

“THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS - 2”
“A TRUE APOSTLE”
Galatians 1:10 – 2:21

It will not have escaped your attention that Wayne Rooney – not someone who immediately leaps to mind when you think of great authors – has signed a £5 million deal with a publishing company to write five books over the next few years. I suspect he will have a fair bit of help from a ghost writer with what he writes, the first volume of which is to be his autobiography so far. Surely there can't be much to write yet?

This morning we're looking at Paul's autobiography which, while not written by a ghost writer was certainly assisted by the Spirit. Those of you who were here last week will, I hope, remember, that one of the reasons Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Galatia was to set the record straight about his own apostolic credentials and to reply to some of the criticisms that he had obviously received from some of the members of the churches in the area. We saw that he makes the transition from his opening remarks to the meat of his message in *1:10*, where he claims that he is in no way trying to please men – and certainly not trying to please himself – but is intent on serving only God. (It's a good passage to be reading this morning as we ordain and induct new elders to serve us over the next year.) Paul stresses once again the divine nature of his revelation from the Lord.

Most autobiographies are simply accounts of one's life, a series of reminiscences from or reflections upon all or part of one's life, with usually no real purpose than self-glorification or making money (which may be Wayne Rooney's motive – who knows?). Paul's story here has a real purpose: he tells it to demonstrate God's work in his life and, once again, to emphasise the gospel.

So what relevance does it have for us, then? As we look at some of the points he makes, let's consider whether we can detect any echo of it in our own lives, and let's remember that Paul's gospel is our gospel too. His experience of God in his own life may well have been quite different from ours, but the principles are nonetheless the same. And what he has to say to us about Christian ministry is, as I've said, a useful reminder to those of us who have any position of responsibility in the church.

1. PAUL'S STORY SHOWS GOD'S HAND IN HIS LIFE (*1:11-15*)

God had touched Paul's life and made a real and dramatic difference to it. Paul wasn't argued into the Kingdom. He wasn't scared into the Kingdom. He wasn't converted by men. His message wasn't borrowed or adapted from someone else's message. There was, therefore, no possibility that it was “*something that man made up*”. When Paul fell from his horse outside Damascus, there was no doubt that it was God's doing and God's alone.

In *1:13,14*, Paul stresses his former zeal and his radical Judaism to show what an incredible transformation had taken place in his life – a transformation that was, quite literally, miraculous. Imagine the shock that he must have caused the members of the early church when he turned up to preach to them! It was a bit like Harry Redknapp turning up at Southampton's training sessions after being manager at Portsmouth. Yet he does not dwell at great length on the pre-conversion part of his life story: he says enough to show that there had been a great change in his life, then goes on to talk about God's work in him since that time. How often we hear and read testimonies of people who have been marvellously converted from a life of crime or degeneracy, but God hardly gets a look in – it's more a sensational story of all the bad things and a bit tacked on the end about how the conversion took place.

Let us never forget that, though we have come to Christ through the ministry of this or that individual, or this or that special event, it is God's work in our hearts through his Holy Spirit that changes us. That's one of the great things about the preaching and the writing of the Puritans (if ever you get the opportunity

to read any of it) – they recognise that fact above all others. Men and women respond to the timeless, cultureless, religionless call of God. Paul sets it out even more clearly in *1 Corinthians 1:11-15*.

We talked about this last time, I know, but it's worth repeating: Paul stresses that **God** had set him apart, he had put his seal on him. God chose him from birth (*1:15*) and called him “*by his grace*” – God did not respond to any merit or goodness in Paul's life.

And that's what we need to remember in our own lives – to put more stress on God's grace than on our own effort. You'd think, to hear some people talk, that they were indispensable to God, that without their amazing and tireless efforts the whole Kingdom of God would come shuddering to a halt. God calls us: we don't volunteer. That's worth remembering, those who are elders here. In *Romans 5:6-8* Paul emphasises it very strongly, and Jesus says the same in *John 15:16*. Reminding ourselves of that can help us check our inflating egos, if they begin to get out of control. And it can also give us real assurance, if we ever doubt our salvation. It is God's work, not ours. It depends on his unchanging mercy, not on our fickle whims and fancies.

2. PAUL BROUGHT GLORY TO GOD (1:24)

I often think of Paul as a bit of an egotist. There seems to be an awful lot of “I” in his writings and there are times when he seems almost to be boasting – but really it's all to bring glory to God. John Wesley's journals are the same, and so is Charles Spurgeon's autobiography. When I was at theological college, I chose to do some research on the life of Charles Spurgeon, the great Victorian preacher, because I wanted to try and deflate the reputation that he had and offer some other point of view from that which his biographers seemed to have. I read all the biographies; I ploughed through the volumes of his autobiography; I got hold of research material from the United States (for which I was almost thrown out of the Cambridge University library!); I managed to look through boxes of his original and uncatalogued notes and jottings. The conclusion that I reluctantly reached was that, in his life, which was so remarkable in very many ways, the glory really did go to God – there was no other explanation. Spurgeon, like Paul, was a man who had been given tremendous gifts and opportunities by God, and whatever he said and did pointed not to his own ego, but to God himself.

Is that true of our own witness? of our testimony? of our lives? Are we wanting the glory, the kudos, the praise for ourselves – or even for our church? Or is all our prayer and effort channelled so that people will praise God and God alone? Of course, we need to recognise the gifts and abilities we have, or we cannot use them effectively, but we also need to affirm that those gifts come from God himself. Jesus himself pointed that out to the disciples in the *Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16)*. It was a feature of the life of the very first Christians, as we read in the early chapters of *Acts*, and Paul writes of it in *Romans 15:5,6* and *2 Thessalonians 1:12*. Is your life of such a quality that men and women “*praise God because of you*”?

3. PAUL'S MINISTRY WAS RECOGNISED BY OTHERS (2:1-10)

We need to note as well, though rather more in passing, that Paul's ministry, although it didn't originate among men, was nevertheless recognised by them. His calling was, if you like, confirmed by other Spirit-filled men and women of God. That is a point well worth noting when God appears to be calling us into any particular area of service for him. If we feel called by God it's important to check it out with other Christians, however strong the call might seem. That's what our Church Meetings and elections are all about.

When Sally and I first felt that we were being called into some kind of “full time” ministry, we checked it out with other Christians. The sense of call had come at a crucial time and in a way that seemed to be too much of a coincidence not to be God's will. But it wasn't confirmed by other men and women of God.

Later, when we felt an even stronger conviction that God was leading us in a particular direction, the call was recognised by the leaders of the church where we were members. If we had tried to go ahead the first time, things wouldn't have gone right – we can see that with hindsight. When I've been speaking on Christian holidays I've often had people come to me to say that they feel they have a particular ministry and it's obvious to everyone except them that they don't! Paul's example is an important one.

And notice too, that little comment in *2:10*. After deciding what direction the ministry of evangelism was to take, Paul was encouraged to “*continue to remember the poor.*” His proclamation of the gospel had a very positive social dimension that we must never overlook. The gospel is not just words, but actions too. Do your actions speak of the love of God in practical ways?

4. PAUL STOOD FIRM EVEN IF IT MEANT CONFLICT (2:11-21)

Paul knew his message inside out. He'd spent fourteen years (*2:1*) reflecting on it and listening to God. He knew what the gospel was and he knew what authority the gospel had because it came from Jesus himself. So he was unwilling to let **anyone** water it down, pervert it or add to it – even Peter!

You see, Peter had started to revert to the legalism of the Jews (which Paul was really arguing against in this letter) – he was refusing to eat with Gentiles. This is the same Peter, remember, who had that vision in *Acts 10*. Paul saw this as a distortion of the gospel and as an example of hypocrisy, so he told him so. He told him to his face and he told him in front of others (*2:14*), so there was no possibility of half-true rumours getting about. He didn't go round behind his back spreading gossip; he didn't criticise him behind his back and then act all sweetness and light to his face; he didn't gather a little group of malcontents around him and act as their spokesman – that kind of behaviour is seized upon by the Devil to cause division among God's people. He practised what he himself preached to the Ephesian Christians in *Ephesians 4:15*.

We, like Paul, need to be sure of our own position, sure of the gospel we believe, and point out lovingly and openly to others when it is obvious they are in error. Paul was talking here about the foundation of the gospel, though: he wasn't fussing about the inessentials and the peripheral things – it wasn't his own opinion he was voicing, but the word of God himself.

5. IT WAS ALL OF CHRIST (2:20a, 21b)

Paul concludes this section by pointing to Christ, so that there is a transition to the next part of the letter, which we'll look at next. He writes that Jesus has taken the place of all the old sins in his life. These are what we said last time are key verses in this letter. Having got rid of all his old anti-Christian ways, his old character, he now fills the vacuum with Christ. He talks again later in the letter about being “*crucified with Christ*”, but introduces the idea here to explain why Christ died for him. What was the point of Christ's dying if we can keep our old character and simply **work** our way into God's favour? Paul's Jewish zeal was useless: our good deeds, our attempts to keep the Law are useless. All we can do is, like Paul, accept God's grace and live in it as Christ lives in us, which he does by his Holy Spirit.

Again and again in his letters, Paul stresses the superiority of Christ in his life. I wonder if we would be able to say those things with him. Look, for example, at *1 Corinthians 2:2*; *2 Corinthians 4:5*; *Philippians 1:21* and so on. Paul was a remarkable person, but a human being like all of us. He was sinful, he had his weaknesses – but God worked in his life and Paul wanted all the glory to go to him. The secret of his success, if we can put it like that, was that he recognised God's hand in his life and he wanted everyone to know about Jesus. Do you?

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS
2. "A TRUE APOSTLE"
Galatians 1:10 – 2:21

One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Galatia was to set the record straight about his own apostolic credentials and to reply to some of the criticisms that he had obviously received from some of the members of the churches in the area. We saw that he makes the transition from his opening remarks to the meat of his message in *1:10*. Paul's story here has a real purpose: he tells it to demonstrate God's work in his life and, once again, to emphasise the gospel.

1. PAUL'S STORY SHOWS GOD'S HAND IN HIS LIFE (1:11-15)

In *1:13,14*, Paul stresses his former zeal and his radical Judaism to show what an incredible transformation had taken place in his life – a transformation that was, quite literally, miraculous. **God** had set him apart, he had put his seal on him. God chose him from birth (*1:15*) and called him "*by his grace*" – God did not respond to any merit or goodness in Paul's life.

2. PAUL BROUGHT GLORY TO GOD (1:24)

We need to recognise the gifts and abilities we have, or we cannot use them effectively, but we also need to affirm that those gifts come from God himself. Look at *Matthew 5:16; Romans 15:5,6* and *2 Thessalonians 1:12*.

3. PAUL'S MINISTRY WAS RECOGNISED BY OTHERS (2:1-10)

Paul's ministry, although it didn't originate among men, was nevertheless recognised by them. His calling was, if you like, confirmed by other Spirit-filled men and women of God. The gospel is not just words, but actions too.

4. PAUL STOOD FIRM EVEN IF IT MEANT CONFLICT (2:11-21)

Paul was unwilling to let **anyone** water down, pervert or add to the gospel – even Peter!

5. IT WAS ALL OF CHRIST (2:20a, 21b)

Paul concludes this section by pointing to Christ, so that there is a transition to the next part of the letter. Again and again in his letters, Paul stresses the superiority of Christ in his life. I wonder if we would be able to say those things with him. Look, for example, at *1 Corinthians 2:2; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 1:21*.

Questions for discussion

1. Think about Paul's conversion (you can read about it in *Acts 9* if you need to). Was he prepared in any way for the experience? What was at the heart of that experience? Was it in any way unique? Do you know anyone who has had a similar experience? What would you say to someone whose conversion was much more gradual and feels it is in some way inadequate?
2. Paul seems to have developed his theology without anyone else's help. How should we respond to those who claim to have had direct revelation from God? How can we test their authenticity?
3. How are convictions formed? How can we know that they are right? Must we always stand by them or is it right to compromise or abandon them on occasions?
4. Paul was obviously unwilling to give in to Peter, even though there was a real possibility of conflict. In what circumstances should we be willing to engage in conflict within the church? Or should we go for peace whatever the price?
5. Paul calls Peter's action "*hypocrisy*" (*v13*). Why was it hypocrisy? What parallels might we be able to identify in the church today? How should we handle it?