

“Stand Firm in Freedom”

April 10, 2011

Text: Galatians 4:29-5:1

In 1894, Benjamin B. Warfield (also known as B.B. Warfield) was a professor of theology at Princeton Seminary, when he wrote this=>

“The chief dangers to Christianity do not come from the anti-Christian systems. Mohammedanism has never made inroads upon Christianity save by the sword. Nobody fears that Christianity will be swallowed up by Buddhism. It is corrupt forms of Christianity itself which menace from time to time the life of Christianity. Why make much of minor points of difference between those who serve the one Christ? Because a pure gospel is worth preserving; and is not only worth preserving, but is logically (and logic will always work itself out into history) the only saving gospel.”

In his book *Evangelicalism Divided*, Iain Murray points out that this gospel-purity was compromised during the 19th century, when mainline denominations set aside doctrinal differences for the sake of unity among them.

Because they had dropped their guard theologically, liberalism moved in & took advantage of this situation, invading almost all of these denominations.

As a result, a growing gap emerged within them, between the biblical creeds of their founding fathers, & the new ideas that were now being taught within them.

I.e., what people heard coming from their pulpits each Sunday, became very different from what their founding documents said they stood for.

Their theology had been corrupted.

During this time, the teachings of a German theologian named Friedrich Schleiermacher took hold, both in Europe/America.

He taught that religion is a matter of feeling, not doctrine.

Because people in virtually all Xn denominations share the same religious feelings, this became the basis of unity among them, and doctrine was deliberately set aside, as being divisive.

Today, the emergent church isn't merely indifferent to doctrine, but actively hostile towards it, arguing you can't ever be really sure what the Bible means anyway.

Which takes us back to B.B. Warfield's statement that doctrinally corrupt Xnity is the greatest menace (threat) to the Church;

A pure doctrine of the gospel is worth defending, because without it, men's souls cannot be saved from sin.

In our study of Galatians, we have seen that this was the same battle Paul faced in Galatia.

An impure gospel was being taught by Judaizers in the churches there, advocating circumcision and adherence to Mosaic Law as a prerequisite for salvation, in addition to personal faith in Jesus X as one's Savior/Lord.

In this case too, Xns had dropped their theological guard, because the Judaizers seemed so concerned/solicitous for the Galatians' welfare.

In Gal 4:17, Paul says=> *“They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you may seek them.”*

The Galatians were duped/lured by the insincerity and hypocrisy of false teachers, into accepting a false doctrine that would enslave them.

Instead of being truly concerned, the Judaizers were really entangling them in spiritual slavery—actually persecuting them by stealth, undermining their theological foundations.

They were doing it all so subtly/nicely, the Galatians hadn't even recognized it as an attack, or persecution.

They needed to learn to defend their own spiritual freedom, and that had to begin with their learning to recognize their enemies.

Today's text is a call for Christians to stand firm for their spiritual freedom.

1st, Paul will tell them, Recognize that legalism is your enemy.

2nd, he'll say, Recognize your need to decisively reject legalism.

3rd, Recognize your need to embrace your own spiritual freedom.

4th, Recognize the need to actively defend your freedom, by resisting the error of legalism.

*** Recognize that legalism is your enemy**

The Galatians hadn't defended themselves against the Judaizers' legalism, because they didn't recognize it as an enemy.

It was like a Trojan horse that they had welcomed into their church.

Paul points out that legalists, who add human works to faith as a means of attaining salvation, have a long history of persecuting those who believe in salvation by grace, thru faith alone.

That was the crux of the comparison between Ishmael/Isaac that we considered last Sunday.

[Galatians 4:29]=> *"But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh [Ishmael] persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit [Isaac], so it is now also."*

Last time we saw the context in which Paul makes this statement=> an allegory comparing the Judaizers' legalism with the birth of Abraham's son, Ishmael a/w/a his mother, Hagar.

Ishmael's mother was a bondslave, who had cohabited with Abraham for the specific purpose of giving him a son, because his own wife, Sarah, was incapable of doing so.

After Ishmael's birth, his mother (Hagar) despised Sarah.

13 years later, God worked a miracle in Sarah's womb, she became pregnant at the age of 89, and she gave birth to Isaac—the son God had long before promised to Abraham.

Now Isaac is old enough to be weaned—prob. about 3—and Ishmael is prob. 16 or 17 y.o.

A feast was held to celebrate the baby's surviving the dangers of infancy, as was customary in that culture.

At that feast, Ishmael mocked Isaac, causing Sarah to demand that Abraham drive both Ishmael/Hagar out of the household.

In all likelihood, Ishmael's mockery reflected his mother's disdain for Sarah, but he didn't keep it hidden as well as his mother had, for all these years.

God told Abraham he was to do as Sarah had demanded.

Abraham was torn by all this conflict since Ishmael was, after all, his own flesh/blood.

Gen 21:11 says=> *"The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son."*

In Gen 17:18, Abraham had said to God=> *"Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!"* (live a life of obedient faith).

This was God's response (Gen 17:19-21)=> *"No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, & you shall call his name Isaac; & I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting*

covenant for his descendants after him. / And as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, & will make him fruitful & will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, & I will make him a great nation. / But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

Paul's statement in verse 29 of our own text mentions that Ishmael had been born through normal human means, but Isaac's birth was a miracle of the H.S.=> "He who was born according to the flesh [Ishmael] persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit [referring to Isaac's miraculous birth]."

But then Paul adds these very significant words=> "...so it is **now** also."

Paul is saying that, just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, those who are the spiritual descendants of Ishmael (because they're enslaved to a legalistic religion of works-righteousness), are again persecuting the spiritual descendants of Isaac.

Isaac's spiritual descendants are what Paul has just called in

Gal 4:28, "children of promise"=> "*And you [Galatian Xns] brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.*"

God's "promise" was that those who believe in X would receive eternal life thru the H.S., just as Abraham did;

And just as Isaac had received physical life thru the H.S.

They are the "children of promise."

Paul is saying to the Galatians, "Even though you don't realize it, you are under attack, suffering persecution (subtle, but spiritually destructive, persecution)."

"The Judaizers are modern-day Ishmaels, persecuting you Galatian Gentiles by trying to hang the heavy yoke of legalistic enslavement to the Law around your necks.

"You need to wake-up/recognize that you're under attack, and that their legalism is your enemy."

Ishmael's spiritual descendants believe in salvation by good works and religious deeds.

They will always hate/mock Isaac's spiritual descendants, who hold to salvation by God's grace alone.

They will always feel irked at hearing the "children of the promise" say they'll make it into heaven w/o doing only good works, & simply on the basis of their faith.

And they'll mock the claim of Isaac's descendants that they never can/will lose their salvation by sinning it away.

Why? Because God's grace will preserve their salvation, just as it saved them in the first place.

We must always expect opposition/persecution from our religious half-brothers—the church of Ishmael, the church of legalistic human achievement.

* Jesus was opposed by the Jewish legalists of His day.

* Paul's fiercest opponents were legalistic Jews/Judaizers in his day.

* The legalistic medieval papacy persecuted Protestants with ruthless ferocity during the years of the Inquisition.

* And the established church which has dismissed doctrinal issues for good works, religious ritual, or feel-good religion, is the great adversary of Isaac's spiritual descendants today.

Someone=> What exactly is legalism?

It's not overly strict obedience to the Law of God (how could anyone obey Him to well?).

It's human efforts to gain God's favor.

It either adds manmade rules to God's Law, or uses it as a human means of self-justification, in lieu of faith in X.

Those who trust in God's provision of salvation through the atoning death of Jesus X will always be persecuted by those who trust in their own righteousness to save their souls.

We too must recognize that all such legalism is our enemy, spiritually.

***2. Recognize your need to decisively reject legalism**

“Rejection” is such a negative word, that many people reject it out of hand, becoming naively/indiscriminately tolerant.

But a judge who says, “I don't want to reject anyone, so I never punish criminals,” is derelict in his duty.

Abraham didn't want to reject his own son, Ishmael, but God supported Sarah's demand, forcing him to cast Ishmael out.

Abraham had to set aside his own feelings and do what God had hold him to do.

Paul now makes that very point, by quoting Gen 21:10.

The words are Sarah's, but God's support made them His words as well.

[Verse 30]=> *“But what does the Scripture say? ‘CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN.’”*

This is very emphatic language in the original text, using a double negative=> In no way shall the son of the bondwoman be an heir w/ the son of the free woman.

Paul is making a point to the Galatians, that Judaizers think they are descendants of the free woman (Sarah) but they're really spiritual descendants of Hagar--the slave.

And they are to be cast out of the Church, just as God told Abraham to cast Hagar & her son Ishmael out of his family.

The Judaizers were prob. aghast when they heard that Paul was calling them children of Hagar—the Arab.

After all, they were biological descendants of both Abraham/Sarah, and they'd been circumcised as confirmation of their Jewishness.

They were even trying to persuade Gentiles to become circumcised so they could be 2nd-hand Jews too, as proselytes.

Implying that they were the children of Hagar was tantamount to calling them the spiritual equivalent of Arabs.

And that's exactly what Paul meant.

He explains himself in Rom 2:28=> *“He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. / But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter”* (28-29).

Becoming a true child of Abraham and therefore a true “child of promise” involves believing in X as Abraham did, & having God count your faith as righteousness.

And it is a “circumcision of the heart” (not the flesh)—the separation/consecration of one's heart unto God.

So Xn believers (whether Jewish/Gentile) are true sons of Abraham, but unbelievers (Jewish/Gentile) are not.

True “sons of Abraham” are spiritual sons, not physical sons.

The legalistic spiritual children of Hagar/Ishmael will receive no eternal inheritance from God.

In fact, they'll be cast out of God's household into outer darkness, and Jesus won't hesitate a moment to do so, no matter how many good-works/religious-deeds they have to show for themselves.

Mt 7:22 (Jesus)=> *"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' / And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS'"* (22-23).

Others will undoubtedly say, "Lord, didn't I get baptized and go to church & take communion regularly?"

"Didn't I have a reputation for doing good and for not swearing/cursing? So why are You casting me out?"

"It's true, I didn't seek Your righteousness or Your forgiveness, but I didn't think I needed to, because I was doing so well on my own, and I came from a good family."

Others may say, "Lord, I thought You would be more merciful than this, and give me credit at least for my sincerity, even if I wasn't perfect."

"I expected you to leave me a little margin for error/iniquity."

But they will find that any trust they've had in their own righteousness at all has been their undoing, because they've been judged by God's Law, which leaves no room for error.

The Law makes no allowance/provision for mercy, or even for imperfection.

By contrast, the spiritual children of Sarah/Isaac will come before X with no certificates of merit, no evidence whatever of their own good deeds, saying,

"I bring nothing meritorious of my own, but simply cling to Your cross, trusting that, because of my faith in You, You have accredited God's own righteousness to me, and cleansed me of my sin."

And they will receive their eternal inheritance from God, like everything else they've received from Him=> As an undeserved gift of His grace.

They had realized long before, that's the way (the only way) God deals graciously with sinful men.

We must recognize that the legalism which causes people to trust in their own righteousness, will send them to hell.

It's a deadly evil which must be rejected here/now/decisively.

***3. Recognize the need to embrace your own spiritual freedom**

This means applying to ourselves what we know about being "sons of promise."

It means identifying w/ it, & putting it to work in our lives.

[Verse 31]=> *"So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman."*

If I am a child of Hagar the bondwoman, I will think/act like a spiritual slave; but if I'm a child of Sarah, the free woman, I'll think/act like a free man—like Isaac.

So I must begin by asking myself, Which one am I? Whose child am I? Who is my mother?

* Is my religion that of Hagar—the religion of human achievement, which asks what I can do by my own efforts to improve my spiritual standing before God?

Or, is my religion that of Sarah—the religion of undeserved grace, which trusts in what God has done for me?

- * Have I entered into what Heb 4 calls the “promised rest” of God—confidence in X’s finished work for my salvation, that involves a peaceful reliance on Him?
Or, am I making myself righteous, because I don’t really trust my soul’s welfare to the Lord?
 - * If I **haven’t** yet entered into God’s promised rest, it’s because there is a false X (an antichrist) reigning in my heart=> me!
So I need to humble myself and ask Jesus X to forgive me of that and every other sin, by which I have offended His grace.
And I need to entrust my soul to Him, by the H.S.’s power.
 - * If I **have** entered into that condition of rest, I need to discipline my mind to think like the spiritually freed man that I am, not reverting back to my old slave-like, legalistic thoughts.
- I need to ask myself questions like this=>
- * Am I, at this moment, placing unreserved dependence on X’s atonement of my sin through His death;
Or experiencing the anxious bondage of reliance on myself, and my own moral resolve or achievements?
 - * Am I trusting in God’s grace alone, or falling back once again on my own self-righteousness, hoping to sense His love for me as I do so?
 - * Is my heart ruled at this moment by a spirit of humble surrender to the H.S., or is it being ruled by my pride?
 - * Am I resting/delighting in the Lord as His adopted son or daughter, crying “Abba, Father” the way Isaac must have cried to Abraham; or am I thinking cynical, self-assertive, self-protective thoughts like an Ishmael?
 - * Am I trusting the Spirit to sanctify me, or having begun by the Spirit, am I relying on my flesh to perfect me?
 - * Do I have a sense of joy/blessing/freedom such as that enjoyed by the Galatians, before the Judaizers showed up (4:15);
Or am I constantly doing something to prove myself and to improve my standing with the Lord?
Some good deed, or religious activity.

When Paul tells the Galatians=> *“We are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman,”* the implication is=> So let’s start thinking/acting like what we are, and stop acting like slaves.

I.e., Let’s wholeheartedly embrace our new identity.

And that is what we too must do.

Martin Luther=>

“Who is able to express what a thing it is when a man is assured in his heart that God neither is, nor will be, angry with him, but will be forever a merciful and loving Father unto him, for Christ’s sake?”

***4. Recognize the need to actively defend our freedom** (by resisting legalism)

[Gal 5:1]=> *“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore **keep standing firm** [a call for ongoing action, since the urge to fall back on spiritual self-reliance is ever-present] and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”*

In this verse, we have a statement and a command=>

The statement: Christ has set us free for the purpose of freedom.

Our former state was one of spiritual slavery, but X has become our liberator, our conversion was an emancipation, and the new life we live is one of freedom from the Law's condemnation, freeing our conscience from guilt & the terrible treadmill of trying to gain/keep God's acceptance/favor.

The command: Since X has set you free, stand firm in your freedom.

This applies to us, both as the Church, & as individuals.

Because the verb here is a 2nd person plural, the primary application is to the Church=> you all stand free together.

This is the solution to the problem B.B. Warfield warned about=> "It is corrupt forms of Christianity itself which menace from time to time the life of Christianity."

The only way for the Church to protect itself from the corruption of legalism is for Xns to confront/cast-out those who teach it, just as Abraham cast out Ishmael.

So Paul is urging the church to do what Jude urged us to do in Jude 1:3=> "**contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.**"

As Warfield said, This is why we make so much of minor points of doctrinal difference between us and those who serve the same Christ.

We are striving to keep a pure/orthodox understanding of the gospel, so the message we preach will save souls.

Paul went toe-to-toe with the Judaizers in his letter, but now it was time for the Galatians to do it themselves.

And we all have a responsibility to guard the church's freedom, standing firm in the doctrine of salvation by faith in Jesus X, apart from any/all human works.

But there is also an obvious personal application of this guardedness against legalism, that is essential to our own Xn lives.

The freedom Paul is talking about in this verse is freedom from the slavery that comes with striving to keep the Law in order to achieve our own righteousness.

In Phil 3:9, Paul said he had suffered the loss of all things, "*that I may gain Christ, / and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, / that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.*"

That was Paul's quest, & it needs to become ours as well=>

to know X intimately, trusting in His (not our) righteousness.

We must persevere, standing firm like a soldier confronting his enemy, resisting mental/spiritual re-enslavement.

We must learn to enjoy more/more habitually the freedom of conscience that is ours by right, because Jesus has died to take away all our guilt/condemnation.

In Lk 4:18, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah (61:1)=> "**THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE DOWNTRODDEN,**

We are the downtrodden captives, X has set free from the Law.

Obviously, this doesn't mean that we no longer sin, nor that we are free to sin w/o becoming concerned about it.

But when we sin, we confess our sins to God, and Jesus is always faithful/righteous to forgive us our sins (I Jn 1:9), and cleanse us from unrighteousness once again.

Throughout the rest of Galatians, Paul will be teaching us to “*walk in the Spirit*” so that we won’t turn our freedom into an opportunity for the flesh (5:13), or use it to carry out the desires of the flesh (5:16).

But now we walk upright as free men, no longer stooping over, crushed under the heavy burden of the Law’s yoke.

We have responded to Jesus’ invitation (Mt 11:29-30)=> “*Take **My yoke** upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND **REST FOR YOUR SOULS.** / For **My yoke** is easy, and My load is light.*”

No longer are we alone in the struggle to live righteous lives, “*for it is **God** who is at work in you, both **to will** and **to work** for His good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13).

An anonymous Xn poet once wrote=>

This is a liberty unsung
By poets, and by senators unpraised;
Which monarch cannot grant, nor all the powers
Of Earth or Hell confederate, take away:
A liberty which persecution, fraud,
Oppression, prisons, have no power to bind;
Which whoso tastes, can be enslaved no more.
‘Tis liberty of heart, deriv’d from Heaven
Bought with His blood who gave it to mankind.