

Why Apostle's Matter

Galatians 1:11-24

Intro: In our text this morning we deal with an extremely important question – the question of authority. Is Paul an authentic apostle with real authority? Is his message the real thing? It matters profoundly.

You know, there are people who impersonate police officers. They buy a badge online and some police car lights and start pulling people over as though they are actual police officers. I was reading recently of one who had the misfortune of pulling over an actual off-duty police officer and ended up arrested. They both looked like police officers – but one of them had actual authority and the other didn't.

The issue of authority matters. On what authority is our faith founded? The authority of God – or of men? If the Christian faith is just one of the many man-made religions in the world – then there is no real authority behind it. Then we have no authority to call men to repent and believe and be saved. But if it comes from God Himself – well then, that message comes with all the authority and weight of the Ever-Living, Sovereign and Reigning God. To reject it is to reject God and to believe it is to receive God Himself.

I. The Claim

¹¹For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹²For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul is battling for the spiritual life of the church in Galatia. Some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem had come to these churches with a revised version of the gospel. Paul's gospel was a gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. The revised version was salvation by grace plus works, faith plus circumcision, Jesus plus Moses.

As we pointed out last week, it was a plausible and compelling revision particularly for the Jewish Christians in the churches of Galatia. But, to lead these people into this revised version of the gospel – the false teachers had to undermine the authenticity of Paul's apostleship and the consequent authority of his message.

This was not that hard to do. You could make an argument that Paul, after all, was not one of the original 12 apostles. He wasn't like Peter or James or John – men who had walked with Jesus through his earthly ministry. He wasn't an eyewitness of Jesus's miracles or his death on the cross. He was a second-class apostle at best – and his preaching had a concerning lack of regard for the Jewish traditions. He wasn't a bad man; he meant well and had a lot of good things to say – but he wasn't the "final word" on the gospel. His message needed a little revising.

If Paul was going to win back the Galatian believers to the true gospel he was going to have to deal with the accusations. And that's precisely what he does in verses 10-24.

"For I would have you know brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel." This is Paul's central claim. The gospel he preached didn't originate in Paul's mind or the mind of any man at all. It is purely divine in its origin. He didn't invent it. Nor did he receive it from any other man. He received it from God through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Obviously, if that's true – then the contest between Paul and these false teachers is over. If Paul is truly an apostle of God and his message is what he received from God – then it's checkmate for anyone who teaches a different gospel.

II. The Evidence

What is the evidence that Paul can use to support his remarkable claim? Paul points to the facts concerning his own life: his life before his conversion; his experience of conversion; and what happened after his conversion.

A. Before Conversion

13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 14 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

Paul reminds them of the man he once was. Paul had once been Saul of Tarsus – the Pharisee and persecutor of the church! Paul highlights these two aspects of his pre-conversion life: his active persecution of the church and his zeal for the traditions of the Jewish fathers. Saul had been a true zealot in both areas.

The best contemporary illustration we could use for Saul would be an Islamic Jihad warrior. Do you remember a few years ago when jihad warriors took 30 Coptic Christian men to the seashore and slit their throats? Saul was one of those guys. He was ruthless – dragging men and women off to prison and consenting to their death. Remember, he participated in the stoning of Stephen. He was a terrorist committed to destroying the church of Jesus Christ by any and all means.

And, just like a Islamic suicide bomber walking into the middle of a crowded market convinced that he is pleasing to Allah; Saul the Terrorist carried out his murderous plans convinced that he was pleasing God. That's who Saul had been. He was completely consumed with hatred for Christ and committed to destroying those who followed Him.

Why does that matter? How does that bolster his case?

Stott, " A man in that mental and emotional state is in no mood to change his mind, or even to have it changed for him by men....Only God could reach him – and God did!"ⁱ

B. Conversion

¹⁵But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone;

There is wonderful emphasis here on the grace and power and saving intervention of God. Notice how the pronouns of verses 13 and 14 were all personal – "I, I, I". But now the story is all about God.

1. God's Sovereign Choice: "he set me apart before I was born". Paul was not a Christian by accident nor an apostle by choice. He didn't volunteer for this. He had been specifically and sovereignly set apart for that task by God himself before he was born.

This is very similar to God's choosing of his prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.

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."

God's official, authoritative messengers are never volunteers – they are always divinely ordained and then specifically called. God speaks of false prophets in the OT as men "I did not send."

2. God's Sovereign Call: "who called me by his grace". The story of Paul's conversion is so clearly a story of incredible, straight-up, unadulterated grace and grace alone! God, for no other reason than His own sovereign choice, to glorify his own name, determined to save a terrorist like Paul at the cost of the blood of His own Son. Paul's conversion was not owing to anything whatsoever in Paul except that he was the worst of all sinners.

3. God's Revelation: God *"was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him to the Gentiles."* God who does whatever He pleases, was pleased to reveal Jesus to Saul the Terrorist in order to make him and Apostle of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. On the road to Damascus Saul the Terrorist was suddenly confronted by the Living Christ, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And Jesus said, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting." Saul had been convinced that Jesus was a lie, that the story of his resurrection was a diabolical myth – and now, that very Jesus, in all his resurrected power and glory was standing before him. In that very moment, Saul the Terrorist died and Paul the Apostle was born – all by the revelation of Jesus.

The Greek preposition translated here as "to me" is literally "in". God revealed his Son "in" me. In other words, when Saul met the Living Christ on the road to Damascus, Jesus was not only revealed to Saul but "in" Saul. The truth of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of me was evident to his mind and his heart. He was, at that very moment, a radically transformed man.

This is, in some sense, the story of every true Christian. To be a true Christian is to have seen Jesus, with the eyes of faith, as the true Son of God and only Savior of sinners. Christ is the core of Christianity.

Paul's radical transformation by the purpose and power of God and God alone is clear evidence that his mission and his message did not originate with him, or with any other man, but with God and God alone.

C. After Conversion

In verses 17-22 Paul explains that, following his conversion he did not go to seminary, at least not in the traditional form. He did not go to Jerusalem in order to sit at the feet of Peter and James and John. He went into the wilderness in order to sit at the feet of Jesus. For three years Paul was in Arabia – he doesn't say where. Paul doesn't tell us specifically what he was doing there – but it appears to have been a time of isolation.

Most likely, it was a time where Paul went back through the OT Scriptures he had studied and memorized as a Pharisee, to read them now in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. One commentator said that Paul spent these three years preparing to write the book of Romans. Can you imagine how texts he had known all of his life suddenly leaped off the page, pointing to the person and work of Christ!

I'm sure you've seen those 3-D drawings that at first appear to be a swirling pattern of colors and shapes until suddenly you see a 3D image appear. That was undoubtedly Paul's experience as he now read the Bible with brand new eyes and saw Jesus everywhere!

The central point of these verses is that Paul did not receive his gospel from men. Not even from the other Apostles. He received it from God.

The only input Paul had from men was the shocked response of those who heard him preach!

²²And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

²³They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

The radical transformation of Saul the Terrorist into Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ was one of the greatest miracles in the early church.

III. The Significance

Now why does this matter to us today? What is the significance of the fact that Paul was a true Apostle and that his message was directly from God?

A. It means that our faith is not founded on a message from men, but on the very words of God.

Ephesians 2:19–20you are....members of the household of God, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

The apostolic message is the true gospel and the necessary gospel for the salvation of sinners. The gospel we have from the apostles is the only gospel message there is. This is helpful to remember – our faith is not simply the Christian faith, but the Apostolic faith. One of my first litmus test of a new popular teacher or teaching is simply – does this sound like Paul? Would Paul, Peter or John approve of this message?

When J. Gresham Machen was battling with the theological progressives and the social gospel they were advocating, he repeatedly pointed to the discrepancy between their religion and Paul's religion. Paul wasn't calling people to adopt the ethical values of Jesus – but to believe in Him as Savior and then to obey Him as Lord. And Machen's point was that Paul's religion is called Christianity. If you disagree with Paul's religion at least have the integrity to admit that you are starting a new and different religion. Our faith is an Apostolic faith.

B. Our Message, as the Church, Must have an Apostolic Tone

Our message should sound like Paul's message. It should be filled with the life and hope and peace that flows from the glorious gospel of God's grace for sinners in Jesus. It should have that seriousness that's appropriate for speaking of eternal things and the joy that is appropriate for such a magnificent truth. It should sound like the Apostles.

I remember an ongoing conversation, years back, with someone who wanted me to preach like Paul Washer. Paul Washer is an evangelist who preaches every sermon with the assumption that most people listening to him are not converted. This person wanted me to preach to the Harvest congregation as though the majority were unsaved. And my response was that I didn't see Paul preaching that way. Paul gave thanks for the church and assured them of the signs of faith and hope and love he saw in them. He always preached to the church as though they were actually the children of God and then called them to live like it.

In the same way, when the Emergent Church movement began to become popular, what struck me was that these men just didn't sound like the Apostle Paul. Our message must have that Apostolic "tone". Our message should be focused, with laser clarity, on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that means for the salvation of lost souls.

C. Our Mission must have Apostolic Warrant

What is the mission of the church? Why are we here in this world?

- To help people find fulfillment?
- To provide a place for community?
- To make this world a better place?
- Restore traditional values?

No, the mission of the church is to make disciples as we proclaim Jesus in all His saving power and glory. The mission of the church is to reveal Jesus to a lost world. That mission, by the power of God, is the only hope for this world – and results in the glory of God. What was the end result of Paul’s conversion?

²³ They only were hearing it said, “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

The Apostolic faith, and message and mission matter because they come from God and redound to the glory of God. Let’s be faithful to it! Amen.

ⁱ Stott, 32