

## CHAPTER 1

### Getting Into Galatians -

#### An Introduction

I walked out of the house a frustrated preacher - not my house, but the house of a man who had invited me to talk about the Bible. When he phoned and invited me over to his house, he had said he wanted to talk about the law. Specifically, he wanted to know if the Ten Commandments still applied to Christians.

After I arrived, we chatted amiably for a few minutes, and then he raised the question again: Are the Ten Commandments applicable to God's people since the cross?

I explained why I believed they were. For one thing, Paul said that "through the law we become conscious of sin," and "through the commandment sin [becomes] utterly sinful" (Rom. 3:20; 7:13). Paul also said that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12), and James spoke of "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25).

My host became extremely agitated. "That's not true!" he exclaimed, almost yelling in my ear. "Haven't you read that Christians are released from the law?" He pointed me to Romans 7:1-3- "The law has authority over a man only as long as he lives," he read from verse 1. Then he proceeded to verse 3, which changes to feminine pronouns. "But if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage" (verse 3). "Besides, we are not under law, but under grace," and he pointed me to Romans 6:14.

I flinched. But not because of the sudden gender shift.

"And look at this!" he continued triumphantly. He turned to Galatians 3 and began reading: "What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions *until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come*" (verse 19). He spoke

the last few words with special emphasis. "It says right there that the law was in effect only until the Seed came," he said. "And if you'll look at verse 16, you'll see that the Seed is Christ."

I took a deep breath, but I didn't have a chance to get a word in edgewise.

"And here's the final proof," he exclaimed as he jabbed a finger at verse 25: "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law."

Frankly, I did not know how to answer. Instead I mumbled a few words and excused myself because I had another appointment. As I walked out of the house, I was determined to get to the bottom of this problem. Not that this was my first exposure to it. I had presented my standard proof texts on law to people many times. Only occasionally did anyone come back at me with the proof texts for the other side of the question. But it had happened often enough that I was painfully aware of the apparent contradiction in the New Testament, and especially in Paul's writings, about law. In the past each time someone confronted me with the problem, I had managed to explain my way out, and each time I had resolved that someday I would study the problem until I found the answer. This time I knew that "someday" had become "now."

The next day I got out my Bible and began. I decided to start with Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, since that's where most of the problems are, especially in chapter 3. However, I started with chapter 1 on the assumption that I had to understand the context of the entire book if I was to understand the problem passages in chapter 3.

After a few months of prayerful study I finally found my answer. It wasn't easy, but I found that it is possible to bring a problem to the Word and find the answers. That was in 1984. Since that time I have had opportunity to write out my views in a series of Bible study guides, and I have given a series of lectures on audiotape on the subject of the law in Galatians. Finally, I decided it was time to write a book - the book you are now reading.

I should perhaps explain to you that I did not refer to any commentaries on Galatians during my study. I did not read any of the scholarly literature on the subject. I simply studied the Bible. Also, though I have a working knowledge of Greek, for the most part I did not refer to the Greek New Testament in my study of Galatians. I used the New International Version. After several years of intensive study I finally “figured out” Galatians to my satisfaction.

In other words, I am writing from a pastoral, not a scholarly, background. I lay no claim in this book to discussing every nuance of Galatians. To do that I’d have to be a scholar, which I am not. This does not mean that I doubt the validity of my conclusions. Like most people who study carefully into a particular subject, I believe that I have reached a correct understanding of Galatians, especially the problem texts in chapters 3 and 4. However, I am aware that my conclusions may be flawed, and it seems to me that the best way to find out whether I’m right is to share my views so that others, including scholars, can criticize them.

At the risk of being misunderstood, I would like to share with you one other significant conclusion I have reached from this study. But in order to do this, I need to give you a bit of background.

As I said earlier, when I began my study of Galatians I decided to study the Bible only. However, after I finished writing the chapters on Galatians 3:19-25 - the most difficult passage in Paul’s entire letter - my curiosity got the best of me. Did any commentator interpret Galatians the way I did? I happened to be on the campus of Andrews University at the time, so I went to the library and browsed through the Bible commentary section. I picked up the *Word Biblical Commentary* on Galatians, turned to Galatians 3:19, and began reading. I discovered that the author, Richard N. Longenecker, clearly explained the Greek text of the Bible and probed the nuances of every word and phrase. The commentary is one of the finest I have ever read.

## THE GOSPEL VS. LEGALISM

And the further I read, the more excited I got. Dr. Longenecker interpreted Galatians 3:19-25 exactly as I had interpreted it. In verse after verse he pointed out exactly the same problems in the text that I had observed, and in almost every case he explained these problems in harmony with the conclusions I had drawn. I couldn't believe it!

I share this experience with you because I want you to know that I approached Galatians exactly the same way any layperson would. Yet my conclusions are not necessarily unique. And if I can do it, so can you.

I suspect that many Christians come to Scripture with a good bit of fear that without the background of a scholar it would be impossible for them to figure out what the Bible really means. I have good news for all who hold this fear. It's groundless. All you need is a good modern speech translation on which to base your study, with several others for cross-checking when you run into problems. It also helps to have a reputable Bible dictionary and a good commentary or two. (Just because I chose not to refer to commentaries in my study of Galatians does not mean that commentaries are unnecessary.) With these tools, all you have to do is pay careful attention to every word. Don't try to make the words mean what you want them to mean or think they ought to mean. As much as possible, set aside your preconceived ideas and the theology you grew up with, and let the words of Scripture tell you what the Bible writer means. I guarantee you that God's Word will not lead you astray.

Before we get into Galatians, I'd like to give you a bit of background about the place and the people to whom it was written. Paul wrote Galatians to a church or group of churches in central Asia Minor. (Asia Minor was roughly what we today know as Turkey.) This region was called Galatia. Paul wrote the letter in response to a doctrinal crisis in the New Testament church that involved a false teaching which he called a "different gospel" (see Gal. 1:7-9). This false gospel was being agitated by a group of Christian Jews who may have been Pharisees before their conversion to Christianity. A number of

Bible translations, including the King James Version, the New King James Version, and the *New American Standard Bible*, call this group “the sect of the Pharisees” (Acts 15:5). The Revised Standard Version and the New International Version call them “the party of the Pharisees.” Modern Bible students often refer to them as “Judaizers.” I have chosen to call them “the Jewish party.” You will be reading a lot about this Jewish party in the rest of this book. The church in Galatia appears to have been particularly susceptible to their false teachings.

You will find it helpful, as we go through Galatians, to understand a little about the structure of the book. There is an introduction and a conclusion, of course. And the body of the book can be divided into three sections: historical, theological, and practical. The following diagram shows just where each part begins and ends:

### **AN OUTLINE OF GALATIANS**

#### **Part 1**

##### **Historical**

**Galatians 1:6 – 2:14**

#### **Part 2**

##### **Theological**

**Galatians 2:15 - 4:31**

#### **Part 3**

##### **Advice About Legalism**

**Galatians 5:1 - 6:10**

I must warn you that Paul's line of reasoning in the Epistle to the Galatians is not easy to grasp. Peter once said that Paul's letters "contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Galatians surely must have been at the top of his list of difficult Pauline letters! I will do my best to make the Epistle easy for you to understand, but you will get the most out of reading this book if you work at it a little harder than

you do most of the books you read. I suggest that you begin by reading through Paul's entire letter to the Galatians in a modern speech translation of the Bible preferably the New International Version, since that is the version will use throughout most of the book. Then keep the Bible by your side, opened to Galatians, as you read this book, so that you can quickly refer to it when you come to something that seems unclear.

Many people believe that in Galatians Paul addressed a doctrinal controversy that occurred nearly 2,000 years ago and that is largely irrelevant to Christians today. The main benefit from reading Galatians, they say, is the theology about justification by faith that Paul wrote in response to the Galatian heresy. Nobody today is demanding that Christians be circumcised. Therefore, Paul's practical message was for the Galatians and other Christians of his time, not ours.

That is simply not true. It is correct, of course, that we do not have to deal with the exact form of the theological heresy that the Christians at Paul's time did. I don't know of anyone who is going around insisting that modern Christians submit to circumcision and other ceremonial laws as the Jewish party demanded. But the practical lesson from Galatians has much more to do with legalism as a wrong principle of life than it does with any specific form of legalism.

I am a Seventh-day Adventist. Because of that, I have written this book from an Adventist perspective. However, I tried to keep all Christians in mind as I wrote, because I believe that Galatians has a message for all of us.

Let me be totally frank. You're going to see a lot of dirty laundry in this book. Adventist dirty laundry. The kind that no one has yet attempted to wash.

Did you ever stick your nose in a dirty clothes hamper and take a deep breath? The result wasn't very pleasant, was it? Let me assure you that Adventist dirty clothes can get awfully smelly. In fact, I might be quite embarrassed about hanging out our dirty laundry for the world to see were it not for one thing: we've all got the stuff. There isn't a Christian denomination on

the face of the earth that hasn't got plenty enough and to spare. And the reason is simple: we're all infected with the disease that causes dirty laundry - it's called sin.

Furthermore, we're all tempted with legalism - the effort, somehow, even if it's in the tiniest way, to be saved by our own works or to assume that something we do changes God's attitude toward us. And all too many of us, from all denominations, yield to the temptation. Legalism is not just an Adventist problem. It's a problem that every Christian has to deal with.

And that's why I'm willing to hang out the Adventist dirty laundry for you to see. Because I know that you've got some too, whatever denomination you happen to belong to. If what you learn about cleaning up dirty laundry in this book can help you live a better life in your Christian community, then it's worth it to me and my church to let you see our dirty laundry.

In fact, I believe that the best way for any of us to learn about dirty laundry and how to clean it up is to take a close look at some specific dirty laundry. I don't think my comments would be nearly as helpful if I were to write a book about legalism in general, which discussed legalism as it is found in all churches. The best way for us all to benefit from a book about legalism is to examine it up close in a denomination with plenty of it.

And I think Adventists are well qualified to offer other Christians that look. A hundred years ago many Christian denominations had prohibitions against the use of jewelry, theater attendance, dancing, playing cards, etc. The majority of denominations have dropped these prohibitions in the years since, but a few, including Seventh-day Adventists, have not. I don't have a problem with the fact that we still have these "standards," as we call them. The problem is not with the standards, but with the way we use them.

In addition to the traditional standards I just mentioned, we Adventists have added a few of our own. We have standards on health - no alcoholic beverages, no tobacco, no tea or coffee, no unclean meats, and you'd be better off if you

## THE GOSPEL VS. LEGALISM

didn't eat any meat at all, we say. Because of our emphasis on keeping the fourth commandment, we also have maintained some rather strict rules about Sabbathkeeping - don't go to work, don't play secular games, don't work in the yard, don't clean the house, don't pay the bills, don't do business on the Sabbath, etc.

Any religious organization that teaches its members to keep standards of behavior is open to someone in the church turning those standards into legalism. And the more standards a group has, the greater the possibility for abuse. Because we have retained most of the traditional rules of 100 years ago, and because we've added a number of our own, Adventists can be, I believe, an excellent case study for anyone wanting to study legalism. That's another reason that I'm willing to be specific about Adventist legalism.

If you are a Seventh-day Adventist reader, I hope you can learn more about yourself and your own spiritual life as you read this book. If you are not a Seventh-day Adventist, I hope that you will gain a greater insight not only into Seventh-day Adventists but also into your own life and the life of your own church. Whoever you are, I hope the lessons you learn from Galatians will help you be a happier Christian.