

# I

---

## **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.

#### **I. 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; Jeremiah 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 Corinthians 9:1–2). Furthermore, as Christ possesses the power to perform miracles, so too did his apostles (2 Corinthians 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 Samuel 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’.<sup>1</sup> 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 Corinthians 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Corinthians 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. Philippians 4:21), but he does not name them (whereas he does in 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; Philemon 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. Nehemiah 13:1; Lamentations 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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, Revelation Dr Peter Cameron, principal of St Andrews College at the University of Sydney, replied, 'So what?'<sup>5</sup> 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.'<sup>6</sup>

## **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 ...*