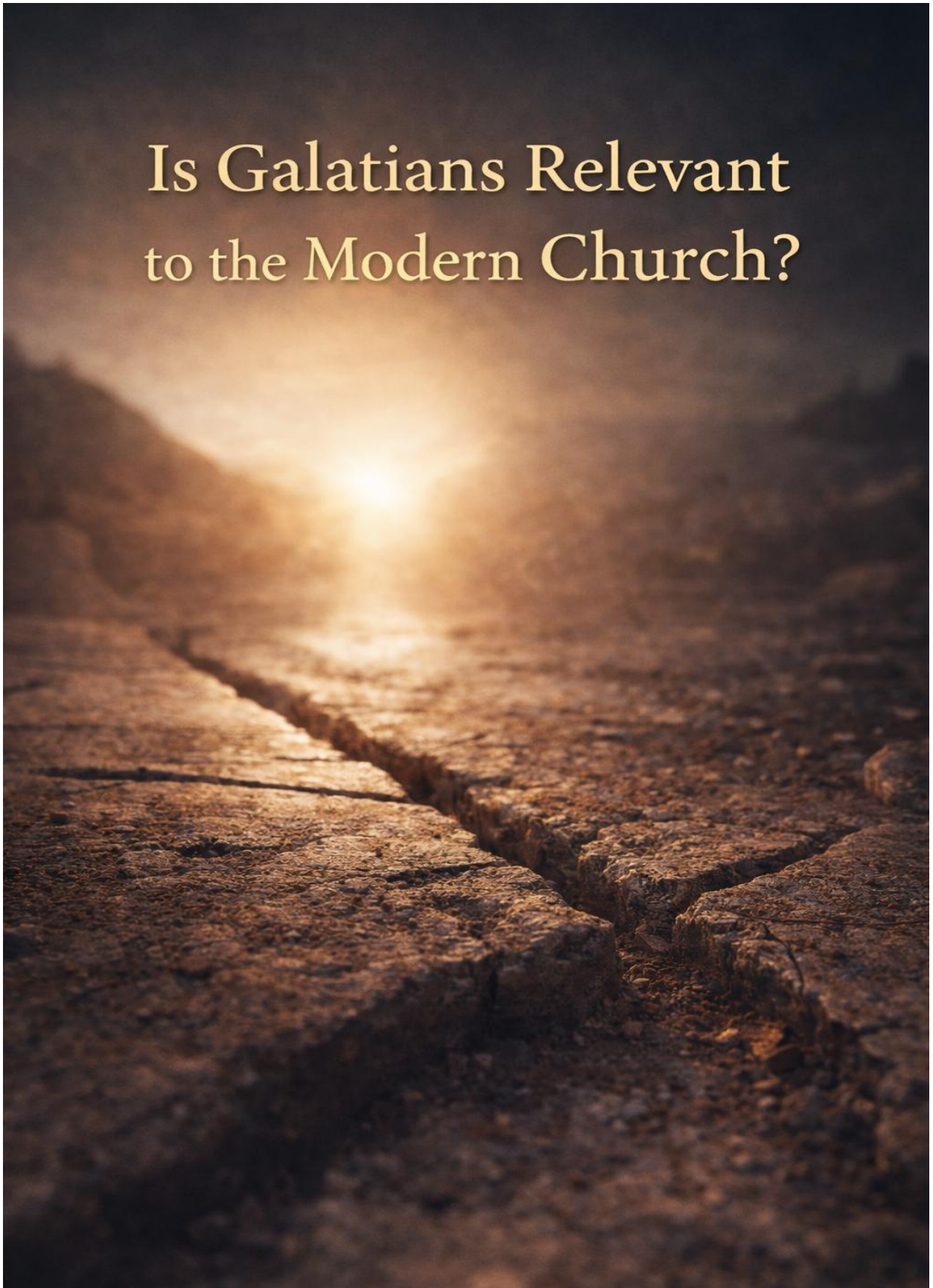


Is Galatians Relevant to the Modern Church?



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Galatians was written regarding a real historical and theological /doctrinal crisis involving an assembly founded by Paul himself. At stake was the heart of the gospel he preached: Judaizers entered the local assemblies and insisted that faith in Christ, while necessary, was not *sufficient*—one must also take on the law’s badge and burden (beginning with circumcision) to be right with God. This was the historical context.

But to limit Galatians to that bare historical context is to drain it of its continuing authority and relevance. If Paul’s letter only addresses a controversy most Christians have never faced, then Galatians – an entire book of the New Testament - becomes largely irrelevant for nearly two millennia of believers. Yet Paul writes as though the very gospel itself is at stake—*because it is*.

The heart of Galatians is not merely “don’t get circumcised.” The heart of Galatians is the exposure and condemnation of a *structural* – theological “distortion” of the gospel: the attempt to base life, standing, and acceptance with God in something...*anything* of self; *some contribution we add* to Christ and grace—not as fruit, but as basis of justification / salvation.

1) “Having begun by the Spirit” is not “you used to believe in grace”

Paul’s question in Galatians 3:3 is rhetorical in its intent. It is not a mere sentimental appeal to their former doctrinal correctness. He is not saying, “You used to recognize grace alone; why not keep recognizing it?” Paul’s language is stronger and more objective: “Having begun *by* the Spirit...” (ESV, NASB, NASB ’95, NASB ’77). They owe their beginning in faith itself to the Spirit – to grace alone “Sola Gratia”. Their Christian start was not self-generated. It was not merely a human decision that responded to offered grace. It was a beginning *caused* – brought about - *by* the Spirit. (See John 3:8)

 **Paul describes a divine *act* they once understood. The Galatians did not merely “start believing *in* or *about* grace.” They began *by* grace.**

This is why the rebuke lands with such force: “Are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Paul contrasts the Spirit’s power which began their walk of faith with natural human power. This reading is substantially reinforced by John 3:8 - “the Spirit blows where it wills – so it is with everyone born of the spirit.” Notice, Jesus said the new birth is analogous to the wind blowing where *it* will. We do not know where it comes from or where it will blow next – we can only see, feel, hear the evidence of it. Jesus added this is how it is for *everyone* who is “born of the Spirit.” Paul’s doctrine affirms Christ’s categorical non-negotiable foundation in John 3:8 and assumes that same truth: the Spirit is operative, initiating, *causal for everyone* who is so born of the Spirit. To be “born of the Spirit” per Jesus is the same meaning as “having begun *by* the Spirit” per Paul. The Greek preposition means the same thing. Strong’s defines “ek” as “out of, from, *by means of*”

2) The issue is basis, not fruit

Works cannot be the ground of justification, but rather than the fruit of it. Works – “of the Law”, or as in Abraham’s case 4 centuries *prior* to the Law, or as the *evidence* of faith itself re obedience to God’s command – in all three cases, are *not* the basis or ground of salvation, or our standing with / before God.

IF what *you* supply is the decisive difference between salvation and condemnation, then regardless of how it is defined, it cannot remain merely instrumental – “only the means” as those who will argue this point will claim. It becomes *determinative* – since there is no standing or acceptance with and before God without and apart from what you supply. **And whatever determines the outcome cannot be theologically neutral.** If two sinners hear the same gospel, and one believes while the other does not, and that difference is not ultimately and entirely located in God, *then* it is necessarily located in the sinner. At that point, the *decisive cause of justification has been relocated from grace to self*. And this is precisely the theological / structural error Paul condemns in Galatians and it is precisely the heart of the entire debate between those who affirm faith as being entirely God-wrought – thus truly “Sola Gratia” – and those who affirm faith as being partially “influenced” by God and grace but ultimately self-produced / chosen / activated. All these words lead to the same conclusion – “I” am in the final analysis, the determinative agent in my own faith.

Jesus called faith in Himself a “work”: Paul did not contradict Jesus

Faith in Christ is a command – “This is His command, to believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 3:23). Any act of obedience to a command, *if that obedience is the result of what we supply or do*, places the burden of that obedience within the sinner.

And whatever the sinner supplies, *if it becomes decisive*, can and does occupy the same role in principle, which Paul condemns in works. We need to not only understand Paul's specific language – framed in the language of 1st century Judaism – but also his theological intent by that language.

- If faith is *ultimately* self-originated – as per all Arminian / Synergistic theology regardless of whether they also say grace is necessary in “some way” for that faith, it *functions* in the same role Paul condemns. Even if it is not categorized as a “work of the Law” by Paul, the theological point Paul is making by his terminology is that *nothing* we do or supply is the active cause or basis of our standing with / before God.

For this reason, why Paul differentiated between faith and works has been misunderstood and therefore egregiously misapplied by many. Jesus said faith *is* “a work.” I am not about to challenge *His* term. The only question is *whose* work is it? Ours, or God's in us?

Objection: “But Paul distinguished faith from works, so you are redefining his terms or negating his distinction.”

Reply: No. I am not redefining anything or negating Paul's point. I am arguing that if the obedience to the command to believe is self-originated, meaning if the burden of that obedience lies ultimately within us, then regardless of how it is categorized, it assumes the very role Paul condemns. But if that obedience is *not our* doing, but rather, as Jesus expressed, “the work... of God,” and as Paul later phrased it “for it is God who works in you *both* to will and to do His will” (Phil 2:13), then there is no conflict with Paul. Not merely the work God requires, but the work God *does*; the doing of God which is faith in Christ.

A Glaring Problem Exposed

Many synergists will say, “The basis of our acceptance with God is not us or our faith – it is all Christ and His work alone. All we did / do is submit to it, accept or receive what Christ already accomplished, and God offered to us by His grace.”

This sounds good and right on the surface. Yet it is fraught with glaring inconsistency; For according to all synergists, the work of Christ *by itself* in and of itself *does not* and *cannot* justify or save anyone apart from *their own contribution* of faith / surrender / repentance / acceptance / consent. So, though they claim, “It is all based on Him and

His work, all we do is accept a free gift,” **this idea falls apart under scrutiny.** Here is why;

Whatever Is Necessary to the Outcome Cannot Be Treated as Secondary

If something is necessary for a specific outcome, such as justification (salvation), so that without it, the specific outcome is not present, it holds *equal necessity for the end result* to any other required element from a *structural* and *functional* standpoint.

IF there is no justification apart from faith *and* faith is *our* contribution even if it is assisted in some vague, undefined, non-specific way by God’s grace, **THEN** our contribution is as *functionally necessary and important to the outcome* of justification as Christ and His work are. There is simply no logical way around this axiom.

In this distortion, it becomes logically impossible to continue to deny that we are saved by *what we* do – not *only* by what He did. This is because for them, *nothing* Christ did actually saved anyone, it merely made salvation possible – activated or actualized by what *we* contribute to His work. This is what their teaching reduces to at its lowest common denominator.

- **Do not misunderstand me here. I am not talking about *ontological* worth or merit; *Nothing and no one compares to Christ and His work in this regard.***

But that only magnifies the problem! *Because* for all His infinite personal worthiness combined with the infinite value of His saving work this is still insufficient *by itself* to justify or save me apart from *my* contribution of faith; If this is true – as all synergists insist - then I *am saved by what I do*. In that view, *my* contribution becomes as vital and necessary for the outcome of salvation / justification as anything and everything He did! From a functional standpoint – this is simply unarguable. There is no logical, theological way out of this – despite all the semantic word games they will employ to obscure the water, cloud the issue and argue that the obvious here is not the obvious.

Some will object that the “meritorious” and “instrumental” causes operate on different causal levels and therefore do not compete for the same functional slot. But this defense quietly presupposes precisely what monergism asserts - that the instrument is itself carried *and supplied by* the principal cause. Under synergism it is not. The sinner’s faith is not a passive conduit through which the meritorious cause flows;

it is ultimately the self-determined act (even if assisted by grace) without which infinite merit produces *nothing*. And whatever infinite merit cannot accomplish without your finite, infinitely un-meritorious contribution is not operating as the principal /primary cause in *any* meaningful sense — *it is operating as a joint cause*. At that point, the ‘different causal levels’ defense has not answered the functional equivalence argument. It has simply restated it under more sophisticated terminology which seeks to evade the obvious point here.

✚ **However, when it is understood that even our faith in His Son is the result of *His* work in our hearts, this obvious structural, functional, theological problem completely disappears.**

Perhaps you have never thought it through to its *only* logical conclusion like this? Or reduced it down to this – but if you are a synergist in your doctrine this *is* the “bottom line” of your theology nevertheless. If your doctrine is that *you* make the decisive difference in justification, then you are guilty of the same structural error that had bewitched the Galatians. By such subtle distortion, you have moved into the doctrinal *structure* – affirming in principle, even if not the identical particular, the same distortion Paul condemned.

3) “Sola Gratia” Does Not Deny “Sola Fide”

This does not deny “Sola Fide” - faith alone. Faith *is* required for salvation. It denies that the faith which receives justification is “of ourselves”—as though the *decisive* act that differentiates the saved from the lost is in the sinner, rather than entirely in God and the operative, persuasive, influential power of His grace – truly “Sola Gratia.” **To be “influenced” by another is, to be moved to a change of thinking, attitude and or behaviour *by* that influence. To be persuaded has the same practical meaning.**

If “grace” teaches, *then* grace therefore, causes. And if grace causes, then the *decisive* turning is not ours—but His. You cannot sing “*Twas grace* that taught my heart to fear” ...and then build a theology where grace merely waits or merely assists – for *exactly* where did its influence/persuasion cease to be active in the result? Either grace in its saving aspect acts or grace offers. But it cannot be both – not practically or theologically. And if the turning of the heart depends on us, then the song we sing is no longer worship—but contradiction. And if so, *why* such prayers as this below ion scripture? For they serve to do nothing except muddy the waters then.

✚ If they sing such truth as “worship” why then do they deny it doctrine, practice and testimony?

Psalm 80:3 “Turn us O God...and we shall be saved”

Psalm 80:3 “Turn us again O God...and we shall be saved.” Strong’s Concordance defines the key Hebrew word for “turn” as “a primitive root - “*to turn back*” (KJV, ASV, ERV). Young’s Literal Translation and the Literal Standard Version both render it as “O God *cause* us to turn back.” The NAS Concordance defines it “to turn back, return.” The point is that the Psalmist here prays asking God *as the decisive agent*, to “turn” the people back to Himself – *only then* shall they be saved. In this sense, the functional meaning equals the idea of “restore” (per the NIV, ESV, NASB); when God restores the people to to their former state of faith and repentance, they will be saved. This is the essence of the prayer of Elijah on Mt. Carmel when he said “Answer me O Lord that this people may know that You are God and *You have turned their hearts back* to Yourself” (1 Kings 18:37).

✚ The Psalmist and the Prophet here agree – if and when any heart “turns” to the Lord it is not evidence of free will in action but of God who has turned that heart to Himself!

Was not the Law God’s Law? Of course. *That is what makes the error Paul condemned in Galatians so devastating!* Though the Law in both its ceremonial and moral aspects came from the holy God Himself, Paul still condemned the mingling of it in any way to or with grace; *where does that leave any other human “contribution” from a sinner?* Once you make *anything* of self, the decisive hinge on which salvation /justification turns, whether by circumcision or any other modern “contribution” or “act” done by the sinner— you have recreated the same problem in principle. You have merely changed the terminology – but not the *structure* it is built on. You have changed the clothing, but not the tailor. You are still dressed in the same garb Paul condemned as a “*different* gospel.”

The Basis of the Law and Arminianism is the Same: Choose

The LAW was predicated on one word – a word at the very heart of all Arminian / Synergistic theology – *choose*. Two of the most oft-cited passages by Arminians who use them as “proof texts” for their view of free will are “Choose you this day whom you will serve” and “Choose life...”.

“But that is referring to the Law not to the gospel,” they will say.

Let’s examine the structural similarity here:

The LAW says: “Choose whom you will serve” and “choose life” **promising** “Do this and you will live.”

The Synergist’s ‘gospel’ is: “Choose to accept Jesus,” “decide for Christ,” “believe,” “submit,” “cooperate with grace”, **promising** “Do this and you will live.”

The structural foundation is identical: In both cases, the *decisive* act resides in self and *that* is precisely the problem for Paul in Galatians. Regardless of how much they protest saying “We do not teach we are saved by our works,” this comparison at the structural level reveals that they do. It is now exposed and revealed to be the identical principle.

The issue is not “faith vs works” in a simplistic sense as they so often erroneously argue. **The issue is *who* or *what* supplies the decisive cause that results in understanding, believing and thereby coming to Christ?**

✚ **This not a denial of the objective truth that to be saved we must “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31) but the denial of *how* those who believe so, do (Matt 16:17; Acts 13:48, 16:14, 18:27; 1 Tim 1:15; Gal 1:14; Phil 2:13; Eze 36:24-26). The *how* of faith changes the foundation *entirely!***

Galatians will not allow the decisive cause to be relocated from grace alone to self in any capacity. That is the point...entirely.

4) “Grace ceases to be grace”

This is because grace is not only unmerited favor. For Paul, it is empowering and sufficient. The New Testament already had a word signifying “unmerited favour / kindness” — *mercy*. And mercy is glorious in its own right: it is the kind disposition of God toward the undeserving. Grace includes that disposition but goes further — *grace is mercy with power*. **Mercy looks upon the kindsinner with compassion; grace acts upon the sinner with transforming, effectual force.** Grace is the operative, enabling, and effective power of God that accomplishes what mercy intends. Grace is not merely God making salvation possible if the sinner supplies the final decisive act. Grace both initiates and carries out what mercy purposes. **Grace is therefore the power of God for salvation – this is the heart of “Sola Gratia” – Grace alone.**

This is what Paul meant and why he said of his own conversion, “The grace of God was exceedingly abundant *with faith...*” (1 Tim 1:14). Paul did not supply the faith after God supplied the grace. Rather, faith came *with* grace!

Paul’s entire argument in Galatians is that *anything* that places the decisive act of justification in self is condemned. All Arminian / Synergistic doctrine of salvation – known as soteriology – does precisely this, as we saw above. **The structural basis of their soteriology is not merely similar to the Law but identical! Both have as their basis choose...and live...because of that choice.**

This distortion denies the “Sola” in “Sola Gratia -Faith Alone” and therefore reproduces the same Judaizing error in principle. It does not matter that they say it does not do so – we have now seen that is exactly what it does.

“Faith is different from works, Paul said” they will say.

Yes, that is true. Paul did distinguish faith from works. *But he did not ever teach faith was the human produced contribution.* He maintained faith came “with” grace – grace, therefore, produces our faith. What Paul condemned is the idea that the decisive act by means of which the sinner is justified is any “work” – contribution, act - the sinner does.

IS obedience to the commands of the Law a “work”? Yes, obedience is considered “works of righteousness which we have done” by Paul. Paul denies we are saved by any work of righteousness which *we* have done (Titus 3:5). Notice, Paul does not merely deny our *sinful* works did not contribute to our salvation – who has ever

said they did? Paul denies any *righteous* works which *we* have done are why God saved us. Here then two simple questions are instructive;

Is faith obedience to the command of God?

Is faith righteous or unrighteous?

The Greek word for “works” in Titus 3:5 and John 6:29 means “act, doing, accomplishment”. Is faith an act? Yes it is! Faith has both a noun and verb component; It is something one has and belief is something one does. Paul said, “faith *works* by love” (Gal 5:6). Faith though metaphysical is still a substance which *acts*. This is why “received” in John 1:12 is a strong synonym for “believed.” Faith is what one has, believing is what one does.

Why then is obedience to the command to believe (1 John 3:23) not also a “work of righteousness which we have done”? In *both* instances the command calls for a response of obedience. If one is a “work” done by us, it is no longer credible or coherent to claim the other is not also.

Again, the categorical difference is not whether faith is required – it clearly is! – but *who* is responsible for it and *how* it comes to reside in the human heart.

5) Galatians Offers no Pass for Sincerity Alone

In Galatians, Paul does not allow for or even suggest a false assurance based on “sincerity.” *If only he had!* He does not treat their error as a harmless variation. He warns them as people in *real* spiritual danger: “You are severed from Christ...you have fallen away from grace.” And most devastatingly: “If you accept circumcision, Christ will profit you nothing.” That means: Galatians does not coddle a Church that embraces a “grace-*plus*” structure – even if just a little. For Paul – in Galatians – “a *little* leaven leavens the whole” (Gal.5:9) **The entire book then serves as Paul’s categorical, comprehensive, decisive expose of and condemnation of any and all leaven – subtle or overt, big or little which adds even a “little” of self to Christ and His grace alone because so doing, denies the “Sola”!**

Any “pastoral” reading that tries to soften Paul’s severity misunderstands Paul’s pastoral purpose. Paul wounds to heal; he condemns the false refuge so that the

sinner will flee to the only refuge: Christ alone, grace alone. So, the comfort Galatians offers is not, “You meant well. Your sincerity is sufficient because God knows your heart” – yet this is the way most modern preaching will redact the truth to.

Conclusion

Galatians is permanently relevant because the human heart is permanently tempted to relocate confidence from Christ and grace alone to self as the decisive hinge which saves. Circumcision was only the first-century form of a timeless error: making the decisive hinge of salvation something the sinner supplies – by whatever name it is called. **Paul’s letter stands as a living rebuke to every gospel structure/theology that makes grace a mere offer and the self the deciding power.** And it stands as a liberating summons back to the only hope strong enough to save and keep: grace that begins by the Spirit and completes by the Spirit—so that Christ, and Christ alone, profits us everything.

Sola Gratia, Sola Christus, Soli Deo Gloria

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