

Background to Galatians

An apostle was one who had witnessed the resurrected Lord and been directly commissioned by the Lord to “make disciples of all nations.” Paul had not been with the others when they met the risen Jesus in the locked room, or on the road to Emmaus, or in Galilee. In fact, during the first years of Christianity he persecuted Christians, even overseeing the killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:59 – 8:1).

Then Paul had a very dramatic conversion experience, unlike any other. In Paul’s case the Lord appeared to him in blinding glory and commissioned him to preach the gospel (Acts 9). Paul begins all of his letters this way: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...” This was to emphasize that he had been in the presence of the risen Lord and was an apostle. All of his letters begin this way, except the letter to the Galatians. There he writes: “Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead...” Why the difference? Because it was there (among the Galatians) that his position and authority was questioned and put to the test.

Paul had already been accepted by the original apostles: Peter, James, John, and others; and they had agreed that he would take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15). Included in this agreement was an understanding that Gentile converts to the Christian faith need not follow the ritual law of Judaism, such as eating only kosher foods and being circumcised.

The churches of Galatia were ones that Paul had founded or preached at on his missionary journeys. Many of the new Christians in these churches were Gentiles. In Paul’s absence some other missionaries had told the Galatians they must conform to Jewish ritual law; they undermined Paul’s preaching and his authority. That is why Paul began his letter to the Galatians in the manner he did. He said to them, “I want you to know brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”

His conversion was authentic, his gospel and authority came directly from the Lord.

[Paul did not see his own message of Christ as “Paulinism.” His message makes sense precisely because his message was given him by God who created the universe and chose to redeem humans through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Paul is no advocate of a free-form spirituality in which each person listens individualistically for messages from God and in effect invents his or her private religion.” This passage does not condone private religious experience in opposition to long-standing church tradition. The bumper sticker “Question Authority” does not apply here. True authority is found in preaching that is true to the revealed gospel message.]

[We remain skeptical to claims of preachers that they have privileged access to divine revelation. Paul and the other apostles are on the original roster of witnesses to the resurrection. The risen Christ appeared to them, and gave them the commission to take the good news that Israel’s God has acted for the salvation of all people. We do not repeat or re-experience Paul’s revelation, but we do continue to see the world in the light of the same revelation that he announced. Those who today seek after special experiences of continuing revelation all too easily fall prey to fantasy, delusion, self-fulfilling visions, or arrogance.¹]

Purpose or Preference?

It has never been easy to build stable community structures in the church. People are always attracted to messages that entrench the gospel in the language and structures that people are comfortable with. (Galatians were attracted to the message of the Missionaries for this reason). That is why we still have disagreements in the church about styles of worship, or what programs or classes to have, or sometimes the content of what is preached. Paul understood that the gospel causes tension in structures of the present age. Jesus Christ continually calls the community to be judged by a vision of freedom and unity found in Him (see Gal. 3:28). We have to be vigilant to keep ourselves focused on Jesus Christ, over and above our preferences, prejudices, or opinions. It is so tempting to grab a facet of Jesus’ life or teaching and fit him into our current concerns,

¹Leander Keck, ed.; *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol. XI*, “Galatians” (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 218-220.

and assume his blessing upon how we've already decided to live. Doesn't it seem that we are continually tempted to squeeze Jesus into existing categories that suit us?

Paul resisted the message of those other missionaries precisely because he sees it as turning the gospel into a domesticated human tradition. This would make the church just one more cultural institution – rather than a divinely appointed movement to bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. It was then, and still is today, a tension between a preference driven church and a purpose focused church.

Transformation

Of all people, Paul knew that religious conviction and passion can have an ugly side. He readily admits this in his own past. His zeal for the traditions of his ancestors led him to sanction and commit acts of violence. "...how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it," he said. Those who take seriously the holiness of the one God can find it difficult to tolerate people who deny God or break God's revealed law. The laudable desire to defend the truth can contain the seeds of violence. This must always be disciplined by the deeper wisdom of the faith.

The cross is the central symbol that short-circuits any justification for hubris or violence: God's way of dealing with dissenters and adversaries was not to destroy them, but to give his Son to die, even for them. So, when Paul received his call, he did not turn around and start persecuting Jews who failed to respond to the gospel; rather, like Jesus, Paul became the persecuted (Gal. 5:11; 6:17), rather than the persecutor. Paul models for all Christians the responsibility not to eradicate the enemies of God but to announce God's reconciling power in the world (see 2 Cor. 5:17-20).²

Paul was transformed from persecutor to apostle and the churches in Judea marveled and gave glory to God. Paul doesn't tell this story as a testimony of "what Jesus did for me." He isn't focusing on how his sins were forgiven or how his needs were met. Rather, his message is a testimony about how the revelation of Jesus Christ – Savior and risen Lord of glory – turned his world upside down and used him as an instrument of reconciling grace. By God's grace, speaking the message of truth given by God through Jesus, Paul was able to reach out to those who had previously been "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

[Bronwen Healey grew up in an upper middle class home in Melbourne, Australia. As a teenager, she fell into a life of drug addiction and prostitution. After years of alienation and a failed suicide attempt, a Christian physician recommended that she go to a Christian detox center. Bronwen recalls entering the facility:

Let me tell you I was rude and angry, rebellious, acting out my hurt, against all these people who just wanted to love me and every Sunday for six weeks I would sit outside and smoke cigarettes and refuse to go inside and on the seventh Sunday it poured rain so I had to go inside and the pastor was preaching a message on the anointing and said it was the burden-destroying yoke-removing power of God and the yoke bit totally confused me but the power of God, I've tried every other power, they just don't work and it was that day I met and fell in love with Jesus and that was in 1999 and my life has never been the same.]³

Today Bronwen is married with three children. She works for the non-profit "Hope Foundation" helping women escape from addiction and the sex industry through consistent Christ-centered connection and care.]

Though you and I have not received a direct revelation of the risen Lord, as did Paul and the other apostles; though we may not have had as dramatic a conversion as this young woman from Melbourne; we have received the gospel. [Those who attend steadily to the once-for-all revelation of Jesus Christ are given a truthful vision of reality, as it is in God's new creation (Gal. 6:15).] God has revealed to us, through Scripture, long-standing apostolic tradition, and the witness of other believers, his great grace in Jesus. God can also seize you and me and empower us for tasks we might only dream about. The real Jesus transforms lives. The real Jesus puts you on a path in life that leads to completeness. It leads to Him.

²Ibid.

³Preaching Illustrations thistweek@preachingillustrations.com, June 6, 2010