

Galatians 1:11-24

Paul's Vindication of His Apostleship

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me.

Psalm 146

Praise for God's Help

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,

in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;

on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith for ever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

*I began the sermon at the communion table and walked around the sanctuary preaching, and as I finished with each page, I let it fall to the ground.

Paul gets a lot of ink time in the New Testament.

His letters to churches and early Christian communities spans a variety of topics. And being that Paul was an evangelist, speaking regularly, the first early consultant on how to grow and nurture churches, most of his words should be heard, and not simply read.

And being that what we have in our Bible is a one-sided conversation, we need to consider what the ***other side*** may have been saying or communicating in a variety of ways to stir Paul's heart to write to these churches. The Oxford Companion to the Bible says that "Paul was a formidable opponent (*Galatians) but he also had a remarkable capacity for deep concern and true friendship (Romans 16:1-6 and 1 Thessalonians 2:6-9).

What might Paul's Facebook page say, for instance, when he found out that the churches in the area known as Galatia, were listening to people spreading a different idea of the Gospel than what Paul had already taught them?

Might he have stated publically:

Galatians, why are you listening to traitors?

Or, would Paul have posted a link to his most recent preaching assignment, a YouTube video saying prophetically:

“If anyone, regardless of reputation or credentials, preaches something other than what you received originally, let him be cursed.”

If Paul were around today, he'd probably have a mighty grand following, as well as lots of comments, good and bad, from his “friends.”

You see, what we have in the New Testament are various writings, some determined to be from Paul himself, others from those close to Paul, and these letters are all ***one sided***. It is as if we get to see ONLY Paul's facebook posts, without all the comments.

And we get to hear a lot of one-sided conversations these days.

As I was strolling into my gym locker room, minding my own business, trying to get my things together, I hear someone on her cell phone say:

“He cheated on me. Don't I deserve to be happy?”

Is it wrong to be curious and wonder, is she talking with a sister? And is that sister a bit judgmental? Or, is she

speaking with her mom, for whom divorce is really a “four letter word.” Or, is she merely stating a fact to a friend, who wonders if it is too soon to begin dating post-break-up, post-loss, post-heart-break?

And, knowing I’m preaching on Paul this Sunday, and his one-sided letters, I wonder what the churches were feeling when they read what Paul wrote...and what they were saying on their end.

We will travel with Paul for three weeks through Galatians. We will see what Paul is up against as he explains his own calling, his own understanding of faith in Jesus Christ, and who the imposters are and why he thinks the Galatians are “fickle” and easily stray away.

We will look at how Paul creates an argument for why Christians need not be circumcised Jews first to belong to the community. We will discuss the Law vs. the Gospel and then we will look at Paul’s view of the FULL inclusion of all in One Gospel, One Faith, One Body, and One Baptism of Jesus Christ. And in this day of who is “inside” the border and who is “outside” – who is “one of us” and

who is a “stranger” I’m sure Paul’s words will speak a word of truth to what we struggle with today.

Let’s begin first with Galatians. It is a different kind of letter for Paul. In his other letters, after the opening greeting, he usually praises the faith community, like in Romans, Paul says:

I thank God through Jesus for every one of you. People everywhere keep telling me about your lives of faith, and every time I hear them, I thank him. The longer this waiting goes on, the deeper I ache. I so want to be there to deliver God’s gift in person and watch you grow stronger right before my eyes!...You have as much to give me as I do to you. (Eugene Peterson translation...Romans 1:8-12).

Contrast that with Paul’s opening words to the churches in Galatia...

I can’t believe your fickleness - how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ by embracing a variant message! It is not a minor variation, you know; it is completely other, an

alien message, a no-message, a lie about God. Those who are provoking this agitation among you are turning the Message of Christ on its head. Let me be blunt: If one of us – even if an angel from heaven! – were to preach something other than what we preached originally, let him be cursed.

If you showed up for worship in the Roman church or a church in Galatia, which one do you think you'd have stuck with?

On a recent trip, one church member found herself sitting in a small church. She was visiting on a Sunday where she too got to hear a one-sided conversation. The pastor stood up to inform the congregation:

After consideration and prayer, the Committee on Ministry has voted not to dissolve the relationship between me, your pastor, and this congregation.¹

As a guest, visiting, there was a whole lot of history she did not know, nor maybe care to know. But it was clear;

¹ See Book of Order, G-14.0610-13

there was a mountain of history underneath **that** statement.

Again, being curious, was it the pastor who wanted the relationship dissolved and then was convinced otherwise? Was it the congregation that wanted to break ties? Or was there some other reason?

Churches are like families, there are members “in good standing” with other members. There are those who only come when personally invited. There are members who offer advice or state their opinions, even when unasked. There are those who show up changed, renewed, and different in some way. And, there are members (of families, churches) who have worn the role well, have adapted, grown, become more open to being in community...a family of different people, different opinions, yet, as Paul was trying to create, a community that stands for one thing, faith in who Jesus is, was and calls the church to be.

And who is Paul calling the churches in Galatia to be?

What is their fault?

We gather from Paul's letter that they have been listening to the wrong kind of preacher. They have learned from teachers who "abused Christian freedom." Paul's belief is that they have been listening to "certain people...from James in Jerusalem (2:12) and Cephas (Peter, 2:14). Paul criticizes those who would create barriers for new believers to come to know God in Jesus. Peter was reprimanded by Paul for being inconsistent...on the one hand, proclaiming that Jews and Gentiles can belong, "that God makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile" (Acts 10:10-35). On the other hand, he left the table of converted Gentiles at Antioch, showing with his actions that God favored the Jewish members.

Paul is bold and addresses the problems of doctrine. Is God for all? Or, is God for certain kinds of believers? Is God for the Jew or is God for the Gentile? (Those non-Jewish believers, some poor slaves, some Roman citizens, some wealthy, some of his co-workers and others who were upper-middle class).

Remember, Paul uses his knowledge of his Jewish roots and training to try to convince not only Gentiles but his

Jewish colleagues that God's purposes, set forth from the time of the Law, was being transformed into a new kind of movement, not a cult, but a new religion.

Paul believes we receive salvation by grace, through faith...not by being circumcised first.

This is termed Paul's letters "Magna Charta of Christian Liberty" (Galatians) paved the way for Christianity to become a religion "instead of a Jewish sect."²

We know from Acts of Paul's conversion experience. Not many people have this kind of experience, completely **other**. No humans were involved in his conversion. He does not credit the sweet older gentleman who taught him how to pray at the temple. Nor does he credit his parents. He does not share a wonderful call story weaving in the many people along the way who nudged him asking "Do you know Jesus Christ?" "Have you heard the Good News?"

Paul's conversion was something **other**.

² New Oxford Annotated Bible. Galatians Introduction, p 263 NT.

He uses this in what I call his "Immediate Defense" of the Gospel to the churches. It is like he is starting ALL OVER. He's already been there to establish these churches, teaching them "you are saved by grace, through faith." But because some wolves have gotten to them, Paul is back...and has to re-sow those seeds.

Paul starts with what he knows best...his own failings.

In essence, Paul begins with a confession, "I was the worst!"

"In those days I went all out in persecuting God's church. I was systematically destroying it. I was so enthusiastic about the traditions of my ancestors that I advanced head and shoulders above my peers in my career. Even then God had designs on me."

Paul says God knew him and had plans for him in his mother's womb.

Reminiscent of Isaiah 49.5:

And now the LORD says,

**who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,**

**and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—**

Paul is establishing his credibility again.

See, here is my resume for work in the ministry of Jesus Christ!

Listen to me.

Don't listen to those other preachers who think they know God's work.

I was the worst offender of the Gospel, and now I am the servant of Christ, who is being persuaded daily by God.

Paul was "That man who once persecuted."

He became the one "preaching the very message he used to destroy."

Paul was known before for “dragging off both men and women to prison” (acts 8:3) for their beliefs in Jesus Christ...even to the point of death (acts 22:4).

Paul was bad news for those first Christians. He wasn't just mean, he was cruel. At the stoning of Stephen, Paul watched and did nothing to stop the murder.

The conversion of Paul – was *other*. God had changed him.

It wasn't his conscience calling him to be a better person. It was God. God wanted Saul to become new, and one of Paul's images would ring true – be a new creation in Christ.

Paul's resume would read:

I once took part in murders.

Now I take part in forming churches.

I am a bringer of Good News.

A bearer of Light.

A writer and communicator extraordinaire for the Way.

God has done this in me. No one else. Paul credits God, always.

And for this, Paul travelled around the area, converting, re-converting and calling the church to OBEDIENCE to Jesus Christ – and not any other form of the Gospel that excludes outsiders. For that is whom God calls, outsiders, to be in community.

God calls those on the margins to be INSIDERS.

And if God can call a man who watched silently while a believer was stoned to death, God can use you too.

Paul's life, quite imperfect, was made new in Christ.

His opening is an immediate defense of his authority. But the first chapter also gives testimony to the God who moves in all our lives to quell the fears we harbor so God's gospel might be shared, no matter our past actions or beliefs.