

Far be it from me to glory except in the cross

A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Gal 1-2; 6:14-17

Paul writes in Galatians 1:6-9 that if anybody, even an angel from heaven, preaches any other gospel, let him be damned. "Any other gospel" means anything that is different from the truth of the gospel. Anyone who preaches anything different is excluded from God forever.

Other Christian leaders challenged Paul, saying: "Who do you think you are to say that? Where did you get that? Who are you, Paul? Where is your basis for saying 'the truth of the gospel' and 'no other gospel?'"

Paul proceeds to point out what the gospel is about. In Galatians 1:1 he writes: "I, Paul, an apostle." But he wasn't an original apostle. Who were the Twelve? It's a problem because the lists of the original apostles don't agree with each other. We know some of them are always named, but there are others and the lists don't match.

But we know that Paul was not one of the Twelve. Yet here is Paul writing to the Galatians: "I, Paul, an apostle," and this is the true gospel.

Acts 1 says that after Judas died, the disciples replaced him by lot (1 Samuel 10:20-21, 24 and 1 Chronicles 26:13) with somebody named Mattheis so they once again had twelve. But in Acts 14:4 and 14:14 it says: "Paul and Barnabas, apostles."

Furthermore, if you look at Romans 16:7, Paul sends greetings to Andronieus and Junias, who, he says, were apostles "before me." (Textual evidence indicates that Junias should be Junia, a woman.) Even more curious, in Phil 2:25 there was someone named Epaphroditus who is called an apostle.

Even though we think of "twelve" apostles, and in the Book of Revelation "twelve" is mentioned a number of times, there also seems to be some kind of slipperiness about who is and who is not an apostle. But Paul was not one of the Twelve.

After Judas died and they looked for a replacement for him, they said they wanted somebody who had been with Jesus in his ministry. Paul had not been with Jesus in his ministry. Paul then goes on in 1 Gal 1:12: "I received this gospel not from human beings but by revelation." Paul says in Gal 1:16: "The Lord himself appeared to me."

But that doesn't really cut the mustard because all kinds of people can see visions and have dreams. Then he goes on to talk about staying fourteen years in the wilderness, meaning he was cut off from outside influences: "I was not dependent on those leaders in Jerusalem." He says it's true after three years I went to Jerusalem and talked with Peter for fifteen days and also James the Just. (That's not James the Apostle because he had been killed by Herod early on, as is recorded in Acts 12:2.)

In the following chapter he writes that he and the leaders from Jerusalem had a big battle. There was a lot of conflict in the early church. We have a totally wrong idea about the early church because of what we learned, probably in Sunday School or Confirmation. Many of us were taught that the early church was one big happy family, that it all worked, that the church prospered and it grew. Oh yes, there were a few persecutions, but it largely grew and flourished.

Not at all! It's true that in the first four chapters of Acts it says they were in one accord. But after that it all fell apart, not only as described in the Book of Acts, but Paul really struggled in Corinth, Galatia, and Philippi. Everywhere there was a battle, and the battle was about the gospel.

What is the gospel? What is the truth of the gospel? At one point they had a meeting which is described in Acts 15. They agreed that there was to be one kind of mission to the Jewish people, led by Peter, and another kind to the Gentiles, not requiring Old Testament laws except for a kind of Noahic covenant, led by Paul (15:29).

The vote for this agreement was recorded as this: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us" (Acts 15:28). In other words, it was a unanimous vote, and all future councils operated by unanimity until the Second Vatican Council. For example, at Vatican I (1869-70), over seventy bishops left early so that they would not cast their "No" votes against papal infallibility. That way the vote for papal infallibility would be recorded as unanimous.

Because of the truth of the gospel, Paul was under attack everywhere. Paul says very bluntly in 2 Corinthians 11:6: "I know I'm not a good speaker, I know that." From other places it becomes evident that he probably had bad eyesight and may have had epilepsy. He kept falling down. He was not an impressive figure. Maybe he was short. But he says: It doesn't matter whether I am successful and impressive.

In Galatians and in 2 Corinthians Paul talks about the “super” apostles or “superior” apostles, these people who are attacking him. They said to him: “You don’t do miracles.” He says in 2 Cor 10:12: “I’ve done as many miracles as you have.” In 2 Cor 11:13-15 he says about these “super” apostles whom he also calls “false” apostles:

“Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves.”

One of the names for Satan is Lucifer, which is simply a Latin name meaning light-bearer. Paul is pointing out that all of those miracles and successes can also be done by Satan. He disguises himself as an angel of light.

What does Paul do? He writes that he and his co-worker, Apollos, are fools for Christ, and he contrasts the successes of the false disciples with the hardships and failures he and Apollos have endured:

“We are fools for Christ’s sake but you are wise in Christ. We are weak but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things” (1 Cor 4:10-13).

He does write that he faced conflict and hardship constantly (1 Cor 15:30-32, 2 Cor 1:8-10, 2 Cor 11:21-33). In 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 he states: “Even my prayers weren’t answered.” He had a thorn in the flesh, and three times he prayed: “Lord, take away this horn in the flesh.” But the answer was “No.”

And the Lord continued: “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). Paul writes: “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

This is also what Paul does in his letter to the Galatians. Over against all those who have been saying: “What have **you** done?” and “How can you say **this gospel** and **no other** is essential for salvation?”

He closes the letter to the Galatians by pointing to the cross and resurrection, the new creation to come:

“Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God. Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:14-17).

Because this is the truth of the gospel. Amen.