

Christ', and although he does not elaborate on this here, we can read Paul's thoughts about being Christ's servant elsewhere in Romans 7.

The letter to the Galatians now begins to take a different turn, and we now hear about how Paul learned the Gospel he preached. From Paul's point of view, he had no other defence than the truth of his calling and his personal experience of Christ. The heart of his claim was that the Gospel he preached was given to him by revelation from Christ himself (1:12), and tomorrow we will find out much more about Paul's testimony. It is fascinating that Paul, the great debater and theologian, chose to defend his preaching of the Gospel by giving his testimony rather than by adding further detailed arguments, but it was surely right. The truth of why any one of us does something is linked up with who we are and all our life's experience, as much as our ability to reason it or talk about it. Paul set out his stall, and said, in effect, 'the Gospel I preach is a result of a revelation of God to me personally, and because I am specially commissioned to preach it, this is my life!' We will read Paul's full testimony tomorrow!

Application

To this day, you will find that people have markedly different views about the Gospel and what it is. Personally, after reading the beginning of Galatians, I am of the opinion that the Gospel is the good news of salvation which tells people that if they have faith in Jesus, then it is possible for them to be 'saved' from the consequences of sin and death by the gracious work of God, and so be reconciled to God who is both our Maker and our Redeemer. This is what Paul summarises in verses 3 and 4 of this chapter, and what he defends in all his letters, and it is what I feel led to proclaim and defend myself, as the authentic Gospel. There may well be different ways to express it, but I do not see how we can talk about the Gospel as anything other than the news that we have been saved by God through Jesus.

I have said this because in reading commentaries as part of my preparation for this study, I found that all of them agreed roughly with this basic understanding of the Gospel. However, one well known evangelical author insisted to my surprise that the Gospel was 'all about building up the people of God on the foundation of Jesus Christ' and by that, he meant the church. Now whilst I agree that what he said is part of how the Gospel works out in the life of God's faithful, I would be hard pushed to say that this phrase about the church represents 'the Gospel', even though it does reflect part of 1 Corinthians 3:10f.. In addition, he went on to say that the Gospel 'isn't a system of salvation ...!' I could hardly believe my eyes, and I was left feeling deeply concerned. As far as I am aware, the Gospel most certainly does explain salvation and it is not a method of building churches as he suggests, however important that is.

I have explained this to let you know how difficult it is even today, to get to grips with what we mean by the Gospel. I do believe that Paul would say that the Gospel is the good news of our salvation, it can be preached in one sermon, almost everyone can understand it when it is explained well, and we all need to try to make sure we are united around the one Gospel, the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ. That certainly, is where I stand.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do people add to the Gospel today, and if so, how?
2. How can the church today show that God's people are united in the one Gospel of God through Jesus Christ our Lord?
3. What place does testimony have within your church and does its use help people know the Gospel by which they are saved?

Discipleship

The Good News of Jesus Christ is unique and historic, but it is very tempting to try and change it a little to suit circumstances. Indeed, it is quite possible that any one of us may have heard an inadequate version of the Gospel when we first responded to Jesus Christ! Scripture is our guide to getting these things right, so it would be a good exercise to start a notebook headed 'the Gospel', and jot notes in it as you go through Galatians. At the end, you will have a series of notes which you can whittle down to the basic Gospel.

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, may we be so sure of our salvation that we can confidently say with Paul that we know the Gospel clearly and can proclaim it. Reveal to us the truth not so that we can make claims about our own abilities, but so that we can be effective in Your service, we pray: AMEN

Prayer

You were born and lived, Lord Jesus, You knew our life;
And then they crucified You, Lord Jesus; You knew our death;
So when You rose again, Lord Jesus, You showed us eternal life;
And when You come again, Lord Jesus, You will bring us home!
Alleluia! Risen Lord Jesus, we praise Your Holy Name!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Gospel

Pray today for God's people, because too many church members who call themselves Christians are quite uncertain as to what the Gospel is and how they stand with God. Pray that the Church will recover its zeal to proclaim a Gospel of salvation in which people are freed from evil and sin, and find that they have peace with God through Jesus.

Meditation

There is no one brave enough or courageous enough
To stand for fallen people before the throne of Grace,
Except You, Lord Jesus; You are God's own Son!

There is no one meek enough or weak enough
To understand the greater depths of human misery,
Except You, Lord Jesus; You are our only advocate!

There is no one good enough or strong enough
To deal with all the sin and sickness in the world,
Except You, Lord Jesus; You are God's Anointed!

There is no one wise enough or sincere enough
To speak the truth about all things with perfect honesty,
Except You, Lord Jesus; You are the world's true Light!

There is no one human enough and divine enough
To be able to forge a way for people to find their God
Except You, Lord Jesus; You are our only Saviour!

Bible Study - Galatians 1:6-12

⁶ I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from the one who called you in the grace of Christ, towards another gospel; ⁷ not that there is another, but there are some who are confusing you and want to change the Gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel should preach a gospel to you which is different to what we preached to you, let that one be cursed! ⁹ As we have said before, so I now say again; if anyone preaches to you a gospel different from what you have received, let him be cursed!

¹⁰ Am I now seeking the approval of people or of God? Am I now trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. ¹¹ I want you to know, brothers, that the Gospel preached by me is not of human origin. ¹² I did not receive it from any other person, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Review

What an astonishing passage! The first few verses of Galatians contained a brief greeting together with a hint of sensitivity on the part of Paul himself about his being an apostle (1:1,2), followed by a few words which summarised the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:3-5). Now, having read this passage today, we can understand why Paul began his letter to the Galatians in that way! Paul wrote because it was his very clear concern that the Gospel he preached to the churches in Galatia had been changed or corrupted in some manner (1:6,7f.). With astonishment, he asked why a church founded on the Gospel he preached should change course 'so quickly' (1:6) in this way. Paul was also concerned that some people claimed that he, the preacher and apostle who had founded the church, had acted with purely human motives. It had been suggested that Paul was a 'people-pleaser' (1:10) and he was keen to refute the charge. He was also keen to state categorically that

there was no other Gospel than that which he preached and which he had received 'through a revelation' (1:12).

Paul wrote to the Galatians intending to defend the one and only Gospel and explain it further, and also to defend his own reputation as a preacher and Apostle of Christ. As one charged with founding the Church, an Apostle together with the disciples who had been with Jesus during His ministry, he was not prepared to see the Gospel changed or altered in any way, and he insisted that it was his duty to correct what was wrong. To this day, despite the complex history of the Church and the way that it has grown and been led over two thousand years, what Paul said remains true. When he wrote to the Galatians, he most certainly had specific false alterations to the Gospel in mind (as we will see), but he also said that in general, 'if anyone preaches a gospel different from what you have received, let him be cursed' (1:9); so what he said applies to us.

The Gospel message has not changed since Paul spoke, and the testimony and preaching of Paul and the other Apostles has not changed because it is recorded for us in Scripture. So although we will certainly study why Paul wrote as he did to the Galatians, the general principles of the Gospel are unchanged today, and we must adhere to what we have received. In addition, the Gospel is holy not just because it is Scriptural but also because it has been proved over years by many faithful people who remain unrecorded in the annals of history. More than that, history demonstrates that where the Church of God or anyone else has attempted to change and manipulate the Gospel or the Apostolic Word of God through Scripture, the Kingdom of God is compromised and churches fade away and die; and we see this happening even in our own day.

Anyone who is used by God for the proclamation of the Gospel attracts criticism, and it was as true for Paul as it is for us now. The focus of the complaints against Paul were firstly that he claimed to be an Apostle (see yesterday's reading; 1:1-5, and tomorrow's; 1:13-24), and secondly that he made the Gospel too easy; but what does this mean? As we will increasingly discover in Galatians, Paul's opponents were Jews who insisted that if Gentiles became Christians, they had to become circumcised. This was a tough and demanding requirement, so you can see that those who demanded it accused Paul of being a 'people pleaser' (1:10). Paul's only defence against this was the truth of the Gospel he preached (1:11,12).

The whole passage speaks strongly about the Gospel and also reveals something of the problems found in the Galatian churches which were the reason why Paul wrote to them.

Going Deeper

This passage begins with Paul's straight complaint that the Gospel has been altered, so we must enquire further what this meant and what was happening in the Galatian churches. Secondly, we must look carefully at Paul's astonishing curse in verse 8 which is repeated in verse 9. Lastly, we will look at how Paul deals with the accusations made against him of being a people pleaser, and how this leads him to defend the revelation of the Gospel he received from Christ. This last point sets the scene for Paul's great personal testimony found in tomorrow's reading and beyond (1:13-24, 2:1-14).

Different Gospel's?

It is fairly easy for us to say that there is only one Gospel. But if you try asking people to write down what the Gospel is, you will find an average congregation will produce a considerable range of statements, some of which will appear, at least on the surface, to be contradictory. So what did Paul think the Gospel was, and why was he so adamant that he had got it right? It is easy to see that in the early days of the life of the church when there were no scriptural Gospels or sacred writings other than the Old Testament, people debated what the Gospel was, and who Jesus Christ was. But this is exactly what Paul was keen to avoid, because Paul regarded such debate as a misunderstanding of what the Gospel was in the first place. The person and work of Jesus Christ was not a matter for debate, as if by having intellectual discussions, clever people could fathom the inner depths of the mysteries of grace! As far as Paul was concerned, there was no mystery about who Jesus was or the Good News about what He had done. Jesus was a man who was also the Son of God, who 'gave Himself for our sins and to rescue us from the age of the evil one in which we now live, according to the will of our God.' (1:4) In addition, Paul had already written a powerful summary of the Gospel in the previous verse. The Gospel was 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,' (1:3) because to be at peace with God was to be saved exclusively by His grace, through the work of Jesus Christ who died and rose again for us.

It is impossible to read the letters of Paul found in the New Testament and find anything else at the heart of what Paul preached. True, he expressed it in different ways, emphasising the 'foolishness of the Cross' in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:18-25), for example, but virtually every letter of Paul speaks directly of the Gospel with these same recognisable features. This is put into

perspective if we turn straight away to look at what other people said around the time the Galatian churches were founded. In Acts 13 and 14, tempestuous scenes surrounded Paul's preaching of the Gospel, largely created by Jews who insisted that believers should be circumcised. The opposition to Paul was so strong that Paul had to go to Jerusalem and report it to the other Apostles. Paul's opponents went as well, saying 'unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' (Acts 15:1). A council was held in Jerusalem at which both Paul and his opponents put their case, and the future of the whole church of God lay in the balance; it was one of the most tense moments in the New Testament outside of the story of Jesus' death and resurrection!

The result of the famous 'Council of Jerusalem' was that Paul and Barnabas were empowered to say to all the Gentile churches they founded, that circumcision was not necessary for salvation and the Gospel had 'no further burden' (Acts 15:28). Without doubt, this decision liberated Paul to evangelise and set the early church on a path of growth, free from the restraints of Pharisaic Judaism. In the mean time, some in Galatia continued to believe that circumcision was necessary and taught this whilst Paul was away both at Jerusalem and his later missionary journeys. As a consequence, Paul wrote this famous letter to them, calling the Galatian church back to its roots and dismissing those who 'added' circumcision to the Gospel. He most certainly had Apostolic authority to do this!

A curse on those who change the Gospel!

Whilst it is important to understand the reasons why Paul wrote so passionately about the Gospel and why it could accept no 'additions', Paul also realised that the battle he fought with the Jews over circumcision was the precursor of things to come. It is my opinion that verse 8 and 9 of our reading are prophetic, and Paul emphasised his point about neither adding to the Gospel nor changing it, because he saw the dangers of people doing just this in the years ahead. He certainly emphasised his point by repeating it, and cursing those who changed the Gospel, but by so doing, he also generalised what he was saying. This means that it speaks to us directly today.

Paul told the Galatians that not only should they not believe people who added circumcision to the Gospel (the original problem), but they should not believe anyone (1:7) who suggested any form of 'change' or preached a 'different' Gospel (1:8,9). The two Greek words used here are subtly different, meaning 'altering' and 'adding to' respectively. This means that we have no right even today to imagine that we can do either of these things in the name of making our message relevant to the cultures in which we live. We must preach the one true Gospel which Scripture affirms, and trust the Holy Spirit to interpret it to those who hear, without imagining that we have to do God's work for Him.

To emphasise his point further, Paul told the Galatians not to listen to anyone at all who altered the Gospel, not him, or angels (1:1:8), or anyone else. However, the most stunning part of the passage is the amazing repetition of Paul's point in verses 8 and 9. Nowhere else in all his writings does Paul do anything like this. He certainly writes at length, sometimes confusing his readers by the sheer complexity of what he says, but ordinary repetition is not his style! Generally, repetition is found in scripture (particularly the Old Testament) where something important is said, but in the context of Paul's letters, this is unique. Perhaps Paul was writing in a unique way in order to to emphasise the uniqueness of the Gospel.

Paul concludes each verse of this incredible passage with a curse, and again, this is unique for Paul's letters (the only other mention of 'curse' is a brief reference in Romans 12:14). For a Jew like Paul to utter a curse was no small matter, for by saying 'let him be cursed' (1:8,9), Paul spoke a pronouncement to cut someone off from the love and mercy of God. It was the exact opposite of a blessing, which pronounced God's love and mercy over people (see Gal 6:18, Phil 4:21-23 etc.). That Paul should write in this way leaves us in no doubt about the importance of the unique and unalterable nature of the Gospel.

The challenge to Paul, and his response

We saw above how the Jews could easily claim that Paul preached an easy Gospel because it did not include the physical hurdle of circumcision (for men), but people could easily level a number of accusations against him. Why should they accept what Paul said and not the word of other preachers of the Gospel? Surely Paul was attempting to build a reputation for himself?

If we can hear these criticisms in the back of our minds, then what Paul says in verse 10 begins to make sense, and we can easily see how Paul answered his accusers directly by quoting what they said about him and throwing back answers at them. He was no 'people pleaser', but a 'servant of