

Galatians 1:10-2:10
Paul's Gospel: God's Gospel
Notes for a sermon preached at
Christ Church Liverpool
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I wonder if you ever look back with nostalgia to the days when you used to have birthday parties.

I don't mean the kind of parties you have now – all civilised meals out at Caesar's Palace or Jalons or the Blue Bar or the Crowne Plaza (according to your budget). I mean real children's parties.

In the days when 10 pin bowling or a trip to McDonalds was one of the most wonderful things you could imagine.

Children's parties.

With sandwiches with no crusts.

Jelly and ice cream.

Chocolate fingers.

Coca cola.

Sausage rolls and...

Party games.

To be fair I personally didn't really like the party games.

Well, that's not entirely true. I liked the party games as long as I won them. But I really didn't respond very well to losing them. Especially at my own parties – after all what's the point of having a party if you can't win the games?

Those of you who know me well are, I am sure, be shocked and surprised by this because you'll know how uncompetitive and relaxed I am about games and sports.

Anyway one of the few games that I was very keen on – because it didn't really have a winner and therefore I couldn't lose – was Chinese whispers. No doubt these days it would have to have a less racist title.

I just used to love the completely random things that were produced by a good game of Chinese whispers.

You know you start out with the first person whispering:

"The grey elephant went down to the Oasis to have a drink and a sleep."

And by the time you get to the end you've got:

"Green aardvarks will drown in Austria if they don't drink shandy."

Chinese whispers is a great party game.

But it's not a method you'd choose to convey an important message.

If you want to say something that matters you want the most direct route possible.

You want to go straight to the person you're trying to communicate with.

When I was at school the standard means of asking someone out was to get one of your friends to go to one of "her" friends to tell the friend that you fancied her friend and would she go and ask her friend if she'd go out with you. The reason for this, of course, was that you wouldn't want to be seen actually talking to this person you are professing to like so much.

These days, I'm told, text messaging is the means of choice to ask someone out. It may seem to lack a certain romance – but it has the great advantage of being able to go direct to the person you want to communicate with.

2000 years ago the apostle Paul was facing a group of people in the churches of Galatia who said that his gospel, the message that Paul preached, was more like Chinese whispers than a text message.

In fact it was even worse than that. Because they felt that Paul's gospel was distorted not just because it had come repeatedly via different people into Paul's hands. It was distorted because Paul had deliberately changed the message of Jesus in order to make it more acceptable to non-Jewish people. They were saying that Paul was a man pleaser. Changing his gospel to suit what people wanted to hear.

That's why Paul is so passionate in 1:10. You don't get all hot under the collar about something like that unless that's what people are saying about you. Paul, in his defence, will show that his message is not at all pleasing to men.

In fact, ironically, what they are accusing Paul of being now – a man pleaser – is what Paul used to be, v10: "*If I were STILL trying to please men...*"

But as he writes this letter Paul is no longer concerned what anybody thinks of him – apart from Jesus. Paul is a servant with only one master – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week we saw Paul shocked and horrified that the Galatian Christians were so quickly turning away from the message of the grace of Jesus that he had brought and turning to a different message – which was not good news at all.

He called down some not very politically correct curses on people who infiltrated the church and brought a different message, a different gospel. Which is all very well.

But it does rather leave hanging in the air the question of why the Galatians, or us or anybody else, should trust Paul's version of events. Why should we believe Paul's gospel?

The answer, as our title suggests, is that Paul's gospel is not the product of Chinese whispers, or of anything more malicious. Paul's gospel is God's gospel.

The passage we are looking at today and on down to chapter 2:14 tell us more about Paul's early life and ministry than almost anywhere else in the New Testament. This narrative can help us to fit together different events described in the book of Acts and gives us lots of important historical information about the growth of the early church. But as important as all that information is that's not the reason these verses are included in the Bible. Paul didn't write this stuff because he thought it was important to leave a bit of autobiography lying around for later historians to pick up. He wrote it to persuade the Galatian Christians, and all of us who would come to read this letter, that his gospel comes from God.

And he wants to make it clear that it doesn't come either from his own imagination or from other people.

1 This gospel comes from God not Paul's imagination

In his Jewish days Paul was not a nice guy. Not the sort of person you would want to meet on a dark night – at least not if you were a Christian.

Paul's mission in life was to be a Jewish zealot. So he hated Christians. With a passion most of us can probably only dream of. He certainly hated them more than his Jewish contemporaries. He persecuted the church of God so effectively that he was entrusted with major commissions, despite his relative youth, by the Jewish authorities – such as a trip to Damascus to arrest and try Christians in that city. And, if it had anything to do with Paul, to put them to death.

Christians, in fact, were probably the only people that Paul hated more than Gentiles. Gentiles, anyone born outside the nation of Israel, were dogs. Paul's contemporaries said that the Gentiles had only been created by God to provide fuel for the fires of hell and, as a top man amongst them, I don't imagine that Paul had a much more liberal view.

But Christians. They were people who had received all the wonderful truths of the law of Moses and then turned their back on true Judaism to follow this miserable criminal Jesus who had died a shameful and accursed death on a cross. They were scum. And Paul dedicated his life to destroying them.

Why does Paul tell us all this here?

After all it must have been extremely painful for him. Recalling all the terrible things he had done in the name of God which turned out not to be serving God at all but, v13, to be persecuting the people of God, to be persecuting Jesus.

He tells us because he wants us to know just how utterly impossible it would have been for Paul, the Jewish zealot and persecutor of the church to have come up with a gospel of faith in Jesus Christ available to all, including the Gentiles. He would just have never made that up out of his own head. He just wouldn't.

Because Paul didn't only come to see that Jesus was the Messiah. No, v16, he was also given the specific task of taking the message of Jesus to the **Gentiles**.

Now Paul becoming not only a Christian believer but the person who would take the Christian message to the Gentiles is about as likely, humanly speaking, as Osama Bin Laden turning up in Washington one day and saying that he's become a massive enthusiast for Western, capitalist democracy and that he wants to become US ambassador to Israel. It's just not going to happen. And it only happened to Paul because God himself intervened:

"God", v15, "called me by his grace."

He's talking about his experience on the road to Damascus. The occasion when he met the risen Christ and, in a moment, saw that he was persecuting not some heretical Jewish sect but the very Lord of the universe.

Paul would never, ever have made up this gospel. He just wouldn't have done it. He only preached Christ because God had revealed

Christ to him. This message came from God; not from Paul's head.

It's worth noting, by the way, that Paul is also dismissing the new teachers' claims that he was a man pleaser.

If Paul had wanted to please men all he had to do was stay where he was:

V14: "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age."

As Timbuk 3 put it Paul could have said:

"I'm doing alright, getting good grades. The future's so bright, I gotta wear shades."

Paul was doing really well for himself. He was climbing the greasy pole and he was nearing the top. If Paul was a man pleaser he'd never have left. Never have given up all that influence and prestige for a nomadic life of persecution, hardship and trouble.

But his encounter with Jesus Christ cured him of man pleasing in an instant.

This gospel comes from God, not Paul's imagination.

2 This gospel comes from God not from other people

The main accusation the new teachers were making seems to have been that Paul got the good bits of his message from the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Peter, James, John and the others) and twisted the other bits out of his own mind.

The new teachers feelings about Paul were like those of the publisher who returned a book to a would-be author with the following comment:

"Your work is both good and original. Unfortunately the bit that's original isn't good and the bit that's good isn't original."

But Paul is quite clear that not only would he have been quite incapable of making up such a message for himself but that there was no opportunity for the church leaders in Jerusalem to teach him the gospel either.

As soon as he was converted, v16, Paul headed off to Arabia, most of which was nothing more than desert with a few Bedouin scratching about, and didn't consult with anybody.

It was three whole years before Paul went to Jerusalem – during which time he had already, we suppose, been preaching the gospel in Arabia and Damascus – both cities packed full of non-Jewish people.

And when he did go to Jerusalem Paul stayed only a fortnight. He only saw two apostles- Peter and Jesus' brother James. And he didn't go to Jerusalem to get them to tell him what he should be preaching. I'm sure they discussed the events of Jesus life. No doubt Paul learned of some incidents he hadn't known about before.

But the reason he went wasn't for a spot of theological education. It was to get acquainted with Peter. To get to know the most senior figures in the Jerusalem church.

The book of Acts tells us that around this time the church in Jerusalem was undergoing quite a lot of persecution which probably explains why Paul only met a couple of the apostles – most of the Christians may have been keeping a low profile or have gone out into the surrounding towns and villages.

At that time that might have seemed like a bit of a disappointment to Paul. But how fortunate it was, looking back, because he can now say to the Galatians, even on oath, v20 there, that his beliefs about Jesus were not shaped by meeting lots of Christians in Jerusalem.

In fact, 2:1, it was 14 whole years later before he went to Jerusalem for a real conference with the church leaders there. That's probably 14 years after his conversion rather than 14 years after the first visit, though we can't be absolutely certain on that, but at any rate it was a very long time.

And he didn't go because he was summoned by the leaders there. He went because God told him to – he went in response to a revelation (v1).

By that time Paul had been preaching the good news of Jesus for years. He had been teaching that the only way to be saved, for Jew or Gentile, was to put your trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To receive his grace and forgiveness for your sins, whoever you were. Paul had been making it clear that for non Jews to be Christians it wasn't necessary to be circumcised, eat kosher food celebrate Passover or any of the other distinctive Jewish laws.

To demonstrate this, when he eventually did go to Jerusalem, Paul took Titus. A Gentile. A Greek. Uncircumcised.

He took him to Jerusalem – and, no doubt, presented him and encouraged Titus to share the reality of Jesus Christ in his life.

Paul went to Jerusalem to share the law free gospel that he preached with the leaders of Jerusalem church.

He went with great trepidation – he was afraid, v2, that he might have run his race in vain. Not afraid that he might be wrong – he knew with 100% certainty that he had received the true gospel of Jesus direct from God himself.

Paul was afraid that the Jerusalem leaders might not see that the gospel was for all. That they might not see that you do not have to become Jewish to become Christian. He was afraid that if they did not see the glorious liberty of grace then Christianity would be destined to remain forever a marginal Jewish sect.

That is they did not see that forgiveness and life in Jesus is for all who trust in him – whoever they are – the church would never fulfil Christ's great commission to make disciples to the ends of the earth.

But Paul's fears turned out to be unfounded. The leaders in Jerusalem rejected the agitations of the false brothers, v4 there, who were campaigning for Titus to be "done."

The leaders in Jerusalem added nothing to Paul's message – v6. They did not insist that Gentiles must be circumcised or that they could not be saved unless they kept the food laws or any other part of Jewish religious ritual.

Quite the opposite, v7. Peter, James and John recognised that their gospel, though being preached to different audiences, was exactly the same as Paul's. They recognised, v8, that, because they were preaching the same thing, God was as much at work in Paul's ministry to non-Jews as he was in Peter's ministry to Jews. They extended a handshake of recognition to Paul and Barnabas and, no doubt, wished them every blessing and success in their mission to take the one gospel to the whole world.

Their only request, and it couldn't possibly be considered an addition to the gospel, was that richer Christians in the churches Paul had planted should express their oneness in Christ

by supporting the struggling churches in Israel itself – something that Paul was only too happy to do.

Ah. I do like a happy ending.

But you may be wondering, of course, what possible relevance all this can have to us today.

After all nobody today is suggesting, are they, that really Christianity is just a part of Judaism and that to be properly Christian you **do** have to get circumcised and obey the kosher food laws?

Nobody today is suggesting that somehow Paul's version of Christianity is just a made up, twisted version of the real thing are they?

Well although not many people are saying the first of those things – that to be a proper Christian you have to be circumcised – the second of them – that Paul's version of Christianity is a twisted version of the real thing is exactly what many, many people **are** saying today.

In fact it was what someone said to be quite recently in an heated discussion over a very nice Sunday evening meal.

The start of that conversation had been about Canon Jeffrey John and the issue of homosexual practice.

Jesus never talked about that, someone said to me. It was Paul who added that to Christian teaching. Paul. Paul the oppressor. Paul who took the simple message of Jesus and twisted and changed it.

That is what the new teachers were saying in Galatia. That is what thousands of people are still saying today both outside and inside the church.

One very typical example comes from the introduction to a book I picked up just on Thursday morning:

"In my book, I show how Paul, after his conversion experience, continued to be in severe error in his concept of God and his understanding of Jesus' teaching. I show how he continually abused Scripture to paint his faulty picture."

"Because of Paul's convictions... he naturally became conceited and continually tried to upstage the very apostles who had spent over three years with Jesus. He was too proud to

learn from them, but instead had to receive his doctrine by "divine revelation"."

"I also show that Paul's doctrine is responsible for the anti-Semitic doctrine of replacement theology. This is the teaching that Christianity is the new true Israel of God and therefore the new rightful heir to God's promises. Anti-Semitism so saturated the pews of both Catholic and Protestant churches throughout history that it could be argued the holocaust itself could not have occurred had it not been for the general 'who cares' attitude of Christians toward the Jews. This attitude found its legitimacy in replacement theology."

So not only is Paul a liar – he is also, it is suggested by that book, partly responsible for the holocaust.

This kind of attempt to drive a wedge between Paul and the other apostles, most of all between Paul and Jesus, is directly refuted by this passage in Galatians. What Paul says about the gospel God says.

And before we all get all smug and go "well, we're sound solid evangelicals. We wouldn't fall into that trap, We're Christ Church Liverpool."

Before we do that we need to reflect very carefully.

Because this tendency to divide up bits of the Bible, or to divide Paul and Jesus is alive and well in evangelical churches today. You see it in all sorts of areas.

One of the most common areas where people divide Paul and Jesus is on the issue of the roles men and women in the church.

Jesus was positive about women, people say. Paul was anti-women. So let's ignore what Paul has to say on this issue.

Now I don't want to open up the can of worms that is this issue. But whatever convictions we each have about this issue we cannot simply ignore Paul and follow Jesus. Firstly because it is simply not true that Paul is anti-women. And secondly because Paul's words in his letters, preserved for us in the Bible are God's words. They are Jesus' words.

Paul's gospel is God's gospel. You can't divide the two.

Well, of course you can. But then you're not at liberty to pick and choose. If you reject Paul's gospel you reject Paul's gospel.

You can't keep Paul's teaching on heaven in 1 Corinthians 15 or on justification by faith in Romans 3 if you reject the other things he says. Because all you're doing then is saying that the gospel is whichever bits of the Bible you prefer – which is a long way from throwing yourself on the mercy and grace of Jesus.

Now most of us here are probably not very systematic in the way we divide the gospel. It's not that we like Jesus and we don't like Paul or that we like John and we don't like Luke. Rather we like all of them – but only really read, think about and emphasise some bits of each of them.

- We love Jesus' parables – except the ones that talk about hell.
- We love the bits of the Bible about God's love for his people – but not the bits that tell us to go out and declare that love to others, even if they live in what we think are nasty parts of Liverpool.
- We read the bits of the Bible that tell us God will bless us – but not the bits that show us that 99% of blessing is in heaven and that this life is full of struggle and shadow.

Well if we believe Galatians that will not do.

For the testimony of Paul is that the message he brought is the same message that the other apostles preached.

That message, the gospel, that was written down for us by the apostles and their close associates, is one message. It is not divisible. As a church we are committed to apostolic authority.

That means that we are not at liberty to discard bits of the gospel that we do not like. It means we need to listen to Paul's gospel. And it also means that we need to learn to be like Paul.

Of course we're not exactly like him. He was defending a message brought directly to himself from God. We are defending a message brought by God to Paul and recorded for us in the New Testament. But the principle is the same.

V5: We did not give in to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

We need to be hugely thankful to God for Paul. This man, arguably the second most

influential person in human history after Jesus himself, ensured that a gospel of grace for all would be preached by the church for us to hear today.

If we give in to people who want to add anything to the message of Jesus Christ. People who want to change or dispute what the apostles have written we won't lose something small and trivial.

What is at stake here is enormous. What is at stake is the truth of the gospel.

If Paul had given in on this one issue. If he had just had Titus circumcised. If he had said "you know actually I did get from God that Gentiles don't need to follow the law, but it would make life a bit easier if we did require them to be circumcised." If he had said that everything good in the gospel would have been lost and we would have ended up, v4, as slaves.

Once we start dividing Paul and the other apostles or Paul and Jesus we are not engaged in very sophisticated theology. We are giving away the gospel and we will end up as slaves.

For the sake of our own freedom as Christians, to maintain the glorious liberty that we have whereby we are freed from the hopeless attempt to make ourselves good enough for God, we must stand by Paul's gospel, God's gospel.

Martin Luther put it like this:

"Let this be then the conclusion of all together, that we will suffer our goods to be taken away, our name, our life, and all that we have; but the Gospel, our faith, Jesus Christ, we will never suffer to be taken from us."