves to us that they have no knowledge of

God; indeed, they are following the path of reprobates.

Let us observe, then, that when Paul tells us there is no other gospel, he wants us to abide in the Lord Jesus Christ and to remain faithful to him, now that we realise the gospel has come from him, rejecting anything which is contrary to its teaching. If we have such maturity, we will be equipped to do battle with Satan, and to oppose all the various opinions that are in the world today. We will never be shaken, whatever troubles come our way; nor will we ever lack the assurance of faith. However, if we waver, we will be just like little children: if they are offered an apple in one hand, sure enough, they will run to it. If they are then offered some other pleasant thing in the other hand, they will reach for that in the same way! Having deserted the first thing, they will rally around the second. If, I say, we are as fickle as this, then it is a sure sign that we are completely unfaithful. Know, therefore, that there must be harmony between our faith and the gospel. Having given ourselves totally to it, we will never turn aside, because we fix our faith on what is contained therein, as we have already said. Not that we can all be as well-versed as each other; for it is certain that most of those whom the Lord Jesus Christ has in his flock do not understand the tenth part of the Holy Scriptures! Yet, whatever else we do not know, we should have the following beliefs in common: that, (1) There is one God the Father, in whom we all believe, who has adopted us out of his pure mercy. (2) There is only one Jesus Christ, through whom all blessings are given to us. (3) We are made regenerate by the Holy Spirit.

Concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, we must also be aware that he is our Advocate, and that without him we cannot approach God. We would not dare to say 'our Father' unless we were members of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ—unless he spoke on our behalf as our intercessor and friend, guiding us, as it were, by the hand to bring us to God the Father. If we do not know these things, then we cannot obtain salvation. Paul accuses the Galatians of failing to recognise that there is only one gospel, which cannot be altered. He does not want them to grieve our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is to be heeded. He also warns us of seducers, who seek to turn us from the pure simplicity of the gospel of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. He teaches us to regard them as abhorrent, for (as we shall soon see more clearly) they pervert the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. How dreadful it is that the gospel, the foundation of our salvation, and the key that opens the gates of paradise, should be perverted! It is our only treasure. We were banished from the kingdom of heaven and could not come near to it, until God made a way, through the gospel, for us to be his people and for him to be our King, so that we can be led and governed by his authority. Inestimable treasures are contained in the gospel. God is reconciled with man; the gates of heaven are opened to us; our Lord Jesus Christ has been given to us as our inheritance; we are made partakers of all the good things that he has bestowed upon us; and we are assured of our eternal salvation. It were better that the whole world should perish and be consumed than that this gospel should be perverted. This is what Paul says about all those who come to trouble us, after we have been so faithfully taught, and of all those who bring us little novelties, mixing in their own inventions here and there—these people turn men from the kingdom of God, and from his royal throne, so that they are no longer governed by him, and thereby the sceptre of our Lord Jesus Christ is no longer extended to them for their salvation. If God's honour, and our own salvation, is as dear to us as it ought to be, and if sharing in all the blessings of heaven is precious to us, then whenever we are approached by such scoundrels seeking to detract from the majesty of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and even our salvation, ought we not to shun them and cast them out as we would the most deadly plague in the world? This, in short, is what we must do: we must cling with strong affection to the gospel, and not allow anyone to corrupt it in any way. We must not let anybody confuse our minds by their claims to be bringing us an alternative view. Even if the people who speak to us have great knowledge, and are skilful, sharp-witted and very eloquent, we must reject them as abominations, people who have come to draw us away from the purity of the gospel. This is what Paul is teaching us here.

Having spoken of this, Paul then adds, that if either he, or an angel, came to preach any other gospel

than that which the Galatians had already heard, they were to reject them. They must be treated as accursed people, and as devils, and be excommunicated. We see here that Paul becomes heated (in a manner of speaking), as he is seeking to promote constancy in the faith so that we will not be shaken. Yet he does not do so without good reason. For we know how fragile we are, and not only fragile, but worse than this, we are vain and rebellious. When we are first taught from the Word of God, if we are not genuinely touched, we find it the strangest book in the world; for the teaching of the gospel is always foolishness to the human mind, as we have seen on previous occasions (1 Cor. 2:14). And the reason for this? Because we are vanity: our hearts have wandered and gone astray, our natures incline and tend to falsehood, and we almost wilfully desire to be beguiled. Because our minds are thus corrupted, we should not be surprised if we do not desire the Word of God and if it does not become a part of us. For our only activity is in rebelling against God. Although we think we are doing right, we are, in fact, blind. In short, the Scriptures do not say without cause that all men are 'vanity and leasing' (Psa. 4:2). We are in rebellion against God, pulling in the opposite direction when he calls us. God has granted us the privilege of being drawn to himself, and of realising that his truth is what we must hold to. He has so mastered us that we are no longer full of guile, but willing to be completely subject to him. Even so, the devil is still able to lead us astray at any moment, because we are so fragile and inconstant! We have seen this happen to those who were mirror-images of holiness (as it were). We have been shocked to see them change so quickly and wander from the right path. What causes this? As I have already said, even when we are in good form, we cannot remain in this state long before we travel in the opposite direction; that is, unless God works in us and strengthens us in our weakness.

This is why Paul upholds the teaching of the gospel in such a forceful way (occasion having been given him by the Galatians, who had gone astray because they had been taught to observe the ceremonies of the law). Seeing such an example and such a picture of man's great weakness and fickleness, Paul states that the truth of the gospel must supersede anything that we may devise. He also implies that we ought not to be deceived by the knowledge, skill or eloquence of men, for even if the angels from heaven had entered our ranks, we should rather count them as devils. But this, apart from anything else, must have seemed a very strange thing to say. What! The angels from heaven! But what else is it to which he refers? His own preaching. He does not simply speak of the gospel of Christ, but of the gospel which he had preached to them. And can he be superior to the angels from heaven? Well, in the first place, we see that it is nothing to praise the gospel in a general and vague sense; you must know, its teaching. After all, there are many who will mock the folly of the Papists, but if you were to ask them the rudiments, which even little children know well, they do not know them. If one says one thing and another says something else, it is all one and the same thing to them. There is no difference; it is as if they are throwing salt, water, mustard and bitter juice together in a recipe! They will speak often enough in general terms about how we must preach the gospel, and yet they do not know what it is! In order to correct such a sin, Paul speaks of the gospel which he preached to them. By this (as I have said), he is showing us that we ought to know the substance of the doctrine which is brought to us in the name of God, so that our faith can be fully grounded upon it. Then we will not be tossed about with every wind, nor will we wander about aimlessly, changing our opinions a hundred times a day; we will persist in this doctrine until the end. This, in brief, is what we must remember.

Because Paul speaks in such bold language in defence of his teaching, this should make it all the more genuine to us. He does not speak with human arrogance or presumption, but in the name of God. Indeed, there is no question here of his boasting about himself; he proves this by saying, 'if I'. He puts himself first, as if he is saying: 'Even I myself, if I change my doctrine, or if you find I have swerved in any way, let me be regarded as a devil.' Here, Paul is showing that he was not seeking to gain a reputation for himself, nor was he fighting for his own cause, so that people would say how intelligent, wise and gifted he was. No; he puts himself on the level of all believers and says: 'Let us all embrace the whole of our Master's teaching, which God has entrusted to us, and to which we must submit our conduct. For although I have taught you this doctrine, yet it is not mine, but it is of God,

who never changes. If I change, do not be shaken, nor surprised about this, but treat me as a devil, count me accursed. As for yourselves, remain grounded in the truth that you have always known. I would rather you saw me as accursed and abominable, and even the angels from heaven also, than that you forsake the truth about the Son of God and turn away from it.' We can see from this what Paul desired: that God's truth should be revered amongst men, as it deserves to be, and that it should be esteemed in such a way, that all our senses, thoughts, desires and affections should be subdued and held captive to it. It is not lawful for any living creature to change anything in the gospel, for God has spoken by the mouth of his only Son. May he be our master indeed, and may each of us obey him without question. This is what Paul desired. But since we cannot now finish commenting on the rest, it will be reserved for next Sunday, in God's good pleasure.

Now let us fall before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our faults, and praying that he will make us ever more conscious of them. May this lead us to a right repentance, and make us grow and increase in faith, as true sacrifices to him. Since our Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our redemption, let us also seek to dedicate ourselves fully to him. May we be led by him to persevere, so that in life and in death we seek no other contentment or rest than to acquiesce in his good will. May we glory in nothing other than the salvation which he has purchased for us. May this grace not only be granted to us, but to all peoples and nations on earth, etc.

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*Marked up by Lance George Marshall*