

Accept No Substitute

Galatians 1:11-19

Perhaps you've been in a situation where a friend or loved one was taken in by a con man or charlatan. Unfortunately, the deceitful people who choose that path in life become experts in gaining our confidence and trust.

The very term "con man" is short for confidence man, because their deceptions so often involve gaining, and then betraying, our trust. We want so much to protect those we care about from being swindled by an attractive trickster but, sometimes, for all our love and concern, we cannot.

To the Apostle Paul, the Christians in the church at Galatia were both friends and family, as he counted himself their spiritual father, who had brought them the Gospel of Jesus as a missionary. Most of them, we believe, were converts from paganism, and thus were some of the first to benefit from the opening up of the Gospel to Gentiles.

After Paul's departure from Galatia, these

young Christians were led astray by false teachers. While Paul does not make it clear in this passage, these false teachers were probably Judaizers, who taught that in order for Gentiles to be saved by the Gospel, they first needed to embrace at least a superficial obedience to Judaism and the laws of Moses, usually in such matters as Sabbath observance, circumcision, and diet.

Paul's inner parent responded angrily. He was clearly vexed by the audacity of the false teachers, but also frustrated that his spiritual offspring fell for the fraud. That's the tone in which he addresses the Galatians in this passage.

"Why do you think I'm talking to you this way?" he thundered. "To win over the crowd and hear their cheap applause? There are no crowds to win over, I'm writing you a private letter."

"Am I speaking so strongly to curry favor with God, to impress Christ? He knows I'm His slave, and the Gospel I brought to you as a sacred message, He knows where I got it from. Straight from Him!"

He continues, "I wasn't taught the Gospel of Jesus in school. I was a Pharisee among Pharisees, the traditions they handed down to me didn't mention Jesus Christ. I was told the Gospel firsthand after Jesus knocked me down and left me blind on the road to Damascus."

Paul is reminding the Galatians of his authority as an apostle. Only those who had lived with Jesus and heard the message from Him face to face during His earthly journey prior to His death were counted as apostles... with one exception. Saul of Tarsus, later named

Paul, who was confronted by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus where Saul was traveling to persecute the followers of the Way, as early Christianity was called.

Our risen Lord appeared to Saul, dashed him to the ground with a blinding flash of light, and shouted, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" The men traveling with Saul saw the light, we're told, and heard Saul speak, but they did not see what Saul saw, or hear what he heard. That frightening, powerful encounter with the risen Jesus was reserved for Saul alone.

"It's hard, isn't it, Saul, to kick against the ox-goad?" Jesus used an old Syrian proverb with which Saul would have been familiar, describing a vain act of rebellion that doesn't work and brings the rebel only pain.

In this way, Jesus revealed to Saul in frightening clarity the vanity of attempting to crush a Gospel backed by God's Son, and the depth to which Saul was wounding his own spirit by persecuting the church. By the authority of that miraculous personal encounter, Saul became the apostle Paul.

Paul's implication in reminding the Galatians of his conversion experience is clear. Did the Judaizers, the false teachers who led the Galatians astray, have such an encounter with the risen Savior?

Could they claim that God had set them apart as apostles while still in their mother's womb, and then called them to His service in a miraculous revelation on Damascus Road? Of course not.

Did they personally consult for more than two weeks with the great Apostle Peter, as Paul had?

Did they meet with the Lord's own brother, the Apostle James, to tell him of their

miraculous conversion?

What is Paul saying here? He is reminding these young believers of his apostolic authority among them, and rebuking them for turning away from his teaching to follow false guides who lacked his authority.

Then Paul makes a stern statement to the Galatians, meant to keep them from falling prey to charlatans again.

"From now on, if anyone," Paul says, "comes to you with a Gospel different from the one you learned ... even if they claim to be an angel from Heaven ... even if it's ME ... don't believe it! Never again! And let whoever tries to do that to you again be cursed!"

Don't listen to con men who say there's another way besides Jesus.

Don't listen to charlatans or attractive tricksters. Don't listen to angels with halos and beautiful wings.

Don't even listen to the apostle Paul, if he someday tries to lead you astray.

Or to some priest or bishop or TV personality who tries to tell you of another way.

Cling instead to the Holy Faith which you've already received, the Gospel laid out for you in the Scriptures and supported by Holy Tradition of the Church, the Faith which you've read for yourself and tucked away in your heart, the one that says Salvation is only through Jesus Christ. There is Salvation in no one else! For God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. Accept no substitute!

Glory to Jesus Christ!