

Homiletics Analysis: Galatians 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Galatians 1 opens with Paul's most combative letter introduction in the New Testament canon. Unlike his other letters, there is no thanksgiving section — Paul moves immediately from greeting to astonishment. The chapter divides into three movements: (1) the salutation and its embedded gospel summary (vv. 1–5), (2) the anathema section in which Paul pronounces a double curse on anyone — including himself or an angel from heaven — who preaches a gospel other than the one delivered (vv. 6–10), and (3) Paul's autobiographical defense of his apostolic authority and the gospel's divine origin, tracing his pre-conversion persecution of the church, his Damascus Road encounter, and his subsequent independence from the Jerusalem apostles (vv. 11–24).

The theological spine of the chapter is the phrase “not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (v. 1) — a claim Paul will not let go. The gospel he preached did not originate in any human tradition, institution, or consensus. It came by direct revelation. This is not merely a claim about Paul's credentials; it is a claim about the gospel's nature. A gospel that can be revised by human authority is not the gospel at all. The Galatians are being pressured by Jewish-Christian agitators (“the Judaizers”) to supplement the gospel of grace with circumcision and Torah observance. Paul's response in chapter 1 is not to argue the doctrinal point yet — that comes in chapters 3–4 — but to establish that the gospel he preached is not up for renegotiation because it did not originate with human authority in the first place.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through this passage is to produce in the reader a settled, non-negotiable allegiance to the gospel of grace as it has been revealed and delivered — and to immunize the reader against the perpetual temptation to accept revised gospels that add human conditions to divine grace. The chapter is not primarily an exercise in Paul's self-defense; it is a pastoral alarm. The Galatians are described as “quickly deserting” (v. 6), and the tone of urgent alarm is the Spirit's instrument for awakening readers to the seriousness of gospel-abandonment. The double anathema is not rhetorical excess — it is the measure of what is at stake. God intends that the reader feel both the gravity of gospel-distortion and the security of a gospel whose origin is divine and therefore beyond human revision.

Subject Sentence: The divine origin of the gospel places it permanently beyond human revision or supplement.

Primary Claim: God is calling the reader to an uncompromising, settled allegiance to the gospel of grace precisely because that gospel did not come from human authority and therefore cannot be legitimately altered by human authority — and to recognize that any “gospel” requiring human addition is not another version of the gospel but its replacement and destruction.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of the “Different Gospel”

The central interpretive question in Galatians 1 is the identity and character of the “different gospel” (v. 6) and the “some who trouble you” (v. 7). The near-universal scholarly consensus — Reformed, Lutheran, and Baptist alike — identifies these as Jewish-Christian teachers who required Gentile converts to observe the Mosaic law, particularly circumcision, as a condition of full standing before God. The debate is primarily about *why* this constitutes a different gospel rather than a supplement to the gospel.

Dispensational interpreters have sometimes argued that the Galatian situation is historically unique — the Judaizers were operating at a transitional moment in redemptive history when the old covenant had not yet fully given way to the new — and that the severity of Paul’s anathema reflects this unique transitional moment rather than a permanent principle about gospel-purity. This reading **must be refuted**: the anathema is structured in timeless terms (“even if we, even if an angel from heaven,” v. 8) that explicitly transcend historical circumstance. Paul is not describing a transitional problem; he is articulating a permanent principle. The gospel’s divine origin makes it permanently non-revisable regardless of the historical moment.

The Apostle’s Self-Defense and Autobiographical Material

Some Wesleyan and Baptist interpreters have read vv. 11–24 primarily as a template for Christian testimony — Paul recounting his conversion and early ministry as a model for personal witness. This reading **should be acknowledged as containing a genuine application** but **qualified strongly**: the autobiographical section is in service of a theological argument, not a testimony template. Paul is establishing the divine origin of his gospel, not modeling how to share one’s story. To preach this section as “Paul’s conversion testimony” is to domesticate what is, in context, a rigorous defense of gospel-authority. The personal narrative exists to prove a theological point: his gospel came by revelation, not by human transmission.

Justification by Faith Alone — Lutheran Reading

Lutheran interpreters, following Luther’s own volcanic commentary on Galatians, have tended to read Galatians 1 as the opening salvo in Paul’s assault on works-righteousness

— seeing in the anathema a direct anticipation of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. This reading is **substantially correct** and should be adopted, with one qualification: chapter 1 does not yet make the sola fide argument explicitly — that comes in chapters 2–3. What chapter 1 establishes is the *authority-structure* argument: the gospel’s divine origin. The Lutheran emphasis on the content of the gospel (grace alone, not works) runs slightly ahead of what Paul argues in chapter 1, which is more about the *source* of the gospel than its full doctrinal content. Both arguments arrive at the same destination, but careful exposition should respect Paul’s own sequence.

The Anathema and Conditional Curses

Charismatic and some Third Wave interpreters have occasionally been troubled by the “angel from heaven” phrase (v. 8), reading it as a general warrant to test spiritual experiences and revelatory claims against Scripture — which is **correct and worth retaining** — but some have gone further to suggest Paul is engaging in spiritual warfare rhetoric rather than doctrinal boundary-marking. This overreach **should be refuted**: the “angel from heaven” is a hypothetical intensifier for the principle, not a reference to demonic activity. Paul’s point is not “test the spirits” (though that principle is valid); his point is “the gospel is fixed, and no authority — however exalted — can alter it.”

Reformed Verdict

The Reformed reading that best accounts for the whole text: Galatians 1 establishes that the gospel of grace received by Paul through direct divine revelation is, by virtue of its origin, beyond the authority of any human teacher, tradition, institution, or experience to revise. The anathema is the measure of the gospel’s permanence, not Paul’s irritability. The autobiographical section proves the argument by evidence. The pastoral urgency reflects the Spirit’s alarm at the Galatians’ willingness to “quickly desert” this fixed gospel for a humanly-constructed alternative. Application must not soften the anathema or domesticate it — the passage is intentionally alarming because the situation warrants alarm.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 4:2** — “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it.” The principle of gospel-fixedness is rooted in the character of divine revelation itself — God’s word does not admit human revision. Paul’s anathema has deep Old Testament precedent.
- **Isaiah 55:8–11** — God’s word does not return void and does not originate with human wisdom. The divine origin of revelation carries its own self-authenticating authority — Paul’s “not from men” resonates with this Isaiah ground note.
- **2 Corinthians 11:3–4** — Paul addresses a parallel situation in Corinth: “another Jesus... a different spirit... a different gospel.” The pattern of false-gospel intrusion

is not unique to Galatia; Paul consistently treats any deviation as total replacement, not mere supplement. Corroborates the binary structure of Galatians 1:6–7.

- **John 17:17** — “Your word is truth.” The fixedness of the gospel rests ultimately on the character of the God who spoke it. What originates in divine truth cannot be improved by human addition without being replaced by human falsehood.
- **Acts 15:1–11** — The Jerusalem Council directly confronts the same Judaizing demand. Peter’s speech in Acts 15:10–11 establishes the same principle as Galatians 1 from a different angle: to add the yoke of the law is to test God and deny that grace is sufficient. Provides narrative corroboration for the theological claim Paul makes in propositional form.

Aim: To anchor the reader in the divine origin and therefore the permanent, non-negotiable character of the gospel of grace, and to produce in the reader both an alarm at the ease of gospel-drift and a settled confidence that the gospel they hold is not a human construction subject to human revision.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Apostleship claimed: “not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead”	Sets the governing thesis of the chapter before any other word is spoken. Resurrection is already present — the gospel’s origin is inseparable from the risen Christ.
2	“All the brothers who are with me” — corporate greeting to “the churches of Galatia”	Plural “churches” — the problem is regional, not isolated. Paul writes with community support, not as a lone voice.
3–4	Grace and peace from God and Christ — Christ “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our Father”	The gospel is embedded in the salutation itself: substitutionary self-giving, deliverance from the present age, divine-will origin. This is the gospel whose authority is about to be defended.
5	Doxology: “to whom be the	A doxology before the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	glory forever and ever. Amen.”	rebuke. The glory belongs to God — the false gospel, by adding human conditions, implicitly redirects that glory to human achievement.
6	“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”	“Deserting” is a present-tense participle — ongoing defection, not completed apostasy. “So quickly” — Paul is alarmed at the speed. “Him who called you” — to desert the gospel is to desert God, not merely a doctrine.
7	“Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ”	Critical: Paul refuses to call it a “gospel” — it is a distortion of the gospel. The binary is absolute: there is only one gospel; what differs from it is not another version but a distortion.
8	Double anathema, first statement: “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed”	The intensifying sequence: “even we” → “even an angel.” No authority is above the gospel. The curse is on the teacher, not merely the teaching — the stakes are eternal.
9	Double anathema, second statement — repetition underscores the absolute nature of the principle	Paul repeats, often interpreted as deliberate emphasis for oral reading in the congregation. This is not accidental repetition — it is measured, intentional, weighty.
10	“Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”	Paul anticipates the charge that his sharp tone is people-pleasing in reverse — trying to impress by severity. He turns it: the willingness to pronounce

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		anathema is evidence of God-pleasing, not man-pleasing.
11–12	“The gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”	The argumentative thesis of the autobiographical section. “Revelation” (apokalypsis) — not tradition, not instruction, not inference.
13–14	Paul’s pre-conversion life: persecutor of the church, zealous for ancestral traditions, advancing beyond his peers	Establishes that Paul had every reason to be committed to Judaism and every reason NOT to embrace the gospel. His conversion cannot be explained as wish-fulfillment or social formation.
15–16a	“But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me”	Monergistic conversion language: set apart before birth, called by grace, God’s good pleasure the active cause. Paul’s apostleship — and thus the gospel he carries — is rooted in sovereign divine initiative.
16b	“In order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone”	The Gentile mission is the explicit purpose of the revelation. Paul’s independence from human consultation is not arrogance — it is obedience to the divine commission already complete in the revelation.
17	Did not go to Jerusalem; went to Arabia, then Damascus	Arabia likely a period of private reflection and preparation — Paul did not seek apostolic accreditation from Jerusalem. His gospel was not received from the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
18–19	After three years, visited Peter for fifteen days; saw James the Lord’s brother — no other apostle	Twelve. The visit is brief, personal, limited. It demonstrates contact with the Jerusalem leadership but not dependence on them. Paul is not anti-Jerusalem; he is independent of Jerusalem as a source of authority.
20	“In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie.”	Oath formula. The strength of the autobiographical claim requires the strongest possible epistolary verification. Paul’s credibility as a witness is at stake alongside the gospel’s authority.
21–22	Went to Syria and Cilicia; unknown by face to the churches of Judea	Further evidence of independence — his ministry development occurred far from Jerusalem, beyond the sight and influence of the mother churches.
23–24	Judean churches heard: “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” — and they glorified God because of him	The confirmation comes, ironically, from the churches Paul once persecuted. The glory returns to God (v. 24), completing the doxological frame opened in v. 5.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	Salutation: Apostleship Grounded, Gospel Embedded, Glory Ascribed
2	6–10	Alarm and Anathema: The Gospel Has No Alternative Version

Division	Verses	Label
3	11–17	Autobiography I: The Gospel Came by Revelation, Not by Human Tradition
4	18–24	Autobiography II: The Gospel Was Not Received from Jerusalem — and Jerusalem Confirmed It

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The divine origin of the gospel places it permanently beyond human revision or supplement.

Primary Claim: God is calling the reader to an uncompromising, settled allegiance to the gospel of grace precisely because that gospel did not come from human authority and therefore cannot be legitimately altered by human authority — and to recognize that any “gospel” requiring human addition is not another version of the gospel but its replacement and destruction.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that the gospel of grace is not a starting point to be completed by your performance. (*Mind/belief*)

Paul’s anathema is not addressed to obvious pagans — it is addressed to people who were already Christians being pressured to add religious observance to what Christ had done. The Judaizers were not asking the Galatians to abandon Jesus; they were asking them to supplement Jesus. This is the characteristic form of every false gospel: not replacement but addition. Examine where you have come to treat the finished work of Christ as a down payment that your continued faithfulness, moral achievement, or spiritual performance must complete. The gospel Paul received by revelation and delivered to you says this: Christ gave himself for your sins and delivered you from the present evil age — past tense, accomplished, sealed. Every mental system that requires you to maintain or improve that standing by your own effort is operating under a different gospel, whatever vocabulary it uses.

2. Feel the weight of the word “astonished” — and let it produce in you a corresponding alarm about how easily the gospel drifts. (*Affections/worship*)

Paul does not say he is disappointed or concerned. He is astonished — the Greek conveys genuine shock that people who had received the gospel of grace could move away from it so quickly. This is not rhetorical. The Galatians were not stupid or obviously apostate; they

were ordinary believers susceptible to ordinary social pressure from people who sounded serious and religious. The emotion in this verse is an instrument of the Spirit — it is meant to produce in you what Paul felt: genuine alarm at the ease of gospel-drift in your own life and community. Do not read the anathema section with academic detachment. Paul is alarmed because you should be alarmed. Sit with the word “quickly” — because the same speed that surprised him in Galatia is the same speed available to you today.

3. Submit every spiritual authority, teacher, tradition, and experience you trust to the test of the gospel — and let the gospel judge them, not the other way around.

(Mind/belief)

Paul structures his anathema in an escalating sequence: “even we... even an angel from heaven.” He is not speaking theoretically. He is establishing an inviolable principle: no authority — apostolic, angelic, institutional, experiential — stands above the gospel. The gospel is not validated by the authority of its messenger; the messenger is validated by the gospel they carry. Apply this: when a teacher, a tradition, a spiritual experience, or a community consensus contradicts or supplements the gospel of grace, the response is not “but they seem so credible” or “but this experience was so real.” The anathema is clear — let them be accursed. You are not being asked to be uncharitable; you are being asked to be as serious about the gospel’s fixedness as God is.

4. Rest in the security of a gospel whose origin is not human and therefore cannot be unmade by human failure or revision. *(Affections/worship)*

Paul’s autobiographical argument is often read as a defense of his personal credibility. It is more than that — it is a gift to the reader. Because the gospel Paul preached came not from human tradition but from divine revelation, it carries a stability that no human-originated teaching can possess. Human traditions shift, church councils err, teachers fall, movements drift. But the gospel Paul received in the revelation of Jesus Christ is not held in place by the consistency of human institutions — it is held in place by the God who revealed it. The God who set Paul apart before his birth, who called him by grace, who was pleased to reveal His Son — this God’s gospel does not require your maintenance or the church’s unbroken fidelity to remain true. It stands because it came from Him. Live in that rest.

5. Stop seeking the approval of human audiences when the gospel calls you to God-pleasing fidelity, even when God-pleasing produces friction. *(Will/behavior)*

Paul’s rhetorical question in verse 10 — “Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?” — identifies the functional idol beneath the Galatians’ drift and beneath the Judaizers’ gospel-distortion: the need for human approval. The Judaizers were giving the Galatians a way to be religiously acceptable to the Jewish community. The Galatians were taking it because acceptance is a powerful currency. Paul names this plainly: if pleasing people were his goal, he would not be a servant of Christ. Identify where you are softening, adjusting, or supplementing your allegiance to the gospel in order to remain acceptable to your social, cultural, or religious community. Then do the thing the gospel demands

instead — not because you are trying to be difficult, but because you serve Christ, not the audience.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Galatians 1 establishes a principle of fundamental importance for the doctrine of revelation: because the gospel originates in divine initiative — in God’s sovereign act of revealing His Son — it carries an authority that is categorically above and independent of any human mediating structure. This is not merely a claim about Paul’s personal apostolic authority; it is a claim about the nature of the gospel itself. A gospel that admits human revision is no longer gospel — it has been replaced by a human religious system, however gospel-flavored its vocabulary. The passage also teaches that the grace of God is not a religious starting point that human effort completes, but the whole of what God has accomplished: Christ “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our Father” (v. 4). The Father’s will, the Son’s self-giving, the Spirit’s revelation — the entire Trinitarian economy stands behind the gospel’s origin and stands against any human addition to it. God’s glory (v. 5, v. 24) is precisely what is at stake when the gospel is distorted: to add human conditions to divine grace is to redirect glory from God to human performance.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Galatians 1 is foundational for the Reformed understanding of both *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia*. The authority-structure Paul establishes — gospel above apostle, above angel, above institution, above experience — anticipates and grounds the Reformation’s insistence that Scripture alone (which contains and delivers the gospel) stands over every human tradition, magisterium, or religious consensus. Luther’s volcanic response to Galatians was not temperamental — it was the recognition that Paul’s anathema applied with full force to the papal system that had added human merit and ecclesiastical mediation to the finished work of Christ. The Reformed tradition’s insistence that justification is by grace alone through faith alone rests partly on the foundation laid here: if the gospel is not revisable by any human authority, then no church council, no tradition, and no accumulated consensus can legitimately add conditions to what God has graciously accomplished in Christ. Furthermore, the autobiographical section’s monergistic language — set apart before birth, called by grace, God pleased to reveal His Son — is a microcosm of the Reformed *ordo salutis*: election, effectual calling, and revelation are all divine acts before any human response. Paul’s conversion is not an example of a man making a decision for God; it is an example of God deciding for a man.

Main Takeaway

The gospel you have received did not come from human authority, and it cannot be improved, supplemented, or revised by human authority — which means every religious system that requires you to add your performance, your credentials, or your compliance to what Christ has accomplished is not offering you a fuller gospel but a different one. There is only one gospel. It stands because God spoke it. Hold it with both hands and refuse to let it go.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the anathema as rhetorical hyperbole.** Paul's double curse is regularly softened in exposition — interpreted as the emotional expression of a frustrated pastor rather than a measured theological judgment. This is a misreading. Paul repeats the anathema deliberately (vv. 8–9), and the repetition is structurally significant. The preacher who softens the anathema has softened the text's most important claim about the gospel's fixedness. Preach it at full weight: the eternal stakes Paul names are the actual stakes.
- **Preaching the autobiographical section as a testimony template.** Vv. 11–24 are regularly used as a model for sharing one's personal conversion story. This misses the argument entirely. Paul's point is not “here is how to tell your story” — it is “here is the evidence that my gospel is of divine, not human, origin.” To preach this section as testimony guidance is to replace a theological argument with a homiletical technique. The personal narrative is in service of the primary claim; the primary claim must remain primary.
- **Reducing the false-gospel problem to a first-century historical curiosity.** The Judaizing heresy is often presented as a uniquely Jewish-Christian first-century phenomenon with no direct contemporary analogue. This domesticates the passage. The structure of the false gospel — “Christ plus human conditions equals full standing before God” — is not historically limited. It is the characteristic shape of every works-based religious system, every legalistic church culture, and every therapeutic self-improvement gospel. The preacher must build the bridge from Galatia to the contemporary congregation without losing the passage's own force.
- **Separating Paul's apostolic authority defense from the gospel-authority claim.** Some expositions treat vv. 1–10 and vv. 11–24 as two separate units — first the gospel defense, then the personal defense — rather than as a unified argument. The autobiographical material is not Paul pivoting to self-defense; it is Paul providing the evidentiary basis for the theological principle already stated. The two halves must be preached as one argument: the gospel is fixed because its origin is divine, and here is the proof that its origin is divine.

- **Missing the doxological frame and its implication.** The chapter opens with a gospel summary and a doxology (vv. 3–5) and closes with the Judean churches glorifying God because of Paul’s transformation (v. 24). This frame is not decorative — it is theological. The glory belongs to God; the false gospel, by adding human conditions, implicitly redirects that glory to human achievement. An exposition that does not surface this doxological structure misses the chapter’s deepest motivation for gospel-fidelity: it is not primarily about getting the doctrine right, but about ascribing to God the glory that belongs to Him.
- **Failing to apply Paul’s “man-pleasing” diagnosis pastorally.** Verse 10’s rhetorical question about seeking human approval is the most pastorally actionable verse in the chapter, and it is frequently underpreached. The Galatians’ drift was driven by social pressure — the desire to be religiously acceptable. This is not a first-century problem. Contemporary congregations face the same pressure from progressive culture (soften the gospel’s exclusivity), from moralistic religious culture (add performance conditions), and from seeker-sensitive impulses (make the gospel more palatable). Paul’s answer is not tone-deafness to audience — it is clarity about whom one serves. The preacher who does not name the man-pleasing impulse concretely has left the most pointed application on the table.