

GALATIANS 1:1 - 2:10

Unlike his letter to the Philippians which is filled with warmth and thanksgiving, Paul is outraged and hurt by the Galatians. They have become influenced by other travelling missionaries promoting a different brand of Christianity. Who are the Galatians? Who are the 'some who are confusing you' (1:7) and what are they teaching? What is the gospel Paul is proclaiming and by what authority?

1) The letter is written 'to the churches of Galatia' (1:2) (from where some of the Celts have originated), a number of house churches scattered throughout the region. These Christians were Gentiles, and given their ignorance around Jewish traditions, easily influenced by those who wanted to claim more authority for another version of the gospel than the one Paul had taught them.

2) After Paul had established the Galatian churches, other travelling missionaries had come, and they had obviously taught them a version of the gospel Paul found offensive and contradictory to the true gospel. Details of what these missionaries were teaching comes out throughout the letter, but from our reading (1:1 - 2:10) we can discern several important things.

A) Paul offers his typical opening 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father (versus the peace (*pax*) established by Rome) and the Lord Jesus Christ' (versus Caesar), but then he adds: **'who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age**, according to the will of our God and Father....' (1:3-4). Paul would only need to add and emphasize this cardinal pillar of the gospel if it was being threatened or undermined. How?

B) From Paul's biographical references to Titus not being 'compelled to be circumcised' (2:3) and Paul's own trips to Jerusalem not to be taught but to be confirmed, recognized, and supported, it is clear that the Galatians were being introduced to new requirements for being Christians that included adherence to certain ritual and legal requirements of Judaism. It was, evidently, not enough to base one's salvation on Christ's accomplishment, and a way of life based on it (love through the Spirit's working in the human spirit). Rather, there were the additional requirements of fulfilling religious laws and customs that born Jews would be expected to fulfil in order to be good Jews. These included circumcision as well as various dietary, fast, and purity laws. The problem with such requirements, from Paul's point of view, were numerous. At this point, however, Paul points simply to the fact that by adding these requirements, these Jewish missionaries were undermining the all-sufficient redemption achieved by God in Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

3) According to Paul, the problem of sin ('the present evil age' (v.3)) is so deeply ingrained in the order of things that whatever religious practices and disciplines we perform, cannot eliminate it at its roots. We may overcome sins here and there, but sin itself, according to Paul, is a power at work in all life, deforming the beauty in which life has been made. In fact, believing religious practices and disciplines to have this kind of power only reinforces the grip of sin, causing us to believe the lie that we are more powerful and sin less so. Can we really eliminate sin from our lives and master it by our own moral bootstraps? And if so, what is Christ's role but that of merely being an example for us to follow, rather than a saviour who proclaims to us a forgiveness we cannot proclaim on ourselves and does so as one who carries our sin without succumbing to it himself. For Paul, only by binding ourselves to Christ and living our life as a constant dying and rising in Christ, do we find our lives invaded by a power that alone can cut into sin at its roots. While we are alive on this side of eternity, we can never eliminate sin, but we can experience an influence in us rooted in a love through the Spirit's working in us stronger than sin. Sin may oppress and harass us but no longer have uncontested domination over us.

Paul is not suggesting that we shouldn't adopt solid religious and ethical practices. Rather, he is saying that what we need to be saved from has been accomplished in Christ, and by embracing Christ through our faith (trust in him and his way), we live without fear of having to measure up. As a result, our religious practices are modelled on that of Christ (inspired by love and love alone), and they are done as a response of gratitude to God rather than out of a compulsion to prove our worthiness or express our righteousness. Done out of a different basis of motivation, our words and actions as believers are more authentic, and people receive them from us as gifts of charity and love with thanks rather than as evidence of our religious superiority over them.

Finally, as we shall see later in the letter, Jewish religious requirements set up an inequality between Jew and Gentile. Paul, on the other hand, sees in Christ a higher basis of unity overcoming the human distinctions of race, language, and religious custom. In Christ both religious Jew and pagan gentile find a new and deeper foundation to base and build their spiritual lives together as one under God's guiding hand.

4) Paul is claiming an authority that is his own and given to him directly by God. In so doing, he refuses the suggestion that there are those who were closer to Christ or more faithfully Jewish who had a higher authority than Paul. Unlike the 'pillar apostles' such as Peter, James and John who had been disciples of Jesus, Paul had never met Jesus in the flesh. Yet Paul claimed an equal authority and a revelation of Christ no less substantial. Obviously, this has been questioned by some travelling missionaries that have come to Galatia. Moreover, Paul claims that the Jerusalem apostles never questioned his authority, and they accepted fully his approach to the gentiles (not imposing Jewish religious requirements). This too, evidently, was being questioned, and throughout the letter Paul is on the defensive.