

Question: What is the significance of Galatians 1:20? Why is Paul defending himself on such a seemingly trivial issue?

Answer: To answer this question, it is important to understand the overall context of this verse. The first two chapters of Galatians are introductory and foundational. The Galatian believers had deserted God by adopting a perverted version of the gospel (1:6–9). The Galatians were being influenced by the teaching of the Judaizers, who sought to add adherence to the Old Testament law as a requirement for salvation. The Judaizers attacked Paul’s apostleship as part of their teaching of a “different gospel,” a gospel different from that which Paul had proclaimed. Chapters 1 and 2 are a defense of both Paul’s apostleship and of the gospel that he had proclaimed. Chapters 3 and 4 expose the theological error of Judaism by turning back to the Old Testament law, demonstrating that it was neither intended, nor able, to accomplish what the Judaizers promised. Finally in chapters 5 and 6 Paul explains how God has made provision for holiness through the grace of the gospel. Thus, it is only grace that supplies the holiness the law demanded.

Now in Gal 1:20 Paul exclaims, “I assure you that, before God, I am not lying about what I am writing to you!” (NET) By making such a forceful statement, Paul wants to strengthen the points of his letter (even what may appear to be less significant matters, i.e., his history, James’ apostleship) by stating before God he is not lying—he is telling the truth. Paul uses the phrase “I am not lying” three other times (Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 11:31; 1 Tim 2:7) when he is trying to drive home a point. In Gal 1:20, Paul is implying that someone indeed is lying to the Galatians . . . the Judaizers. The reason that he comes on so strong is because if his character or apostleship is questioned so is his message. Paul speaks about those that say one thing and do another in Rom 2:21–24 and states that inconsistency in character while preaching God’s message causes others to think less of God. God is judged by the conduct of those who proclaim his message.

I think it is also worth noting that *if* there is error in any of Paul’s facts or experiences, this causes his entire message to be suspect. The same is true with the whole of the Scriptures. *If* there is error in even a seemingly trivial matter (e.g., geography, history, figures, etc.), can the gospel really be trusted? Fortunately, God’s Word declares that it is “absolutely pure” (Ps 119:140 NET) in everything that it teaches.