

# What Is the Good News?

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*If anyone, if we ourselves or an angel from heaven, should preach a gospel at variance with the gospel we preached to you, he shall be held outcast. I now repeat what I have said before: if anyone preaches a gospel at variance with the gospel which you received, let him be outcast!*<sup>1</sup>

To say the least, Paul was profoundly convinced of the rightness of his version of the good news and of the dire consequences of perverting the truth and turning to a different gospel.<sup>2</sup> If the apostle's language should seem too strong, the New English Bible translation of *anathema esto* (let him be outcast!) is mild compared with the Phillips (may he be . . . a damned soul!) or the Today's English Version (may he be condemned to hell!) or The Living New Testament (let God's curse fall upon him) or the King James Version (let him be accursed).

Paul was stunned to observe the willingness of so many early Christians, recently set free by the good news from the meaningless requirements of false religion to return to the indignity and fear of their former bondage. "O you dear idiots of Galatia, . . ." he wrote, "who has been casting a spell over you? . . . At one time when you had no knowledge of God, you were under the authority of gods who had no real existence. But now that you have come to know God, or rather, are known by him, how can you revert to dead and sterile principles and consent to be under their power all over again? Your religion is beginning to be a matter of observing certain days or months or seasons or years. Frankly, you stagger me, you make me wonder if all my efforts over you have been wasted!"<sup>3</sup>

But what could be expected of new converts when some of the leading brethren in Jerusalem were themselves compromising and contradicting the

gospel of Christ?<sup>4</sup> Even Peter, in spite of his broadening experience with Cornelius, had reverted to some of his former narrow views, and Paul was moved to denounce him to his face and in public.<sup>5</sup> This is the Paul who taught that love is never rude, that love never insists on having its own way,<sup>6</sup> the Paul who was so respectful of the freedom of others that he could say of certain religious practices, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind," and "Who are you to criticize another?"<sup>7</sup> But when it came to the good news and to those who would suppress or pervert it, Paul spoke out with almost frightening conviction and power. He even went so far as to suggest that the legalistic agitators who were upsetting the new converts by urging such external requirements as circumcision "had better go the whole way and make eunuchs of themselves!"<sup>8</sup>

## I

What is this good news about which Paul felt so sure and which through the centuries had provoked such opposition and has been so misunderstood? And what did Paul consider so serious a contradiction and perversion of the good news that he could be moved to express himself so strongly to the Galatian believers?

Since receiving this assignment from the editor of SPECTRUM, I have asked many Christians to state what they understand to be the essence of the good news. The varied replies have included much of the content of the Christian faith, from Grace and Atonement to the Second Coming and Eternal Life. But the reply that I believe came the closest to the heart of the matter was this: "The good news is that God is not the kind of Person Satan has made him out to be."

That the good news should be related to the issues in the great controversy between Christ and Satan is perhaps suggested by Paul's bold assertion that if even an angel from heaven should teach a different gospel he should be held outcast. At first this seems incredibly presumptuous and dogmatic. But was it not an angel who began the circulation of misinformation about God and who still "masquerades as an angel of light"<sup>9</sup> as he seeks to deceive men into rejecting the good news?

Since the great controversy began, it has been Satan's studied purpose to persuade angels and men that God is not worthy of their faith and love. Satan has pictured the Creator as a harsh, demanding tyrant who lays arbitrary requirements upon his people just to show his authority and test their willingness to obey. God has no respect, Satan claims, for their freedom and dignity as intelligent beings.

The Scriptures speak of Satan's unceasing efforts to pervert the truth and blacken the character of God.<sup>10</sup> Ellen White concedes the vast extent of his success: "When we consider in what false colors Satan has painted the character of God, can we wonder that our merciful Creator is feared, dreaded, and even hated? The appalling views of God which have spread over the world from the teachings of the pulpit have made thousands, yes, millions, of skeptics and infidels."<sup>11</sup>

7 But if God were as Satan has pictured him, how easily he could have blotted out his rebellious creatures and started over again! If all God wanted was unthinking obedience, how easily he could have manipulated the minds of men and angels and forced them to obey! But love and faith, the qualities God desires the most, are not produced by force — not even by God himself. That is why, instead of destroying, God simply took his case into court. In order to prove the rightness of his cause, to demonstrate that his way of governing the universe was the best for all concerned, God humbly submitted his own character to the investigation and judgment of his creatures.

Paul understood this when he exclaimed, "God must prove true, though every man be false; as the Scripture says, 'That you may be shown to be upright in what you say, and win your case when you go into court.'"<sup>12</sup>

The good news is that God has won his case. Though all of us should let him down, God cannot lose his case. He has already won! The universe has conceded that the evidence is on his side, that the devil has lied in his charges against God. "It is finished," Jesus cried.<sup>13</sup> By the life that he lived and the unique and awful way he died, Jesus had demonstrated the righteousness of his Father and had answered any question about God's character and government.<sup>14</sup>

Paul was proud to be a bearer of this good news, and he knew what it was all about. "In it the righteousness of God is revealed."<sup>15</sup> He confessed with shame that formerly he had seriously misrepresented God, even sharing Satan's picture of God to the extent of imprisoning and persecuting men and women in order to force them to obey.<sup>16</sup> But after he had accepted the good news, Paul devoted the rest of his life to telling the truth. And who has written more eloquently about freedom, love, and grace — that faith is the only requirement for heaven, that we are not under law but under grace, and that Christ is the end of legalism as a way of being saved?

"Of course, don't misunderstand me," Paul seems to be saying in Romans. "Does faith abolish law? Perish the thought! Faith establishes law, by putting it in its proper perspective."<sup>17</sup> For, adopting Paul's understanding of

faith, the man who really knows, loves, and trusts God, and admires God for his wise and orderly ways, is most willing to listen and give heed to God's instructions on any subject.

"Let me tell you," continued Paul, "why our gracious Lord, who wants us to feel the joy and dignity of freedom, made so much use of law." "Why then the law?" he wrote to the Galatians. "It was added because of transgressions."<sup>18</sup> It was designed to be our guardian, our custodian, to bring us back to a right relationship with God. Correctly understood, God's laws are no threat to our freedom. They were given solely for our best good; they all make good sense and deserve to be intelligently obeyed.

But as for those meaningless traditions that have nothing to do with the purposes of God, away with them! As Paul wrote to the Colossians: "Why . . . do you take the slightest notice of these purely human prohibitions — 'Don't touch this,' 'Don't taste that,' and 'Don't handle the other'? 'This,' 'that,' and 'the other' will all pass away after use! I know that these regulations look wise with their self-inspired efforts at worship, their policy of self-humbling, and their studied neglect of the body. But in actual practice they do honor, not to God, but to man's own pride."<sup>19</sup>

Worse than that, taught and obeyed in the name of Christianity, they present the Christian's God as the arbitrary deity Satan has claimed him to be — and that is not good news.

## II

More than a century ago Seventh-day Adventists accepted the commission to help spread the good news to every nation under heaven, that the end may come. Is it lack of men or money that is responsible for so long delay? Or is it possible that in any respects we may not have been telling the good news? Of course, all of us believe we have the gospel. So did the brethren from Jerusalem who sought to control Paul and add a little legalism to his good news.

At the 1888 Minneapolis session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, every delegate present was a believer. Yet there was a wide divergence of opinion as to the relationship of the law to the gospel and the kind of obedience that is acceptable to our gracious God. Two small books published in 1886 and 1888 summed up the opposing views — the first by Elder G. I. Butler, president of the General Conference, entitled *The Law in the Book of Galatians*, the second by a young physician, Dr. E. J. Waggoner, entitled *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians*. The titles suggest the nature of the disagreement.<sup>20</sup>

There was no disagreement at the conference as to the list of basic beliefs, but some delegates — though appointed as preachers of the good news — held such a picture of God that Ellen White was moved to write this terrible message: “The same spirit that actuated the rejectors of Christ rankles in their hearts, and had they lived in the days of Christ, they would have acted toward Him in a manner similiar to that of the godless and unbelieving Jews.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1971 what is it that Seventh-day Adventists are trying to say about God? Is it the truth? Is it really good news? Are we using the best ways of saying it? In spite of our best efforts, what are people actually hearing? Are there perhaps better ways to say it?

I believe that these are the most important questions facing us today — for our own salvation and in order to fulfill our mission to the world. History warns that there is no justification for an easy confidence. There is a certain illlusiveness about the good news. It is not something that can be summarily stated and hammered home. It was difficult even for God to explain to the angels the subtle though vital differences between the truth and Satan’s charges.<sup>22</sup> Even for sinless, intelligent angels it was more effective for God to demonstrate the good news than to explain it! This is why the Bible is so largely a history of God’s handling of sin and his firm but gracious treatment of those who have been caught up in its destructive consequences.

It cost heaven an infinite price to bring us the good news and confirm it with evidence that will stand for eternity. No wonder Paul was moved to speak so strongly in its defense. Just like the loyal angels, Paul was jealous for the character of God. To him it was unthinkable that some of his fellow ministers would in effect lend their support to Satan’s charges by attributing even the slightest trace of arbitrariness to our gracious God.

It was this same perversion of the good news that stirred Jesus most deeply. He was gentle with the worst of sinners, with Simon in his dastardly treatment of the woman who anointed Christ’s feet, with the woman taken in adultery, even with his betrayer Judas. But when some of the Pharisees, the respected teachers of the people, denied the good news and echoed Satan’s lies about God, Christ uttered those awful words, “You are of your father the devil.”<sup>23</sup>

There was no disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees as to which day was the Sabbath, or as to the existence of God, or Creation, or diet, or the state of the dead. Their disagreement was about God. Jesus came to bring them the good news, a picture of God that would enable them to go

on doing many of the same things but for a different reason — a reason that would make it possible for them to be obedient and free at the same time. But they killed Jesus rather than change their view of God — then hastened home to keep another Sabbath.

There is nothing more diabolical than to suppress and pervert the good news about God. And this can be done even while apparently presenting Christian doctrine. As God is represented in some pulpits, the doctrine of the Second Coming is certainly not good news. The prospect of spending eternity with such a deity would be forbidding. There are explanations of the death of Christ and his intercession in the heavenly sanctuary that put God in a most unfavorable light, less gracious and understanding than his Son. Such subjects as sin, the law, the Sabbath, even good health, are sometimes presented in a way — including the voice and manner of the preacher — to leave the people with precisely the picture of God Satan has been urging.

Surely no greater privilege and honor can come to a man than to be entrusted with the good news about God. Perhaps the time has come that those of us who may share something of Paul's jealousy for God's reputation should speak up with more of Paul's firmness and conviction about what we believe the good news really is.

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Galatians 1:8-9 NEB.
- 2 See also Romans 1:18-32.
- 3 Galatians 3:1; 4:8-11 Phillips.
- 4 See Acts 21:18-26.  
Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1911), pp. 403-406.
- 5 See Galatians 2:11-14.
- 6 See 1 Corinthians 13:5.
- 7 See Romans 14:1-10.
- 8 Galatians 5:12 NEB.
- 9 2 Corinthians 11:14 NEB.
- 10 See Genesis 3:1-4; John 8:44; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10; Revelation 12:7-9.
- 11 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1911), p. 536.
- 12 Romans 3:4 Goodspeed.
- 13 John 19:30.
- 14 See Romans 3:25-26.
- 15 See Romans 1:16-17.
- 16 See Acts 8:3; 9:1-2; Galatians 1:13.
- 17 Romans 3:31.

- 18 Galatians 3:19.
- 19 Colossians 2:20-23 Phillips.
- 20 G. I. Butler, *The Law in the Book of Galatians* (Battle Creek, Michigan: Review and Herald Publishing House 1886).  
E. J. Waggoner, *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians* (Oakland, California: Pacific Press 1888).
- 21 Unpublished Manuscript, Testimonies of Ellen G. White, p. 34; compare Special Testimonies Series A, No. 6, p. 65.
- 22 White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1908), p. 41.
- 23 John 8:44 RSV.