

THE STRAIGHT CUT

The Organic Gospel in Galatians

An organic union between the Triune God and man may sound strangely dissonant to minds that have been overly influenced by the thought that salvation is merely a matter of judicial reconciliation with a righteous God. This idea, however, was not strange to the apostle Paul; it was a reality that shaped his ministry, imbuing him with energy and urgency. In the New Testament, he spoke of the Triune God's desire for an organic union with His redeemed and regenerated believers from many different perspectives. From the vantage point of the eternal purpose of God in Ephesians, Paul spoke of it in terms of "the mystery of His will" and "the economy of the mystery" (1:9; 3:9). From the vantage point of ministering the all-inclusive Christ in Colossians, Paul spoke of it in terms of "the stewardship of God" (1:25). And from the vantage point of care and encouragement in 1 Timothy, Paul cautioned Timothy to not deviate from this "economy, which is in faith" (1:4). In contrast to these lofty words and phrases, however, Paul also spoke of this organic union in simple, frank, and clear words to the Galatians, who had been distracted from its simplicity through a reversion to legalistic observances. Out of his deep concern for the Galatians, Paul simply pointed them back to the "gospel" (1:16; 3:8).

The gospel of God is organic in its very essence, and it speaks of a process involving condemnation, justification, sanctification, glorification, selection, and transformation whereby sinners are made sons of God and constituted to be the Body of Christ. This is fully revealed in Romans. Our participation in the gospel is also organic, and it involves Christ being revealed, lived, and formed in us through the organic operation of the Spirit. This is fully developed in Galatians. While Paul lays a predicate of our judicial justification before God in both Romans and Galatians, his focus and burden are on a gospel that is decisively organic in nature and experience.

After a short introduction in Galatians 1, Paul immediately focuses his attention on the subject of the gospel, referring to it seven times in verses 6 through 16. He begins by expressing his disbelief over the quick departure of the Galatians from the central focus of the gospel and their reversion to a legalistic set of beliefs and practices that fundamentally diverge from the revealed content of the gospel: "I marvel that you are so quickly removing from Him who has called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel, which is not another gospel" (vv. 6-7). While this "removing" is difficult

for Paul to understand, the motive of those who troubled the Galatians is more easily understood: "There are some who trouble you and desire to pervert the gospel of Christ" (v. 7). For these perverters, Paul utters warning and cursing without regard for human or even angelic status:

But if even we or an angel out of heaven should announce to you a gospel beyond that which we have announced to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, now also I say again, If anyone announces to you a gospel beyond that which you have received, let him be accursed. (vv. 8-9)

In contrast to the desires of those who wish to enslave (2:4), Paul only speaks of his service as a slave for a gospel that is rooted in a living and vital revelation of God's Son:

If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a slave of Christ. For I make known to you, brothers, concerning the gospel announced by me, that it is not according to man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation by Jesus Christ. (1:10-12)

This revelation involves more than mental enlightenment; it is a revelation of the Son that initiates and then supplies Paul's gospel with its organic content: "It pleased God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me that I might announce Him as the gospel among the Gentiles" (vv. 15-16).

For the remainder of Galatians 1 and the majority of chapter two, Paul continues with a personal recounting of his response to and his defense of the gospel. He went away to Arabia for reflection and consideration, returned to Damascus, conferred with Peter in Jerusalem, preached in Syria and Cilicia, defended the content of his gospel before the apostles in Jerusalem, and finally rebuked Cephas to his face in Antioch for his hypocrisy related to the gospel. After this detailed and impassioned reminder of the centrality of the gospel, Paul begins to speak about the content of the gospel. The effectiveness of our gospel in conveying and imparting God's salvation is entirely dependent upon the extent to which our message accords with the *content* of the gospel that Paul so rigorously studied and vigorously defended. If there is a concern today about the ability of the gospel to convict the hearts of men and bring them into a vital relationship with God, we must be willing to look

beyond the ways in which the gospel is communicated and look instead at the content of what we are communicating.

The Content of the Gospel

Rather than focusing on the content of the gospel, much of the debate in the church in the West over the past five hundred years has centered on the process by which the gospel is made effectual in the lives of sinful man, i.e., whether justification is by works or by faith alone. This debate was necessary in order for the ultimate truth of the gospel to remain, but the work of fully recovering the content of the gospel remains incomplete. Even today the debate over the means of salvation continues to obscure the organic content of the gospel. For advocates of *sola fide* (faith alone), for example, the sole utility of Galatians seems to be contained in just two verses:

And knowing that a man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, we also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ and not out of the works of law, because out of the works of law no flesh will be justified....And that by law no one is justified before God is evident because, "The righteous one shall have life and live by faith." (2:16; 3:11)

This narrow utility only diminishes the impact of the broader reality in Galatians of Christ being revealed in us (1:16), living in us (2:20), and being formed in us (4:19). This organic reality is made possible by our justification, which is through faith in Jesus Christ, rather than out of works of law. Our faith, however, does more than provide us with an acceptable, objective standing before God. The hearing of faith ushers us into a divine and mystical realm in the Spirit, in which we are organically identified with Christ as Abraham's seed. The truth of 2:16 and 3:11 should never be denied in relation to the means of our salvation, but when the issue of our faith becomes lost in a narrow, judicial debate, the organic aspects of our salvation are largely ignored. We must be willing to speak not only of the means of our salvation but also of the organic issue of our salvation, just as Paul, who, having openly portrayed Christ crucified, also spoke of the organic content of the gospel. This content includes Christ being the reality of the seed in whom all the nations will be blessed and the Spirit being the realization of the blessing of Abraham, making possible an organic union of the seed of Abraham and the sons of Abraham (3:8, 14, 16, 29).

In 3:6 through 9 Paul reminds the Galatian believers that their faith has an organic aspect as well as a judicial aspect. They have been justified "out of faith," just as "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (vv. 8, 6). As such, they are no longer under the wrath of God, because the righteousness of the One who redeemed them out of the curse of the law has been accounted to them (v. 13). However, their faith also has organically joined them to the lineage of Abraham, and thus they are fully qualified to receive the blessing of

Abraham as "sons of Abraham" (v. 7). While the change in our judicial status is discussed, it is this organic aspect that Paul ultimately seeks to impress upon the Galatian believers.

In verse 8 Paul associates the blessing of Abraham with the gospel in one of the most revealing verses in the Bible: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles out of faith, announced the gospel beforehand to Abraham: 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" In the eyes of Paul, when God appeared and spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12, He was preaching the gospel. Through His continued speaking in Genesis 13 and 15, Abraham experienced a hearing of faith, and his belief was reckoned to him as righteousness (15:6). The principal component of God's promise to Abraham was that his seed would inherit the land and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his seed (12:3, 7; 22:18). The God of glory announced the gospel to Abraham, and Paul proclaimed that the content of this gospel was Christ: "But to Abraham were the promises spoken and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to the seeds,' as concerning many, but as concerning one: 'And to your seed,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

Christ is the seed, but He is realized in our experience as the Spirit: "In order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (v. 14). In the hearing of faith, Christ is preached and portrayed crucified, but the Spirit is received (vv. 1-2). In our growth in the divine life, Christ is revealed and formed in us, but the reflection of this growth in us is the Spirit of His Son, crying, "Abba, Father" in our hearts (4:6), walking by the Spirit (5:16), and sowing unto the Spirit (6:8). Just as the Father and the Son coexist and coinhere and cannot be separated, so the Son and the Spirit coexist and coinhere and cannot be separated.

In Galatians Paul speaks not of the Holy Spirit, but of *the* Spirit. The total blessing of the gospel is not salvation, redemption, forgiveness, life, or going to heaven—it is the Spirit. The Spirit denotes the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—who has been processed through incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension....This Spirit enters into the believers to be their life and everything to them. Such a Spirit is the total blessing of the gospel. As the blessing of the gospel, the Spirit includes forgiveness, redemption, salvation, reconciliation, justification, eternal life, the divine nature, the uplifted and resurrected human nature, and the very Triune God Himself. (Lee 129-130)

In the hearing of faith, we hear and appreciate the person and work of Christ and call on His name, but we receive the Spirit. The promise of the seed is equal to the promise of the Spirit because the Spirit is the realization of Christ. The content of the gospel is not justification by works or even justification by faith alone; it is the living person of God's Son, revealed and received by all those who believe, bringing the believers into an organic union with Christ.

In presenting the content of the gospel—Christ as the seed and the Spirit as the realization of Christ—Paul relies upon a very precise explication of the Scriptures based on the singular form of the word *seed*. For Paul, God’s promise refers to more than just the physical lineage that sprang forth from Abraham; it refers to the spiritual lineage that sprang forth in Christ as the unique seed of the divine life. This life, once released through the redemption wrought by Christ on the cross and applied by the Spirit through the hearing of faith, generates a new creation (6:15) that is organically identified and joined to the seed of the promise. At the end of chapter three, Paul speaks of our union with Christ: “If you are of Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise” (v. 29). Given the precision of Paul’s use of the term *seed* in the preceding verses, it is important to note that he does not say, “You are Abraham’s seeds,” as concerning many, but as concerning one—the Christ who has been multiplied as the stars of the heavens and as the sand on the seashore through an organic union with all those who are sons of God through faith (Gen. 22:17; Gal. 3:26). When we receive the Spirit, we are joined to the seed in a union that is so complete that distinctions of race, social status, and even gender no longer exist (v. 28). The conclusion of chapter three is Paul’s identification of the believers with the seed of Abraham, which, though still being one, has been multiplied and enlarged in an organic fulfillment of the gospel that was announced to Abraham.

The issue of the content of the gospel is the organic union of the many sons of God with the Son of God, made possible by our receiving of the Spirit through the hearing of faith. The gospel produces faith. When the living person of God’s Son is preached, there is a response of faith—a hearing of faith—which applies the content of the organic gospel to all those who believe. This faith justifies us and rescues us from the realm of the curse. It also joins us to a realm of blessing in Christ through the Spirit. This gospel precedes teachings about justification, just as it preceded the giving of the law. The gospel will be utterly effectual once we focus our attention on its organic content and goal.

The Application of the Content of the Gospel

The application of the content of the gospel is made possible by the work of Christ and by the impartation of the Spirit. The work of Christ removes the curse of the law associated with our sinful condition, and the impartation of the Spirit brings us into the realm of blessing characterized by sonship. The objective work of Christ becomes effectual in our experience through the hearing of faith, and the receiving of the Spirit also depends upon the hearing of faith.

Concerning faith there are two aspects, the objective aspect and the subjective aspect. Objectively faith is what we believe. Subjectively faith is our believing. Therefore, faith denotes both the act of believing and that in which we

believe. Regarding the act of believing, faith is subjective, but regarding what we believe, faith is objective. As we hear about those things in which we are to believe, faith is produced within us. The more we hear about these good things, the more we appreciate them. Spontaneously this appreciation issues in our believing in those very things about which we have heard. (Lee 122)

In Galatians Paul does not neglect the things that Christ has accomplished on our behalf, because he recognizes that our organic salvation has a judicial base. Judicially, Christ “gave Himself for our sins that He might rescue us out of the present evil age” (1:4). Paul points to the crucified Christ to remind us that our rescue is based on the effectiveness of His death rather than on our efforts to please God in ourselves, even our most sincere and well-intentioned religious, moral, or ethical endeavors. Nothing in and of our flesh can please God and remove the curse brought on by the fall. Man is utterly unable to please God and to satisfy His righteous requirements. The true function of the law in God’s economy is to expose man’s sinfulness and to serve as our child-conductor unto Christ. We have been conducted unto Christ, who has “redeemed us out of the curse of the law, having become a curse on our behalf” (3:13), through His substitutionary death on the cross. What we could not do in our flesh was accomplished by Christ in “the days of His flesh” (Heb. 5:7). In His human living, He fully satisfied God, and in His death, He fully satisfied the righteous requirement of the law by becoming a curse on behalf of those who, through the constitution of sin, have no righteousness before God, being utterly unable to “continue in all the things written in the book of the law” (Gal. 3:10).

In his preaching, Paul presented both the person and work of Christ, but the Galatians received the Spirit as the very content of the gospel. Based on Christ’s judicial accomplishments, the content of the gospel can be organically applied to us through the hearing of faith (vv. 2, 5). In fact, the hearing of faith is the initiation of our organic union.

In this hearing of faith, we hear all the well-speaking of God, all His blessing. Faith involves the hearing concerning all the good things of God toward us. Through this hearing an appreciation for the Lord Jesus is awakened within us. Out of our appreciation for the Lord, we spontaneously call on His name. In this way we receive Him, accept Him, and join ourselves to Him. Then we go on to partake of Him and enjoy Him. All this is related to faith. Law requires man to work, but faith receives all that God is, all that God has planned and purposed, all that God has accomplished, all that God has obtained and attained, and all that God intends to impart into us. (Lee 127-128)

According to Paul, faith is a gift that has been revealed (Eph. 2:8; Gal. 3:23). The revelation of faith is contained in the revelation of the Son. When the Son came, faith came, just as grace and reality came through Jesus Christ (v. 25; John 1:17).

And in our experience, when the Son was revealed to us, faith came to us. The faith that justifies us before God and joins us to God is imparted in the gospel of the grace of God. In fact, grace and faith are two aspects of the believer's organic union with the Triune God. On God's side, grace is the coming forth of the Triune God in His economic procession; on our side, faith is the receiving of the Triune God in His economic procession. With both grace and faith, the gospel is central. The gospel of the grace of God is a stewardship of the grace of God, and in this stewardship, the unsearchable riches of Christ are ministered and imparted through the hearing of faith, which organically joins the believers to the content of their belief—the unsearchably rich Christ (Acts 20:24; Eph. 3:2, 8). Our experience of the gospel of our salvation speaks of this organic process:

When people hear of the grace of God in the preaching of the gospel, something rises up within them to appreciate what they have heard. The grace presented to them becomes in them the faith by which they believe. Spontaneously they begin to appreciate God, Christ, and the Spirit. They appreciate what Christ has done in accomplishing redemption. This appreciation is faith. Faith comes when they begin to appreciate what they hear in the gospel. (Lee 122)

Out of his deep appreciation for the work of Christ, Paul lived a life in the faith of the Son of God. He did not live in his fallen "I," but in an organic union with the Son of God. In Galatians 2:20 he speaks of both his appreciation of Christ and of his union with Christ: "I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." Paul appreciated the judicial accomplishments of Christ, realized the organic content of Abraham's blessing, and fully enjoyed the application of this content by receiving and then continuing in the bountiful supply of the Spirit. In addition to presenting an organic gospel, his testimony in Galatians reveals the progressive experience of Christ that is available to those who live in union with the Triune God.

The Organic Development and Living of the Gospel

The initiation of the organic union is not the end of the gospel in Galatians—it is the beginning. The organic content of the gospel similarly must be living and operative in our living. Through the hearing of faith, we receive the Spirit and God's Son is revealed in us (3:2; 1:16). As the hearing of faith continues, Christ lives and is formed in us through the bountiful supply of the Spirit (3:5; 2:20; 4:19). From the revelation of Christ to the living of Christ to the formation of Christ, the organic content of the gospel must be given the full opportunity to develop in us and to ultimately make us a new creation in Christ (6:15).

We need a thorough recovery of the biblical view of the

gospel. The gospel is not just a matter of an initial reconciliation with God through repentance and belief in Christ. Having been reconciled, we must go on to experience the further salvation that is in His life (Rom. 5:10). This salvation involves the progressive development of our organic union with the Triune God. Only the need for this experiential development can explain Paul's deep and intense burden to speak of the gospel to the Galatian believers. The content of the gospel must be progressively applied throughout our lives, just as it was in Paul's. The content of the gospel has the power to do more than just change sinners into sons; it has the power to cause these sons to grow in the divine life. Through the development of the organic union, God's many sons can mature and become heirs who walk by the rule of the new creation and bear the transformed mark of the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), no longer ruled by the supplanting of the flesh. For this, Christ must be revealed in us, lived in us, and formed in us, just as He was revealed, lived, and formed in Paul.

The organic gospel, although spiritual and mystical in nature, produces a living that, in reality, is Christ living in us and being formed in us. Paul presents a clear view of this living in Galatians 5 and 6. First, our freedom in Christ does not become an opportunity for the flesh (5:13); rather, by our walking by the Spirit in our spirit, the lusts of the flesh are not fulfilled, and they are utterly crucified (vv. 16, 24). Instead of the works of the flesh being manifest, only the fruit of the Spirit is (vv. 19-23). This maturity, however, does not build up individual spirituality; it develops a consciousness of the Body of Christ that causes us to serve one another in love (v. 13), to find our place in the Body without a hint of vainglory, provocation, or envy (v. 26), and most importantly, to care for the Body by restoring those who have been overtaken in some offense in a spirit of meekness (6:1). Such a living is a sowing unto the Spirit that in due season will cause us to reap eternal life, that is, the maturity of life that can only be associated with generation of the new creation within us and through us (vv. 8-9, 15).

The gospel in Galatians is organic. It is judicially founded upon the effectual, substitutionary death of Christ on the cross, but its organic content is realized through our union with the processed Triune God, *the Spirit*, through the hearing of faith. In this union, Christ is revealed, lived, and formed in us. This pleases God and fulfills His promise to increase Abraham's seed as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore. His seed, Christ, has been enlarged through the organic union of God and man. This is the gospel that energized Paul, and it can energize us as well.

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Works Cited

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