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Carefully Chosen Words

Please Read Galatians 1:1-5

Welcome to Paul's letter to the Galatians! It is not the easiest of the great apostle's letters to understand, but it is certainly one his most fascinating. And, despite its complexities, it contains teaching that is absolutely vital for the spiritual health and wellbeing of God's people everywhere.

In many ways it is quite similar to Romans in terms of its main message; but the difference is that Romans has the feel of a message delivered from the quiet composure of a classroom, while Galatians, although its message is unmistakably similar, has the aura of being delivered in the heat of battle. It is clear from the very outset in this letter that Paul knew he was stepping into a spiritual conflict zone as he put pen to paper.

Even as we read his opening greeting and the language he reaches for in his somewhat terse opening prayer, there is more than a little edginess in his words. If it is hard for us to sense that immediately, especially if we are reading Galatians for the first

time, it would not have been hard for his Galatian audience to sense the tension in the words they were hearing as this letter was read out to them.

We can appreciate from our own experience there are certain conversations we need to have, but would prefer not have. Nevertheless, knowing we cannot avoid them, we will think carefully about how we greet the people we're addressing and lead into what follows.

We have already filled in a little of the background to the difficult situation Paul found himself having to address in Galatia, but it is worth reminding ourselves of what that was as we try to get our bearings in these opening verses. As with nearly all the letters Paul wrote, at least the ones that eventually became part of the New Testament, the apostle was writing in response to specific difficulties that had arisen in particular churches.

In this case it was a group of churches in a region called 'Galatia' (1:2). We have discussed the question of where exactly that region was in the main introduction: notably whether it was the northern region that came to bear that name because of the dominant ethnic grouping for whom it was home, or the southern part of the much larger Roman province that bore that name in Paul's day. My own leaning is to see it as the second of these options because it fits more easily with the record we have in the record of Paul's missionary journeys in Acts. It shows clearly that he visited towns in this southern part of Asia Minor in the course of those travels and founded churches there. If this is indeed the case, then this letter was written possibly as early as AD 48, fairly soon after these churches had been planted.

This background scenario would certainly help to explain two things that stand out in what follows. The first is the

air of tension and urgency in the tone of Paul's writing. As the one who had invested so much of himself as well as his energy into reaching these people with the gospel and helping them to get established as embryonic congregations, he would understandably have been on edge as he learned that things were unravelling in those churches so quickly. The second is that it also explains why the gospel is the big issue he needs to address, the gospel which, he says, they are 'so quickly deserting' (1:6).

Putting all this together, it helps us get a sense of why Paul is very deliberate in the way he chooses his words in this opening greeting and prayer. When we compare them with the introductions to his other letters, they have a distinctly different feel and it's only as we begin to grasp the details of the issue he was addressing that we understand why.

That issue and two of its components in particular are so serious and significant we can well appreciate why Paul begins in the way he does. On the one hand there is the monumental question of who has the authority to claim to speak in God's name and as one of his divinely appointed messengers. And on the other hand perhaps the greatest question of all, 'What constitutes the essence of the gospel, the message of God's salvation?' Both of these issues have perennial significance for the church through the ages and, in one way or another, every generation has to wrestle with them.

Let's deal with these opening verses in a bit more detail with the help of three questions.

Why Listen to Paul?

Galatians is not the only letter in which Paul states up front that he is 'an apostle' (1:1), but it stands out here because it almost seems he is overstating this fact. The term 'apostle' is used in the

New Testament in a number of ways, but two uses of the word are most common. The word in itself basically means someone who is ‘sent’—an emissary, if you like. And there are various references to people like Barnabas (Acts 14:4) and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:5) as ‘apostles’ (in some translations, ‘messengers’) in the sense of having been set apart and sent by the church for a specific task or mission. However, the best-known and most common use of the term in the New Testament relates to those who were specially chosen by Christ as those who were, among other things, ‘a witness to his resurrection’ (Acts 1:22). It was this Christ-appointed apostolic band that would play a foundational role in establishing the church in the New Testament era (Ephesians 2:20), not least through the particular role they played in giving us the New Testament itself.

As Paul writes to the Galatians, it is very much the latter sense he has in mind as he uses this designation of himself with all the overtones of the authority bound up with the position. So why does Paul need to state, or better, restate this detail about himself? Quite simply because these Christians in Galatia—especially if they were still relatively new converts—needed to be reminded of the authority that lay behind his teaching. It will very quickly become clear as we read on that this authority, which had originally been instrumental on bringing these people to faith and their churches into being, was now being challenged by teachers claiming an authority of their own. The burning question this inevitably posed for the Galatians was, ‘To whom should we listen?’

In many ways this is the burning question that has seared itself into people’s minds through the centuries. From the mundane level of competing financial advisors trying to persuade us to invest our life savings in their fund as opposed to a rival’s, through to the more serious appeal from spiritual advisors

who want us to invest our life itself in their belief system, the question arises: who are we to believe and how can we tell a fraudster from someone who is genuine?

It is hard to overstate the seriousness of this dilemma for those who claim to be Christian and to bring a message of salvation. The Bible itself tells us we need to check the credentials, not just of such messengers themselves, but of the message they present to see if it is consistent with what the Bible actually says (1 John 4:1). In the case of the competing messages that were circulating in Galatia—both claiming to be Christian—there was one significant clue that would distinguish the true from the false. Were the people behind these messages self-appointed or appointed by God? Paul answers that question for his part with interlocking references which validated his unique position as one of the recognised Apostles of the New Testament church.

He states this negatively in the first place by saying he was ‘sent not from men nor through man’ (1:1). He had not taken on this role on his own initiative or even by the authority of the church. Rather, it was ‘through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.’ The reference to the Father’s role in Christ’s resurrection echoes what Paul says elsewhere about this being God’s public vindication of Jesus as the Messiah (Romans 1:4) and serves to reinforce the uniqueness of the authority he conferred on those he called as Apostles. If all this did not already carry enough weight in itself Paul adds, ‘and all the brothers who are with me’ to his greeting (1:2). He may have been referring to the little band of travelling companions who were rarely far from his side; or, more likely, to the believers among whom he was ministering as he wrote this letter. Either way he was making it clear that his authority was recognised and respected by many others.

Through the ages the church has been accused of all kinds

of crimes and not without some justification, but the worst of them is almost never mentioned: those times it has proclaimed a message it has no authority to proclaim. There is nothing more serious in the sight of God than for those who claim to speak in his name to offer a message of salvation that does not come from him. It is for that reason that Paul is so concerned to reassert his authority so firmly and reassert his right to speak with God-given authority.

Why Consider his Letter?

In the normal protocols of letter writing through the ages the recipients would rarely expect the greeting to be much more than a polite formality. The same was true in the world of Paul's day, but in nearly all his letters he manages to tweak the usual greeting in such a way as to turn it into an entry point to the specific issues about which he is writing. He loads every word with significance for his readers. So, here in Galatians, 'grace' and 'peace' become a subtle but significant variation on the norms of the day. The spelling of the Greek word for 'grace' differs only by a few letters from the word for 'greetings,' which was the standard way to begin a letter in the Greek and Roman world. By adding 'peace' to his salutation Paul was borrowing something that was deeply embedded in the Jewish form of greeting: *shalom!* In a very skilful way Paul was reaching out to both of the major groupings within the Galatian churches: those from a Greek and Roman background and those who were of Jewish extraction. But he was doing something even more striking through his choice of words. By greeting his readers with 'grace' and 'peace' he was providing a three word reminder of what the gospel is all about: peace with God that becomes ours by the grace God extends to us in salvation. The apostle unpacks this thought further as he tells us through whom these

two great blessings come: ‘... from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:3).

The ‘grace’ for which Paul prays for these Galatians is the idea of being accepted, or favoured by God, not because we can somehow earn or deserve it, but as God’s free gift. And, flowing from that, the ‘peace’ with which it is coupled is the idea not only of being at peace with God—reconciled to him through his forgiveness—but also being able to live at peace with ourselves and our fellow human beings. Both of these ideas, as we shall see, were highly pertinent to the situation in Galatia. Far from there being this three dimensional peace in the churches, there was serious unrest and outright conflict. And instead of seeing these blessings as God’s gift, there was a growing sense in which people regarded them as something they had to earn through their own effort and merit.

As we trace these two crucial concepts through church history, it is very striking to see how they seem to crop up and cause disruption for Christians and churches with uncanny frequency. The temptation to view our relationships with God and other people—not to mention with ourselves—as performance-based is the default position of the human heart. So Paul is more than right to begin putting his finger on this issue from the very outset.

The weight of what he is conveying in his greeting is intensified by the way he links them not just to ‘God our Father’ but also to Jesus Christ as his Son and our Saviour. Paul is not content to see these two great blessings from God in the broad light of God’s fatherly love, but more specifically in light of what he has decisively done and provided through his Son, Jesus. Indeed, Paul makes it more specific by adding that Jesus ‘gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age’ (1:4).

Paul is clearly referring to what Jesus did through his death on the cross. In a narrow sense Jesus was literally giving himself as a sacrifice through his crucifixion 'for' the sins of all his people. The littleness of the word 'for' should not obscure the magnitude of what it represents. Paul was saying that the terrible greatness of our sin and guilt, which we could never atone for by ourselves, is perfectly met by the infinite greatness of the One who paid their price. So, as we look to Jesus for acceptance with God, we can be sure that God will indeed give what he has promised because he has gone to such lengths to secure it. But the apostle takes it even further when he adds that Jesus also died 'to rescue us from the present evil age.' He is reaching for language his Jewish readers would have been familiar with from the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) which speaks of the fallen state of the entire created order ever since Adam rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-24). It is an age in which evil and its consequences are pervasive in people's lives and throughout the world. Even at the very best it is spoiled by sin and, despite the best of human efforts to change this state of affairs, self-deliverance is beyond our reach.

The good news of the gospel is that what the human race could never have done for itself, God has secured and provided through his Son. As Paul says, all this was 'according to the will of our God and Father' (1:4). Salvation was central to God's eternal plan and purpose from the very beginning. It was never his intention to allow evil to have the last word in the world and universe he made, or within the race that he made to bear his image. The wonder of it all was that he sent his own Son to bring about this great deliverance: Paul draws attention to this great fact in order that people might see their need and look to Christ, so making the deliverance their own.

Why Fight over the Gospel?

One of the recurring objections to the Christian message through the ages is the accusation that Christians always seem to be fighting over something. Sadly there is a sense in which this accusation is too often true and we as Christians ought to be ashamed over the petty issues that have caused unnecessary strife and division. There are, however, other battles that have been necessary, notably those battles that have been fought to preserve the integrity of the message at the very heart of the Christian Faith. As Paul braces himself to challenge the distortions of this message that were creeping into the churches in Galatia, he wants his readers to be very clear as to why he is doing so.

The biggest clue to what is at stake in all this is seen in the way the apostle rounds off his opening greeting. Having referred to God the Father as the One who has planned salvation, he bursts into praise by adding, ‘...to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen’ (1:5). By pointing to God the Father in this way, he is not in any sense diminishing the role of God the Son, or indeed the work of God the Holy Spirit in redemption, but simply reflecting the pattern of praise that Jesus himself taught his disciples in the words of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13). Indeed, it is not without significance that these words of doxology that round off the introduction to this letter are mirrored in the way it ends when Paul says, ‘But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (6:14).

Paul’s great concern as he addresses the problems in Galatia was the question of who gets the credit for salvation. As we will see from what he goes on to say in the main body of the letter, the new ideas that were being taught in these churches were subtly directing it away from God and his grace to human beings and their own efforts to earn his favour. Paul knew full well

that to allow this to happen would be to reinforce the grip of evil in the world rather than release people from it. Sin and evil in their very essence invert God's order in creation. Instead of God quite literally being the centre of everything, sin has made human beings think and act as though that were true of them. The salvation God has provided through his Son is the only way that people can be truly set free and because of that God alone deserves the glory for it.

As Paul sets the scene for what will follow, he wants his readers to take their eyes off themselves and fix them afresh on God and his grace and all that he has so freely provided through his Son. And that is what the gospel is meant to do. But the fact Paul adds the little word 'Amen' to what he says takes us one step further. It is not enough to look to God and all he has done merely as spectators; each one of us needs to enter into it by faith to receive his great salvation for ourselves. So the ancient Hebrew affirmation 'amen'—one that is meant to be echoed by those who are listening—serves as a confirmation that the gospel is not only true, but that they themselves have embraced it.

The challenge for all of us as we hear Paul's reaffirmation of the gospel at the beginning of this letter is that we too should say 'Amen!' to all that it means for us.