

## **Galatians 1 & 2 – the Truth of the Gospel**

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The Galatians seem to be a group of Gentile Christians, living in what's now Turkey, who were converted to Christian faith by Paul on one of his missionary journeys. Since visiting them, news has trickled back to Paul that other preachers have found their way to the Galatians. These more recent visitors are insisting that the Galatians be circumcised, in accordance with the Jewish law, and follow other aspects of the Jewish law too.

What might appear to be quite a harmless insistence on minor details (although my friend Scot didn't seem to see it as entirely harmless!), is perceived by Paul to be a major threat to the faith of the Galatian Christians. If any confusion is allowed to enter into their thinking about where their salvation comes from – from the Jewish law? or from faith in Jesus Christ? – Paul reasons that faith in Christ will cease to matter to them. And that'll be the end of Christian faith among the Galatians.

### **An overview of chapters 1 and 2**

My wife Sarah and I set up a home group last year. It was made up of about six or seven regular attendees, some of whom were Christians, and some of whom were not. We spent the first six or seven weeks reading through Galatians. Each week we'd read a chapter from the letter, and then pose questions about it. It was particularly interesting to see how much we "bring with us" to the text. We had so many assumptions that affected our interpretation without even being aware of it.

When I was three, my Mum and Dad took me to the Newtown Zoo to foster a love of animals within me. As my father remembers it, I charged through the entry gate, took a cursory glance at a cage full of monkeys, exclaimed

“dogs”, then carried on my way to complete a whirlwind tour of the different cages and enclosures.

This is, I think, how we often approach the Bible – we see what we’re used to seeing, even if what’s before our eyes is very different. So let’s take a look at what’s going on in chapters one and two of Galatians.

Paul begins by drawing attention to his status as an apostle. Later in the chapter he takes great pains to establish his apostolic credentials. He wants to make it very clear that his teaching rests on the fact that he himself has witnessed the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. As a witness to the resurrection, what he says carries weight. Paul has been sent “not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal 1:1).

Today we are often suspicious of anyone who claims to be sent by God. Indeed, in our home group, our immediate impression of Paul was that he was quite arrogant and off-puttingly self-assured. I remember seeing a book title by Anthony Trollope once: *He Knew He Was Right*. That’s how I think of Paul – he just knew he was right. Such people can be deeply annoying, especially in the pluralistic West, and perhaps especially too in the diffident corner of the pluralistic West that is New Zealand, where all opinions are deemed merely to be our own.

At verse six, Paul’s tone cranks up a notch. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”. If you’ve ever had the experience of trying to teach a skill to someone else – how to ride a bike, or tie shoelaces, or swim – and the other person just isn’t getting it, perhaps you’ll get a sense of how Paul is feeling here. He seems to be exasperated. By what? By the fact that the Galatians are trading in the gospel that Paul has preached to them for a rehashed version of Judaism, requiring circumcision and I guess much more besides. Much of the letter is written in this exasperated tone. Paul seems to be impatient with his readers. If we’ve already decided that he’s arrogant, then he’s cranky too. Having reached such conclusions about him, we then read this – “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach

a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”

Now this is where we start seeing dogs, even though we may in fact be dealing with monkeys. In our home group study, as soon as we started reading about eternal condemnation, we immediately leapt to the conclusion that Paul was wishing everlasting torment in a fiery hell for all those who preach a different gospel from his own. It’s interesting that we leapt to this assumption when the concept of hell actually doesn’t get a mention in this passage, and I think I’m right in saying in the letter as a whole. But it seems that we are so used to thinking of heaven (clouds) and hell (flames) in conjunction with Christianity that we read it into the Bible all over the place. Notions of heaven and hell clearly do exist in the Bible, but possibly not as we customarily envisage them to be. And the Bible may be talking about heaven and hell less often than we think.

What does Paul mean when he wishes eternal condemnation – not once, but twice – on those preaching a gospel other than the gospel of Christ? In his translation of this passage, William Barclay uses the word “accursed” instead of the phrase “eternally condemned”<sup>1</sup>. So too does Tom Wright.<sup>2</sup> Given that Paul is describing teachers who would replace the gospel of Christ with a return to the Jewish law, and given that later in the letter, he refers to “the curse of the law”, perhaps he means this: that those who preach the law are wilfully opting into ongoing subjection to a curse. The Jewish law does not liberate us from the power and bondage of sin. The gospel of Christ does.

Further on in chapter one, Paul stresses that his calling and gospel are from God, and not from other men. In chapter two, he outlines the history of argument between himself and other apostles about the importance or

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<sup>1</sup> The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (The Saint Andrew Press: 1958). Page 9.

<sup>2</sup> Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians. (SPCK: 2002). Page 3.

otherwise of maintaining observance of the Jewish law. In particular, in verses 11-21, he retells the story of his confrontation with Peter, who reverted to the law in public, despite his belief that it was faith in Christ and not the law that really mattered.

## **No other Gospel**

Here at St Michael's, we quite often sing a song which goes: "Jesus, be the centre". It's not a bad song, I reckon, in its desire to remind us of the centrality of Jesus Christ, although it is kind of funny that we issue an instruction to Jesus to be the centre, as if he'd been hanging around in the wings for a while waiting for our summons. The New Testament is insistent on the fact that Jesus already is at the centre, and always has been. It seems to me that Paul's big beef with the Galatians is that their renewed interest in the law is taking attention away from what really counts for salvation – Jesus himself.

I don't think we're in strong danger of replacing faith with the Jewish law or indeed any other law. I don't think we're particularly prone to the error of seeing good works as a way of making ourselves right with God, although for some of us, that may be a tendency. If anything, we might benefit from implementing a few more rules in our lives, a few more disciplines, in our bid to institute God's kingdom on earth. The letter to the Galatians doesn't undermine the value of rules. It simply shows them to be finite in their reach and relevance.

What we are often in danger of, however, is sidelining Jesus. It's important for us to sing "Jesus, be the centre", because we are so often tempted to consign him to the reserves bench, or eject him from the stadium all together.

Here's something I read in a book I found the other day, by the former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway:

*Like the rocket that has to fall away when it has established its satellite in space, religion has thrust its best values into the human orbit where we hope they will continue to do their work long after the vehicle that got them there has disappeared. What happens to the launch engine is not as important as the future of the ideals it has carried, though there will be some sadness as we see it disintegrating now that its purpose has been achieved.*<sup>3</sup>

For Holloway, what's important is the "values" and "ideals" that Christianity has borne down the centuries to us. Things like forgiveness, love, gentleness, self-control and so forth. In Holloway's version of affairs, religion – the Christian story and church – is the rocket launcher, destined to become space junk, while the ideals transport us safely into space and I guess if we're lucky all the way back to Florida again. The ideals remain intact, while the religion is disposable.

It sounds plausible. It's palatable. It's not too weird. It's the kind of thing that the editors of our daily newspapers read and think, oh yeah, that'll do for our religion column this week, it's not too wacko. Won't offend anyone. It's the kind of stance which John Caputo, interpreting Jacques Derrida, has described as "religion without religion",<sup>4</sup> and Lloyd Geering as "Christianity without God".<sup>5</sup>

But it's the kind of stance that Paul wouldn't have a bar of. As soon as we discard our faith in Jesus Christ, we discard God. We're essentially saying that we can see what's good about Christian faith – the love, the forgiveness, the peace, the et cetera – but that we can do without the rest. Which means that we're setting ourselves up as the arbiters of good and evil, right and wrong. We are becoming our own gods.

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<sup>3</sup> On Forgiveness. (Canongate Books: 2002). Page 5.

<sup>4</sup> See John Caputo, "Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)". <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/o6.1/caputo.pdf> [Accessed 28 April 2010].

<sup>5</sup> See for example Lloyd Geering, Christianity without God (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2002).

This is precisely what Paul refuses to do. As I've already pointed out, he begins his letter to the Galatians by identifying himself as being "sent not from men or by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead". In verse eleven, Paul claims, "I did not receive [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." These are claims that the members of my home group found arrogant when we first came across them. We thought, "Oh, here we go again, another fundamentalist claiming divine sanction for everything he or she believes." It's an old stunt, and in 21st century New Zealand, we're pretty wary of such claims. But if all who claim revelation from God are to be automatically consigned with Brian Tamaki to the pool room of would-be megalomania, are we not then guilty of a deeply un-Christian assumption? That there is no such thing as revelation? That even our faith in Christ is just one more way in which we humans have created God in our own image? If that is so, then Richard Holloway is right – Christianity becomes disposable. We can find new stories, new vehicles for carrying everlasting ideals on into the future. So we need to ask: How arrogant is Paul really? Which is more arrogant: to claim revelation, or to deny the possibility of it? To worship God, or to worship, ultimately, oneself?

The "truth of the gospel", as Paul calls it in chapter 2, verse 14, lies not in its essential values or ideals. The truth of the gospel lies in its status as historical fact – what the late British missionary to India, Lesslie Newbigin, liked to call the "happenedness" of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Newbigin says it like this: "the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history but stories told to illustrate truths which are valid apart from these happenings."<sup>6</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says it like this: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith".

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<sup>6</sup> The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. (Eerdmans and World Council of Churches:1989). Page 66.

Why? Because – drawing once again on Newbiggin – if you believe in the historical veracity of the gospel, “You will understand your own life as part of a story which is not a story made up by you, not just the story of your decisions and actions, but the story being enacted under God’s creative and providential control in the events of contemporary history.”<sup>7</sup>

If God did not raise Jesus from the dead, then what are our grounds for believing that he will raise us to new life, or that he will redeem the whole of creation? If the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is just a metaphor for something else, then it is no longer central, but peripheral. It ceases to be the basis of our reality, but a picture of some other, pre-existing reality, in which case, it has no power to change a thing.

Versions of reality which relegate the gospel of Jesus Christ to metaphor or space junk offer visions of a future which can only ever be accursed, eternally condemned. Paul saw this. It mattered to him. It should matter to us too. Relinquishing faith in Christ and replacing it with a set of rules, or for that matter, a set of ideals or values, is like trying to have the tree without the roots. We need continually to draw our lifeblood, our sap, from the transformative power of the one true gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. (Eerdmans and World Council of Churches:1989). Page 67.