

## Hopeless Religion

In **Galatians 1:11-24** we walk in on an developing story, one filled with both genuine affection and very uncomfortable tension. To Galatia, that Northern region of the Roman province of Asia, ( what's now part of modern-day Turkey) has come a messenger from the apostle Paul. He is sent to visit each church and read a scroll. Galatia is an interesting case, because unlike most places named in the New Testament where the church first emerged, are no Jews here, nor are these people Greeks. The Galatians are actually Celts. Yes, the same wide spread culture that existed strung out along the trade routes of the ancient world all the way from Persia to Ireland. The Celtic people had their own distinct religion. Celts don't worship the Greek gods, and nor have they ever followed the Jewish Torah. The Celts worship the elements of nature: sun, moon and stars, wind, water, fire. . . . They are a people known for their love of both song and story.

Paul first arrived there through misfortune. Falling ill – possibly an eye infection – he is waylaid him from his travels. And the Galatians offered him the warmest of hospitality and he *told them God's story*. And out of this accidental meeting comes the birth of the Christian church.

And when Paul left Galatia, the churches there were healthy and Spirit-filled. But now something is going terribly wrong. These “foolish Galatians” are starting to turning to a “different gospel” due to the arrival of certain roving teachers, who *claim* to have been sent by the leaders of the Jerusalem church. And their central message is one of conformity to the Torah of Moses. Circumcision for example, was, to these teachers, a must for the Christians.

But why would people who weren't raised in Jewish homes and unfamiliar with Jewish tradition be persuaded to observe them *after* being born of the Holy Spirit, and *after* knowing the freedom of salvation in Christ Jesus? Well, exchange for obedience to the Jewish traditions, these teachers offer, in return, the sense of security that can be found in a neat, tidy, black and white system of religious rules. And this easy comfort can be very tempting.

Paul must write the Galatians for he's terribly concerned that they have begun to believe that religious works are way to salvation rather than faith in Christ. For faced with the overwhelming malignant power of sin, the Galatians are in danger of becoming *Hopelessly religious*.

*You* know what I mean. You've *met* people like this: religious as all get-out yet, still without *hope*. For Torah never did bring sin under control. No. God's goal in *Christ* was to set things right in creation *through the cross*. So to use religious rules as a tool to set things right in creation is a wrong turn from the word go. For you can never climb up the ladder from wrong to right. That simply *hopeless religion*.

But let's be clear: the battle in Galatians is not between Christians and Jews, but between Gospel and religion. Paul nowhere attacks the ethnic Jews for wanting to be Jews – for continuing to observe their historic food laws etc. But those who would impose the Torah on the Gentile world have embarked on in a mission which has at its core the *impotence of human religion*, and they will face the apostle's unrelenting wrath. Their “gospel,” he says, is no Gospel at all. These teachers are offering to the Galatians something no different from the pagan beliefs they were born into ( 4:8-11; 5:4). As such the Galatians are in danger of becoming nothing more than people who are *hopelessly religious*. And the Gospel is all about *hope*.

So this gives us some background. And now picking it up in 1: 11-24 we find . . .

### **A hint of the accusation against the apostle**

Reading between the lines, we can see that Paul is responding to something he's been accused of. Verse 11 “. . . I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by *me* is *not* of human origin . . .”

They are painting Paul as just another slick operator. The Greco-Roman world kept itself entertained with a passing parade of traveling speech-makers – men who had the gift of the gab and who could convince any audience on any given evening of any given argument – until, of course, tomorrow night when the next guy took to the podium and argued the opposite with equal success. So what's alleged is that Paul is trying to tailor the *message of God* to make it more palatable in the Gentile market. And yes, his accusers admit, Paul has been successful at that, but ‘not according to God's law.’ His accusers would have argued that whoever strays from God's will as revealed at Mt. Sinai has lost grasp of divine things, that Paul is a man tossed about by his human impulses and swayed by current popularity and cultural standards. Paul's message, therefore is of strictly human origin.

This, of course, is an accusation that Paul categorically denies. For it was in the *Cross* – not in Torah – that God invaded the human realm. It was not through Israel's obedience to Torah but through the death of Jesus Christ that God finally dealt with human sin and liberated the enslaved human race and was now working by his Spirit to set aright what, since Adam, has gone wrong in creation.

The Gospel is not just another clever argument . It is not of human origin. The Gospel presents each one of us with a crisis of *world-view*. What do I mean by that? Well, think about what would constitute “*good news*” today? What would be a typical good news story? Well, perhaps a medical breakthrough – one backed by clinical trials, or maybe positive numbers on the stock market over several quarters. Or an announcement of a lasting peace agreement in a previously troubled part of the world. *That's* good news! But in our world, in order for something to *qualify* as “good news,” it must be a comprehensible solution to a existing problem both proven and verified by observation.

Good news has to be based on facts.

Only then can good news be believed.

The fact is Jesus rose from the dead. And *that* fact poses a significant challenge to the unbeliever. But we don't evaluate the resurrection of Christ through the microscope of modern thinking. We aren't trying and make it acceptable to the modern mind. No. It's the *resurrection* of Jesus that is the *lens through which we look at all other realities*. Believing this, we judge all other realities. And this, is how Paul answers his accusers. The Gospel is . . .

### **A revelation not rhetoric**

Verse 12 “. . . I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I *received* it through a *revelation of Jesus Christ*.”

I don't know about you, but my personal passion on the Christian journey has always been to keep myself free from any and all entanglements of heart and mind that come in the form of *human religious traditions* that impose themselves on our lives and thereby interrupt and confuse God's communication with us. This is the great freedom in the Gospel. Real freedom. A direct communion with God through Jesus Christ.

But what's curious is Paul then turns around and insists that the Galatians must hold firm to what he's taught them. So isn't he also insisting of a set of required Christian beliefs? Well,

in a sense, *yes*, but what *he* gave them was not a long-standing religious tradition, but an announcement: “God’s has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.”

This was a unique invasion of the human realm. God sent His Son and His Spirit into the world and into human hearts. The Gospel is a *revelation* not a *religion*. ‘You know how you tell the difference? Well, let me propose to you a very simple test as to whether or not we have a real revelation on our hands or just somebody’s religious rhetoric. Just ask one simple question:

### **Where did you get your gospel from?**

As Christians, we don’t “believe in God’s existence.” We *know* him. *There’s* the difference. Think of how important this when considering the views of those who believe that modern sciences leaves no more place for a God in the universe: to be able to say, *yes*, but I know God personally and he answers my prayers. Think of how important that is when talking to those who believe there is ultimately natural explanations for everything, those who say, “I’m a product of my environment. It’s all my parents’ fault.” I am what I am, it’s in my genes. . .so how can you call me a “sinner” for simply behaving according to my nature?”

It is to be able to say “Jesus transformed my life.”

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought

Since Jesus came into my heart!”

But *Paul’s* Gospel didn’t start as a revelation and then eventually become a religious tradition much like any other. Yes, it has a definite linguistic *content*, for example: Jesus is Lord. He died and rose again, Jesus died for our sins. But on the road to Damascus, Paul already knew quite a bit about what Christians believed. But he just didn’t believe it . . . *until it happened to him*. That’s why he says to the Galatians, please, before you buy into this hopeless religion, please consider . . .

### **My Past**

Verse 13 “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.”

It’s likely the teachers had told a different version of Paul’s earlier life. They had probably told them that Paul *used to be* a good Jewish rabbi, *like us*. *Used to be*. But somewhere in his wanderings among the Gentile, this Paul went off the deep end. He lost it, foolishly abandoning the food laws and circumcision. Don’t pay any attention to him! *We’re* the ones on the straight and narrow. So you should listen to us.

So what does Paul *himself* understand about his former religion *Judaism*? Well, he says that in his pre-Christian zeal he had every intention of destroying the “church of God.” The church of God is an interesting phrase because Christians who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic spoke of themselves AS ISRAEL:

the NEW “assembly of the LORD.”

the “congregation of the LORD.”

“*The church of God.*”

These Jews, when they became Christians didn’t see themselves as *abandoning* Israel at all. They were in fact *the renewed Israel*. What they *were* leaving behind was a *religion*. Paul’s destructive zeal found it’s source in his *religion*. His *interpretation* of Torah fueled his passion for the eradication of the church. So Paul’s break with the past was not a rejection of Israel, or Torah. It was not anti-Jewish. What Paul was rejecting was . . .

## **The myth of honoured ancestors**

14 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.

These teachers who had come to Galatia were not terrible monsters. They were normal honest people who got caught up in a myth. Like Paul in his pre-conversion days, they were convinced that they were in fact *honouring the Hebrew ancestors*. Like Paul they had grown up on stories of great Bible heroes. They were standing firm for the LORD. But Paul himself knows what it's like to be totally zealous and devoted but actually destroying the work of God.

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Jesus asked. Why are you destroying my work?

These teachers may *think* they are honouring Father Abraham but their not. In chapter 4 he addresses these teachers as “you who desire to be subject to the law.” And he uses an allegory about the two sons of Abraham: Isaac and Ishmael: and I won't without go into the details right now, but he says to them in verse 29

“just as *at that time* the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, *so it is now also*.” What Paul means is the “flesh” – trusting in that genetic, bloodline connection with Abraham stands in conflict with the workings of the Holy Spirit which is bringing Jews and Gentiles together as one in Christ.

Now this may sound like a distant ancient conflict. But there seems to be a reoccurring phenomena though church history and throughout our own personal histories. It seems whenever the Gospel succeeds and genuine Spirit-filled like happens, very soon one form or another of rules-based religion begins to nose its way in. There is something that causes us to become hopelessly religious. Something that quashes and stymies the advancement of Christian growth. If we fall prey to some version of the myth that we are honouring the tradition handed down from the ancestors.” we too can become hopelessly religious. But for the Galatians – and for us – the *way out* is to follow . . .

## **A new calling**

Verse 15 “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and *called* me through his grace,

Aren't you glad for God's “but when's”? For the ways God has already, beforehand, set it up to get us out of the hopeless states *we get ourselves into*? There's such a strong contrast between Paul's past and present. His past was marked by a strict loveless obedience. His present life is the passionate joy of an apostle ever since, he says, “it pleased God to reveal his son to me.”

Remember, he's responding to a false version of his life's story – that having gone to Jerusalem and received the “true Gospel,” he then later sexed-it-up for the Gentile market. No. It never happened like that at all.

Paul met Jesus.

He was one singled out from birth and called. It's classic prophet stuff:

*Jeremiah*: “Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” (Jer 1:4-5)

*Isaiah*: “Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. (Isa 49:1)

The calling is not from one occupation to another. This is God calling the non-existent

into existence. God's grace is an act of the new creation. You don't go to school, write the test to qualify. Having not even been born yet, before he had done anything to merit it, God through his grace chose Paul. Before there even *was* a Paul to call, God made a gracious choice. And then on the Damascus road God invaded this man's life, calling into existence an apostle, a servant of Jesus Christ.

I want you to note very carefully here that Paul does not say he was chosen to propagate a system of religious beliefs; but "that I may preach . . .

## **Him**

You see, we would have *expected* here that Paul was about to say that God had revealed to him a new set of principles and ideas to replace "the traditions of the ancestors." But no. He will preach "him."

Jesus.

The foundation of the good news is God's act in revealing Christ to the world. What we refer to as "the Gospel" must never be confused with any one verbal formula, no matter how tried and true those words may be. Paul is not preaching a wiser path of life, a better route to happiness, not even a non-law Gospel in contrast to the teachers. No. The good news is *Christ's presence* in the world *for us*.

And what's also surprising, is that Paul doesn't say "from that day onward, from the day I met Jesus, I immediately went about my business preaching Christ.

He didn't do that. Instead, he went to . . .

## **Arabia**

Arabia? That's not where you should go, Paul? If you want to advance in your knowledge of the Gospel, you should go up to Jerusalem and talk to the apostles.

Paul *didn't* there. This city was no longer important to him as the centre of the Temple and priests, nor as the place he received his education as a rabbi. Now it was simply the place where there was church, a place of poverty and distress, a place where significant Christian leaders lived *and* unfortunately where certain false brothers were at work subverting the Gospel. (2:4)

But before he went there, he went to Arabia. Why? And what did he do there? We don't know. His time in Arabia is significant simply because he *didn't* go to Jerusalem.

Paul didn't need to get *church-ified*.

After receiving his revelation, he goes away into the desert for three years to develop his thinking. It took Paul three years to research to even begin to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. For Jesus had asked Paul one very crucial question: "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He needed to find the answer.

Do you have an Arabia? A place where you can answer God's questions? Paul's Arabia experience prepared him for his mission to the Gentile world. God needed to work in Paul's life, to sort out past, his hurts, his anger, his fear. In preparing to facing up to the people he once persecuted he must have felt insecure, must have feared being misunderstood.

But eventually he was ready.

He knew his message.

So he goes to Jerusalem. Not so much to verify that he had got it right but for the purpose of

### **Coordinating the Gospel mission.**

18 Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; 19 but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother.

Whatever the two men discussed and whatever information Paul received from Peter, it didn't change Paul's gospel. They may have discussed the very different and parallel tracks of ministry in their respective communities. There may have been an inkling of a growing vision of a global mission for the church. But the visit seems more personal than official. He didn't go to Jerusalem to receive advanced instruction or debate theology. His contact was actually very brief. He stayed with Peter and almost grudgingly admits to having talked to James.

For there really is only one Gospel. We mustn't overplay the difference between the mission to the Jewish and the Gentile worlds. The Gospel is a revelation of Jesus Christ. And on this, Peter and Paul are on the same page. Now all Paul really needs is . . .

### **A suitable place of ministry**

So we read in verse 21 "Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia . . ."

After his brief visit with Peter Paul immediately leaves Jerusalem and associates himself with the Antioch church, a place where they had already fully embraced the Gentile mission. He finds a companion in Barnabas. Paul has now found his people.

The church is such a multi-faceted organism. What works in one part of the church won't work in another – and vis versa. But that doesn't mean there's a problem. Paul could not have been a student in the Jerusalem church. He wouldn't have fit in there. In fact, for the next fifteen years, he wouldn't as much as show his face in Jerusalem.

But they heard about him.

They heard he was preaching the faith and they gave glory to God.

Looking back, can you see what's happened to Paul? This is a story of a man who went from hopeless religion to doing work that is inspired by God.

Paul became a missionary. You and I will become whatever

But today we have, I hope done more than hear a story of an ancient man, but moreover seen Paul as a role model.

We need to tell others where we got our Gospel from.

We need to tell our stories.

Because there's a lot of hopeless religion around.

. . . but it's our stories