

*“Gospeling” the Faithfulness of Christ
Among the Gentiles:
A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians
Diocese of West Texas
Spring & Fall 2010*

Study and Reflection Session 2:
“Gospeling” the Faithfulness of Christ (Gal 1:11-24)

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Translation of Gal 1:11-12

Galatians 1:11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was gospelled by me is not of human origin; **12** for I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Commentary on Gal 1:11-12

The Gospel divinely revealed to Paul. What an extraordinary statement Paul makes here: that the gospel he bears in word and deed was not taught to him by any of the acknowledged authorities (i.e., the leaders of the Jerusalem church), but came to him as a divine revelation, or in Greek an *apokalypsis* [see the discussion of “gospel” (*euangelion*) in Session 1].

The Greek word *apokalypsis* means, literally, the pulling back of a veil, just as does the English word “revelation,” which is derived from the Latin equivalent. When the veil of our usual ways of regarding the world is pulled back, the world is *revealed* to us as God sees it.

- Where we are distracted by our desires and our involvement in the ups and downs of daily life, God sees the world as it truly is.
- Authentic spiritual experiences offer us a chance to see the world around us with God’s eyes, and then to respond to the world as God would have us do.

Paul’s experience of revelation. Paul is saying here that he had a profound spiritual experience in which God pulled back the veil, showing him the “gospel” of Jesus Christ. The fullness of the gospel that was revealed to Paul, and its implications for how one should live, will be disclosed gradually in this letter.

Divine authority. For the moment, it is most important to see that Paul is claiming divine authority for the insights that came to him as a consequence of his spiritual experience of Christ.

Translation of Gal 1:13-14

13 You have heard of my earlier manner of life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church [ekklēsia] of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my

people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

Commentary on Gal 1:13-14

The violence of Paul's former life. It is hard to convey the vivid violence of Paul's imagery here, in speaking of behavior that he must be ashamed of now. He says that he was "ravaging" the church, and that his persecution was "over the top."

Paul's devotion. The second sentence tells us Paul's *reason* for his persecution of the followers of Jesus: his devotion to God, as defined by the traditions of his people.

The church of God. The "assembly" (*ekklēsia*) of God is Paul's way of referring to the communities of early Christians.

- The word has both a Jewish and a Greek reference.
- In the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the *ekklēsia* was the assembly of Israel, the people God had chosen to live by the Torah, to worship the one God, and to claim the land.
- In the Greek city-states, the *ekklēsia* was the city council, the people chosen to interpret and apply the laws.
- What does that background lend to your understanding of "church"?

Paul did not despair at keeping the Jewish Law. It is a common Christian misconception to interpret Paul as having had some kind of psychological breakdown over a failed attempt to keep a rigorously interpreted Jewish Law.

- Elsewhere, when he describes his earlier life, he says he was, "as to righteousness under the Law, blameless" (Philippians 3:6).
- You might want to compare Paul's discussion of his life in Philippians 3:4-11 to what he says here in Galatians.

- Remember that both of these autobiographical passages were written, not merely to share a personal story, but with a view toward persuading the hearers to adopt a particular course of action!

No conversion. It is common to speak of Paul's *conversion* to Christianity, though it is very important to remember that at this stage (the mid-fifties), the Jewish sect that would become Christianity is still a movement within Judaism. Paul shifts from being a Pharisaic Jew, with strong boundaries between himself and the Gentile world around him, to a believer in Jesus as the Jewish messiah who would draw *all* people into relationship with God.

Translation of Gal 1:15-17

15 But when God, who had appointed me from my mother's womb and called me through his grace [*charis*], was pleased 16 to reveal his son in me, so that I might gospel him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any flesh-and-blood person, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Commentary on Gal 1:15-17

Paul's sense of calling. Paul uses language from the Jewish scriptures ("...God, who had appointed me from my mother's womb and called me through his grace...") to describe his strong sense of God's claim on his life:

- Jeremiah 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

- Isaiah 49:1 ...The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
- The word "grace" implies the life-giving power that God supplies to the one who is called.
- Paul's view of himself as somehow in a lineage with the great prophets of Israel shows to what extent he still sees himself in continuity with Judaism.

The revelation of Christ *in me*. Most English translations read "when God was pleased...to reveal his son *to me*," but in terms of spiritual experience, there is a wide gulf between a revelation *to* a person and a revelation *in* a person. Paul has written, literally, that the revelation occurred *in* him.

- Paul did not perceive the risen Lord as outside of himself.
- The revelation of Christ to Paul was intimate, a deep knowing from within.

Gospeling Christ among the Gentiles. As we have said elsewhere, the verb form of "gospel" implies both words and actions, a kind of embodiment of the good news that goes far beyond merely proclaiming a message about something.

- As with Paul's initial revelation of Christ *in* himself, he gospels Christ ("him") among the Gentiles with his full being, from the inside out, so to speak.
- As we will shortly see, Paul sums up this mystery when he says, "...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Paul's autobiography has a purpose. Once again, it is important to note that Paul has shaped his telling of his story to emphasize the divine source of his revelation.

- See the difference in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, where Paul speaks of the traditions he received and passed on.

- The point is not that Paul is “lying,” for it is possible to reconcile the two stories. But it is very important to pay attention to the *reasons* why Paul chooses one way to tell his story for a particular purpose and another way to achieve a different purpose.

Arabia and Damascus. Paul did not go to Jerusalem, the center of the earliest church, to have his revelation “approved” by others, but seems almost to have fled to Arabia.

- In Paul’s day, **Damascus** (which is also mentioned in Acts, in connection with events surrounding Paul’s revelation) was a beautiful and wealthy Hellenistic city, with a large Jewish population. It also had one of the earliest Christian congregations.
- No one is certain exactly what area Paul means by “**Arabia**,” whether he is referring to the desert areas that would, in three centuries, attract Christian hermits, or whether he means the cities of the Kingdom of Nabataea that were called the *provincia Arabia*. Certain elements of his spiritual life, for instance Paul’s intense sense of union with Christ, have a mystical cast that is not unlike the spirituality of the later desert Fathers and Mothers. It is intriguing to wonder how these three years shaped Paul into the person he became.

Translation of Gal 1:18-24

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; 19 but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. 20 In what I am writing to you, before God, I am not lying! 21 After that, I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, 22 and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. 23 They only heard that, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now gospeling the faith [pistis] he once tried to destroy.” 24 And they glorified God because of me.

Commentary on Gal 1:18-24

The Jerusalem Church. Finally, after three years, Paul does go to Jerusalem, where the central leaders of the earliest church are located.

- Pay attention to the way Paul has distanced himself from the church in Jerusalem. That community remained strictly Jewish and Torah-observant to a degree that ran counter to Paul's "gospel" (his teaching and actions) among the Gentiles. This point will be spelled out in more detail later in the letter.
- **Cephas** (whom we call Peter) is the name Jesus gave to Simon. In Greek, it means, basically, "Rocky." The gospels according to Matthew and Luke, in particular, affirm the importance of Peter.
- In later tradition, Peter is closely associated with the city of Rome, where he is said to have been martyred.
- The other principal leader of the church in Jerusalem in the early years was **James**, Jesus' own brother. He is not mentioned in the biblical Gospels as one of the disciples of Jesus, but rather seems to have received a revelation of the risen Christ, much like Paul's (1 Corinthians 15:7).
- How do you think these two men felt about Paul's claim of apostleship, compared to theirs?

Syria, Cilicia, and Judea. **Syria** here probably denotes the area around Antioch; and **Cilicia** is probably the area around Tarsus (Paul's hometown). **Judea** is the area defined by Samaria on the north, the Negev on the south, the Mediterranean on the west, and Jordan River and Dead Sea on the east.

Gospelizing the faith, or the faithfulness? In Greek there are not two separate words for "faith" and "faithfulness," just the one word:

pistis. This very fact cuts through the contrast that Christians are sometimes inclined to make, between faith and action.

- *Pistis* refers to the state of having become confident about something, to the extent that you will act in accordance with that confidence.
- Paul speaks of the irony of his experience: that he is now *living* the very manner of life that he had formerly been trying to eradicate. The “faith” he had been opposing was not only a set of beliefs as such, but the corresponding practices of faithfulness that, in his view, were contrary to the Torah.

Questions for Reflection

1. The crucial turning point in Paul’s life consisted of a revelation of Christ *in* him. As you moved from childhood to adulthood, were there any significant turning points for you, when your faith changed or deepened significantly? Did the change come from within you, or outside of you? Can you identify with Paul’s description of his own change? As far as you can tell, what seems to have stayed the same for him? What seems to have changed? You might want to come back to this question again after reading the entire Letter to the Galatians.
2. “Gospeling” requires courage and clarity in both speaking and acting. Are there aspects of the gospel of Christ that you find hard to *do*? Are there aspects that you find hard to *proclaim*?
3. Faith (*pistis*, in Greek), cannot really be hypocritical, as it includes the sense of both mind and body united in wholehearted confidence and assent to the ways of God as they are known in Christ. How does your congregation proclaim (“gospel”) its faith through actions alone? How does your

congregation proclaim its faith in words? Is one of these ways more persuasive than the other, in your opinion?

4. We can already sense some tension between Paul and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. What are the causes of the tension? Does this tension mean that there is no mutual respect between the different parties? What personal qualities does one need to develop, in order to maintain mutual respect, in spite of significant differences in practice and belief?