

04.02.10 New Creation Teaching Ministries

Galatians: The Gospel for Our Time

1. Some Background to the Galatian Churches

(1) The letter is written to a group of churches, as a circular letter (e.g. also Col. 4:16; Rev. 2:11), which had been founded by Paul and his travelling companions as part of the first missionary journey

- See Gal. 1:8-9; 3:1ff.; 4:19 cf. Acts 13:1f.
 - Precise location of these churches is difficult to finalise.
 - ♣ The terms used in Acts 16:6 and 18:23 are not precise
 - ♣ Two different regions the ‘official’ Roman one (northern part of Asia Minor) and more loosely used term for the wider region including the south
 - Acts does not recall all the information about the spread of the gospel! Some material we learn about from the New Testament letters is not in Acts, for example. Therefore cannot always exactly tie in the events of Acts with a neat sequence of the letters (more on this later, when we come to speak of the visits to Jerusalem).

(2) But, whatever the case, these were congregations formed by the ministry of the Spirit through Paul’s preaching of the gospel, and so they were ‘his’ churches.

- For this reason, he has a particular care for them, both in terms of mutual affection (e.g. Gal. 4:15; cf. Acts 20:36-38 in the case of the Ephesian elders) and apostolic responsibility (as in other New Testament letters, such as 1 Corinthians)
 - We will see that that matter of Paul’s gospel and his apostolic calling are important elements of this first part of the letter. The question of the *content* of Paul’s gospel is closely related to the *commission* he has to preach it.
- Why? Because, as was the case in many New Testament communities, the work of Paul (or others) was often followed up by other ‘teachers’, who were not preaching the gospel for the sake of the Lord, but for their own sakes.
 - Cf. Acts 20:29-30 (compare with the extensive evidence of other New Testament passages such as Matt. 7:21; 2 Pet. 2:1; 2 Tim. 2:17; 4:3-4; 1 John 2:14; 2 John 1:7; Jude 14; etc.).
 - Part of the nature of the spiritual battle, perhaps much neglected in our day, that the *content* of the message is central!
- In this letter (and we will come to this in much more detail in the weeks ahead) the group who are causing the problem are Judaisers i.e. converted Jews, who wanted to bring the Christians into the Jewish fold, particularly through obedience to the Law in particular ways.

(3) Behind this series stands a vast area of debate in academic and theological circles today, about the nature of the gospel Paul preached. In particular, we are being told that Luther and Calvin were mistaken, having misunderstood Paul because they read him through the

lens of their own medieval church backgrounds and (in Calvin in particular) with the eyes of a lawyer.

- There is a tendency in this approach to minimise the difference between Paul and the Jews of his day, and to argue for a much greater similarity between Christianity and Judaism. Many of our characterisations of Judaism were wrong, or discoloured.
 - This is of particular significance given the role of the Christian (Lutheran) countries in the holocaust. Therefore we need to recognise our solidarity with the Jews rather than our distinction from them, to aim for dialogue and not for conversion.
- Three very brief things by way of response:
 - Jesus knew that what he had come to do was both fulfilment and transformation e.g. wine and wineskins; coming of the kingdom; gift of the Spirit; new Temple; build my church; gospel to nations under his authority and with his personal company; etc. In other words: not just ‘steady as she goes, with a bit of tweaking here and there!’ New Covenant community is built on foundation of apostles and prophets, with Christ himself being the cornerstone!
 - There was an apostolic gospel created through Christ, crystallised on the day of Pentecost that had never existed before. Jesus had not died, been buried, raised and ascended and Holy Spirit had not been poured out before! This gospel came into existence then (e.g. Acts 2:42), and was all in the light of Christ: taking the Old Testament witness about his coming and interpreting all in the light of his advent, and *vice versa*. This apostolic gospel had not existed before!
 - The conversion of people like Saul, means that whatever the roots of Israel from which it came, it was clearly different from the best that Jewish spirituality could produce. Paul makes much of his own conversion in Galatians (and some other places) as it is the proof of three things:
 - ♣ God still has a purpose for his own Old Testament people. He has not given up on them completely, even if there is a partial hardening for a while. Paul is part of a ‘first fruits’ harvest, yet to come, of the Jews.
 - ♣ The work of God in conversion is a work of grace. All that Paul was in himself (especially in his religious zeal) was utterly opposed to the gospel, and he could never simply ‘change his mind’. He had to become the object of grace.
 - ♣ And it also means that what Paul once was (as Saul) was not sufficient for the conversion of the nations, which is the end point of the gospel’s proclamation in this age. When New Testament communities were founded (e.g. at Antioch) they were not Jewish, with modified theology. Cultural meltdown took place, and the great

barrier of the dividing wall was taken down.

2. The Opening Greeting Sums Up the Heart of the Letter

(1) The emphasis on Paul's apostolic calling is tied to the commission from Jesus Christ and God the Father, and at the very same time, with the content of the gospel.

- The word that Paul has brought them has come from the one who is the Word become flesh. God has commissioned him, the Father (of Christ) has sent him, by having Paul meet Christ!
 - We come to know the Father by seeing the Son!
- The one who commissions him is the one who is described in terms of his *work*, not just his person.
 - He is the one who gave himself for us, to rescue from current evil age, according to the will of God the Father.
 - ♣ Here we apostolic gospel! As in 1 Cor. 15:3, 'Christ died' (the fact, although, even to attribute the title *Christ* to Jesus would have had to have been grasped by faith!) 'for our sins' (gospel), according to the Scriptures (i.e. with the authority of God and in accordance with his plan).

(2) And notice that the heart of the gospel rests on the matter of forgiveness through the death of Christ

- The pressing question: how can we stand before God? Answer lies in his grace and mercy.
 - Forgiveness by his mercy at the heart of the New Covenant (as in Jer. 31:31-34 cf. Lord's Supper institution, e.g. in Matt. 26:28) and this on the effective basis of the death of the Son of God (compare Mark 10:45; John 10:11; Rom. 4:25; Eph. 5:2; 1 Tim. 2:6; Tit. 2:14; etc.)
 - Removal of all possibility of self-salvation. If it were possible for salvation to come in any other way, then 'Christ died in vain'.

(3) And the deliverance that is thus accomplished is 'from this present evil age'

- Compare with similar statements such as: Jn. 12:31 (where this current world is being brought to judgment in the cross); Jn. 14:30 (where the ruler of this world is identified as Satan); Jn. 15:18f. (where this world hates the Son and his people); Jn. 17:17f. (where Jesus prays that we not be taken out of the world, but kept from the evil one); Rom. 12:12 (not to be conformed to this world); 2 Cor. 4:4 (the god of this world blinds the eyes of his people); 1 John 5:19 (where the whole world lies in the power of the evil one).
 - Different words used (e.g. 'age' i.e. eon; 'world' i.e. realm of human and spiritual opposition to God)
- But critical question: do we see that this is a current 'evil age'? Have we domesticated and tamed it? Is it something with which we feel too at home?
- And in particular, how do we relate to the world's 'goodness'?
 - The issue in this letter is that the 'evil age' will present a system of salvation, based on how well we can operate with the law to perfect

ourselves and others! Luther, ‘Paul is correct in calling it the evil world; for when it is at its best, then it is at its worst. The world is at its best in men who are religious, wise and learned; yet in them it is actually evil twice over’ (LW, Vol. 26, p. 40).

(4) This gospel of the justifying grace of God, built on the only ground of that justification (the death and resurrection of the Son) is the most powerful and liberating thing in the entire world. May we be given hearts and ears to hear it!

3. Only One Gospel

- (1) We have seen that the heart of Paul’s gospel was contained in the opening statements of the letter, which tell us that grace and peace come from one source (God the Father).
- (2) His grace and peace have been manifested in the appearing of the Son, who gave himself for us, according to the will of the Father, for our sins. This one statement deals a deathblow to all human attempts to win favour with God, or our attempts to present ourselves before him in anything that arises from our own strength. The gospel of the free grace of God brings due glory to his name, seen in the doxology of Gal. 1:5. This is one of the marks of gospel truth, that it gives all glory to him!
- (3) The forgiveness of sins lies at the very heart of the new covenant, and it is the key to our deliverance from this ‘present evil age’.
- (4) We will say more about this forgiveness and the deliverance it brings in the weeks to come, but we emphasise that the ‘evil’ of this age is not simply in manifest deeds of wickedness. It is in the many expressions of ‘goodness’ and ‘spirituality’ by which we seek to present our righteousness to God and the world, particularly as seen in the ‘righteousness’ that comes by ‘works of the law’.
- (5) Gal. 1:1-10 highlights one of the main consequences of the appearing of the Son of God, namely, that there is only one gospel. This gospel is fully focused on God as its author and stands in contrast to any other so-called gospel, which turns the focus onto us

4. The Galatian ‘Exchange’

- (1) The passage in hand immediately opens up the *occasion* of the letter.
- (2) The occasion of the letter is that the Galatian churches are ‘deserting’ the gospel
 - The word used here denotes a transposing, a moving from one thing or person to another.
 - As in the NIV ‘deserting...and turning...’
 - The point should not be lost, that Paul says they are not deserting a system of doctrine, but they are deserting ‘*him* who *called* them by the grace of Christ’ i.e. God the Father.
 - This is an incredible truth: when the gospel is proclaimed, God himself speaks! See, for example, 1 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:3, 25.
 - This is also called ‘the gospel of Christ’. This phrase is peculiar to Paul and also appears in Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 2:12; 9:13; 10:4; Phil. 1:27;

1 Thess. 3:2; while in Rom. 2:16; 16:25 & 2 Tim. 2:8 he speaks of ‘my gospel’ and 2 Cor. 4:3; 1 Thess. 1:5 & 2 Thess. 2:14 he speaks of ‘our gospel’. The authority that Paul has, then, does not rest in his own intellect or self-appointment. He has brought to the Galatians the Word of Christ!

♣ My sheep hear my voice! The Father calls his children through the preaching of his word!

- See the ‘golden chain’ of Romans 8:30. The word creates its own response, as in the man with the withered hand!
- So to turn from Paul’s gospel was to turn from God.

♣ It would be a reversal of the process of conversion, like turning to idols from God (paralleling 1 Thess. 1:9).

(3) This transposing has been brought about by certain men who came teaching a different gospel.

- These are men who are ‘troubling’ the Galatian congregations. They are ‘disturbing’ or ‘agitating’ them.
 - This has come through their teaching, which results in unsettled hearts and minds, troubling the conscience, breeding fear, suspicion and competition etc.
 - This has its outworking in factions within the congregation, and the deeds of the flesh being raised up among them.
 - ♣ The life of the churches before this seemed, therefore to be peaceable, and stable, full of love and joy (cf. Gal. 4:15 and fruit of the Spirit). Not devoid of suffering, but the suffering was positive and they were sustained by joy, mutual love and encouragement and in the pure hearing of the Word by which they were going on in the fullness of the Spirit.

(4) The nature of this so-called gospel is one that is based on ‘works of the law’. See, for example, Gal. 3:2, 5, 10; 5:4.

- We will see more about this as we go through the letter. They related to the three great boundary markers between the Jews and Gentiles: the Sabbath; dietary laws; and circumcision.
- And because they came from Jerusalem (the mother church) claiming the authority of that congregation and the leaders there, they belittled Paul’s authority since he had not come from Jerusalem.
 - See more in the weeks to come, but for background we note that in Acts 15:5 there were many of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, but still wanted the Gentile converts to practice circumcision (and the rest of the law of Moses); that in Acts 15:24 James says that some had gone out from among them (in Jerusalem) to whom they had given no authority or command to so; and Acts 21:17ff. we are told that in the Jerusalem church there were thousands ‘zealous for the Law’.

(5) So are we free from ‘works of the Law’ being a problem for us, if they were

particularly bound to the issues of Pharisaic Judaism?

- If we were to ask what is the characteristic of such a so-called ‘gospel’ it is that it seeks to maintain our righteousness on the basis of something that is true about ourselves.
 - ‘Legalism is the idea that we can win acceptance with God on the basis of something that is true about ourselves. That may be something we have done, something we have experienced, something infused into us or some privilege which distinguishes us from other people. Whatever it is, if it allows us to boast about ourselves before God it is legalism. If we deemed ourselves justified on the basis of national privilege it would be legalism. If we deemed ourselves justified on the basis of our own covenant keeping it would be legalism.’ D. MacLeod, SBET, 22.1, 2004, p. 20
 - Self-salvation, or otherwise?
- And we must not under estimate the power and fascination of this ‘gospel’ ...so much so that Peter and even Barnabas were carried away in its power!

5. The Question of Authority

(1) The wider point to be made is the everyone has a gospel.

- The ‘gospels’ that the world brings to us will always drive us to look at our own performance, efforts, works, or spirituality.
 - Ultimately they are expressions of the Flesh (of which more later in the series!) i.e. the whole human personality (even in its religion) that is opposed to God.

(2) The end point of any other gospel is ‘accursed’ (here taking up a restricted use of the term from the Old Testament i.e. what has been dedicated to destruction. TNIDONTT 1, 414).

- Paul applies this as much to himself as to anyone else!

(3) The emphasis in these verses is on the authority of Paul to speak to them, on the basis of his message.

- The message validates the messenger (Cole quoted in Stott, p. 28, ‘The outward person of the messenger does not validate his message; rather the nature of the message validates the messenger’).
- Not to judge by outward appearance! Paul seemed in most cases to be weak and unimpressive (as in 2 Cor. 10:10 For some say, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing”.)
- Paul’s apostolic authority related to his apostolic gospel. In that gospel, God speaks. In any other ‘gospel’ some other voice speaks (flesh, devil himself who makes himself as an angel of light, as in the Corinthian reading!)
- Luther has an extraordinary passage in his 1535 Commentary on Galatians in which he remarks that the devil even tries to present his word as the word of Christ in our conscience, terrifying us, driving us to seek a righteousness within ourselves to present before him and to appease him, so we flee from Christ as though he were Satan (LW26 p. 38-39 cf. p. 35ff.). But Christ himself is the propitiation for our

sins!! ‘If He gave Himself into death for our sins, then undoubtedly he is not a tormentor. He is not One who will cast down the troubled, but One who will raise up the fallen and bring propitiation and consolation to the terrified....There is no fear here; there is sheer sweetness, joy and the like. This kindles a light that shows me the true knowledge of God, of myself, of all creatures, and of all the wickedness of the kingdom of the devil’ p. 39.

- Does what we hear cause us to flee to Christ, and to love the Father for his grace and mercy? Or flee from him, or bring to him something that we can present to him out of our own religious flesh?