

St. Paul's ἀνάθεμα ἔστω in Galatians One

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“Let him be accursed!” An article in a religious periodical on words such as these today? Considering the theological climate in which we are living, to present a study on the subject before us would seem to be about the last thing anyone should think of doing. When so much progress is being made in bringing about cooperation, and this not only in externals, between denominations of varying shades of confessionalism; when there is a growing trend, both here and abroad, to consummate mergers, or at least federations, of churches not in complete doctrinal agreement; when polemics in doctrinal matters are sternly frowned upon, even to consider applying St. Paul’s words today would, to say the least, appear to be throwing a monkey wrench into the works. But might not this be the very reason for doing just that at this very time? We must of course make certain that we understand Paul’s words correctly and apply them properly, and this in the right spirit. Hopefully the following presentation will serve this purpose.

The word ἀνάθεμα is derived from the verb ἀνατίθημι, which literally means “place upon.” Generally, also in the New Testament, this verb is used only in the passive voice, in the sense of “declare, communicate, refer,” with the added idea of laying something before someone for consideration. Thus Paul uses it to tell us that he laid before the apostles in Jerusalem the gospel which he was preaching among the gentiles (Ga 2:2), and Luke, to tell us that Festus laid Paul’s case before King Agrippa (Ac 25:14). Literally therefore the noun ἀνάθεμα could be used for anything that has been set before someone. Actually ἀνάθεμα is the Hellenistic form for ἀνάθημα¹, which occurs only once in the New Testament (Lk 21:5), where it obviously refers to a votive offering: “And as some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with good stones and gifts (ἀναθήμασιν).” The use of ἀνάθεμα for a thing accursed is just as obvious. This is the case in the Septuagint, where it is generally used for the Hebrew אָנָה, where this is obviously meant in the sense of something set apart for destruction by the Lord or for the Lord’s sake (e.g., Dt 7:26; Zch 14:11; Nu 21:3, where the verb ἀνεθεμάτισεν occurs).

In the New Testament the idea of a curse is evident each of the six times that ἀνάθεμα appears. Acts 23:12–14, where also the verb ἀναθεματίζω occurs, we are told of the forty Jews who conspired to kill Paul, that they bound themselves under a great curse (ἀναθέματι ἀνεθεματίσαμεν). That more than the excommunication from some ecclesiastical unit, as a congregation, is meant, is true at least in Romans 9:3. There Paul adds to his wish, ἡχόμην γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἐγὼ, the phrase ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, “I could wish that I myself would be accursed (and therefore separated) from Christ.” Certainly nothing less can be intended in 1 Corinthians 12:3, nor in 1 Corinthians 16:22, which reads: “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema.” This understanding of the word ἀνάθεμα in its New Testament usage is also given in the Cremer-Koegel Lexicon.²

This brings us to the passage in question, where ἀνάθεμα is used in two successive verses: “But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (Ga 1:8–9. Translation from NASB³). When Paul says in verse 9, “As we have said before, so I say again now,” he is not introducing what amounts to a mere

¹ The spelling ἀνάθημα “often alternates with ἀνάθεμα in the texts, in so far as the fine distinction between ἀνάθημα for ‘votive offering’ and ἀνάθεμα for ‘a thing accursed’ is not observed.” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (The University of Chicago Press, The Cambridge University Press, 1957) p 54.

² “Indes zeigt apo tou Christou, dass es sich nicht um Loesung d. kirchlichen Gemeinschaft, sondern um Aufloesung d. Heilsgemeinschaft mit Christus handelt, u. d. Gebrauch d. anathema sonst bei Paulus (1 Kor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8f) zeigt, dass es nicht eine Disziplinarstrafe, sondern das d. goettlichen Gerichte Anheimfallende od. Anheimgefallene bez.” *Biblisches-theologisches Woerterbuch der Neutestamentlichen Graezitaet*, von Dr. Herman Cremer, herausgegeben von D. Dr. Julius Koegel (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1911), p 1060.

³ *New American Standard Bible*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, Inc., 1971).

repetition for emphasis of what he wrote in verse 8. He is rather stating that he (“I”) is now in this letter reiterating the earnest warning which he and his associate Silas (“we”) spoke on the occasion of Paul’s revisit of the Galatian congregations founded on his first missionary journey. This helps to point out the seriousness of the problem that existed in the Galatian churches, a problem that had not been solved by Paul’s visit, but had rather grown worse. What it was, we learn from verse 6: “I cannot understand that you are so soon turning away from Christ who called you in grace, to a different gospel” (Translation ours). At least some members of the Galatian churches were in the process of turning away from Christ, who had called them, to a different gospel, to a teaching which was a mixture of law and gospel, and of which Paul says, it is not another gospel, that is, it does not deserve to be called gospel, good news. How had this change in the Galatian Christians come about? Paul knew: “There are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (NASB). False teachers had either come into the congregations or had arisen in their midst, claiming that Paul was withholding part of the truth from them by teaching justification and salvation alone by faith in Christ without works, without the deeds of the law. They insisted that observance of at least part of the Old Testament Law, as the laws concerning circumcision, festivals, clean and unclean foods, was also necessary, was in fact a condition of salvation. Men of their stripe from Judea are quoted in Acts 15 as saying, “That it was needful to circumcise them (the gentiles), and to command them to keep the law of Moses,” yes, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.” More rapidly to gain acceptance for their false teaching among the Galatian Christians, the false teachers pictured Paul as a second rate apostle, who was not converted until after Christ’s ascension and so must have received what he taught secondhand, thus accounting for a lack of understanding of what Christ had actually taught.

How serious, yes, how soul-destroying the error of these Judaizers was, Paul shows when later in the letter he in no uncertain terms warns all those involved in it: “You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law, you have fallen from grace” (Ga 5:4, NASB). This error was aimed at the very heart of the gospel, was in fact nothing less than a dethronement of Christ as only Savior, and thus threatened to destroy the very foundation of Christianity. And bad enough as it was for the soul of anyone caught in this error, it was and is far worse to promote the same and thus to delude others into accepting it to their soul’s eternal harm. It is in the light of all this that we must understand Paul when he says of such a false teacher: “Let him be accursed.” With these words he is not merely expressing a wish either, but a verdict. This verdict, Paul writes using a contrary to fact condition, would apply even if he himself or an angel from heaven should be guilty of such a perversion of the law-free gospel. And so Paul does not hesitate to apply this verdict to those to whom in a second condition, one of reality, he refers as being then in Galatia engaged in that kind of teaching. This verdict Paul could pronounce on those perverters of the gospel with full authority as an apostle and representative of Christ, even as later in the letter he could with equal authority make the pronouncement: “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you” (Ga 5:2, NASB). But just what is Paul doing when he writes, “Let him be accursed”? As previously stated when discoursing on the term *ἀνάθεμα*, Paul was also not here using the right of excommunication, a right he also did not usurp in his advice to the Corinthians concerning the incest case, but rather urged them to carry out (1 Cor 5:3–5). That excommunication from the Christian congregation would naturally follow if someone despite admonition persisted in this error or in the promotion of it, stands to reason. What Paul *is* doing is actually to pronounce a curse upon the perverters of the gospel, calling them such on whom the curse or wrath of God lies, who have separated themselves from saving communion with Christ. And in doing so he is merely repeating the verdict which Jesus Himself pronounced against the perverters of the truth of His day, the Pharisees (Mt 23:13ff.). While these strong words of the Apostle were without a doubt intended to shock the false teachers in the Galatian churches into a realization of the seriousness of what they were doing, in the hope that they might repent and desist, there was at the same time an urgent message in these words for all the members of the Galatian congregations. They simply dared not tolerate this kind of teaching in their midst lest the lambs and sheep of Christ be led astray. If admonition failed, they would have no other recourse than to separate themselves from the promoters and adherents of the soul-destroying error and thus do what Paul told the

Christians at Rome: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them” (Ro 16:17).

At this point a number of questions quite naturally suggest themselves. Was what Paul did in pronouncing a curse upon the perverters of the gospel only a prerogative that belonged to him and to the other apostles of that day? Have other preachers of the truth, has the church since that day made similar pronouncements? If so, were they justified in doing so? Bringing the matter up to date, have we today the right to do this? Remembering an earlier comment that Paul merely repeated the verdict Jesus had pronounced on perverters of the gospel, we ask: Where in the Scriptures does it say that we may not also apply the Lord’s verdict when we are confronted with perversions or perverters of God’s truth? In fact, would we be proclaiming the whole counsel of God if we failed to do so? Luther did not hesitate for a moment to do just that.

Commenting on Paul’s *ἀνάθεμα ἔστω*, he wrote in his 1535 Galatians commentary: “Here Paul subordinates himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters at all to Sacred Scripture. This queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to, her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should any doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God. Otherwise, let the teachers and the hearers be accursed along with their doctrine.”⁴

Well-known are also the many occurrences of *damnant* (“they condemn”) and *damnamus* (“we condemn”) in the Lutheran Confessions. And while many of them are spoken against the false teachings, our Reformation fathers did not hesitate to follow Luther’s example and condemn also the false teachers themselves, even calling them by name. The Augsburg Confession especially abounds in examples of the latter practice. The Pelagians, the Anabaptists, the Donatists, the Novatians are condemned, and many others who are not mentioned by name. In fact, the Preface to the Christian Book of Concord has an explanation as to how the condemnations are to be understood. In quoting from it, we call attention to the distinction that is made between the weak (“those men who err from a certain simplicity of mind”) and the “obstinate and blasphemous teachers.”

As to the condemnations, censures, and rejections of godless doctrines, and especially of that which has arisen concerning the Lord’s Supper, these indeed had to be expressly set forth in this our declaration and thorough explanation and decision of controverted articles, not only that all should guard against these condemned doctrines, but also for certain other reasons could in no way have been passed by. Thus, as it is in no way our design and purpose to condemn those men who err from a certain simplicity of mind, but are not blasphemers against the truth of the heavenly doctrine, much less, indeed, entire churches, which are either under the Roman Empire of the German nation or elsewhere; nay, rather has it been our intention and disposition in this manner openly to censure and condemn only the fanatical opinions and their obstinate and blasphemous teachers, (which, we judge, should in no way be tolerated in our dominions, churches, and schools) because these errors conflict with the express Word of God, and that, too, in such a way that they cannot be reconciled with it. We have undertaken this also for this reason, *viz.*, that all godly persons might be warned diligently to avoid them.⁵

There could conceivably be only one reason for not following the example of the signers of this Preface today, and that is, that there would be no error or errorists which needed to be corrected or condemned. This kind of Utopia will never become a reality. It certainly does not exist today. On the contrary, hand in hand with the mushrooming growth and spread of lawlessness, crime, and immorality, in fact largely responsible for this, there is going on in the churches today an ever increasing rejection of the truth and promulgation of erroristic and often blasphemous teachings. It need not all be of the crassly blasphemous kind as that of the Rev. John A.

⁴ *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535. Translated by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), p 57f.

⁵ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), p 19.

T. Robinson of *Honest to God* fame (?), whose latest diatribe was quoted on the church page of a recent Saturday evening *Milwaukee Journal*, under the heading, "Taking a New Look at Christ." The writer of the article introduced it: "A former Anglican bishop, who hit the best seller list 10 years ago with a book that sought to scrape the pietistic barnacles from modern man's concept of God, is currently performing the same kind of radical surgery on the image of Christ." What is sadder to read is the comment in the article: "If the audience at the Southern Baptist related university of Richmond (Virginia), where Robinson spoke, was distressed by the speaker's observations, few gave any sign of it." Certainly no less alarming is the growing infidelity to the Scriptures as the verbally inspired, inerrant Word of God. One major reason for this is the fact that more and more churches are determined, if and when they set up statements of faith, to follow the principle expressed in a song popular some time ago: "Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative." As a result error is not eliminated either, is not even exposed, but rather tolerated and swept under the rug. The saddest thing in all this is, that precious souls are being deceived and confused, are not able to recognize error when they are confronted with it, and eventually are swept away in the stream of indifference toward revealed truth.

Lest we, too, become guilty of thus endangering the souls not only of our own people, but of others as well, we need today more than ever to follow the example of our Savior, His apostles, and the fathers in doing both: faithfully preaching and teaching the truth of God's Word, all of it, but no less faithfully warning against and condemning every perversion of the truth. That we do the latter at the risk of being branded negative should not disturb us unduly. This is only part of the cross that goes with being a disciple of Jesus. We need of course to be continually on guard against acting in a pharisaical spirit. Instead, our only motive, also in warning against error and errorists, must be love, love for Christ, love for His Word of truth, and love for the brethren, yes, even love for the enemies of the truth against whom we may be giving warning. For this very reason it is also highly imperative that we assure ourselves that we are standing foursquare on the truth and that there really is error that needs to be corrected or condemned. Just this is well stated in the Galatians commentary of John Brown: "We should be very cautious how we charge men with preaching another gospel; but whenever we are conscientiously persuaded that they do so, the line of conduct to be followed by us is very plain. We must not acknowledge them as teachers; we must not listen to their instructions. They must be to us '*anathema*.' I wonder what amount of worldly good could have induced the Apostle Paul to have acknowledged such men as ministers, and to have treated them as brethren. Never was there a man more disposed to bear with weak brethren; but never was there a man more determined to oppose, and to expose, false brethren; and I believe it will be always found that, when the love of the truth renders men kind and forbearing to others who really love the truth, it renders them just in the same degree intolerant (so far as church fellowship is concerned) in reference to those who are the enemies of the truth."⁶

"My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me" (Jo 7:16). If the Savior was moved to say this of the word He taught and preached, which He, being also true God, could rightly, claim as His, with what holy awe should not we stand before the truth of God's Word. May we ever zealously guard it against any and every encroachment of error, but then also just as zealously proclaim it in its truth and purity for the salvation of souls now lost in sin and error's maze.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word;
Curb those who fain by craft and sword
Would wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son
And set at naught all He hath done.

⁶ John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Evansville, Ind.: The Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1957), p 47.