

A Different Gospel?

A sermon on Galatians 1:1-12; 1 Kings 18:20-39 & Luke 7:1-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 May 2016

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Message

The gospel of love and grace revealed by Jesus is always at risk of being distorted into a false gospel of 'holy' hostility.

Sermon

I had a surprise phone call on Thursday morning. The caller identified herself as Jeni from country Victoria and she was calling after reading about us in an article in *Eternity* magazine. I immediately braced myself for what I thought was likely to come. The article had labelled us as "liberal" and supportive of same sex marriage, and to the typical reader of *Eternity* magazine, those would be pretty pejorative labels. I confess that I so pre-judged what was likely to come that it took me a few minutes to realise that I wasn't getting a lecture correcting my many heresies. The caller had rung because she was delighted and intrigued to find that there might be kindred spirits in the Baptist churches in Melbourne. In her experience, she said, Baptist churches had tended to be rather belligerent and hostile places that tried to aggressively police some old ways of thinking about God that simply didn't work any more. She was hopeful that a new appreciation of a more beautiful and gracious gospel was emerging, and she was looking to connect with others who might be on a similar journey.

At the end of the call I turned back to my research for tonight's sermon and read again the words of the Apostle Paul from his letter to the Galatian church: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."

It struck me just how careful we need to be with words like that. They can easily be used to bolster our sense of being the right ones, wherever we live on the spectrum of opinions. I had been expecting to hear words like those quoted at me to tell me that I was deserting Christ and perverting his gospel. Instead, the caller and I had been identifying with one another, trusting that we were holding to the grace of Christ and that it was others who were trapped in a "different gospel" that parted company with the way of Christ. But how are we to know whether what we are holding to is the true gospel or the different gospel? Is Paul with us, or targeting us? The answer is probably a bit of both. One of the reasons that Paul's letter to the Galatians has been retained in the Bible as sacred scripture is that God continues to speak through it to address real issues that most churches struggle with at least some of the time. We have to sit humbly before these words, and listen for what the Spirit is saying to us.

Paul was addressing a dispute about whether gentile believers should become Jewish by conforming to all the Jewish laws when they joined the church, but it probably wasn't really about a legalistic Jewish understanding of Christianity. Galatia was a troublesome place for the Roman Empire, and questions of religious identity were pretty important for staying out of trouble. The Jews had been granted an exemption from the normal requirement to worship the emperor, but in order to police exemptions, it was important to be clear about who was who. Jews were exempt, and thus Jewish Christians were exempt, but where did that leave gentiles who became followers of Jesus the Jew? Were they covered by the Jewish exemption or not? For understandable reasons, the Jewish believers were not keen on people

blurring the lines. Blurry lines were dangerous. The Empire demanded clear lines, so we had better provide clear lines. Everyone had better become identifiably Jewish – circumcision, food laws, sabbath keeping, and all. That way the lines would be clear and the Empire could be kept happy. It actually may have had very little to do with whether the Jewish believers thought you had to be Jewish to be acceptable to God. It was just that all the believers had to be Jewish to keep the community safe from a hostile Empire.

Now if that is right, perhaps you can begin to see why Paul's message to the Galatians is still relevant to us. It is very rare nowadays to hear anyone suggesting that we have to become Jewish to follow Jesus, but it is not at all rare to be confronted by questions about how the church compromises or conforms itself to the expectations of the Empires that rule the world around us. How often do we hear people suggesting that religion should stay out of politics or out of education or whatever? The Empire demands clear boundaries. Religion is okay, provided it stays in its private spiritual place and doesn't blur the lines by sticking its nose in where the Empire doesn't want it.

The Galatian situation provides a good illustration of the paradox that takes place here. You might think that when the Church allows itself to be defined by the world, it would become rather bland and watered down, but in fact, it tends to go the other way. It stays within its boundaries, but it tends to become very strident about those boundaries. The Galatians wanted to be more hard line about lawkeeping to keep the boundaries clear and assert their identity and persuade themselves that they were taking their religion sufficiently seriously within those boundaries. So who's in and who's out becomes more important, not less. Clear boundaries. And if you take that to the extreme, you get the situation that follows tonight's first reading where straight after winning the fire-from-the-sky competition that we heard about, the prophet Elijah felt justified in slaughtering the prophets of Baal. Clear boundaries. They are wrong, and therefore not us, and so they are to be purged from our midst. And there is a bloodbath in the name of God.

Today we see churches becoming more and more militant about policing their boundaries and expelling those who might blur the lines and threaten the purity of the group. It always tends to focus around whatever the current hot-potato issues are, so at the moment many churches are seeing sexual diversity as the big enemy – far too many blurred lines. And when pressed on why that matters so much, it becomes a battle over how to read the Bible, and they begin denouncing and expelling people with “unacceptable” views of the authority of the Bible, or perhaps of some other test-case doctrine like creationism or penal substitutionary atonement. They can easily become belligerent and hostile, as my caller described many of our Baptist colleagues. Clear identity is found and defended by clearly identifying those who are not acceptable, and opposing them vigorously. We know we are the true believers because we have so obviously taken a stand against those who are not the true believers. The boundary lines are clear and everyone knows who's who.

It is easy to understand churches wanting to shore up their boundaries, because when you are a minority group in a hostile world, you are much more likely to survive if you have a strong identity and clear boundaries. But the trouble is, such shoring up of boundaries does not seem to be the way of Jesus. In fact, Jesus was constantly criticised for breaching the boundaries. He was always eating with the wrong people, forgiving the wrong people, and welcoming the wrong people into the community of his followers. Instead of maintaining a clear boundary between neighbours and enemies, he urged us to love our enemies. Instead of maintaining a

clear boundary between the sinful and the righteous, he forgave prostitutes and said that they were entering the culture of God ahead of the priests and religious scholars. Instead of rewarding the righteous and punishing or at least reprimanding those who fell short of expectations, he showered mercy on the most undeserving and argued that God's blessings shone on the worthy and unworthy alike. It is arguable that his constant blurring of the boundaries was one of the main reasons the religious establishment and the Roman Empire conspired to execute him.

The story we heard in tonight's gospel reading is as good an example as any. Admittedly, there are people in the story who are eager to prove that the Roman Centurion and his sick slave were worthy of Jesus's attention, but of course the only reason that they thought they might have had to make that argument is that one might normally expect a Jewish holy man to turn his back on such people. Jewish holy men do not mingle with Roman soldiers or their slaves, but Jesus expresses no concern or hesitation about these boundaries at all. Nor does he question the relationship between these two men. High ranking Romans having sexual relationships with their slaves, male or female, was a very common thing in that world, and this Centurion sounds more than usually attached to his kept man. There are just so many possible purity boundaries at stake here but, despite the constant scrutiny and criticism, Jesus doesn't seem to take any notice. All he seems to see are human beings, beloved by God, and hungry for God's mercy and healing. All he seems to see is another opportunity to pour out the love of God in all its scandalous extravagance.

Now perhaps you are a step ahead of me here and you are already spotting the logical problem in all this. If we say that Jesus ignores and erases all these boundaries, and so we'll side with Jesus against those who want to assert the importance of tight religious boundaries, then haven't we just set up another boundary, another binary distinction between two opposed groups? Haven't we now got an "us", who don't observe boundaries, and a "them" who are concerned about boundaries? And isn't this precisely the bind that Paul seems to have gotten into with the Galatians when he gets so passionately fired up about it that he is beginning to call down curses on anyone who begins proclaiming a gospel that demands the reestablishment of the old religious boundaries?

To be honest, I think the answer is probably yes, we are left in that bind. As it is sometimes jokingly expressed, there are two kinds of people in the world, those who think there are two kinds of people in the world, and those who don't. I don't think it is possible to ever entirely eliminate categorising people into binary opposites, although I still think we are called to try. Even Jesus seems to do it when he says that the prostitutes are entering the kingdom ahead of the religious scribes – two groups divided. So perhaps the question is not really about whether we can eliminate all such thinking, but what we do with it and how we make our judgement calls on it.

Back at the start I posed the question of how we are to know whether or not what we are holding to is the true gospel or the different gospel. Paul doesn't directly address that question in our passage, but his emphatic statement that the true gospel was received through a revelation of Jesus the Christ probably tells us how he would answer it. The criteria for judgment is always the example and teaching of Jesus. So if Jesus was perfectly willing to offer love and acceptance to uncircumcised gentiles, then Paul is right to argue that anyone now asserting that gentile believers must be circumcised is proclaiming a contrary gospel. And if Jesus seemed not the least bit interested in checking out the obvious suspicion of a

homosexual relationship before offering acceptance and healing to the Centurion and his kept man, then surely anyone arguing that the church needs to rigorously police such sexual boundaries today is proclaiming a gospel that is contrary to the gospel modelled for us by Jesus himself.

The criteria for judging the legitimacy of the message we proclaim is always Jesus. Jesus was adamant that the thing his followers were to be known for in the world was their love. “They will know that you are my disciples by your love.” So if what we are actually known for is our hostility to homosexuals, or to Muslims, or to heretics, or to sex education in schools, then somewhere along the way, we have lost touch with the way of Jesus. But let’s not go feeling all smug and forgetting to notice that it is equally true that we will have lost touch with the way of Jesus if what we are known for is our hostility and contempt for judgemental fundamentalists and moral crusaders and seven-day creationists.

As Paul says, this clearly isn’t about seeking human approval, because the quickest way to win the popularity contest is always to confirm and reinforce people’s identification against those other people who aren’t us and who we don’t like. Jesus calls us to stop doing that and to love even those who don’t accept that love is the first and last criteria of judgement.

So I think my phone caller was absolutely right that there is a more beautiful and gracious gospel being rediscovered among our churches, and that there are still other churches that are clinging to some older boundary policing modes of faith that don’t work any more, and that were never really a good reflection of Jesus. But every time we start despising and denouncing the people in those other churches, we will have fallen into the same trap and become mirror images of them. And because such binary oppositional thinking is so impossible to break free of, the only way we are going to avoid that trap is, as Paul emphasises again and again, by keeping our eyes fixed on the teaching and example of Jesus himself, and modelling ourselves on him alone.