

A pastoral ministry of truth and compassion (Galatians 4:12–20)

With a change in tone which begins in verse 4, Paul reveals his pastoral concern for the Galatian believers in verses 12–20. His preceding doctrinal arguments are not evidence of a heartless orthodoxy, but arise out of a deep compassion for the believers, whom he calls “brothers,” and for their spiritual well-being. Paul points to his earlier manner among the Galatians and pleads for them to imitate him. He reminds them how the gospel was proclaimed and received by them. Finally, he contrasts his motivation with that of those false brethren who were misleading them into legalism. Here is a pattern for any good spiritual leadership, combining solid doctrine and deep compassion.

I. *The manner of Paul’s ministry (4:12a):* “Become like me, as I also became like you.”

1. *Paul desired that the Galatians live in freedom from the law (cf. 4:21–5:1) as does he.* Most recently in 4:1–3 and then earlier in 2:19–20 Paul declares that he is free from the law, no longer a slave, but a son of God. He lives to God, Christ lives in him, and he lives by faith in the Son of God. He gave his previous doctrinal emphasis to help them live free.
2. *Paul had set the example of living free by becoming like them.* In the freedom of Christ by principle he could live as a Jew or a non-Jew to win others for Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). He preached freedom from the law, lived that freedom, and wanted that freedom for them.

II. *The proclamation in Paul’s ministry (4:12b–16)*

1. *The Galatians had received Paul as a messenger of God, despite his physical weakness (12b–14).* Whatever it was, it posed a trial for the Galatians and a potential reason for scorn. Nevertheless, they understood Paul had a divine message for them, and they received him as a divine messenger.
2. *It was the truth which Paul preached which God had used to change the Galatians and give them great joy (15–16).* They had rejoiced when they learned that they too as Gentiles could have righteousness reckoned to them apart from works (Acts 13:48; cf. Romans 4:6, 9). In appreciation they would have done anything to help Paul as a divine messenger. Yet now under the influence of legalizers, they perceived Paul as an enemy because he had taught the truth of salvation by grace alone by faith alone.

III. *The motivation in Paul’s ministry (4:17–20)*

1. *In contrast to Paul the false brethren in Galatia had the unworthy motive of gathering their own disciples.* They ‘courted’ the Galatians by making them think that without the law they were shut out of the family of God, but with their teaching they could help them.
2. *To be concerned about others is not necessarily bad, but good, if it is done for a good purpose.* The Galatians had shown great concern for Paul when he was there, and he for them when present and when absent, always with good motive.
3. *Paul was purely motivated.* He spoke as their spiritual father, who had brought them the gospel under great suffering (cf. Acts 13–14), and who wanted to see Christ formed in them, even as it again caused him great anguish. Though they had the Spirit of Christ in them (4:6), their very nature needed to be formed more like Christ to look more like Christ (cf. Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). Paul sought to make disciples of Christ for Christ.
4. *Paul was concerned for the Galatians and stressed doctrine in this letter for their own sake.* He wanted to be with them, and communicate better, and clear up the reason for their unreasonable behavior.

The apostle Paul wrote great doctrinal, practical exhortations, and moving expressions of love. He could write and be a pastoral model of truth and compassion, not only because he was moved by the Spirit of God to write, but because Christ was being formed in him. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is full of grace and truth. As Christ is formed in the believer, both grace and truth will grow. A growing concern for both doctrine and compassion is becoming more Christ-like.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- What habits or practices do you have that could be changed in order to lower barriers of communicating Christ to unbelievers?
- What is important to value in pastors and teachers and what is important not to value greatly? Why? What do you need to be equipped for such discernment?
- Do you regularly rejoice in your salvation? Why/ why not?
- How can you distinguish if a person or a church is seeking their own disciples or is striving to make disciples of Jesus Christ?