

Paul was not content with anything less than the truth (4:16), and few who knew him would expect anything else. The general truth we can observe is that churches can and do change and grow away from the Gospel, but they need not do so. One of the lessons of this passage is that church leaders should keep watch on their charge; Christ and Christ alone is the goal of every Christian community.

Application

Measured passion is one of the greatest gifts of communication. Each one of us needs to know that the person we communicate with is sincere in their beliefs about what they say. There is no other basis for trust. Whilst some cultures (more notably in the past than the present) insist that communication is best when performed exactly and coldly, so that there is no question about what is meant, such notions are humanly impossible. Research into the nature of communication shows that we accept what we hear on the basis of empathic signals which show us whether we can trust what is being communicated. So for communication to be effective, trust is required. This is why no human venture can succeed when based on directives or lists of regulations alone (or as Paul illustrates in Galatians, on the Law). People need to feel that they are connecting with people.

I explain this because Paul knew the truth of this intrinsically when he wrote to the Galatians. He would not win an argument from a distance against the Judaisers who were there with the Galatian churches, ready to rebut everything Paul said. Having attacked the Galatian churches for their faithlessness to the Gospel, Paul turned to speak to them emotionally. He did not speak condescendingly, but he made empathic connections with them whereby he could remind them about the truths they had learned from him. He knew what he was doing.

Sometimes, we still hear within the church that we should keep our emotions at bay when dealing with faith or religion. That is utter rubbish, because whether we like it or not, people's emotions are deeply bound up with what they do and why they do it. Satan likes to try and convince us that we should keep our emotions at bay in order to create confusion amongst us. Have you noticed how in most churches, people quickly back away from dealing with emotional issues concerning certain 'touchy' individuals, and this leads to people 'walking on egg-shells' in their presence? Have you noticed how awful this becomes when the person concerned is the Vicar or the Pastor? It is bad enough when it is the church door steward! No, instead of playing games with our emotions, the mature Christian is content to allow their emotions and feelings to be known, respected, and tested before God; and is also prepared to accept rebuke if what they feel is inappropriate or inaccurate (which is a common problem). May all God's people be as open about their feelings as was Paul about the Galatian churches, so that Satan may have one of his main weapons of preventing church growth taken away from him!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How can we tell a good church leader and evangelist from a bad one?
2. In what ways is Christian love shown between the leader of your church and the individual church members or participants?
3. How does the enemy flatter us today to try and persuade us to depart from the full and complete Gospel of Christ?

Discipleship

It is quite possible that at some time, you have had to try and find a way to explain that you believe something which is happening in the church is wrong. You may have failed to do this in the end because the personal problems of raising some issues have been too great. If possible, find someone with whom you can talk about this, and try to work out what it is that has prevented you from saying what you believe to be right. Alternatively, if you have been able to deal with the matter, how was it received? Discuss this with others who may not know about it.

Final Prayer

Lord God, You have created the circumstances of our lives, and we have not always done the best with them that we can. Forgive us for our failures, and rescue us from the consequences of the bad mistakes we have made. Set our feet on a firm path which will lead us to our proper destination through Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer

Holy Spirit, come as a fire and come as a dove. Challenge us with the truth of Your Gospel, which alone can change the hearts of people towards truth and justice and righteousness. Bring peace to this troubled world through the love You inspire in the hearts of Your people. Come, Holy Spirit. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Local Shops

Pray today for any local shops which are facing closure because of the competition from larger stores in the area, general development or lack of trade. Pray that if there are good community reasons for such shops to continue to trade, then they will be assisted to serve their purpose. Pray for local officials who have to decide on issues of planning and development.

Meditation

There is something in music which is indescribable;
It has the power to deeply move the human soul,
And minister to our feelings, spirit, mood, and heart.

There is something in colour which is inexpressible;
We see the same thing in a million different ways
In the ever-changing light patterns playing all around us!

There is something about flavour which is indefinable;
A beautifully prepared dish delights our many senses,
Uncovering emotions, passions, and even memories.

There is something about faith which lies beyond our faculties,
For the human soul falls short in finding its true potential
Without communicating, spirit to Spirit, with the One who made it.

So dance with impossible truths, and be at one with your Creator;
May your soul be truly freed to hear the heavenly music,
See God's rainbow promises, and taste the heavenly banquet!

Bible Study - Galatians 4:12-20

¹² Friends, I beg you, be as I am, for I am like you. You did me no wrong. ¹³ You know it was because of a physical illness that I first preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴ and although it was a burden to you, you did not despise or reject me because of my physical condition, but you welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ What has become of your blessing? For I testify to you that if it were possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷ They show great interest in you, but for no good purpose. They want to isolate you, so that you might show great interest in them. ¹⁸ Now it is good to be flattered (though always for a good reason), and not just when I am with you. ¹⁹ My dear children, for whom I labour in birth again until Christ is formed in you! ²⁰ I would like to be with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Review

Suddenly, the letter of Galatians takes a new turn. Instead of Paul the debater, arguing powerfully for the purity of the Gospel and against the Judaisers who had taken over the Galatian churches, we read the words of Paul the man and pastor; worried and concerned about everything that has happened within the churches under the influence of false Jewish teachers. The whole passage abounds with phrases like 'you did me no wrong' (4:12), 'you welcomed me' (4:14) and 'my dear children ...' (4:19) which indicate Paul's deep feelings for the people to whom he writes; but within this very personal appeal to his readers, Paul did not put one step backwards in his strong defence of the Gospel. This part of the letter to the Galatians

is an example of how to handle those difficult pastoral issues which crop up when people are doing the wrong thing within the church. However much hurt there is on anyone's part, whether church or leader, the church must be affirmed and the truth exposed, but there can never be any compromise with anything contrary to the Gospel of Christ.

The purpose of this emotional appeal to the Galatians is for Paul to make personal contact with the churches he founded. Just as we would do, Paul felt very deeply about the work he did for the Lord and was deeply upset to hear that people he had seen converted and baptised were now embracing the old Jewish legalism. He began by saying 'be as I am for I am like you' which sounds at first to be rather strange. However, Paul was simply expressing the fact that when they first met, both Paul and the people who formed the first churches in Galatia had given up their past for a new future in Christ. Paul had given up the past of being a Jew, and the new Christians had given up the old life of paganism. Now that some were tempted to go backwards and accept the legalism which he had been liberated from, Paul implored these people to be one with him again in the freedom of the Spirit!

Out of the many things Paul wrote which alludes to their previous contact, the one thing which seems most strange is Paul's comment about having some kind of 'physical illness' (4:13) when he first came to preach to the Galatian churches. What could such an illness be, and how could Paul have travelled on foot around the whole of central Asia (Turkey) whilst ill? The answer is reckoned by most scholars to be found in this same passage, where Paul suddenly writes most surprisingly that affections between Paul and the churches was so deep that 'if it were possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me!' (4:15). The theory is that Paul suffered eyesight problems, and Paul's words in verse 15 reflect the love and care he received because of his failing sight. Indeed, we know that Paul suffered failing eyesight from elsewhere in Galatians, because towards the end, he says 'see with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.' (6:11). Clearly, he was having difficulty with his eyesight many years later!

By making such powerful and emotional connections with the individuals who he knew from those early days, Paul sought to draw the Galatian Christians away from the Judaisers. Caustically, he could not refrain from making plain that their motives were not for the good of the Galatians; he said, 'They want to isolate you, so that you might show great interest in them.' In other words, the intention of the Judaisers was to draw the Galatians away from the rest of the growing Churches of the first century and gain a separate leadership of their own faction. Paul's only motive was to ensure that 'Christ is formed in you' (4:19). As Paul demonstrated here and in every other place where he had to defend his preaching and his work, the only measure for the church was Christ, and Christ alone.

Going Deeper

There is of course, much more in this passage. Various phrases pop out at us, such as 'you did me no wrong' (4:12) and 'you welcomed me as an angel of God' (4:14) which each need some explanation. Though we will find that if we keep close to the understanding of the text already built up, it will not take too long to come to a reasonable understanding of what Paul is saying in this brief, but important passage.

Paul and the Galatians

We have already seen how Paul began this passage by appealing to the Galatians to recall their common experience in Christ. If you are able to read Acts 13 and 14 you will find it invaluable because of the background it gives to Paul's founding of the churches of Galatia. It is interesting to see, for example, that after Paul and Barnabas first reached Antioch in Pisidia (the first of the 'Galatian' churches), Paul preached powerfully on the first Sabbath (Acts 13:16-41), but when he went back to the same synagogue to preach on the next Sabbath, there was violent opposition to his preaching (Acts 13:44f.) which forced them to go on to Iconium (Acts 13:51), even though many had been touched by Paul's message. In Iconium, they had trouble with the local Jews again (Acts 14:5,6,7) and went on to Derbe and Lystra. At Lystra, Paul healed a crippled man, and the people of the town came and worshipped Barnabas as an incarnation of the god Zeus, and Paul as the god Hermes (Acts 14:8-12), and it was all they could do to stop them offering animal sacrifices! In response to this incident, the two evangelists explained themselves as messengers of the one God of all Creation (Acts 14:14-18). Now there is a close Biblical connection between the word for 'messenger' and for 'angel', so it may be that when Paul said in this passage 'you welcomed me as an angel of god ...' (4:14), he was making a brief reference to this famous incident.

However, although Paul did his best to make these connections with the history of the churches and their remembrance of how he had founded them, Paul was also clear that the fellowship had been broken because they had abandoned the centrality of the Gospel. It is highly likely, for example, that when Paul said 'you did me no wrong' in verse 12, the emphasis was on the verb tense, or in English, on the word 'did'. What Paul meant was that back then, everything was all right between them, but now they were divided and Paul felt wronged and let down by their rejection of Jesus Christ.

The rejection of Jesus Christ

In this part of the letter, Paul did not try to write out in black and white how the Galatians had abandoned Christ for a lie; he had already done that (see chapter 3), but the theme runs all the way through the passage. Paul spoke about the way that the churches of Galatia had accepted him and provided for him despite his physical problems (see above), but more than that, they had welcomed him (and Barnabas) as if receiving Jesus Christ Himself (4:14). Indeed, after suffering terribly at the hands of the Jews in all the Galatian cities, Paul and Barnabas were bold enough to return to each place they had been. They strengthened and supported the infant church before going back to Antioch (Acts 14:26) and then Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-5) and finally reporting to the Apostles on their mission. 'What has become of your blessing?' Paul asked the Galatians (4:15). Did those he had worked to save now regarded him as an enemy (4:16)? Paul had not changed his message; they had changed what they believed!

Paul went on to challenge the people of the Galatian churches. Pointedly, he told them they had changed what they believed because of underhand flattery on the part of the Judaisers (4:17,18). Looking back at Acts for a moment (chs.13,14), it is noticeable that in every place where a church was founded, there was vehement opposition by Jews from the same synagogues where Paul preached his message, and we are left with the suspicion that once Paul and Barnabas had gone, those opposed to them had tempted the Christians of the young churches back into the synagogues from whence they had come. Personally, I think it likely that Paul abandoned the practice of evangelising from synagogues in his later missions (from Acts 16 onwards), because he found the problems created in Galatia so disturbing. He did not want to constantly go through the heartache of trying to rescue the churches he planted from the grip of those who had opposed him in the very places where he preached the Gospel!

The purposes of the Judaisers was none other than to suggestively draw the young Christians back into the path of Judaism and the Law, which included circumcision for all proselytes (i.e. Gentiles who wished to become Jews). The Judaisers had their own 'evangelistic' purposes and it was not Christ centred as far as Paul was concerned, so it was not 'good' (4:17). They used all kinds of smooth talk and flattery (4:18) in order to isolate them from the rest of the church and secure the interest of the infant churches back on themselves, not Christ (4:17).

Paul's personal anguish

Paul's final plea was expressed personally. He spoke like a mother who had given birth to a child; who would want to go through such birth-pains again (4:19)! What is interesting is the way that Paul speaks of Christ being 'formed' within the life of the church. We can be sure that Paul was not addressing individuals when he said this, so what does the word 'formed' mean? The Greek word is 'morphē', meaning 'change', but change of general form more than outward shape. So Paul appears to be saying that although some of the outward features of the life of Christ were observable in the churches of Galatia when he left them, what he left behind were 'works in progress'. It clearly hurt Paul to talk in this way. He was not in a position to do what he would like, which was to go straight to Galatia and deal with the problem face to face (4:20), but the difficulty he faced is to our benefit, for without that constraint, whatever it was (and we do not know), we would not have this letter of Paul in our Scriptures!

So this last part of our passage introduces a thought which is not unique to Paul's writings but is not expressed in this way anywhere else. This is the idea that the Christian church does not just arise as people are converted, but it undergoes 'formation', sometimes over a period of time. Contrary to the practice of some churches today which refer quite extensively to the spiritual 'formation' of individuals, Paul only uses such words about the church. A church may be founded on the preaching of the Gospel and faith in Jesus, but the evidence is that organically, it can become something less than the sum of its parts because of human sin, and this is what had happened to the Galatian churches. We can almost imagine the pain of some within the churches who remembered Paul and would feel deeply hurt to read what he said, but