

Paul's Unique Transforming Gospel

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[0 : 00] I'll turn with me to Paul's letter to the Galatians. And tonight we look at these verses at the end of chapter 1, verses 11 to 24.

Under the title, I suppose, Paul's Unique Transforming Gospel. Well, we're in the run-up to the general election.

It's obvious, isn't it, even though the date hasn't been announced, because the spin doctors are out in sports. Of course, we hear that Alistair Campbell's back at Number 10 Downing Street, and the BBC are sharpening their knives, and we're in for quite a spectacle.

Well, there's a sad feature, isn't it, of our elections these days, that they're marked by these smear campaigns, digging up dirt and discrediting the opposition. And rewriting history is so common, isn't it, in these areas.

We live, I suppose, in the age of revisionist history. And it's so easy, isn't it, for us to have our beliefs moulded and changed, quite different from what the true history really is.

[1 : 07] I was just listening on the radio, I think it was yesterday, some of you may have heard, because this year is the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth. And I was listening to a piece that was saying that all the tour guides in Salzburg, the place of his birth, are having to go on special classes, to be re-educated about the truth about Mozart's life, because they've been so influenced, as everybody else has, by the film version Amadeus.

Everybody thinks that Mozart was poisoned by Salieri. Everyone thinks that he was a pauper and buried a pauper's grave. Everyone thinks that he was a penniless man throughout his life.

All of that's complete nonsense. But we all believe it, because history has been revised. And thirdly, spin-doctoring and rewriting history and smear campaigns aren't new.

And they're not foreign either to the Christian Church, either today or in the first century, in the New Testament days. And so we mustn't be naive.

It's interesting. People who are not Christians often think Christians are rather naive and precious people. We should be the least naive people on the face of the earth, because we know the reality of sin, and sin in the human heart.

[2 : 21] And it's so easy for this kind of thing to happen in churches, either consciously or unconsciously. For leaders to be undermined by those who really are driven by wanting a personal influence.

who want to be the centre of attention in a church fellowship. It can be subtle, just dropping a little thing here, a little hint there, something else.

And tidbits of information began to gather up. People put two and two together and make five. And Chinese whispers begin. And soon, well, everybody's got completely the wrong end of the stick.

And the result can be that confidence is undermined. And people are troubled. And as a result, they rush into the arms of the personalities of those people who want to be the centre of attention, who want to make them dependent upon them.

And we've all seen that happening. We've all heard of that happening. And that's exactly what was happening in this church in Galatia. One of the chief tactics used to undermine Paul's message was to get him undermined as a person, as an apostle.

[3 : 30] And that's why at the beginning of this letter, the first thing he does is to clearly restate the heart of his gospel in verses 1 to 5. That it was a gospel of rescue from this evil age and from all the encumbrances of human religion and human intrigue.

Then he goes on to point out very clearly the falsity of these troublemakers, these other teachers, who were promoting a different gospel, as he says in verses 6 to 10.

It's no gospel at all. But having done that, Paul straight away has to get into a strong defence of his own authority and his own authenticity against the kind of revisionist history and the smear tactics of the spin doctors.

These troublemakers who were coming into the church. They claimed, you see, that Paul was inferior in the face of their superior ecclesiastical credentials.

They were missionaries who came from Jerusalem and Jerusalem is the home of the real apostles where it all began. Paul, of course, well, a bit of a jolly come lately.

[4 : 44] But Paul said, no, my gospel isn't from the Jerusalem apostles. My gospel is from Christ himself. You can't get any higher than that. Christ alone is the agent of my gospel.

They claimed that their gospel was superior because it offered not just Paul's gospel but Paul plus Moses and all the great traditions of the Israelite faith.

And Paul said, no, my gospel in its entirety is direct revelation from Jesus Christ himself.

He is the means of my gospel. Nowhere else. And from the rest of chapters 1 and 2 he lays out his whole defense.

The structure is very simple. Just look at it. Verses 11 and 12 are the text, if you like, the thesis statement. But I would have you know. My version reads for there.

[5 : 46] The NIV just doesn't have the conjunction but I think I'm persuaded it should read but. I'm not going to tell you why. Read Richard Longenecker's commentary if that sort of thing bothers you or interests you.

But Paul says, but I would have you know. This is the true situation. My gospel is revelation from Christ alone. And then from verse 13 onwards the rest of it is an expanded proof.

For you have heard. In other words, these are all the facts that demonstrate the truth. Yes. Paul's quite willing to admit he is a different apostle from the others.

Yet he's not inferior. Mark of an apostle was one who saw the risen Lord. John 15, 27. Acts 1, 21. Paul did see the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

And that changed everything about him and everything about his life. And that's why in his discussion here proving the facts that prove his authority he relates everything to that great experience.

[6 : 52] Verses 13 to 17 relate to the immediate surroundings of that experience on the Damascus Road. And verse 18, right on to the end of chapter 2 describe the later events.

Now, that fact of the centrality of Paul's experience on the Damascus Road helps explain the chronology. If you read any commentaries on Galatians you'll see that the chronology of Paul's visits to Jerusalem caused him a lot of headaches.

I'm not going to go into all of that even if you are interested. But the key, let me just say the key is the centrality of that experience on the Damascus Road for Paul. Everything he writes here is governed by the huge change that took place in him on that day.

And that's why if you read the whole outline here he gives everything relates to that day. So the then of verse 18 after three years and the then of verse 21 and the then of chapter 2 verse 1 all refer to time after that experience.

It's not after three years he went up to visit Kephas and then he went somewhere else and then 14 years after that all of these time slots take their cue from that great day because that was the day that changed everything for Paul.

[8 : 11] And we know that's right, isn't it? There are sometimes things in our experience which just become the reference point for everything else in the rest of our life. I was just thinking about that and our sister Tian Tian who went back to China from here just a few weeks ago she said to me I'll never forget my time in Glasgow because that's the time my whole life changed.

Everything afterwards will be before Glasgow and after Glasgow. That's what it was for Paul here. We can think of that in our experience there could be certain things that happen in our life might be having kids most of us it was before kids when there was life and then there was something after kids closely akin to life but not quite as we knew it before.

And that's what Paul's saying here. This is the central experience and everything hinges around it. So let's look at verses 11 to 24 and pull out the key threads of Paul's defence of what he says is his unique transforming gospel the authentic gospel the only gospel the gospel of grace alone in Christ.

Let's look at under three headings. Paul talks about the unique source of God's grace in Christ the unique power of the grace of God in Christ and the unique purpose of God's grace in Christ.

Look at that at the first thing the unique source here it is. Paul's gospel of grace alone in Christ is not a religion it's a revelation.

[9 : 41] verse 11 it's not man's gospel literally it's not according to man rather verse 12 it's a revelation from Jesus Christ.

My version there reads a revelation of Jesus Christ the NIV I think has it right a revelation from Jesus Christ and therefore it's a unique and authentic gospel.

That's a very important claim very important to get hold of that today Paul is still under the same kind of assault today within the professing church as he was then. Lots of people say the same sort of things as they were saying in Galatia well Paul got the original gospel from Jesus and the other apostles but then he perverted it he changed it let's get back to the original Jesus that's what we really want you've heard people say that and that's exactly what they were saying in first century Galatia you see they were saying well Paul got the gospel at first from James and Peter and all these others but you see he went off on his own away off to Arabia or somewhere I don't know where but he dreamed up all these new ideas and when he came back well he developed his own theology it's quite different it was partly the same I mean the basic message was the same but oh there was all sorts of things that he'd lost from the gospel that you really need all sorts of things he'd added it's very pervasive that sort of spin still in our newspapers today

I was reading that sort of thing yesterday in the Times newspaper and people fall for it so why shouldn't the Galatians fall for it well they were in danger of it and that's why Paul in a detailed way rebuts every single point that was being made against them look at it first of all he says his gospel is not derived from men verse 12 I did not receive it from any man from an apostle or anyone else verse 16 I did not immediately consult with anyone literally with flesh and blood verse 17 I did not go to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me no he says in verse 12 after I received it directly from Jesus Christ what did he do verse 17 didn't go to Jerusalem he went away away from all of the rest of them to Arabia to Damascus all the emphasis is on Paul's total independence of all other human authorities except for Jesus Christ himself

Paul's gospel is not derived from any human source second he's very clear to say that his gospel is not developed in his own mind not at all like it was a gradual development in his own thought a gradual moulding or changing of the apostles message no Paul's absolutely clear there was one single sudden radical decisive change and that happened on the Damascus road look at the difference between the sorrow of verses 13 and 14 and the poem of verses 15 and 16 there's a huge but and it signals a complete change of direction Paul's religion was totally replaced by a revelation of Jesus Christ to him verse 12 and in him verse 16 revealing his son in me that's not development that's direct intervention by God by Jesus Christ himself you see he's saying he's totally independent it's totally new it's not derived it's not developed it's direct from heaven itself very stark but nevertheless thirdly he's clear to point out that his gospel was not different from the apostolic gospel and that's a crucial point see verses 18 to 24 tell us clearly that Paul's gospel was recognised by everybody as being the authentic the orthodox the identical gospel verses 18 to 20 he shows that he was clearly recognised as such on his first visit to Jerusalem that informal visit to just speak to Peter and James they recognised that his gospel was the same as theirs just as later on if you look at chapter 2 verse 9 at his next visit when they met him officially as the apostles they recognised him chapter 2 verse 9 and they perceived the grace that was given to me they gave the right hand of fellowship to

[14:17] Barnabas and me that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised recognised by the apostles to be the same gospel as theirs verses 21 to 23 shows that it was clearly recognised by his ministry and his mission to be genuine gospel mission there he was in Cilicia and Syria preaching the gospel what happened well F.F.

Bruce says enough was happening for news of Paul's activity clearly to get back to Judea what did they recognise was happening verse 23 he who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy they clearly recognised that what he was now preaching was exactly the same that's what he once tried to destroy his gospel was not different verses 22 to 24 show that it was clearly recognised that the same gospel by all the churches of Judea verse 22 what were they doing glorifying God because of Paul here's Jewish churches in Judea praising God for Paul's gospel witness to the Gentiles they knew it wasn't a different gospel that's very very important Paul's gospel was not derived from men it was not developed in his own mind but it wasn't different from the one true apostolic gospel of

Jesus if you've been reading some of the commentaries I know some of you are you'll see that some scholars today totally dispute that they want to say that well Paul always had a different gospel from Peter and the others right from the beginning there were two different strands of the way the church went it's been like that ever since why do they want to say that sort of thing well because they want to say well we can have different types of gospels today for different people in different situations let's not get too head up about preserving one unique gospel well it seems to me they haven't read the text of Galatians all that carefully no Paul says there's only one gospel and it's not religion it's not derived or developed by humans it's a revelation it comes once for all directly from heaven from Jesus Christ himself it's a revelation of Jesus Christ he's the content of it verse 16 Paul says Jesus has been revealed in him and it's revelation verse 12 from Jesus

Christ he's the source he's the one who gave it to Paul the Christian gospel has a unique source and that's why it has a unique authority and that is Paul is unique that's the whole point here revelation to him is part of what Jude 3 calls the faith once for all delivered to the saints part of the once and for all inauguration of the kingdom of Jesus Christ through his own work and the explanation of it through Jesus word and his teaching and the completion of that teaching through his apostles with his full authority I'm not Paul and you're not Paul none of us are apostles and neither is anybody else today anybody else today or any other time making the kind of claim Paul is making well we think they're bonkers they'd be right they would be or else just deceiving themselves we're not to think we can emulate Paul's experience that was once for all but we are to emulate his loyalty his loyalty to the once and for all gospel the faith delivered to the saints and why are there troublers today who want to put the same kind of spin on things as the gentile troublers did in

Galatians we've got to answer with Paul no we're to be loyal to this revelation of Jesus Christ not to flesh and blood but to Jesus Christ we're not to give way to any man pleasing in any of its forms anything that seems to add the things of flesh and blood to the pure gospel of Jesus Christ the gospel of grace alone it's such a great temptation to do that it's happened all through the church history it happens today flesh and blood is often so hard to resist you see might be our own flesh and blood pandering to our desire to have experiences that would add to our experience of the gospel and make us feel we have more or it might be our great desire within us and it's a powerful drive within every human being on this planet to try and impress ourselves with the things that we can do with our own spirituality with our own righteousness with the good deeds we do whatever it might be do you see that's pleasing flesh and blood might be other flesh and blood the desire to conform to the culture around us very powerful for those in ministry to want to pander to the church establishment to get approval to the party line to avoid persecution might be the worldly culture around the data just add a little bit of what we do to your

[19 : 43] Christian faith