

Paul and the False Brothers

What did Paul think of the false brothers? How did he speak of them? And what did he do about them? In his letter to the Galatians and in his second letter to the Corinthians he made all that, and more, perfectly clear.

When he wrote his second letter to Corinth,¹ he opened his case against the *pseudadelphoi* and their doctrine with an oblique reference to them:

We are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? (2 Cor. 2:17 – 3:1).

But it wasn't long before the apostle issued the most direct, and completely unmistakable, statement on the old covenant and its law given to Israel under Moses – focussing his attention on the ten commandments (surely, as a summary of the entire law of the covenant – see Exodus 24:12; 34:28, the stone tablets being placed in the ark of the covenant, in the very heart of the tabernacle – Exodus 25:21-22) given at Sinai to Israel for Israel. Indeed, as Moses told Israel, and told them over and over again:

The LORD declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone... I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you... The LORD gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant... The two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands (Deut. 4:13; 9:9,11,15).

¹ I do not start with 2 Corinthians because it precedes Galatians in our bound Bibles. Chronologically, I should start with the latter. But, for the sake of making my point as clearly as I can, I prefer to treat Galatians as the climax to this chapter.

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Drawing on that point – that the ten commandments and the covenant were virtually synonymous – the apostle drew a stark contrast between himself, and his faithful colleagues, and the false brothers: he and his friends were servants of God for the gospel in the new covenant; the false brothers, alas, were harking back to the old covenant for Israel. Paul pulled no punches:

God... has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory... To this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their [that is, Jewish] hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:7-18).

Hark back to the old covenant? That temporary, faded and obsolete glory carved in stone, which condemned those under it? Really? You Corinthians need to get serious! This is the age of the new covenant, the day of the Spirit! Wake up!

Having laid down that vital marker, his meaning as clear as noonday, having stressed the triumphant provisions of the new covenant over those of the old, Paul turned to motive – his own, and, by implication, the Judaisers'. Having bluntly begun with:

We are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ...

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...he pressed on:

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2).

To whom was he referring when he talked of men who are 'peddlers of God's word', who act in 'disgraceful, underhanded ways... practice cunning... tamper with God's word'? The Judaisers, no less!²

Just in case the Corinthians might mis-read the apostle's own motive in saying these things, and expressing himself so bluntly, he explained:

We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart (2 Cor. 5:12).

Paul could speak of his 'genuine love...³ by truthful speech' (2 Cor. 6:6-7), clearly pointing a finger at the *pseudadelphoi* and the deceptive, underhand way they went about their work, and the vile motive behind their teaching. He could say of himself:

We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together (2 Cor. 7:2-3).

If any doubt remains about this, a reading of the entire second letter to Corinth will remove it. Here is just a sample of what the apostle told his readers:

I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ – I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away! – I beg of you that when I

² Remember the obvious: 2 Cor. 3 connects 2 Cor. 2 and 2 Cor. 4, and 2 Cor. 3 is fulsome on the new covenant as opposed to the old.

³ Sincere love for the Corinthians, no doubt, but was the apostle also implying love for Christ, love for the gospel?

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am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete (2 Cor. 10:1-6).

It case it needs pointing out, the apostle's reference to 'flesh'⁴ in the above should be understood in terms of his earlier words about the letter and the Spirit:

God... has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death... will not the ministry of the Spirit... the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness... (2 Cor. 3:6-9).

As we proceed, we will met the contrast between flesh and Spirit time and time again. Indeed, that contrast encapsulates the core of the apostle's argument.⁵ The old covenant was a covenant of the flesh; the new covenant is the covenant of the Spirit. 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). This is more than one or two doctrinal adjustments. Christ has ushered in a new age, the age of the Spirit.

To continue with Paul's words to the Corinthians.

In particular, Paul knew he had to let his readers know that he had to wrestle with the *pseudadelphoi* over their doctrine in all its aspects. He did not mince his words:

⁴ I note this word 'flesh'. It is not the last we shall hear of it.

⁵ See the previous note. Rom. 8 and Gal. 2:16-21; 3:1-5; 4:2-31; 5:13-25; 6:8-13 are just some of the passages where Paul pressed home the point. Remember the interplay between 'law' and 'flesh'. There is more to be said.

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They [that is, the false teachers] say: ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account’. Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding (2 Cor. 10:10-12).

It was a serious business:

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things (2 Cor. 11:1-6).

He pressed on:

What I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds (2 Cor. 11:12-15).

He then laid into his readers for buying into the doctrine and practice of the law-men. The Corinthians needed to wake up:

You bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! (2 Cor. 11:20-21).

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The law-men were Judaisers. Judaisers are they? OK! Paul would have none of it! The wraps were off. They wanted to bring Jews, the Jewish law, into the picture? Let them listen to this:

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers [*pseudadelphoi*]; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness...

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it... But on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses... I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 11:21 – 12:10).

Of course, he was saying all this not simply for the *pseudadelphoi*, but, in particular, for the Corinthians. In short:

I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing (2 Cor. 12:11).

Thus the Corinthians were not left in two minds about what Paul thought of the law-men and their doctrine, and what it was costing him to maintain the gospel. Do not skip his list of

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dangers to which he had been exposed; above all, do not miss the climax:

[I have been] in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers [*pseudadelphoi*].

Dangers aplenty: ‘risks’, ‘perils’, ‘jeopardies’; above all, ‘danger from false brothers’, and that as bad as robbery, mugging, starvation, drowning, but worse because the danger was spiritual. The *pseudadelphoi* posed a very real threat to the apostle. They knew that he would stand his ground. He would not yield. But facing up to them was no picnic. Christ was at stake; the gospel was under threat; believers faced slavery. Nevertheless, however the *pseudadelphoi* might go about their business, and however nasty their motive and tactics, and however popular they and their teaching might be, Paul was going to be upfront and outspoken. He would pull no punches. He had nothing to hide; his motive was transparent.

And if necessary, he was prepared to have it out in person:

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them – since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God... We are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down. (2 Cor. 13:1-4,9-10).

So much for the Corinthian letter.

Now for Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul had hardly begun – he had no time to waste on the niceties of a pleasant

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introduction – before, in the bluntest of terms, he let his readers know why he was writing to them: he was staggered that they were deserting God the Father, the one who had called them to Christ by his Spirit, and were adopting a false gospel – and all so rapidly:

I am astonished [he wrote] that you are so quickly deserting him who called you⁶ in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But 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. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For 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 (Gal. 1:6-10).

Calling a spade a spade, the apostle let the Galatians know that he fully understood how it had happened: false teachers – Judaisers, professing believers who wanted to reinstate the Mosaic law and impose it on believers – had infiltrated the *ekklēsia* in Galatia, and were wreaking havoc with their doctrine. ‘I’m not speaking out of theory’, in effect he told the Galatians. ‘Oh no! I know by painful experience what I’m talking about. I’ve had more than enough of such teachers and their pernicious doctrine. I’ve been through the mill with them’. And so Paul fills in the missing details for the Galatians.

But... here we run into a difficulty: tying up the history presents us with a considerable headache. Douglas J.Moo, in his comments on Galatians 2, made his position clear:

In this passage [that is, Galatians 2:1-10] Paul’s description of the meeting in Jerusalem brings us face-to-face with the

⁶ There has been much debate over ‘him who called you’; I take this to be God the Father, by the Spirit, effectually calling sinners to Christ (John 3:3-8; 6:37,40,44; Rom. 8:26-30; 1 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:15-16; 5:5,6,8; 1 Thess. 2:12; 5:23-24).

historical and chronological issue that has long bedevilled Galatians interpreters. Is the meeting he here describes the same meeting⁷ that Luke narrates in Acts 15? Or does he describe a meeting that took place during the famine-relief expedition to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30)? While the arguments for each of these two options are very finely balanced – far more finely balanced than most interpreters acknowledge – [I] prefer the latter option.

Without getting embroiled in the discussion about the precise order of these events, I go back to the time when Barnabas, seeing that the infant *ekklēsia* at Antioch needed solid teaching, went looking for the necessary teacher to help him. He knew the very man for the job:

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:25-26).

Now when the believers at Antioch heard of an impending famine, they resolved to send financial help to their fellow-believers in Judea:

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27-30).

As Paul explained to the Galatians:

[I went to] Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus,

⁷ Moo had ‘council’. See the following note.

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who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek (Gal. 2:1-3).

So far so good; everything appears hunky dory. But then storm clouds gathered, bursting over the apostle's head. Some false teachers had been smuggled in among the believers, and those false teachers were not empty-handed; they came with an agenda:

Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery... (Gal. 2:4).

Did Paul keel over? Not a bit of it! He knew it was no local, passing difficulty. He could see the long term consequences only too plainly. He knew what he had to do. And he was prepared to do it, come what may:

...to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) – those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me (Gal. 2:5-6).

And things were settled amicably – for the moment:

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do (Gal. 2:7-10).

But then the Judaisers infested Antioch:

Some men came down from Judea [to Antioch] and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them

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[that is, they stood up to the false teachers, and warmly contended for the truth (Jude 3)], Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question (Acts 15:1-2).

What happened next? This:

So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said: 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses' (Acts 15:3-5).

Having thoroughly discussed the matter, the Jerusalem meeting⁸ concluded that the law-men were wrong: the law should not be imposed on Gentile believers;⁹ as for Moses, they reminded everybody, he could look after himself:

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues (Acts 15:21).

* * *

Having had this historical excursion, we can now take up the Galatian thread once again. The historical details of timing may be difficult to unravel, but the outcome of it all is as plain as plain could be. In bringing the Galatians up to speed about all these experiences, as we have seen, the apostle thundered that these Judaisers were:

⁸ Not a Council (talk about reading back into Scripture!). See my *Battle* pp85-90.

⁹ It should not be imposed on Jewish believers, either, of course (see Hebrews), but as I have already pointed out, this question only arose after Gentiles were being converted.

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...false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery (Gal. 2:4).

Note the false teachers' agenda: slavery. They wanted to turn believers into slaves! And they were going to use the law to do it.

Note the apostle's use of 'secretly' and 'slipped in' and 'spy'. Once again, we are in the realm of motive – the motive and tactics of deceit, stealth, underhanded-cunning: 'to creep or steal in', 'secretly brought in as spies, traitors' 'brought in by the circumcision party to fulfil the design of establishing the... law,¹⁰ and thus to accomplish the overthrow of the faith',¹¹ to 'spy out, search out with a view to overthrowing',¹²

These questions of agenda and motive are vital. It is not difficult to read between the lines in the following passages, and see the motive and tactics of the law-men:

There are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:7).

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 (Gal. 1:10).

I would have you know, brothers, that 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 (Gal. 1:11-12).

The law-men were not above using flattery to gain their ends:

¹⁰ Original 'ceremonial law', repeating the mistaken notion of a threefold division of the law. As I have argued repeatedly in many works, and as in the body of this present work, it was a question of the law (Gal. 5:2-3), the law full stop! When will we be free of this Reformed threefold division of the law? See my 'An Appeal to the Reformed' on my sermonaudio.com page.

¹¹ W.E.Vine: *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

¹² W.E.Vine: *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

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They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them (Gal. 4:17).

And what had been the apostle's reaction? This, of course:

To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you (Gal. 2:4-5).

Nor had he allowed personality and friendship to make him shrink from unpalatable tasks:

When Cephas [that is, Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all: 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?' (Gal. 2:11-14).

So much for Paul's own personal and painful experience of the Judaisers. And now they had got to Galatia, and the Galatians were being seduced by their teaching! Peter, Barnabas, and now the Galatians! Who next! Where would they strike next? Would he never be free of the pest? The rest of Paul's letter to the Galatians – and much also in letters to other *ekklēsia* – is taken up with exposing and exploding the error, and its ramifications, of the law-mongers.

But just before I proceed with that, let me take a glance at the way in which the apostle responded to the same issue at Philippi and elsewhere. Although he did use the actual word *pseudadelphoi*, there is no doubt who he had in mind. And he used equally blunt language:

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:2-3).

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Unmasking his batteries, he let fly:

Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish [or dung], in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:4-11).

Paul clearly left the Philippians in no doubt as to his mind on the subject:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Nor did he leave any doubt as to where their duty lay:

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his

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glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:12-21).

And it was not only at Philippi. Take his letter to the Colossians:

As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the Head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (Col. 2:6-15).

So much for the facts. Now for the consequent duty of every believer:

Therefore let no one pass judgment¹³ on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath (Col. 2:16).

That is, don't listen to the false brothers when they try to impose the law on you. Why not? The answer is patent. Take all the particulars of the law:

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:17).

Calvin commented:

¹³ 'Impose on you', 'censure or condemn you' (*cf.* Rom. 14:3-10; Col. 2:8).

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To judge means here to hold one to be guilty of a crime, or to impose a scruple of conscience, so that we are no longer free. [The apostle] says, therefore, that it is not in the power of men to make us subject to the observance of rites which Christ has by his death abolished, and exempts us from their yoke, that we may not allow ourselves to be fettered by the laws which they have imposed.

As Peter had said at Jerusalem:

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? (Acts 15:10).

And, it surely goes without saying, if the false brothers put paganism or Gnosticism into the mix, you believers ought to know what to do about it:

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God (Col. 2:18-19).

At all costs, stick with Christ! To yield to the siren song¹⁴ of the law-men is utter stupidity:

If [that is, since] with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:20-23).

Believers awake! Remember what you are and what you have in Christ! Live it out! Don't yield to the law-men:

¹⁴ An appeal that sounds attractive but is fatal. In Greek mythology, the sirens lured sailors into shipwreck.

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If [that is, since] then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory... Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all (Col. 2:6 – 3:11).

So much for Colosse.

Although (perhaps) the plague had not yet broken out in Ephesus,¹⁵ Paul thought it necessary to let loose a pre-emptive shot across the bows for the good of the believers there:

Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:11-22).

After all, as he told Timothy:

¹⁵ But see the extract immediately following this.

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As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Tim. 1:3-11).

The false teachers were trying to get believers to submit to the law. That was the threat. Paul was concerned with the danger to believers, wasn't he? At this point, he was not in the least worried about what the *pseudadelphoi* might be trying to do to unbelievers, and whether or not those unbelievers were externally conforming to law or self-righteous hypocrites. It was believers he was concerned with. He was anxious because the false brothers were trying to get believers under the law. That is what Timothy had to sort out and put a stop to. The law was not made for believers, said the apostle.¹⁶

And Paul saw it was necessary to use plain speaking when he warned Titus about the Judaisers in Crete, reminding him of his responsibility. He did so in no uncertain terms:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you... An overseer, as God's steward... must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able

¹⁶ For more on this passage, see my *Christ*.

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to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. One of the Cretans, a prophet [that is, a poet] of their own, said: 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons'. This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work... Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Tit. 1:5-16; 3:9-11).

So far so good. But what was it – precisely – about what the law-men were teaching which made Paul incandescent? As he had made clear, he knew that these men, if they managed to promulgate their doctrine unhindered, and if believers started buying into it – as, alas, they were in Galatia and at Corinth – the end result would be disastrous. It would spell the ruination of the gospel, the sidelining of Christ, slavery for believers, and the eventual end of the new-covenant *ekklēsia*. He had to stamp on the error, and be quick and thorough about it!

The way he counteracted this assault was by setting out the truth of the gospel. And that is what we now examine.