

A gospel of no human source

The apostle Paul is upset when he writes his letter to the Galatians. It's one of the few letters—it's, I think, the only letter, actually—of Paul, addressed to one of his churches, where he doesn't actually thank them for their faith, and their love, and their hope.

And that usually follows right after his greeting to them. So, he says, "Paul, an apostle... grace to you and peace..." And then, at chapter 1, verse six, where one would expect words of thanksgiving to these Galatians for their faith, this is what he says,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--not that there is another gospel...

So, already, Paul sets the tone of his letter by those words that began at verse six of chapter of his letter to the Galatians.

So, why is he upset? Well, there are evidently individuals who have come into that community after Paul and Barnabas founded it. There are people who have come into that community who are endeavouring to communicate what Paul regards as a "different gospel". And, when you look at what he has to say in the course of the letter, you find that the "different gospel" incorporates a lot of observance of Jewish practices, some of which are still with us today, in one form or another, even in the Christian community, such as the observance of special days, the Sabbath, or Passover, or whatever other special day; and also observance of circumcision.

He is upset that this "innovation" has been made into the gospel he has proclaimed, for one thing, because it denies the validity of the gospel he proclaimed whereby non-Jews could receive this gospel on the basis of faith in Christ, and find the freedom of the children of God expressed in the fruits of the Spirit. So he is upset on that basis.

But he is also upset because their actions, following the actions of these "interlopers" in their midst, has been to put a question mark beside his own calling as an apostle. It's as though they came to the Galatians and said, "Well, you've heard from Paul; but, you know, you have to take what he has to say with a grain of salt. Now, we are going to proclaim to you the true gospel." It's as though they said something like that to this early Christian community.

And so, Paul, at the beginning of the letter to the Galatians—that I read to you not too long ago—stresses the fact of his call. The gospel is not from a human source; it has come from God, and God has, in fact, called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

So, it's on the basis of that call that Paul has received that he can be extremely emphatic when he is writing his letters, when he is also speaking to people. In fact, in the context of this letter to the Galatians, he remarks that he confronted Cephas (otherwise known as Peter) because, when they were having fellowship with one another here, among Gentile Christians (non-Jewish Christians), when some Jewish-Christian individuals came into their midst, suddenly Peter acted differently, as though, somehow, the fellowship that the Christian Church had among non-Jews was somehow incomplete; other aspects needs to be added. So, it's on the basis of the apostle Paul's call that he could act as forcefully as he did, not only in this letter, but in the way he dealt even with the primary apostle, the apostle Peter.

Albert Schweitzer, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, had a good deal of influence on New Testament studies, and, particularly, the understanding of Jesus. During the nineteenth century, there was an emphasis on following the teachings of Jesus. The sense was that you could simply, on the basis of the Bible, pick out selected texts and follow the teachings of Jesus. But, to do that, you sometimes had to eliminate certain passages where Jesus referred to

the end-times, for example, and Jesus' place in those end-times, the coming of the Son of Man. That wasn't simply following the teachings of Jesus. Albert Schweitzer emphasized that aspect of Jesus' preaching.

But right at the end of his book—remember that Albert Schweitzer was not only a theologian; he was a doctor who served in Lambarene in the Congo in Africa; he was also musician of note; he produced a series of recordings of organ music of J.S. Bach—but right at the end of Schweitzer's book, he makes a point that Jesus of Nazareth put his shoulder—this is paraphrasing what he said—he put his shoulder to the wheel of history, and that wheel of history finally crushed him.

Well, that's maybe not precisely how we would put it. But there is the sense that Jesus did put his whole preaching, his whole life, against the powers that be, against the power of death itself, human sinfulness of various sorts. Yes, he was crushed in the crucifixion. But it's as though, in that endeavour on his part, in obedience to God the Father, that the life and light of the Spirit of the Risen One is now made known to people in such a way that we can have faith in him, and we can find the freedom of the children of God that he would wish to communicate to us.

Paul is like Jesus in this respect. He has this calling which means that he is not content with the status quo. He can preach, he can act, forcefully, in order to make known the Christian faith to the non-Jew. The result was that the Christian faith did spread strongly and quickly in the non-Jewish world.

I mentioned before to you that, in Paul's letter to the Romans, he takes quite a different approach. And this may be because he didn't actually found that church in Rome. Or it may be that he has changed over the years his approach. But his attitude to the Christians in Rome, some of whom were Jewish-Christians and some who were non-Jewish or Gentile Christians, was to say that the Jewish-Christian ought not to condemn the Gentile Christian for not observing days, years, and not observing kosher requirements. On the other hand, the non-Jewish Christians ought not to despise the Jewish-Christians for all their following of the Jewish calendar, Jewish dietary laws and so on. So it would seem that Paul takes a somewhat different approach in his letter to the Romans. But perhaps, if Paul had not been forceful, as he was, in obedience to the call he received, the faith would not have gone forth into the non-Jewish world the way it did—and, in spades, one could say.

Let me just give you a bit of Presbyterianism. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada met in London, Ontario, this past June. And they agreed to a motion that would change something of our polity, something of the way in which we conduct ourselves as the church. The change is because, in some areas, such as in Northern Ontario—Cochrane, Kirkland Lake, and other communities—the Presbyterian congregations are very small. There are no ordained Presbyterian clergy in that area. So the motion that was accepted at General Assembly was that ruling elders and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministry be given—under certain conditions, and under the direction of an Interim Moderator and Presbytery—would be given the right to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is because, in those places, they are having difficulty finding and keeping Presbyterian ministers. And so, this is the solution that is being proposed, and will be voted on by presbyteries.

Now, the question I have is—well, we have many questions but— is this the beginning of the end for pastoral ministers? Will we simply have ruling elders, some of whom will preach and will celebrate the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism? Is that going to be the case?

Of course, this does not have to be this way. That motion of General Assembly does not have to lead in that direction. But I think it's worth considering the role of call in all of this. If there is no call to do such things as proclaim the gospel or celebrate the Sacraments, or rule as elders in the Church, then we are more or less—shall we say—“officials” as part of church government, so to speak.

We eliminate the aspect of God's call, as part of the process.

And I think, if we eliminate that, we're going to eliminate a critical and essential part of the Church, because, when you look at the history of the Church, when it had to deal with things like the abolition of slavery or the improvement of worship or the inclusion of women as part of the ordained ministry or leadership of the Church, all of that, I would say, has come from a sense of call on the part of persons that has resulted in the church being moved along.

The Church can become somewhat fossilized, caught in one place, and doing one thing, and not moving beyond that. But, on the basis of the call that people receive, the Church can be moved ahead into the freedom that God wishes the Church to exhibit in the world.

Now, having said all of that, let me just reiterate what Fred Craddock said in his sermon. Yes, call can be the basis of some pretty emphatic sort of language and commitment and conviction on the part of individuals. But, on the other side we need to be attuned to the fact that we need to do this in a way—this urging of people in particular directions—in a way that is loving, that is caring for them, like God who reaches out his hand to bless others, and one observes that this hand [of God] is marked with scratches.

The call is an essential requirement for the Church to be the Church. But that call needs to be expressed in a way that is loving and which calls people beyond where they may be now, beyond fear, beyond bitterness, to a fuller view of what being the Church is, now and in the world.