

A Brief Word on the Epistle to the Galatians

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I believe that we might shortly describe this epistle as thus — the "scripture" by the ministry of Paul now, as once by the voice of Sarah, casting the bondwoman and her son out of the house of Abraham.

The apostle, in order to this, first proves his warrant. And this he does to perfection in Gal. 1, 2 — showing that he received his gospel purely and immediately, from God Himself, in a way that admitted of no human admixture whatever, and that, under the full conscious authority of a gospel so received, he had already met the bondwoman and her ways in the person of the Apostle Peter at Antioch, and withstood her — thus making proof of his present ministry on a small scale, so to speak; or, like Samson, slaying the lion on his way to this Philistine den in Galatia, when he was to meet a host of them.

<04:166> And besides this, he makes the experience of their own souls, and the voices of Scripture touching Abraham and the law, his further witnesses. He makes them, as it were, seal his authority to do this great work in the name of the Lord. (Gal. 3.) And further, he shows that the time was now fully come, when the Lord had ripened all His dispensational actings up to this very point of casting out the bondwoman and her son. (Gal. 4: 1-7.)

Nothing could be more perfect than a warrant thus delivered, thus verified, thus sealed, and thus countenanced, if I may so speak, by God's own acts. The apostle, therefore, with full ease, and conscious authority, find himself in company with Sarah in Gen. 21. As she then knew her right, without leave from her husband or apology to anyone, summarily to demand the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from the house, so does Paul here. He shows what the modern or mystic Hagar is — that it is the religiousness of mere nature, or a system of observances and ordinances, either imposed or revived by man in the churches of the saints — that formality of days, and months, and times, and years, which genders the spirit of bondage, and hinders the formation of Christ in the soul, and that spirit of liberty which He ever brings with Him. And the expulsion of this Hagar, this bondwoman, from the house of Abraham, or the churches of the saints, he demands with as full, unsparing decision as ever Sarah demanded the casting out of Hagar the Egyptian and her mocking child. (Gal. 4: 8.; Gal. 5: 12.)

But, if I may so speak, the energy of the apostle even exceeds that of Sarah. And this is but right. It is right that, as we advance in the unfolded ways and thoughts of God, and get from the time of Gen. 21 to the time of Gal. 5, we should find the energies and demands of the spirit still more wide and more intense also. We often see this. It was written of old, "Thou shalt not forswear thyself;" but it is written at a later period, "Swear not at all." * So here, the demands of Paul are somewhat larger and more intense than those of Sarah had been. She was satisfied with the dismissal of Hagar and the child, but Paul calls together with that for the removal out of the house of all that belonged to them. He will do what he can to get every vestige of their former residence there effaced. He would fain obliterate every remembrance of them — the very customs they once observed there, their habits and modes of living, and the spirit and tempers which they were nourishing and practicing, all these he would have to be gone, as well as themselves. He would even purify the place of the very air their breath and presence

had diffused. Not merely the religiousness of the flesh would he peremptorily expel the house, the miserable and beggarly elements which kept the soul in bondage; but the works of the flesh also, its moral ways, its boastings and energies. Yea, and its conceits and highmindedness too — its despite of a poor overtaken soul, through the vain thought of its own security. Against all this, and more than this, he lifts up his more-than-Sarah voice, knowing no stint to the demand, that the bondwoman, with all that belongs to her, as well as her child, shall be turned out of the churches of the saints, or the modern mystic house of Abraham. And even in addition to this, he would have that house learn and practice the very opposite and contradictory habits — the ways of the Spirit and not of the flesh, the things that become the new creature in Christ, and not what was found inseparable from the flesh. (Gal. 5: 13.; Gal. 6: 10.)

*Just, as we all know from abundance of cases, the dispensational purposes of God are gradually disclosed more and more perfectly, so the holy demands of the Spirit are more and more fervent and intense. (See an instance of the first of these in Psalm 8 and 1 Cor. 15)

He then gives us another witness of the importance he attached to all this truth, writing this epistle with his own hand. (See Rom. 16: 22.) For the defense of it demands more vigour than its publication. (Gal. 6: 11.)

He, in the next place, exposes the moral or the interested purposes of those who were leading them back to circumcision or religiousness, and is bold to present himself as one that knew the power of the opposite principle (see Gal. 1: 4; Gal. 6: 14), with all authority, too, as from God, speaking peace to all who clung to that principle. (Gal. 6: 12-17.)

And he closes by a suited valediction. For it is their spirit he commends to the grace of the Lord. (Gal. 6: 18.)

Such I judge to be the principal details of this epistle. And generally, I may say, there is a tone of peculiar decision and fervency in it. The apostle felt as though the citadel itself were in danger. A standard-bearer at Antioch had already well-nigh fainted. He had come, as it were, fresh from that sight, and he must grasp the banner of the gospel with fresh vigour because of it, and to step into the breach like a man.

It was a moment of deep interest, and he cannot but be alive to it. And though we are not in commission exactly as he was, entrusted with the truth of the dispensation in a special way (1 Cor. 9: 17), yet we are, as in the train of this great ambassador, to be of one mind with him, and give place by subjection, no, not for an hour, if the mine have been laid again that threatens the citadel.