



TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

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FROM SOLA SCRIPTURA PUBLICATIONS

ISSUE 141 (July/Aug. 2023)

READER QUESTIONS (11)

SELECTED TEXTS

ONCE AGAIN WE TURN TO QUESTIONS OUR READERS HAVE on certain texts of Scripture or specific issues. In this installment of a series that began way back in January of 2008, we address four questions.

Galatians 1:6–10?

Question: Have you written a TOTT on Galatians 1:6–9? I just thought it would be good to make people aware of the compromise of the Gospel by evangelical leaders who are signing unity accords with Roman Catholics that state we share a common faith in the Gospel. The RC clergy is under the same anathema as the Judaizers and the evangelical leaders don't seem to be concerned. In essence, they have discouraged evangelism in this huge mission field by stating we share a common faith. (MG)

Answer: This dear, burdened reader is absolutely correct. Here is one of those passages that is a "tough text" not because it is difficult to *interpret* but because we fail to *implement* it:

6 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:

7 Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.

8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

9 As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

10 For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.

Let us examine this passage with three observations and three questions in application.

First, Paul's *Distress* at the Galatians' *Abandonment* of the Truth (v. 6). **Marvel** translates the Greek *thaumazō*, a strong word that means "to wonder, marvel, be struck with admiration or astonishment." We find it most often in the Synoptic Gospels in relation to people's reaction to Jesus' miracles. Matthew 8:27 is a good example; after Jesus commanded the storm to cease, the disciples "marveled, saying, What manner

of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!" Jesus' teaching brought the same reaction: "Now about the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and taught. And the Jews marveled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" (John 7:14–15).

Here in Galatians, then, we see Paul astonished and in deep distress at the believers in the churches of Galatia. Why? Because they had actually abandoned what he had taught them concerning the Gospel. They had jettisoned the truth that salvation is by **grace** alone and were embracing **another gospel** (which as we will see in v. 7 is *not* the Gospel).

Oh, how the word **removed** (*metatithēmi*) graphically demonstrates their defection! Its literal meaning is "to bring or set in another place." Metaphorically, it means "to change," as one might change to another opinion. It was used in Classical Greek, for example, for "one who runs from one philosophical school to another,"¹ as well as for "a turncoat."² The verb is also in the present tense indicating that the defection was still in progress. Further still, the verb can be taken in either the passive voice, meaning someone was acting upon them to change them, or the middle voice, indicating that they acted on their own behalf in the change. Either way the result was the same—they had abandoned the Truth and had done so **soon** after Paul had taught them.

In application, we should, therefore, ask: Why are we not astonished and in deep distress? We are seeing the same kind of abandonment of this truth today, but many are not troubled at all and are even willing to compromise for the sake of "unity." In addition to the older *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* document of 1995, and its sequel *ECT 2* in 1997, the most recent is *The Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience* (2009). With more than 150 signatures from Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical leaders, its purpose was to foster unified support of "the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty." It identifies those three groups as "Christians" and calls all of us to unite in "the Gospel." But the simple fact is that these three groups say *very different things* about "the Gospel," which means many are unbelievers. I personally was very grieved to see some names on this document who I highly regard but also encouraged that men such as Alistair Begg, Michael Horton, John MacArthur, and R. C.

Sproul have stood firm and spoken out against it. As horrific as abortion is, as important as traditional marriage is, and as wonderful as religious liberty is, those things are not the Gospel. We are to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

Second, Paul’s *Discernment of the False Teachers’ Alteration of the Truth* (v. 7). Continuing in his distress, Paul declares in divine dogmatism: **another gospel . . . is not another Gospel!** There is only one Gospel, and to alter any “jot or tittle” of it is to **pervert the gospel of Christ**. The Greek behind **pervert** (*metastrophō*) is a compound: a root (*strophō*) that means “to turn” and a prefix (*meta*) that means “a change.” The full meaning, then, is “to transform into something of an opposite character.”³ Paul immediately recognized that his opponents had altered the Gospel into the very opposite of what it is.

Who were those opponents? The Judaizers. These false teachers had infiltrated the churches and were undermining *the very core doctrine of Christianity*, justification by faith alone. In their self-righteousness and self-appointed superiority, they insisted that Gentiles had to become Jewish proselytes and obey the Mosaic Law. In his shock and dismay, Paul added later in this letter: “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth. . . . Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” (3:1–2)?

In application, we should now ask another question: Why are we not discerning? As I continue to research and write on church history, one of the most obvious realities throughout that history is the glaring truth that *Roman Catholicism is not biblical Christianity*. Am I misreading things. No, I am not. Catholic theologians clearly, and without apology, do not teach justification by faith alone. In its self-righteousness and self-appointed superiority, it teaches that salvation comes by works, works that infuse grace into us. Again, am I misrepresenting Roman Catholicism? Indeed not, for the Council of Trent (1545–47, 1551–52, and 1562–63) stated with no ambiguity whatsoever, and which has never changed:

If anyone says that by the said sacraments of the New Law [a term that refers to Trent’s canons and decrees on the seven sacraments] grace is not conferred through the act performed [ex opere operato, lit., “the work worked”] but [says] that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace, let him be anathema (Session 7, canon 8).

In other words, grace is not received from God by faith, but is rather infused by man’s works, specifically, through performing of the sacraments. *Grace is no longer unmerited; it is earned*. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* proudly states, “We can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life” (Paragraph 2027).⁴ The Catholic Church, therefore, is the dispensary of grace. It is through it alone that grace is dispensed through the sacraments.

What is so troubling about many evangelicals today is their failure to recognize this fact, for it really does not require a great deal of discernment. Even the smallest smidgeon is enough to see the difference. If I may lovingly say, the only way to miss it is to *ignore* it, and, frankly, that is to be in *complicity* with it. That leads us to our final observation.

Third, Paul’s *Denunciation of the False Teachers’ Abase-*

ment of the Truth (vv. 8–9). Paul denounces and condemns any false gospel in the strongest of terms. So there would be no mistake, in fact, he says it twice. The word **accursed** translates the Greek *anathema*, which refers to “something handed over to God for judgment.” As one authority specifies, “The word does not denote punishment intended as discipline but being given over or devoted to divine condemnation.” In other words, no corrective action is implied, only judgment and sentencing.⁵ So pointed is this command, so all-encompassing, that even if an **angel** or any **man** (including Paul or one of his associates) **preach any other gospel**, they were to be turned over to God’s judgment.

In application, may we once again ask a question, Why are we not denouncing those who abase and pervert the Gospel? There can be only one answer. It is because we want to please people, which Paul says in verse 10 he refused to do, adding finally: for if I yet **pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ**. We need, like never before, to realize that any compromise with false teaching, especially on the doctrine of salvation, does not please or serve our Lord. Indeed, as our reader question points out, Roman Catholics are an enormous mission field, just as large as are Muslims, cult members, and the “non-religious.”

What Does Mark 9:49 Mean?

Question: I am really puzzled by Mark 9:49: **For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt**. What does this verse mean? (DW)

Answer: Well, you are not alone in your puzzlement. There is perhaps no other verse in the Bible that has perplexed commentators as much as has this one. It has accurately been dubbed a *crux interpretum*, that is, difficult to interpret and, by extension, difficult to understand. It is not only a “tough text,” but one of the *toughest*. That has resulted, in fact, in a whole plethora of interpretations (Oh, my!), which I will not inundate you with here, so we will just dive immediately into the deep end of the pool.

Perhaps it is best to take the verse piece by piece. *First*, the word **For** obviously ties this verse to what precedes it. This makes one commentator’s statement a little shocking: “Here is a rare case where consideration of the context hinders rather than helps the interpretation.”⁶

Second, to whom does **everyone** refer? Throughout the NT, the Greek *pas* (“all, every”) carries one of two ideas: “all without exception” or (far more often) “all without distinction.” The former is illustrated John 1:3, for example, where John declares of Christ the Creator, “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” In contrast, we see the latter, for instance, in Luke 11:42, which literally says that the Pharisees tithed “every herb” or “all herbs,” but the translators clarify with “all *manner* of herbs.” Likewise, when our Lord says He will draw “all men” to Himself (Jn. 12:32), does this mean every single person on earth? Obviously not, because not all people will be saved. Rather it means that He will draw “all *peoples*” to Himself, that is, people of every sort, every description, and every ethnic group without distinction.⁷ In light of the context preceding our text, however (vv. 38–48), it would seem that **everyone** is inclusive, referring to both believers and unbelievers

but in different ways.

Third, to what does **fire** refer? As fire is usually used to refer to judgment, this would refer to hell for unbelievers (as in vv. 44, 46, 48) and the testing of the works of believers (1 Cor. 3:12–13).

Fourth, to what does **salted** refer? The Greek verb here (*halizō*) is simple: “to sprinkle with salt, to preserve by salting.” So, with the image of preservation established, unbelievers will be preserved in the fires of hell for eternity, while believers will be preserved (and *purified*, another image of fire in Scripture) through God’s discipline and chastening, as well as persecution, throughout their lives (1 Pet. 4:12).

Fifth, that final phrase, **every sacrifice shall be salted with salt**, comes right from Leviticus 2:13, which refers to the salting of the OT sacrifices. Once again, while unbelievers are a *dead* sacrifice but will be preserved through eternity, believers are a *living* sacrifice (Rom. 12:1) and are all the more savory because of the salt of their dedication and service. Verse 50 goes on, in fact, “Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.” Believers must remain “salty,” remain obedient, holy, loving, and faithful.

Revelation, Inspiration, and Illumination

Question: I’ve heard the terms illumination, revelation, and inspiration but don’t know the difference between them, or are they just basically the same thing? (CJ)

Answer: Don’t feel alone here, for many folks are not clear on these three critical terms. Since these are all works of the Holy Spirit, they are sometimes confused, or even used interchangeably, but while they are certainly related, they are still quite distinct.

First, the doctrine of *revelation* is the act of God whereby He discloses Himself, or communicates Truth, to the human mind, unveiling to His creatures truth that could not be known in any other way (1 Cor. 2:10–11). This revelation is two-fold. “General Revelation” is given through nature by way of: creation (Rom. 1:20), the events of history (providence, Is. 46:9–10; Acts 14:15–17; Deut. 8:18–19; Prov. 21:1), and the human conscience (Rom. 2:14–15; Jn. 8:9; 1 Tim. 4:2). “Special Revelation” comes only by the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:18; 10:30) and through Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

Second, there is *inspiration*. As noted in a previous TOTT,⁸ while revelation refers to the act of God of making known His Truth and to the content of that Truth, inspiration refers to the way God makes His Truth known. It is the forceful and conscious exhaling of God into the Scripture writers. It is, in fact, the “expiration” of God, that is, with His energy He “blew” His very words into the writers of Scripture, while still allowing for the writer’s personality, style, and even vocabulary, with the result being exactly what God wanted to convey. So, while revelation *presents* God’s Truth, inspiration *protects* it by ensuring that it is authentic, trustworthy, authoritative, and sufficient.

Third, then, there is *illumination*, which is the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing understanding to our hearts. This is what “turns on the light” so we can see the Truth. As 1 Corinthians 2:12 and 14 tell us, the “natural [unregenerate] man” cannot understand spiritual truth; only through the Holy

Spirit is Truth “spiritually discerned” by the believer (see the follow-up question below). This fulfills our Lord’s promise that He would send “the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost” to “teach [us] all things, and bring all things to [our] remembrance, whatsoever [He] said” (Jn. 14:26). I cannot begin to count how many times during in-depth study of a particularly difficult passage, verse, or even a single word that God turned on the light for me. That is why David prayed, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Ps. 119:18).

A key passage on illumination appears in 1 John 2:20 and 27: “But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things. . . . But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.” Both “unction” and “anointing” translate *chrisma*, which in Classical Greek refers to what is rubbed on, such as an ointment or whitewash and was used medicinally for a healing ointment. The verb form *chriō* appears 60 times in the Septuagint and, except for only two instances, always translates the Hebrew *māshah*, “to smear, anoint with oil or ointment.” It is used throughout the OT to express the theologically significant phenomenon of anointing, primarily three classes of people: prophets (1 Kings 19:16), priests (Ex. 28:41), and kings (1 Sam. 9:16; 10:1). (The word “Messiah,” of course, is a transliteration of another form of this word, *māshîah*, “anointed one,” which is then rendered *christos* in the NT.)

So, here in these two verses, which are the only occurrences of *chrisma* in the NT (though *chiro* similarly occurs in 2 Cor. 1:21), it is used in direct contrast to “the antichrists” (false teachers) in the context. Unlike the apostates, true believers have been anointed with the Holy Spirit so they could “know all things,” again in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise. That “spiritual healing ointment” does, indeed, cure our blindness and teaches us “all things” concerning His Word.

We should also not overlook John’s statement, “ye need not that any man teach you,” which has been horribly abused to teach that no pastors or Bible teachers are needed, that one can just “let go and let God” teach them through mystic understanding and inner insight. But this, of course, directly contradicts Ephesians 4:11–12: “he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” John’s point is that believers should rely not on *man*, that is, *man in himself*, his human wisdom and philosophy (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–2:9; Col. 2:8), but rather on *God* as He uses Spirit-gifted men to help illumine believers as the Holy Spirit works in both.

We should also note that illumination does not negate diligent, in-depth study, especially for the preacher. There are those who say, “I don’t need to study. God will fill my mouth.” Indeed, such a mouth will be filled. but it will be filled mostly with hot air. Scripture is unambiguous on the need for diligent study (1 Tim. 4:12–16; 5:17; 2 Tim. 2:15).

We now have the whole picture: revelation *presents* God’s Truth, inspiration *protects* it, and illumination *pours* it into the heart and mind of believers to give them understanding.

Can Unbelievers Understand Scripture?

This was not actually a reader question, but I have added it because it arises from a debate over 1 Corinthians 2:14, which we briefly mentioned earlier: **But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.** The question has arisen in recent years whether an unbeliever can understand the Bible. After all, some insist, an unbeliever has a brain and can think cognitively. If he or she can read intelligently, they can surely grasp the vocabulary and grammar of the Bible and, therefore, understand what the words mean. In his otherwise good book on preaching (which is why I withhold the title and author), that writer puts it this way:

The verse can be wrongly interpreted to say that only Christians can understand the meaning of the Bible because they alone receive special assistance from the Spirit when they read it. . . . I think Paul is saying that once unbelievers understand what the text says, they reject it because in their unregenerate judgment it is “foolishness” or nonsense to their unredeemed minds.

The writer’s primary argument hinges on the word **know** (or “understand” in the NIV, the author’s primary translation). If Paul simply wanted to say that the unbeliever could not intellectually understand what the text says, “he could have used the Greek word *oida*, but he did not”; instead, Paul used “the Greek word [*ginōskō*, which] carries the connotation of understanding something by experience, not cognition or ‘mind-only’ understanding.”

Now, it is, indeed, true that *oida* refers to knowledge gained by perception, but to say that *ginōskō* means *only* knowledge gained by experience is inaccurate. As one Greek authority makes clear:

Another significant aspect of the usage of *ginōskō* lies in the meaning “understand.” It refers to understanding the law of God (Rom. 7:1); the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:16); the mysteries of heaven (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10); and the spiritual aspects of God’s revealed truth (John 7:17; 14:20; 8:28, 32; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Pet. 1:20). From a negative viewpoint, Jesus points out Nicodemus’ failure to understand spiritual truth in John 3:10. General lack of spiritual understanding is indicated in John 8:27; 10:6; 1 Cor. 2:14.⁹

Another authority agrees that *ginōskō* includes “the sense of to perceive (Matt. 16:8; 22:18; 26:10) [and] to understand or comprehend (Matt. 13:11; Mk. 4:13; Luke 18:34; [etc.]).” Even more academic authorities also agree. One writes: “The words of the *ginōskō* group embrace the whole gamut of knowledge.”¹⁰ Still another concurs: “[This word group] denotes in ordinary Greek the intelligent comprehension of an object or matter.”¹¹ So, *ginōskō* is not devoid of cognitive thinking. It is, indeed, a *fuller* knowledge than *oida*.

It is also critical to point out that the earlier writer does not address the last phrase: **because they are spiritually discerned.** The Greek behind **spiritually** (*pneumatikos*) means “dominated by the Spirit, in contrast to [the] natural.”¹² To be

spiritual means we are characterized not by our natural instincts, opinions, or even intellect but rather by the Holy Spirit. Only by the Spirit, then, can these things be **discerned** (*anakrinō*), which expresses “the questioning process which leads to a judgment: to examine, cross-examine, interrogate, enquire, and investigate.” Other concepts in the root *krinō* are to scrutinize and sift.¹³

So, unbelievers might *know* the words (such as “God,” “love,” “faith,” “grace,” “works,” etc.) and can even define them, but they do not and cannot *understand* their true meaning. That is why their conclusion is that it is all **foolishness**. Understanding comes only by the Holy Spirit. As quoted earlier, even believing David wrote, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Ps. 119:18). John Calvin put it well:

The testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason. For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.¹⁴

Or, as someone has so quaintly put it, the best man can do on his own is to “gnaw the bark of Scripture without getting to the wood.”¹⁵

Dr. J. D. Watson

Pastor-Teacher, Grace Bible Church

Director, Sola Scriptura Publications, a ministry of GBC

NOTES

- 1 Gerhard Kittle (Ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. VIII, 161.
- 2 Kenneth Wuest, *Galatians in the Greek New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1944), 35.
- 3 W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Thomas Nelson, 1986), 469–70.
- 4 Further, salvation is by faith *plus*: baptism (*Catechism* 1256); sacraments (1129); good works (2016); the Mass (1405); penance (980); indulgences (1498); and law keeping (2068).
- 5 Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (AMG Publishers, 1992), entry #G331.
- 6 James A. Brooks (Gen. Ed.), *The New American Commentary, Mark, Volume 23* (B&H Publishing Group, 1991), comment on Mk. 9:49.
- 7 For a deeper study of the usage of inclusive words (“all,” “every,” and “world”), see the author’s *Salvation Is of the Lord: An Exposition of the Doctrines of Grace by a Former Arminian* (Sola Scriptura Publications, 2015), 175–90.
- 8 See Issue 125 (July/Aug. 2020), “Is Biblicism Biblical?”
- 9 Stephen D. Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), entry “KNOW.”
- 10 Colin Brown (Gen. Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 1, 393.
- 11 Gerhard Kittle (Ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. I, 689.
- 12 Zodhiates, entry #G4152.
- 13 Brown, Vol. 2, 362.
- 14 *Institutes* (Beveridge Trans.) I.VII.4.
- 15 Cited in John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Moody, 1984), comment on 2:14–16.

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