

Galatians

1. No Other Gospel (Gal 1:1-9)

William Poteet wrote in "The Pentecostal Minister" how in 1903 the Russian Czar noticed a sentry posted for no apparent reason on the Kremlin grounds. Upon inquiry, he discovered that in 1776 Catherine the Great found there the first flower of spring. "Post a sentry here," she commanded, "so that no one tramples that flower under foot!"

Tradition is part of life in our society and life in church. But what happens when things change and the reason for the tradition no longer applies? We find tradition difficult to break from and as I pointed out this morning, in history, error has been tolerated and made part of the church because it was too radical to change it and follow what God's Word says.

By and large many of our traditions don't create problems for us but they can when clearly what we are being asked to do conflicts with what is set out in the Word of God.

This was the major issue of the first century. We see the roots of it in Acts. If you can remember the series we did on mission in Acts, we saw how even the Twelve seem to have had a difficulty with what Paul and Barnabas were doing in Antioch and in Asia Minor which included the Roman province of Galatia.



Gentile people were becoming believers without ever having any background in Judaism and Paul was not encouraging them to become Jews. It all came to a head in the Council of Jerusalem where for all intents and purposes Paul's position was vindicated.

There were many Jewish believers that really couldn't cope with the idea that Gentile Christians were not being required to obey the Jewish law. Worse these Judaizers set out to undo Paul's work in Asia Minor by trying to convince believers converted under Paul that they needed to become Jews. The map shows the Roman province of Galatia

between 25 and 137 and as you can see it included the cities Paul preached at in his first missionary journey.

As I said this morning, grace thinking does not naturally come to us. It's easier to live a life of religious activity than live a life honouring to Christ - the two are not the same thing.

As we shall see Paul was dead against the people that were spreading this other gospel and you'll see evidence of his thoughts on this in many of his writings. On the other hand they were claiming that Paul was a fraud and not a true apostle.

Galatians was possibly the earliest of Paul's writings. Scholars used to think it was 1 Thessalonians but the nature of the argument in Galatians suggest it may have been written as early as AD 47 - 15 years after the death of Jesus and it competes with Mark's gospel for the title of earliest NT book. It was written after the Council of Jerusalem but refers to incidents before.

We have explored the issue before when we looked in Acts. We have explored it too in the Freedom in Christ series I did a year ago. We even touched a little this morning.

It's simply over the issue of whether our faith is meritorious or whether it's free. The conventional wisdom of this world our salvation depends on our merit, or on us doing something that somehow ingratiate ourselves to God.

The trouble is the fundamental principle of all religions, except true Christianity, is that favour with the gods is based on human achievement and merit. It's what I call primal religion. It's based on doing things which we think will save our skins.

That was much the basis of Judaism in the first century - but not may I add, the teaching of the Old Testament. As I've said before, the 10 commandments - or words as we should call them correctly - start with a statement :I am the Lord *your* God who brought you out of the land of Egypt etc. It's a statement of grace.

But as we look in the gospels we see the quality of faith that characterised first century Judaism. It was works based. You do your bit and somehow God may shine on you. As we considered this morning, that isn't the way of grace.

This was the position of the Judaisers. To them faith was conditional on trusting Christ and obeying the Jewish law. For Paul, he saw them as placing heavy burdens on free people and enslaving them again.

John Piper sums up Paul's position on grace in this way:

Galatians exalts these two things: the cross of Christ as the only way a person can get right with God, and the Spirit of Christ as the only way a person can obey God.

What's this got to do with us? What it has to do with us is that in the modern Christian faith we are still weighed down with the notion of law. Somehow we still try to attract God through our merit and we weigh ourselves down with law.

Let me give you some examples:

👉 we say must please God by having a certain dress code. If we fail in that we sin and dishonour God. How many stories of people have you come across where they have been turned away from church because they are not properly dressed. Not wearing a tie? Now what part of the Bible is that in?

👉 we must worship in a certain way and the way other people worship in a different way to use dishonour God and are sinful. We take offence at people who get a bit

emotional, or are a bit noisy - tut, tut - they shouldn't do that. Because the Bible says we should be all quiet, reserved and respectful in worship. Perhaps the psalmist must have been mistaken when he penned the words "Shout to the Lord"?

👉 If people don't have the same doctrine as us regarding behaviour, dress, worship style, use a modern version of scripture, or use spiritual gifts that we don't think exist must be sinful, evil or even satanic and must be avoided. Now in which part of the Bible are we instructed which English version we should use. Oh dear, when it was written, English hadn't been invented.

👉 we make generalised judgements about people or denominations which suit our prejudices but are not true when we deal with groups or individuals - all Methodists are liberal, all Anglicans tolerate homosexual acts, all charismatics are crazy, Alpha is bad because it's been misused by one person or another.

👉 certain activities are evil and must be avoided at all cost as they pollute our minds and are therefore sinful - going to the cinema, walking into a pub, drinking alcohol, mixing with certain kinds of people, listening to popular music particularly if it is loud, dancing of any sort, particularly in a disco or night-club. Were any of these prohibited in Scripture? Nowhere, because most hadn't been invented.

This was the sort of situation Paul was facing with Judaisers. They were binding free people with law. Let's see what he has to say to them

➡ He speaks to them with the authority of God

Gala 1:1 Paul, an apostle--sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-- 2 and all the brothers with me,

When we are faced with law - any suggestion that the gospel is not all grace - then on whose authority do they speak. In our case our only appeal is to the Word of God. Whenever we have to deal with error, you'll find at the root of that error that it isn't based on the Word of God.

People I know sometimes ask questions about what I preach about. All I would bring to you is this notion - is it in the Word of God. is it what it actually says. Some of the biggest errors in the Christian church are based on bad scriptural interpretation Usually law is a result.

What is good practice? We need to ask ourselves a question - what did this passage mean to the original readers because it is unlikely to mean anything else. This is true of the NT and usually true of the OT except where the NT reveals more about it. The trouble is, once error starts, it's difficult to stop it.

This morning I mentioned the problem with baptism and the problem with what a disciple is but there are other issues which we need to look at what the Word of God actually says not somebody else's interpretation of them.

➡ The basis of our faith is in the death of Christ

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

This is a clear statement of grace. We have been delivered from this present evil age by Christ according to the will of God. Not mine, not my actions - but God's actions. I hope after what I said this morning that this is obvious. It's his sacrifice not sacrifice plus church attendance, not sacrifice plus religious acts or sacrifice plus doing worship in a certain way.

➔ Paul condemns those who taught untruth and lured people from the truth

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

The Galatians had slipped away in a matter of years. Don't be fooled with the allure of people who try to draw us away from grace. What untruth are we likely to come across. Obvious ones are JW's, Mormons or in Christian circles, prosperity ministry.

But part of the loss of the church in the past 20 years has been due to other gospels. We thought we had truth but haven't communicated it effectively because we have been so steeped in our religion that we haven't done it. Judaizing wasn't that different from what Paul had taught but it was a case of grace plus.

That's been the sin of the modern church - grace plus do it our way, grace plus witnessing is an optional extra, grace plus our denomination is more important, grace plus the gospel must only be preached in a certain way, grace plus it doesn't matter if we preach. And the gospel has been watered down and we must be people who stand for truth and face up to what God is calling us to do - the hard things and the easy ones. In the next few weeks we are going to explore some of these.

Let's be challenged.

