

Galatians - Law | Life | Freedom
Galatians 1:1-24
No Other Gospel

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The Epistle to the Galatians! On a first reading you might ask yourself what on earth has this got to say to us today? It's all about circumcision! It's all about the Law of Moses and the struggle in the early church with what role the Jewish foundations played, if you accepted that Jesus was the promised Messiah. There were Jewish food laws, Jewish festival's and seasons, and most significantly circumcision.

The big question was, were Gentile converts required to keep the law of Moses? How Jewish were they expected to become?

The other question in this opening chapter is the place of Paul as an apostle and his relationship with the other apostles. On what basis is Paul an apostle and does he have authority to teach the faith?

So circumcision and apostleship, not exactly the burning issues of our day are they?

Yet I want to assure you that this little letter is very relevant in our own day. Over 6 short chapters this Epistle pin-points for us the true nature of faith, freedom and life in the Spirit.

Looking this morning at Chapter 1 the two big questions this chapter answers are –

1. What is the Gospel we are to believe?
2. Can we trust Paul to answer that question?

What is the Gospel? This was in dispute in the churches in Galatia.

Galatia is a region in what we now know as central Turkey. Paul knew these churches intimately; he founded them on his first missionary journey. We know about churches in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. You can read all about his adventures there in Acts Ch14.

After Paul planted these churches other preachers came on the scene preaching a different gospel. They were saying, yes faith in Christ is good but you also need to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses. We call these people Judaizers. They saw faith in Christ as a sect of Judaism; to follow Christ was to also become a Jew; and that meant circumcision.

Paul saw faith in Christ, and especially trusting what Jesus did in his death and resurrection, as all that is necessary for salvation. [Did you notice the resurrection mentioned in v 1 and the allusion to the cross in v 4] It is faith in these great saving events and faith alone, by which we are saved, not faith plus works of the law.

So Paul's primary purpose in writing is to refute this false gospel. So in v6 he says, *"I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all."*

Paul is very strong in his opposition to this false gospel. Twice he calls down God's curse on anyone who is not preaching the grace of Christ. V8 *"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!"* And then again in v9, *"let them be under God's curse."*

Them's fighting words aren't they? Is this just the ravings of a dogmatic heresy hunter? Or is the very issue of eternal salvation at stake?

Well Paul is clear, it is about salvation! Jesus Christ and Jesus alone is the only way we can be saved.

When you've seen the glory of who Jesus is and what he was prepared to do, going to the cross for our sins and his victory over death in his resurrection; then anything that adds or subtracts from this gospel, this wonderful good news, causes emotions to rise, and has to be refuted.

Imagine if Jorn Utzon who designed the Sydney Opera House was told some other architects have turned up and they've changed the design to look like the Brisbane Entertainment Centre at Boondal! I think Utzon would be very upset.

The apostle Paul is very upset when people preach a different gospel to the glorious gospel of grace in our Lord Jesus Christ, that he preached.

Now today, I don't think circumcision is a great threat to our understanding of the Gospel.

There are many issues today which challenge the Gospel but I think the underlying key issue is the exclusive claims of the Gospel. By exclusive claims, I mean that Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the only means of salvation.

This idea is so counter-cultural in our day. We live in a society that lives by the creed of being inclusive. Being inclusive of course can be a very positive value but it all depends how you define it, and mostly it is not defined and therefore creates woolly thinking.

I may be wrong, but I think most people in our society today would probably define inclusive like this: Everyone is on a journey seeking truth and no one can assert they have found it any more than anyone else. We're all fellow travellers seeking after the divine, Nirvana, the meaning of life; or whatever word you want to use for it.

The idea that one religion stands over and above all other religions and worldviews is seen as dogmatic and intolerant. To exalt Jesus Christ above Buddha, or Mohammed, or the various Hindu God's or even Richard Dawkins, invites a cultural cringe.

So, Christians find meaning by following Christ
Buddhists do it by following the eightfold path
Muslims do it through the five pillars of Islam
Hindus do it through following multiple Gods
Atheists do it by exalting the material world.

Each to his own. We're all on a journey!

However, the Bible provides a very different lens for our understanding.

The Bible claims to be revelation ie. God revealing himself,

-revealing himself as the Creator,

-revealing himself as the Redeemer - Jesus Christ.

- Christianity is not about us seeking God but God seeking us.
- It is not about us trying to reach up to God but God reaching down to us.
- Christianity is not about us doing enough to make ourselves acceptable to God.
It is about what God has done to make us acceptable.

You can sum it up in 2 words – DO and DONE

-Every other worldview or religion is about you having to DO something to be acceptable

-Christianity is about what God has DONE. Jesus Christ has done everything necessary,

- lived the perfect loving life,
- died a sacrificial death for our sins,
- rose on the third day to defeat death.

God simply invites us to be 'in Christ' and all that is Christ's is credited to us.

It is a gift of his grace.

I hope you might be able to see that every other religion is about us striving to reach up to God. Using many different methods, but it's about us doing, striving to be good enough.

Christianity is about God coming down to us and giving us salvation as a gift. Therefore we have peace with God and a wonderful assurance that can't be found anywhere else.

This is the gospel Paul proclaimed. And he proclaimed it in a society every bit as multi-faith as our own. Paul simply wanted everyone to know Jesus, and especially about his crucifixion and resurrection. We see this in the rest of the Epistle.

Ch 6:14, *"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world."*

Ch 2.20 *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

This is the gospel Paul got so excited about. This is why Paul got so upset when people distorted it, for whatever reason.

It is this Gospel which actually leads us into the best possible understanding of being inclusive. If God in his grace has reached out to us while we were still sinners, and included us; then we should reach out to others and seek to include them in this grace that we've found. Grace is the best chance we have of being truly inclusive.

So the Gospel is about grace,
-it's about God taking the initiative in Christ,
-It's about what God has already done in Jesus. - His death and resurrection.

So I hope that gives some clarity to our first question, What is the Gospel?

The second question is:

Can we trust Paul's explanation of the gospel?

After all he came to the gospel late, he wasn't one of the original 12, but he claims to be an apostle and speak with Apostolic authority.

Ch1:1 *"Paul, an apostle - sent not from men nor by a man but by Jesus Christ."*

Throughout the rest of the book but especially in the second half of Ch1, Paul seeks to establish this claim that he is an Apostle. He does this by both distancing himself from and showing his affinity with the 12 Apostles.

Distancing

Paul says after his Damascus Road experience in v17, *"I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were Apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus."*

So why didn't Paul go up to see the Apostles straight away?

1. Possibly he saw his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus as giving him direct Apostolic commissioning. In the end I think you have to read his Epistles and see if his claim rings true. I certainly believe his writing confirms his calling.
2. Given his understanding of the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament, he came to see very early on how Jesus' life, death and resurrection was the culmination of all that was promised through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. In Ch1:14 he says, *"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers."* Paul was a scholar in the tradition of the Pharisees. He most likely knew the Jewish scriptures at a much deeper level than the 12 Apostles. He could see how Jesus fitted into the big picture of the Old Covenant and he certainly sets it out in magisterial terms in his writings.

God gave him a unique and direct insight, so he didn't need the 12 Apostles to back him up. He didn't feel a need to go and see them.

Yet there is **an affinity** with the 12.

Ch1:18, *“Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas [ie Peter], and stayed with him 15 days.”*

Ch1:23,24, Talking about the churches in Judea he says,
“They ... heard the report, ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they praised God because of me.”

The report is that he is *‘now preaching the faith’*. It would seem this is a report from the church in Jerusalem to the other churches in Judea. The leaders in Jerusalem were confirming Paul is indeed *‘preaching the faith’*.

So there is an affinity with the 12, and the 12 do indicate Paul's Gospel is authentic.

Conclusion

The word “Gospel” can easily just be another one of those Christian terms that slips off the tongue without real understanding. Perhaps you know the word means good news but could you say much more than that?

For the Apostle Paul the gospel had specific content, content which energised him and drove him forward in his Christian faith. If people changed that content he got upset.

I invite you to engage with the content of the book of Galatians and expand your understanding of this little word ‘Gospel’. To understand the message of this book is life changing. It will get you energised just like it did the apostle Paul.

As I prepared this sermon I couldn't help but think about Trish Mortley. Trish came regularly to our Wednesday service where there is more opportunity to share. From what I remember she had a church background, but it was only when she filled out ‘the Gospel’ with content that her faith came alive. Jesus had died for her. Jesus rose on the third day for her. The Gospel was not about doing things, trying harder, it was about Jesus and all he had done for her. She spoke with great passion for Jesus, I believe, because she truly grasped the Gospel.

My prayer is that as we work through this Epistle over these 8 weeks we will come to the same clarity about the Gospel that the apostle Paul had, and all the more live to love and proclaim Jesus.