

Galatians 1:1-9
Different Gospel: No Gospel
Notes for a sermon preached at
Christ Church Liverpool
September 2003

So here we are. Christ Church Liverpool on our inaugural day. I'm very pleased and happy to be here and to see so many friends, some visitors as well as our core team who have worked and prayed very hard to get this new local church up and running.

This is a good day. But beginnings are dangerous. Newly germinated plants are the most likely to die. Take off is the most dangerous part of flight.

I wonder if any of you have thought about what might spoil our church?

What might stop it from growing and flourishing as we all hope that it will?

What might make Christ Church ineffective in our mission of bringing the good news of Jesus to the people of Liverpool?

I guess if you went "out there" and asked folk why it is that the people of our nation are not exactly flocking to the churches you'd get a fair spread of answers...

That church is boring
Irrelevant
Dated
And intolerant.

As far as most people are concerned churches simply don't relate to the spirit of our times.

In fact that is more or less exactly what someone said to me just yesterday afternoon as they were giving me a hard time about working for a church.

With all their dogma and traditionalism and ritual and narrow-mindedness how can churches ever hope to grow and flourish?

And, to be perfectly honest, beginning your new church with a passage like the one we've just heard read to us doesn't seem like a terribly auspicious start.

Look at 1:8-9

Paul calling down curses from heaven on people who disagree with him.

And in a week when former minister Paul Hill has been executed in Florida for the murder of a doctor and his bodyguard at an abortion

clinic maybe we're especially nervous about religious intolerance like Paul seem to show here.

Certainly some of the commentators on the book of Galatians are a bit twitchy about Paul's tone.

They seem uncomfortable about suggesting that the man who wrote that wonderful material in 1 Corinthians "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud..." could have written this as well.

Some of them are kind enough to point out that this is probably the first of Paul's surviving letters...

with the none too subtle implication that we should go easy on the poor guy because he hadn't really got his theology sorted out and still had a lot to learn...

Well before we dismiss Paul, or at least this portion of his work, as ranting not worthy of attention in our enlightened, liberal 21st century, maybe we need to reflect that perhaps all this tolerance business is a bit of a double-edged sword.

The poet Ogden Nash put it like this:

*Sometimes with secret pride I sigh
To think how tolerant am I
Then wonder which is really mine;
Tolerance, or a rubber spine?*

So, before we consign Paul and the letter to the Galatians to the dustbin marked "bigot" maybe we need to think a bit more carefully about our culture's views of "tolerance" and about the situation the apostle Paul found himself in as he wrote to the Galatian churches.

Because, as we shall see, Paul's contention is that the biggest danger to these 1st century congregations in Turkey was not intolerance but too much tolerance.

Paul's contention is that the biggest danger to these churches was not intolerance but too much tolerance.

The Galatian churches were young. There is some dispute amongst the scholars about exactly where the churches that received this letter were.

It's possible that they were in what had historically been called Galatia – in which case the people in the churches were ethnically Celts, like the Gauls, Scots, Welsh and Irish.

But it's more likely that the churches were in the Roman province of Galatia in cities like Psidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe and Iconium – you can read all about Paul's visits there in the book of Acts chapters 13-14 if you like.

Either way these churches were only a few years old at most.

And unlike so many churches in our own nation they were not dying on their feet, but brimming with new life. They were new church plants, full of enthusiastic, keen Christian people.

So it shouldn't, I hope, be very difficult to make a connection between the situation Paul is speaking into and our own situation here at Christ Church. You see the problems of death and the problems of life are very different. And one of the problems of life in a church is that so often the enthusiastic young Christian is willing to listen to anyone.

And, as we will see, the Galatian church was being afflicted with teachers who abused the tolerance of this young church to bring a message that would, if allowed to run unchallenged ultimately, destroy the church.

What we have in the book of Galatians is a fight for the soul and allegiance of a young church between the apostle Paul and the new teachers.

Over the next few weeks we'll be thinking in much more details about what the message was that these new teachers were bringing and why it was that Paul felt obliged to oppose them with such vehemence and ferocity.

But for now we're going to introduce the principal characters in the drama that is going to unfold before us in the book of Galatians...

1 Paul – messenger of Jesus grace (1-5)

All of Paul's letters, preserved for us in the New Testament, begin in the traditional Roman style – Paul, to the Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, whoever.

On different occasions Paul expands on or emphasises different parts of this traditional opening.

And here at the beginning of Galatians he focuses attention particularly on his job as an apostle.

V1 – sent not from men nor by man but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

It seems that Paul is responding here to those who questioned the authenticity of his message. He is challenging those who said that though he had laid a good foundation, to be a proper Christian, there was more to do than Paul had let on.

But Paul is clear. "I do not speculate on my message," he says. "It's not just an interesting hypothesis, a theory, an idea."

"I possess a unique, first hand, God-given gospel and my role is to define that gospel for others. I was not sent by anybody. I was not commissioned by men. I am a messenger of God himself."

I'm sure you all know one of two of those irritating people who love to name drop. Actually, let's be honest, most of us love to name drop... "Oh I was just talking to this person the other day..." Whether it's the senior consultant, the Hollyoaks star, the author, the "famous Christian" we all like to show that we're in with the people who are in.

And you might be forgiven for thinking that saying you're sent from God is really the ultimate piece of name dropping. But Paul isn't doing this because he's into one upmanship. He's doing it because he is genuinely concerned to assert the authority that he has been given by Jesus. Because the message Jesus has given to Paul is good news.

And to turn away from that message would bring disaster to the Galatian churches or to our church.

For the message that Paul brings is one of, v3 there, grace and peace. It is the message that the Lord Jesus gave himself in order to rescue us from the present evil age.

It is a message of joy and freedom, and to turn away from it would be tragic.

Paul starts his letter to the Galatians with an appeal to his authority, not because he has an over inflated sense of his own ego, but because he has a commission to tell the truth.

And we can't afford to negotiate about the truth. When it comes to truth and falsehood tolerance is not a virtue. To allow yourself to be persuaded out of the truth is not wisdom but foolishness.

Paul is a messenger of God's grace. And the Galatians will need to listen to what he has to say **because they are turning from grace to rules.**

2 The Galatians – turning from grace to rules (6-7a)

The heart, the Bible teaches, is deceitful above all things.

And the truth of that claim is shown by the response of the Galatians to Paul's teaching.

Even Paul, experienced evangelist and Bible teacher that he was, is, v6 there, astonished at the speed at which they are moving away from the message he brought.

Depending on exactly when Galatians was written it may be as little as a few months since Paul was last with these churches and already they are turning away.

But what is it exactly they are turning from? And what is it they were turning to?

The first of those questions Paul answers directly. V6: the message they are turning away from is the message of the grace of Christ.

The undeserved mercy and goodness of God extended in forgiveness to those who trust in Jesus – who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.

What it is they were turning too is harder to answer.

It seems to me that the situation Paul is dealing with a party of what might be called "Jewish Christian sympathisers" that has arrived in the Galatian cities.

The message these teachers brought was similar to that brought by new teachers in Acts 15 – that people who were not Jewish but who wished to follow Jesus the Messiah needed to be circumcised (if they were men!) and required to obey at least some of the distinctive Jewish laws – such as observing the Sabbath, the feasts and the food laws.

The Galatians were keen. They wanted to be the best Christians that they could possibly be. So when someone came along and told them that there was more they could do to make themselves really pucker Christians, they wanted to do it. So they turned to a belief system of Jesus plus keeping the law. Or, to put it simply, Jesus plus rules.

They weren't turning away from Christ, they thought. Not at all. They were moving on, they were progressing, they were growing into a more mature gospel.

But not according to Paul. As far as he is concerned this message they were hearing and listening wasn't a progression. It was a different gospel.

And that meant that it was no gospel at all. Not good news.

This "back to Moses" campaign that the new teachers are running, Paul says, isn't an improvement on my message. It's a reversal of my message.

In fact, as we'll see over the next couple of weeks, the new teachers were going back to the way of life that Paul himself had been liberated from by the message of Jesus.

The new message probably didn't look that different. Paul says later in the letter that a little yeast works its way through the whole dough. A little yeast.

The new teachers would never have got a hearing if they'd jumped in and said everything the Galatians had believed up to now was all wrong. So they didn't say that. They just said you need to do a bit more.

The frightening thing about rules is just how much human beings want rules to keep.

In my own experience I've seen that most clearly in the way so many people I meet have totally misunderstood what Christianity is all about.

To be a follower of Jesus, according to all the documents of the New Testament is not anything to do with being approved of by God on the basis of our moral good deeds. In fact, according to the Bible, to be a Christian is exactly the opposite of that. It is confessing our inability to be morally good and trusting in Christ's grace to save us, because we are not good.

But most people I meet still think being a Christian is, essentially, about keeping rules.

Whether it's the people who don't want to be a Christian because they don't want to have to keep rules or the people who say they can't become a Christian because they aren't good enough, both have completely misunderstood what it's all about.

This impulse to want to make or keep ourselves right with God by what we do is hugely strong in us. Later on in this letter we will see that both Barnabas, Paul's trusted friend and missionary colleague, and the apostle Peter were both taken in by this teaching. It is very seductive. And totally opposite of the true good news of the grace of Jesus.

It is often said that as Christians we can be faithful in our generation but that we cannot guarantee the next generation. But what Paul says here is that we cannot guarantee even our generation to remain faithful the gospel brought by Paul and the other apostles. There is no space for complacency here.

What a tragedy it would be if in just a few years time people looked at Christ Church and said how sad it was that we turned away from the grace of Christ to a different message which was no good news at all.

The tragedy had not yet happened to the Galatians. It was not too late for them. They are deserting, v6, but they have not yet finally turned away. That's why Paul's tone is so urgent here. Come home Galatians. Don't do it.

And did you notice what it is they are deserting?

Not Paul.
Not just a message.

No. By turning from grace to rules they are deserting the one who called them by the grace of Christ – they are deserting God himself.

As our church starts we need to be really careful who we listen to.

Because our nature will make us want to listen to people who tell us that if we follow certain rules we will be OK.

Our pride will make us want to think that if we are good citizens, go to church a lot, are really committed and perform the right routines God will like us and we will be secure.

So we need to be very careful that we don't listen to those siren voices but to the message of Paul and the other apostles kept for us in the pages of the Bible.

3 The new teachers – damned liars (7b-9)

If Paul agonises over the Galatians and their fickleness he reserves his anger for the teachers who are seducing them from the true message of Christ.

They are, he says, throwing the church into confusion (v7) and trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

We don't know exactly who these people were. But Paul did. And, with an apostle's insight he knew their motivations too – theirs was a deliberate attempt to change his message of grace.

That's not to say they were ogres. No doubt they genuinely and sincerely believed that the message they were bringing – Jesus plus obedience to a set of rules that would mark God's people out as different. They believed that was a more biblical gospel.

Possibly they were motivated partly by a desire to help Christians live ethical lives in a pagan world full of immorality and sin.

But nonetheless what they did was pervert the gospel of Jesus. They added to it in such a way as to make it bad news and not good news.

They probably sounded very convincing. They were probably sincere in their own minds that what they were doing was for the best.

But none of that made any difference in the end.

Even if Paul himself, v8, or a mighty seraph from heaven radiating pure light and fire were to come and give the Galatians a gospel which was different from the one they had already heard and accepted it would not matter.

Because to say that we need something else to be saved in addition to Jesus is a terrible sin. Whoever says it.

To say that we need to keep rules to be rescued or to keep in relationship with God is to say that Jesus is not enough. It is to say that he is not the promised king who would save all who put their trust in him.

In fact if we deny that Jesus alone is sufficient, if we suggest that there is anything else we have to do, anything else we **can** do but trust in his grace. If we add anything to Jesus we are saying that Jesus is not who he claimed to be.

And Jesus himself said that that was the only unforgivable sin in the universe.

That is why Paul here calls down curses on the false teachers.

They are not just liars – they are damned liars because they deny Jesus' saving grace and try to drag the Galatians away from it too.

Now Paul is no Paul Hill.

He did not kill for his beliefs – and nor should any Christian.

Christians do not kill for their belief in the uniqueness and sufficiency of Jesus – though we should be willing to die for that belief.

Paul is no fanatic in that sense. But he was rightly intolerant. Intolerant of claims that distorted and misrepresented the truth about Jesus. Intolerant of a gospel that was not good news but the same old rule keeping with a new gloss.

He was intolerant of anything which would rob the Galatians of the free gift of salvation which was theirs by trusting in Christ alone.

It was right for Paul to be intolerant of such teaching. To allow the false teachers to have put the Galatians on a path that would lead them away from the salvation Jesus offers would not have been admirably enlightened.

It would have been breathtakingly irresponsible.

I very much hope that Christ Church will be a tolerant church. That people who come here Sunday by Sunday will be welcomed, cared for and feel that Christian love and hospitality has been extended to them, whoever they are. Whatever their gender, ethnicity, language, religion or sexuality. I hope that we will be courteous and honest with those who disagree with us. I very much hope that Christ Church will be a tolerant church.

But I hope too that we will be intolerant of any message that detracts from the unique grace of Jesus, which alone can rescue us. I hope that as a church we will never be seduced by "another gospel" which is no gospel.

This is an issue of such importance that Paul repeats his curse in v9.

*I say again. If anybody, **no matter how qualified they look**, is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned.*

Newly germinated plants are the most likely to die. Take off is the most dangerous part of flight.

What might spoil our church?

What might stop it from growing and flourishing as we all hope that it will?

As John Stott wisely points out in his commentary on Galatians, today, just as in Paul's day, the greatest threat to the church, the thing that will stop it growing and flourishing comes not from outside, but from inside.

From people who want to change the gospel. People who are not satisfied with Jesus. Let us not join them.

Andrew Evans