

## The Gospel of Man

Galatians 1:1-24

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*From Paul, an apostle, though not an apostle sent by people nor an apostle under the authority of any person but an apostle by the power of Jesus Christ and by God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. And from all the brothers who are with him.*

*To the assemblies in Galatia.*

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself up for our sins such that we might be removed from this present, evil age according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen!*

*I am astonished that you are switching from the one who called you through grace to another gospel. Not that there is another gospel, except that some are causing you anxiety and are wanting to distort Christ's gospel. However, even if a heavenly messenger were to proclaim to you a gospel other than the gospel that has been preached to you ... I say: let him be cursed. I'll say again what I said before: if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the gospel that has been preached to you, let him be cursed.*

*Do you think that I am trying to convince anyone by persuasive speech or to manipulate God by magic? Do you think that what I am doing is to try to please people? If what I was doing was still to please people, I would not be a slave to Christ.*

*For I am telling you, brothers, that the gospel that I preached was not a gospel created by any person. The gospel that I preached to you I did not receive from anyone nor was I taught it. The gospel that I preached came by revelation from Jesus Christ himself.*

*For you have heard of my former life when I was in Judaism (you have heard of the revolution that happened to me as a Jew), how severely I persecuted God's assembly and was destroying it, and how I was more advanced in Judaism more than many of those my age, being more militant for the traditions of the fathers. You have heard how God, who had set me apart while I was still in my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his own son because of me, so that I might announce the good news about him to people who were not Jews. When that happened, I did not take counsel with flesh and blood nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before I was, but I went away to Arabia and then returned to Damascus. Then after 3 years, I finally went up to Jerusalem to visit with Cephas and get to know him. I stayed with him there for 15 days. I didn't see any of the other apostles, except for James, the Lord's brother. I am writing these things to you and God knows that I do not lie. Then I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. The assemblies in Christ that are in Judaea didn't know me. They*

*only heard: the one who was persecuting us is now proclaiming the good news of our faith that he was once so successful in destroying. And they glorified God because of me.*

How was your Wednesday? Do you remember? No. That's OK. Most of us have difficulty remembering exactly what we had for breakfast this morning.

Wednesday of this week, June 5, was the day that the church throughout the world remembered the ministry of St. Boniface. Boniface was, as you may know, born in England and continued to live there in relative peace until he was in his 40s. But, then, in his 40s God called him to proclaim the gospel of Christ. And where did he go, but to those God-forsaken people living in ... Frisia... where his life was constantly threatened by the people living there, the ancestors of many of you here this morning. But, then, as if that weren't enough, God called Boniface at a ripe old age to go to the even more God-forsaken peoples ... the Germans ... by whom he was martyred ... in his 80s!<sup>1</sup>

Now, "centuries later, what message can we gather today from the teaching and marvellous activity of this great missionary and martyr? For those who approach Boniface, an initial fact stands out: the centrality of the word of God, lived and interpreted in the faith of the Church, a word that he lived, preached and witnessed to until he gave the supreme gift of himself in martyrdom. He was so passionate about the word of God that he felt the urgent need and duty to communicate it to others, even at his own personal risk."<sup>2</sup>

This was a man for whom the gospel of Christ was real. Boniface, like the apostle Paul before him, embraced the gospel of Christ and knew when he did so that it required him to share it with others. And so he, like Paul, proclaimed it to wild, untamed, violent, vicious, immoral peoples who had no idea who Jesus was, how they could escape from this horrific world in which they lived, or that there was a God, a true God, who loved them. These are the three pillars of the gospel of Christ that Paul and later men like Boniface preached: (1) that Jesus gave himself freely to remove the sins of men and women; (2) that in doing so, Jesus freed men and women from the evil world in which they found themselves; and (3) that all this had happened because of the great love of God for humans.

And it worked! The Frisians and the Germans, like the Galatians centuries before them, were set free and you and I are here this morning because they were. We are not out hunting down our enemies. We are not ravaging the wives and daughters of our enemies ... or of our neighbours. We are not living in a predominantly violent world. People around us are not dying as fast as they come into this world. We are not scrounging for food. We are here this morning celebrating the great love of God, made known to the world in Christ... and made known, again I say, by men who raced throughout the known world and into the far corners of the unknown world, abandoning the comfort of their own known worlds to proclaim this gospel of the self-sacrifice of the son, freedom for sinners and slaves, all because of the love of God, to our ancestors and in some cases to us.

OK, have you got the three elements of the gospel now? After all, this is just review from last week. .... Good. Now, take out a pen and paper. Write down the three pillars of the gospel of

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<sup>1</sup> The present European boundaries of states do not correspond to the boundaries in the 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, March 11, 2009, found at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20090311\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20090311_en.htm)

Christ that Paul proclaimed to the Galatians. ... That's OK, we'll stay here until you're done. .... Who wants to read theirs? ... OK, now we're ready to move on.

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What we are now ready to talk about is the burning question raised by this letter of Paul to the Galatians: Knowing what they knew about Jesus and his sacrifice for them, having been freed as they had been freed from the evil world around them, and knowing how much they were loved by God... why, in heaven's name, were the Galatians willing to give it all up? And, what were they willing to give it up for?

This is an important historical question for us: after all, we wouldn't have Paul's letter to the Galatians if it weren't for the fact that the Galatians were giving up the gospel that Paul had preached to them, and needed to be called back to it. That is the point of this letter.

But, it's not just an historical question, because not only the heirs of Paul, but also the heirs of Boniface in Frisia and Germany have been willing to give up the gospel of Christ for another gospel, and many have. Look at Europe today. Look at the lives of many of the other descendants of the Frisians and Germans, the Swedes, and the English among whom the gospel of Christ took root.... those who aren't here this morning or anywhere close to any church. No, I know, not all of them have turned away from the gospel of Christ but many of them have, and you know that as well as I do? But, why? And to what have they turned?

Well, we know why the Galatians turned away from the gospel of Christ and what they turned to. After Paul left Galatia to continue to preach the gospel of Christ elsewhere, followers of Christ who were associated with the apostles who had been with Jesus -- Peter (here called by his Aramaic name "Cephas"), James, John, and others -- arrived in Galatia. Perhaps they rejoiced that the Galatian Gentiles had received the message about Jesus, the Jewish messiah, but they also told those Galatian Gentiles that what Paul had preached to them was not the whole gospel, that they needed something else to be saved. With the authority of the ordination by Jesus -- which counted for a lot more than Paul's somewhat dubious mystical experience on a road with no witnesses except for a few soldiers -- these apostolic emissaries explained to the Galatians that accepting Christ was just a mere doorway to the true religion, which was of course, the ongoing religion of Moses. They told the Galatians that if they were to be fully acceptable to the one true God, they needed to tidy themselves up and make themselves acceptable to that God. And to be acceptable to God, they needed to follow the Jewish law.

Following the Law meant that they would have to be circumcised, start to follow the Jewish laws on diet, pray and worship according to the feast days of Israel, give alms for the upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem, keep the sabbath, and on and on ... In other words, these men told the Galatians: 'we are here to make sure that you are actually fit to come before God'.

Well, this doesn't seem like such a bad thing does it? I mean: what's wrong with giving some order to the disordered lives of these pagan Celts living in Asia Minor? In fact, Boniface could have learned a thing or two from them about how to bring the unruly Frisians and Germans under control!

The Galatians must have thought it made sense, too, since the Galatians who had been freed from their former life after hearing the gospel that Paul had preached accepted these requirements. They decided that they would accept the Law and all of its requirements for their lives. If this is what God asked of those whom He loved, then, who were they to say no.

And yet for Paul, as you have heard, the requirements that these followers of Jesus from Jerusalem -- associates of Peter, James, and John -- have placed on the Galatians are fundamental perversions of the gospel of Christ. Paul says that they have proclaimed to the Galatians another gospel, which the Galatians have accepted.

Why is Paul so angry? Why does he call these fellow Christians who have preached this other gospel “cursed”?

It is because if this gospel that they have preached is the gospel, then Christ has died in vain, and all that Paul has preached about Christ is in vain. Because if this is the gospel, then all that would have been required of the Galatians or of any Gentile was for them to have accepted the Law at any time and to start to live it. If faithful obedience to the Law was what was really required for true religion, then all that would have been required of the gentiles was to become Jewish, offer regular animal sacrifices to atone for past sins, and then live a life of regular adherence to the Law. The Gentiles could have adopted this Law at any time in their lives. There were certainly enough synagogues scattered around the Mediterranean for them to know what was required. So Paul says: Then why did Jesus have to die if all that mattered was adopting the Law?

And who better than Paul to have preached this to the Galatians. Remember, he says, ‘if anyone should have been preaching Judaism to you it would have been me! I was a pure Jew, a member of the royal family, a Pharisee applying the Law of God strictly to my life and teaching it to others, and persecuting the violators of the Law, including Christians. These guys who have come to you now are johnny-come-latelys to Judaism. They used to spend all their time fishing on the Sea of Galilee and collecting taxes. But, no, they follow Jesus for a few months and suddenly they’re more devoted to the Law than the Pharisees!

‘But, I didn’t preach Judaism to you. Why? Because when Jesus made himself known to me on the Damascus road, I realized that, though I had followed the Law faithfully all of my life, I was still blind and worse, I was lost. The Law hadn’t saved me, and it had not helped me to see. And if it didn’t help me, who followed it all these years, if it did not save me from this present evil age, then why do you think that it will save you? You’re starting from scratch. I’ve followed the Law for decades. I know it by heart. But, I now know that the Law was only there until Jesus came in order to lead us to Jesus. That’s why the Law was there: to make us slaves to it in order to keep us safe until Jesus came and freed us. If you, however, now adopt the Law, having known Jesus, you will become slaves of the Law just as the Jews are who haven’t yet accepted Jesus. Why would you want to start worrying about whether it’s a new moon or not, whether the sabbath has actually started yet or not and how many steps to walk if it has, about whether this animal is pure enough for a sacrifice, about whether this food has been touched by unclean hands or not, about whether your wife has spent the proper number of days purifying herself or not? Is that what Christ has set you free to do? Hasn’t he freed you so that you can set your minds on

spiritual things, rather than on the passing things of this world? By thinking only about the passing things of this world, you'll just become even more enslaved to it.

'And because you will never know for sure whether you've done enough to please God through the Law, you will never know peace. You will never know a God who loves you, even when you fail, because you will always fail and the God of the Law will always be there ready to punish you for your failure.'

That's Paul's impassioned plea to the Galatians: don't give up the freedom that Christ has given you for slavery to Law.

The other gospel that the Galatians had turned to was the gospel of law.

But, underlying that other gospel lie insights for us about the perennial challenge to the gospel of Christ by another gospel, the gospel of man.

(1) For Paul the fundamental problem facing humanity was sin that separated us from God; the gospel of man sees our fundamental problem as lack of control over our own destinies. The gospel of man will always suggest that we can achieve what matters most to us when we control our destinies, whether it be through law -- as in the case of the Galatians -- or through mental or physical discipline, or through technology, or through some larger political force. You're depressed? Take this medicine or visit this doctor. You're worried about your finances? See this financial consultant or consult this plan. Your life is in shambles: see this counselor, watch this programme. Do something. Take back your life. .... Sound familiar? That's exactly what the Galatians were being told. The problem is that these attempts are all human attempts to take back control of our lives from the chaos that has always threatened us and that has always stood opposed to God's good creation from the beginning. And it is only God who can take on the chaos and bring creation forth from it. A life lived following the gospel of man ends up being a life that ends up debilitated and exhausted by the stress of trying to achieve the impossible. A young man at the gym this past week told me of his father, my age, lying in his bed for 3 years, dying from the stress of a life lived trying to gain control and never succeeding. What a difference from Boniface who even into his 80s raced to embrace the Germans to tell them of God's love for them, only to be killed by them.

(2) The gospel of man also moves us away from a focus on what has been achieved by God in Christ, our freedom from this evil age. The gospel of man turns us toward a scrupulous attention to the things of this world to make sure that we are not polluted by them. For the Galatians, it was: don't touch this food it's not kosher, make sure you honour the sabbath, don't wear that fabric, don't touch this, don't do that... Don't... don't.... don't... Sound familiar? The gospel of man is not about freedom; it is always about "don'ts". Many of these are laudable -- don't wear this brand of jeans if it's produced in Bangladesh; don't eat that junk food it's bad for you. There is nothing wrong with some of these, but that won't deliver anyone from the violent viciousness of this world. The Muslim militants of Boko Haram in Nigeria will not stop killing Christians or forcing people to believe in Islam by being told: don't do that. Paul or Boniface would never have succeeded had they simply proclaimed the 10 Commandments to the violent Galatians or the violent Frisians: don't kill people; don't rape and pillage your neighbours. Paul came into

the midst of the Galatians in the power of the Holy Spirit and silenced demons, and defied violent men, with miracles that no one could deny. And as a result, the people listened to the gospel and were freed.

(3) The gospel of man also turned the Galatians away from a God who had made Himself known as a God who loved them to a god of law who wanted strict obedience of his law. This was the god that the Jewish followers of Moses knew, the god that strict Islamists know, the god of karma... the god of logical consequences. The god of logical consequences is a god who makes a lot of sense out of life: you've done this; well, now you'll suffer for it. But that god is a cold analytical doctor god, not the warm embracing Father God who says: yes, I know what you've done; don't worry, I'll make it all new. And he does.

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My friends, we don't know in the end what happened to the Galatians: did they continue on in the false gospel that the Jerusalem apostles had sent their way, or did they return to the gospel of Christ as preached by Paul? What we do know is that eventually Christianity in Galatia, in the very centre of what is today Asia Minor, completely disappeared, except for a handful of Christians. In fact, everywhere Paul went -- Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, even Greece and Rome -- he was plagued by the followers of the false gospel who followed after him and insisted that Gentiles could not be saved without becoming Jewish followers of the Law.

Boniface and the missionaries who went to the far corners of the world, whether Europe, or Africa, or Asia, or the Americas, and who proclaimed the same gospel of Christ as Paul, also have found their legacies jeopardized by others who came after them, and who have sought to replace the gospel of a Messiah who freely gave himself for our sins, who has given us absolute, unfettered freedom from this evil world, all because God loved us so much. In doing so, they have started us on a backwards course. They risk sending us backwards at full speed toward that time in which violence and viciousness ruled. In the west, thanks to the abdication of churches that proclaimed the gospel of Christ, we are headed backwards faster than we are forwards, with a growing acceptance of violence on the most defenceless in society, namely, the unborn, with a growing ease with personal sexual satisfaction at the expense of covenant faithfulness, with a growing self-centeredness that determines that my need for a MacMansion outweighs my need to share what I have. Eventually, before we know it, it is not impossible that we will be where the Galatians and the Frisians were centuries ago. And then another Paul, another Boniface, will have to come and proclaim the gospel of Christ again to us.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This trend backwards could not have happened without the abdication of churches in the faithful preaching of the gospel, which was what began the change in the first place. It was the gospel of Christ that began to free people; it is the loss of the gospel of Christ that will send people backwards. The institutional church, primarily in its Protestant form, has "facilitated this slide". "Mainline Protestantism decided during the mid twentieth century that its vocation was not to teach permanent truths but [to] strive to echo secular society". Slowly, and then with growing haste, it gave up on the gospel of Christ for the gospel of man. "The Church of What's Happening Now replaced" the gospel of Christ "with sociology. "Catch up!" became its refrain. "<http://juicyecumenism.com/2013/05/30/churches-and-destructive-pathologies/>

And so my friends, please take those 3 pillars of the gospel of Christ that you wrote down and memorize them. Find ways to celebrate what you have in Christ. Beware of succumbing to another gospel that may make a lot of sense but takes away the freedom that you have. And then go forth and continue the transformation of the world that Paul and Boniface and so many others have begun.