

1. The personal narrative

Galatians 1 – 2

Paul's commission and message (Galatians 1:1-5)

In this introductory paragraph, Paul wastes no time in laying a foundation for dealing with the matters that are concerning him. Paul deals with himself as an apostle and his apostolic message. This is a message which comes from God and returns glory to him.

1. Paul's authority as an apostle

1:1-2. Paul, an apostle — not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead — and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia...

Why read this ancient letter? The reason for doing so is that it was written by Paul in his capacity as '**an apostle**' (1:1). An apostle was like an Old Testament prophet in that he possessed a divine calling (see Amos 7:14-15; Jer. 1:5-6; 23:16,21,26,31-32). Paul is here referring to the events recorded in Acts 9. He was not simply a preacher, but one who was an authoritative eyewitness of the person and work of

Jesus Christ (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1-2). Furthermore, as Christ possesses the power to perform miracles, so too did his apostles (2 Cor. 12:12).

As a missionary, Paul was set apart by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). However, as an apostle, he was directly commissioned by Christ (1:1). In many ways, his credentials must have seemed rather weak — he was a latecomer; he was not one of the Twelve; he may never have laid eyes on Christ in his public ministry; and he was initially a fierce persecutor of the Christians (Acts 8:1,3; 9:1-2). Yet Christ had called him to himself, not only to become a Christian but also to be an apostle.

Paul was named after Saul, the first king of Israel, who physically was head and shoulders above any of his people (1 Sam. 9:2; 10:23). **'Paul'**, however, means 'little'. Augustine suggested that Saul chose the name Paul that he might 'oppose such as plume themselves on their own works, in order that he may commend the grace of God'.¹ That is an attractive thought, which would fit in with the message of Galatians. Yet the main thought behind the name change may have been as much physical as spiritual. Physically, the great apostle was less than imposing (2 Cor. 10:10; note that at Lystra in Acts 14:12 he was mistaken for the little messenger, Hermes, while Barnabas was mistaken for the main god, Zeus). From a worldly perspective, Paul seemed to have little going for him; from Christ's perspective, he was a messenger of salvation (see John 13:16). For all that, it is not unlikely that Saul called himself Paul simply in order not to be burdened with a Jewish name while seeking to reach the Gentiles with the gospel of Christ. After all, even Peter's two epistles have come down to us as 1 and 2 Peter, not 1 and 2 Cephas.²

No man conferred the status of apostle upon Paul — not Peter, who addressed the crowd on the Day of Pentecost, nor Ananias, who baptized Paul, nor any

church council or assembly. Paul's apostleship did not come **'from** [ἀπό] **men'** (plural) nor **'through** [διὰ] **man'** (singular, possibly meaning 'a man'). The church ordains pastors, but she does not confer apostleship. Paul was, in fact, the last apostle to see the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:8), so there can be no more apostles. Apostleship comes **'through'** (διὰ) the only King and head of the church — Christ Jesus. In doing this, Christ works with God the Father. Paul does not repeat the preposition 'through'. He does not say 'through Jesus Christ and through God the Father'. The one preposition covers both Christ and the Father — such is their unity of purpose and essence.

The resurrection of Christ is explicitly mentioned here. The historical event is not referred to again in this epistle, but the fact that it ushered in the new creation is foundational to Paul's whole approach to salvation history. This is the fulness of time, the age of God's Son, the age of the Spirit, the last era before the consummation of all things (cf. 4:4-7). The resurrection of Christ is the supreme proof before the world and the highest testimony of God regarding the truth of the Christian faith. If Christ rose from the dead, all other claims fall into place.

So Paul writes in an authoritative way. He does refer to other brothers who were with him (1:2; cf. Phil. 4:21), but he does not name them (whereas he does in 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1). The fact that Barnabas is not named, even though he had accompanied Paul on the first missionary journey, may indicate that the wounds revealed in Galatians 2:13 were still rather raw. The NEB's 'the group of friends now with me' is a rather more casual paraphrase than Paul's words would allow. The **'brothers'** could be brother Christians or brother Christian workers. The latter is perhaps more likely in view of the fact

that the ‘brothers’ are distinguished from the ‘saints’ in Philippians 4:21-22. Whether the brothers were so well known to the Galatians that there was no need to name them is something over which we can only speculate. What is certain is that to us they must remain anonymous. Presumably, while making it clear that he is not alone, Paul sees no need to mention possible reinforcements. In any case, by verse 6 Paul is very obviously writing in the first person singular — there is no hint of a royal ‘we’.

In the name of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, Paul dictated this letter, before adding the final touches himself (cf. 6:11). To reject Paul is to reject Christ. There is no other way of knowing Christ except by reading the apostolic record of him.

Finally, we see that Paul is not writing to one congregation but to a number of **‘churches’** or assemblies in **‘Galatia’** (*ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῆς Γαλατίας*). These predominantly Gentile assemblies are the New Testament counterpart to the assembly, or congregation, of God in Israel (e.g. Neh. 13:1; Lam. 1:10). But Paul is sparse with the details!

Application

The influential nineteenth-century philosopher, John Stuart Mill, referred to Paul as ‘the first great corrupter of Christianity’, while Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, ‘The “glad tidings” were followed closely by the absolutely worst tidings — those of St Paul. Paul is the incarnation of a type which is the reverse of that of the Saviour; he is the genius in hatred, in the standpoint of hatred, and in the relentless logic of hatred.’³

One might expect such a statement from Mill, an atheist who finally came to hint at some vague version of theism, and from Nietzsche, a virulent and obsessive atheist who went insane. This is, however, a recurring theme. In 1986 Hyam Maccoby published *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*,

which portrays Paul as a Gentile proselyte who suffered a nervous breakdown, came to misinterpret Jesus and triggered off anti-Semitism.⁴

Today, the apostolic authority of Paul is often questioned and repudiated within the church. In 1992 in Sydney, when faced with the apostle Paul's opposition to the ordination of women as pastors and teachers, Rev. Dr Peter Cameron, principal of St Andrews College at the University of Sydney, replied, 'So what?'⁵ He was pitting his authority against the one who spoke in the name of the risen Christ — a serious thing indeed! Charles Spurgeon once compared a preacher who differed from the apostle Paul to a cheese-mite differing from a cherub. Our attitude to all of Scripture ought to be as reverent as that of the Puritans. As William Perkins put it, 'Seeing then the writings of the Apostles are the immediate and mere word of God, they must be obeyed as if they had been written without man by the finger of God.'⁶

2. The gospel that Paul preached

1:3-4. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father...

Paul tells us the basic content of his gospel: **'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.'** 'Grace' is God's unconditional goodwill towards his people, and 'peace' is the result of this grace being expressed in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the cause and effect of the gospel, and constitutes Paul's characteristic greeting in his letters (e.g. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess.

1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 3; extended slightly in 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2).

Paul does not repeat his prepositions in either verse 1 or verse 3. As we have already seen, Paul's apostleship came from Christ and God the Father (1:1), not *from* (or 'through') Christ and *from* (or 'through') God the Father. Similarly, grace and peace come '**from**' the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:3), not *from* the Father and *from* the Lord Jesus Christ (as the KJV erroneously puts it). This shows how habitually Paul identifies the work of the Father and that of Christ. Christ is distinguished from mortal men but identified with God. Grace could be said to come from Christ (1:6) or God (2:21). The same could be said of peace (Col. 3:15; Phil. 4:7). J. Gresham Machen thus refers to verse 3 as 'the most stupendous ascription of deity to our Lord'.⁷

Verse 4 may or may not be what Witherington thinks it is — a fragment of an early Christian confession. However, it does summarize Paul's gospel message, which declares that this world (literally, 'aeon' or *ὁ αἰών*) is under sin. Here he is not referring to the wickedness of the first century, but to the world as cursed by God for its sin and rebellion. According to Betz, Paul does not say that the coming age has already begun,⁸ but that surely is implied. Paul has already mentioned the resurrection in verse 1, and it is understood in that Christ is still conferring grace and peace in verse 3. This is the age of the Spirit (3:2-5; 5:16-18; 6:8). The new age has indeed come in the resurrection of Christ, and the consequent pouring out of the Spirit, but for those who fail to trust the Messiah, the news is all bad. The whole world lies in the power of the Evil One (1 John 5:19). Hence Peter's call on the Day of Pentecost: 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation' (Acts 2:40; see Phil. 2:15). In the words of Calvin, 'While man

remains in his natural condition, he is rotten to the core and, of necessity, displeasing to God.⁹

This is our sad state by nature, but Christ gave himself for many sinners so that they might be delivered from this bondage (Mark 10:45; Eph. 5:2; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14). The preposition **‘for’** (ὐπὲρ) signifies substitution (as in 2:20; also 1 Cor. 15:3). In this act of self-giving, Christ freely gave himself **‘according to the will of our God and Father’** (note Acts 2:23). This, and this alone, won our redemption. Forgiveness and deliverance are only won by Christ. It is highly likely that this is Paul’s first written statement about the meaning of Christ’s death at Calvary.

The Galatian churches were departing from this gospel of free grace. Christ did not die for 90% of the sins of his people, but to pay the penalty for all their sins. We — whether circumcised or not — add nothing to his perfect work. Some years back, Thomas Howard wrote a book entitled *Evangelical is Not Enough*, and then joined the Roman Catholic Church. The truth is that evangelical is enough. Christ paid the debt in full. The penalty is death, and Christ died for all the sins of his sheep, his bride, his elect. To cite Lightfoot, ‘The Gospel is a rescue, an emancipation from a state of bondage.’ It tells of something Christ has done (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4), not something which you and I must do.

Application

In Martin Place in Sydney one fine day, I met up with a Krishna devotee who was collecting money for drug addicts in King’s Cross. We got talking about Christ, and he professed to believe in him. ‘As the eternal Son of God?’ I asked. He replied that we are all eternal. That was his first error. I then asked how we are

saved. He replied that Krishna makes us perfect in this life and so worthy of salvation. That was his second error.

The Bible's message is that Christ saves, not just offers us help so that we can save ourselves. Commenting on Galatians 1:4, Martin Luther boomed: 'These words are very thunderclaps from heaven against all kinds of righteousness.'¹⁰ The churches in Galatia, evangelized by no less a figure than the great apostle himself, were losing this doctrine — that our only righteousness before God is in Christ. Paul's response shows that to depart from that gospel is no minor aberration.

3. From God and to God

1:5. ... to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Nowhere else in his epistles does Paul utter a doxology at the end of his introduction, but he does so here. He refers to 'our God and Father' (1:4), and then adds, **'to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen'**. Salvation comes from him, and so the glory goes to him, literally 'to the ages of the ages', meaning 'for ever'. To cite Calvin, 'All pride is beaten down; man cannot boast of anything save the free grace of God.'¹¹ The message of the epistle to the Galatians is that the free grace of God in Jesus Christ is more than sufficient. To that the Christian can only say 'Amen' (*ἀμήν*) — a carryover into Greek from the original Aramaic.

Only one gospel (Galatians 1:6-10)

Before we look at what Paul says in this next section of Galatians, we should take note of what he does not say. In his letters to the various churches, Paul would invariably give thanks to God for them. Even in the Corinthian correspondence, where the apostle had to battle a devaluation of the cross, divisions, immorality, court cases, a lack of Christian love, a misuse of the gifts and a denial of the resurrection, he could still find it in his heart to write, 'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor. 1:4; see also Rom. 1:8; Phil. 1:3). Not so in the epistle to the Galatians. Paul launches immediately into a decisive confrontation with the Galatians over the nature of their threatened departure from the gospel. He does not say, 'I give thanks' (*ἐυχαριστέω*), but only, '**I am astonished**' (*θαυμάξω*).

Paul is grieved, and expresses his perplexity and surprise at what has happened. As John Chrysostom says, 'This Epistle breathes an indignant spirit.'¹² Paul comes straight to the point: the Galatian churches are turning to another gospel — but there is no other (1:6-7). The gospel is being persecuted from outside the church, but the greater danger is that it is being undermined from inside. Martin Luther thinks that Paul writes here with 'a motherly affection' and 'a fatherly care' — even 'gently and mildly'.¹³ But that may tell us something about

Luther's own forceful temperament! Paul is not gentle and mild, although in all his vigour he remains loving. He still calls the Galatians 'brothers' (1:11; 3:15; 4:12,28,31; 5:11,13; 6:1,18).

1. We can easily lose the gospel

1:6-7. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Calvinists are fond of quoting Philippians 1:6: 'I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.' This is right and good, but it is nevertheless true that a work of God can still collapse very quickly. As Luther said, justification is 'a very brittle matter, because we are brittle'.¹⁴ James Haldane declares the truth that 'In every age men have corrupted religion.'¹⁵ We should not imagine that the period of the early church was any different.

The Galatian churches would have appeared to be soundly and firmly standing on the gospel of God's free grace in Jesus Christ. Yet within what was surely only a few months, or a year at most, things had gone horribly wrong — so much so that Paul can write, '**I am astonished**' (*θαυμάζω*). He marvelled, he was astounded, just as Jesus marvelled at the unbelief in his hometown of Nazareth (Mark 6:6). One can sense the disappointment in his words. The Galatians had seen Paul and heard his words — indeed, they had witnessed and experienced miracles (3:5) — but now they were embracing a false gospel. The defection of the Galatians had all happened so soon, so '**quickly**', or perhaps 'suddenly'. No sooner

had Paul left Galatia than Satan rushed in. Or Paul may mean that no sooner had the troublemakers arrived in Galatia than the Galatians were listening to them. There is no real need to decide whether Paul is writing of the rapidity of the process or the brevity of time that had elapsed. The two are linked.

Paul writes of the Galatians who **'are turning to a different gospel'**. The verb (*μετατίθεσθε*) is in the present tense, meaning that the Galatians were still in the process of defecting, or transferring their allegiance. A church can appear firm, standing on the grace of Christ, and twelve months later it is all lost. As Luther put it, some 'unlearned idiot' can undo the work of a decade.¹⁶

'Call' (*καλέω*) can refer to God's irresistible call (as in Rom. 8:29-30) or to the general call to all the world (as in Matt. 22:14). It is difficult to tell in what sense Paul uses the term in Galatians (1:6; 5:8), although the latter meaning may fit the overall context better. Whatever the case, Paul distinguished between weak brethren (Rom. 14:1; 15:7) and false brethren (e.g. 2:4). To those who are weak, the Christian is to respond with grace and love for souls; to those who are false, the Christian is to respond with indignation and love for truth.

Some unidentified troublemakers were leading the Galatians away from the gospel of grace (it is not obvious why the NIV adds 'evidently'). Did these troublemakers believe in the deity of Christ, that he is the Lord from heaven? Yes, there is no hint of trouble on this account. This militates against — although it may not entirely disprove — Lightfoot's theory of identifying them with Pharisaic Ebionites.¹⁷

Did they believe that Christ died for sinners? Surely yes, in a sense at least. Did they believe in his resurrection? Again, there is not a hint of concern about this. On the surface, it seems that surely nothing drastic could be wrong. Yet Paul considers

that something very drastic is wrong. The Galatians were turning to a different gospel, one which was a false gospel, and so were perverting the gospel of Christ. They believed in Christ's deity, his death and resurrection — yet they were defecting from the gospel! For many of them, this may have been as much unwitting deception as wilful apostasy. John Brown says, 'It is a most hazardous thing to tamper with the gospel of Christ. It must neither be abridged nor enlarged.'¹⁸ 'Grace admits no partner, or fellow. Grace must be freely given every way, or it is no way grace,' affirmed William Perkins, for 'If Christ have a partner in the work of justification, and salvation, he is no perfect Christ.'¹⁹ And Luther warned: 'If the article of justification be once lost, then is all true Christian doctrine lost.'²⁰

Not much should be made of the two words used for 'other' — **'a different [or 'other'] gospel'** (1:6) — **'not that there is another one'** (1:7). The word used in verse 6 is *ἕτερος*, while the one in verse 7 is *ἄλλος*. It is sometimes claimed — for example, by Burton,²¹ Boice and Longenecker — that Paul was saying that the Galatians were turning to a gospel of a different kind, whereas the reality is that it is not possible even to have another gospel alongside the original gospel. That is probably too subtle by half. When John the Baptist asked whether Jesus was the one to come, or if they should look for 'another', Matthew uses the word *ἕτερος* (Matt. 11:3) and Luke uses *ἄλλος* (Luke 7:20; note also that they are interchangeable in 1 Cor. 12:9-10; 2 Cor. 11:4).

Application

Much can be lost in a short time. Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days, and the Israelites built the golden calf (Exod. 32, especially verse 8). The spiritual life of Israel looked fairly bright

in Joshua's day, but it took a nosedive soon after his death (Judg. 2:7-13). Joash looked good for a time but eventually came to reveal himself as unregenerate (2 Chr. 23 – 24). Paul knew that the big test for Christians can come when a sanctifying influence is absent. The Philippians were praised because they were the same when Paul was absent as when he was present (Phil. 2:12). The fact that the West has known gospel privileges in the past may mean nothing now. As the Puritan William Perkins put it, simply and graphically, 'All visible churches upon earth ... are subject to apostasy.'²²

The devil wishes to lure the church into sin or into error — and in some ways error can do more damage than sin. In the early 1930s J. Gresham Machen wrote, 'And in these sad days, when Christian language so often conceals a profoundly unchristian mind and heart, would to God that we had, in all our churches, less of empty pious words, less of a foolish optimism, and more of the fearless honesty of Paul.'²³

2. Paul's gospel is the only gospel

1:8-9. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to [literally, 'besides'] the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

In the West we live in pluralistic, multicultural societies. So Hans Dieter Betz writes, 'Paul's language is of course biased.'²⁴ Behind that comment is the view that there is no revealed truth. The society of Paul's day was also pluralistic and multicultural. If the Christians had only wanted to add Christ to the Roman pantheon, that would have been quite all right. But they were wanting to say that Christ is *the* Lord, and that there is only one ultimate truth. The gospel is not one way to God; it is the only way.

In verses 8-9 Paul does not celebrate diversity, as religious liberals profess to do. He declares clearly and unashamedly that there is only one gospel. Whoever departed from that gospel — even were he to be an angel from heaven — was accursed. Paul is not saying that he was the only one preaching the gospel. He was independent of the other apostles but he taught the same gospel as they did (2:1-10; 1 Cor. 15:11). He was not dependent on the Jerusalem leaders, but he was not dissociated from them.

The issue is this: is Christ's work of atonement perfect and complete, or not? The Galatians, wittingly or unwittingly, were drifting towards the view that Christ's work of atonement needed some bolstering. It is like being offered a cool, refreshing drink that appears delightful in every way — except that there is a drop of poison in it. You might say, 'Surely circumcision is not that significant?' No, not in itself, as Acts 16:3 makes clear. But circumcision for evangelism is one thing; circumcision for salvation is another. Salvation is not by Christ *plus* circumcision, or Christ *plus* anything. There is only one gospel, and it is not 'Christ plus'.

This is not a trivial matter. Verse 8 begins with a resounding and adversative '**but**' (*ἀλλὰ*). Paul is emphasizing his point in the strongest possible way. The apostle's language might sound a bit extreme, but certainly he did not think so, for he repeats himself in the next verse. Verse 8 was thus no slip of the pen.

In verse 9, when Paul says, '**as we have said before**', he may be referring to verse 8 (as Cole thinks) or, as Betz, Dunn, Ridderbos, Fung, Hendriksen and Morris think, to an earlier occasion when he was with them. Betz even suggests the possibility of an earlier letter. Ramsay considers that the '**we**' refers to Paul and Barnabas.²⁵ It was undoubtedly a truth that Paul had emphasized many times when he

proclaimed the gospel to them. In any case, he is expressing his determined convictions. As Hendriksen says, this is not ‘a mere wish, but an effective invocation’.

Verse 8 has *ἐάν* followed by the subjunctive (**‘even if ... should preach’**), whereas verse 9 has *εἶ* followed by the present indicative (**‘if ... is preaching’**). The idea seems to be that in verse 9 Paul has moved from possibility to actuality. He has become more definite, and is dealing with a real and present threat to his gospel. Yet the fact that Paul virtually repeats himself is significant. As John Chrysostom says, ‘That his words might not seem to be spoken in anger, or with exaggeration, or with recklessness, he now repeats them.’

Joseph Smith says that an angel, Moroni, appeared to him to give him the Book of Mormon. The Christian is not to be unnerved by such a claim. The Book of Mormon does not fit in with the gospel. It is religious; it claims divine authority; but it is not of God. Muhammad claims much the same thing about the Qur’an, that it was conveyed to him by the angel Gabriel. If the devil cannot persecute and destroy, he will undermine by pretending to correct and refine. Luther quotes a German proverb: ‘In God’s name begins all mischief!’²⁶

The Greek word which Paul uses is ‘anathema’ (*ἀνάθεμα*). The idea is found in Leviticus 27:29: ‘No person under the ban, who may become doomed to destruction among men, shall be redeemed, but shall surely be put to death’ (NKJV). Achan suffered under this ban (*herem*) in the book of Joshua (see Josh. 6:17-18; 7:11-13,15). Paul says that he would be prepared to be anathema if only his fellow Jews could be saved (Rom. 9:3). To suffer anathema is to suffer the judgement of God for not loving the Lord (1 Cor. 16:22). Dunn thinks it goes too far to translate this as being ‘eternally condemned’ (NIV) or ‘condemned to

hell' (GNB).²⁷ However, Paul's view of the judgement did not consist simply of annihilation, but of wrath, fury, tribulation and distress (Rom. 2:8-9).

It does not matter who the messenger is. If he has a message **'contrary to'** — as the ESV, NASB and RSV have it — Paul's gospel, he is anathema. The context favours that *παρά* can be translated as 'besides', and not necessarily — as Ronald Fung so decisively translates it — as 'at variance with'. Paul is not implying that anybody is pitting himself against everything that is obviously precious about the gospel, but that it is being distorted in a way that may appear minor but is in fact a major assault upon the whole concept of grace as God's undeserved favour.

No minister, no bishop, no synod, no pope, no angel has the authority to change this gospel one iota. Luther used to phrase things very bluntly: 'That which does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Peter and Paul be the teachers. On the other hand, that which does teach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod should propound it.'²⁸ Luther had good reason to write this, because his Dominican opponent, Silvester Prierias, had sought to answer Luther's appeal to Scripture by asserting that 'He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic.'²⁹ At times Calvin could be even fiercer than Luther: 'We may say that even if the Pope and all his stinking clergy had the angels on their side, this would be nothing compared to the Lord Jesus Christ.'³⁰ Indeed, the renowned medieval doctor Thomas Aquinas got this right: 'I answer that nothing is to be taught except what is contained, either implicitly or explicitly, in the Gospels and epistles and Sacred Scripture.'³¹

In summary, the message is more crucial than the messenger; content means more than credentials.

Application

This has far-reaching implications for today. In his autobiography, Billy Graham declared that his policy on co-operation is this: 'If a man accepts the deity of Christ and living for Christ to the best of his knowledge, I intend to have fellowship with him in Christ.'³² Furthermore, in 1994 the declaration *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* was issued, signed by Bill Bright, James Packer, Os Guinness, Mark Noll and Charles Colson, with its claim that 'All who accept Christ as Lord and Saviour are brothers and sisters in Christ.' However attractive all this may sound, it will not do. Such an approach would have led the apostle Paul to co-operate with the Galatians. Nowhere in his epistle to the Galatians does Paul ever mention the person of Christ as being at issue. Nor does he spend pages condemning the lifestyles of the Galatians. But he is vigorous in condemning their undermining of justification by faith.

Herman Gunkel's famous thesis is that 'Christianity is a syncretistic religion.'³³ In a considerably milder vein, James Dunn wrote a book where he highlighted the unity and the diversity of the New Testament. His claim was that many different theologies — both liberal and conservative — could be found in the New Testament from the beginning.³⁴ Paul is saying the opposite — there is only one gospel. And we find out about that gospel in the Word of God, and only in the Word of God. John Calvin testified: 'Our faith must be totally grounded upon that Word, as much as it would be if the heavens had opened a hundred thousand times and revealed the glory of God.'³⁵

3. Our first aim must be to please Christ

1:10. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant [literally 'slave'] of Christ.

The word *γάρ* (**'for'**) has been given its usual translation here, but Hendriksen translates it as 'There!' — perhaps even 'Yes indeed!' Paul is defending his motives for writing so strongly in the previous verses.

Of more significance is the word *πειθω*, which often means 'I persuade' but can also mean 'I conciliate', 'I satisfy', or 'I seek the favour of' (see Matt. 28:14; Acts 12:20). Hence, as in the KJV and NKJV, Paul could be asking, 'For do I now persuade men, or God?' However, it seems more likely that, as it is translated here, Paul is referring to what motivates him — whether it is to seek the approval of God or to curry favour with men.

If we aim to please the world, we cannot please Christ (cf. John 5:44). Paul is not revelling in being belligerent, but his first declared aim is to please God (1 Thess. 2:4) or Christ (1:10). There is a real sense in which we must bend over backwards to please Jews, Greeks and our fellow Christians (1 Cor. 10:32-33). On non-essentials, the Christian is to be the most accommodating of creatures. Paul could bear patiently with weak brethren (Rom. 14 – 15), and he could bear with those whose motives were less than pure (Phil. 1:15-18). But he could not abide the notion of two gospels.

There has been rather too much 'mirror-reading' in some scholarly circles concerning Paul's epistles,³⁶ but it is not unlikely that the Judaizers had charged Paul with leaving out the demand for circumcision because he did not want to offend the Gentile sensibilities of his potential converts. Philo, for example,

recognized that circumcision was ‘an object of ridicule among many people’.³⁷ Paul denies any such motivation on his part, and later fires it back at his critics (cf. 4:17; 6:12-13). He sees the need to speak strongly in verses 8-9 and then to defend himself in verse 10.

Paul describes himself, in a roundabout way, as **‘of Christ a slave’** (*χριστοῦ δοῦλος*) — to follow the apostle’s own emphatic word order. The first connotation that this carries is that of lowliness (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:5), but there are also overtones of authority, as Old Testament leaders such as Moses and Joshua are both described in the Septuagint as ‘a servant of the Lord’ (*δοῦλος κυρίου* — e.g. Deut. 34:5; Josh. 24:29).³⁸

Our first task is not to be pleasant or to be friendly. Today it is often said that to raise something which is painful or controversial is inherently unchristian. On the contrary, Paul wrote this letter because he was possessed by a higher claim than simply being bland. Peter’s weak behaviour in Galatians 2:11-14 shows what can happen when a Christian fears men more than he seeks to please Christ. Calvin says, ‘This text exhorts all ministers of the Word to shut their eyes to the sinful desires of men if they wish to carry out their duty faithfully.’³⁹ What people want to hear and what they need to hear are not necessarily one and the same.

To put it more positively, as Isaac Watts sang:

’Tis not by works of righteousness
Which our own hands have done,
But we are saved by sovereign grace,
Abounding through the Son.

There is one gospel — and that is Paul’s gospel.

Application

J. Gresham Machen stated: 'Paul was intolerant about the content of the message but tolerant about the personality of the messengers; the modern Church is tolerant about the message but intolerant about the personality of the messengers and about the methods by which the message is proclaimed.'⁴⁰ We see this illustrated in the life of the modern evangelical church, where personality can mean more than character, style more than substance, music more than message and friendship with people more than fellowship with God. It was one of the besetting sins of the Pharisees that they loved the praises of men (Matt. 6:2,5,16; 23:5-7).