Only one gospel: Galatians 1:6-12

Paul is having a bit of a rant. Whereas he normally starts his letters with a prayer thanking God for the church to whom he is writing, he jumps straight in here with a rebuke, saying that he is astounded that they are turning their backs on the one who called them in grace by switching their allegiance to a different, false, counterfeit gospel. The word ‘gospel’ actually means ‘good news,’ ‘glad tidings.’ In verse 7 he accuses some people of distorting or even perverting the gospel of Christ. So, the big question is, what is the good news of Jesus? What do you think are the essential elements of the gospel message? Can you compile a succinct summary of the good news of Jesus? Is there someone you could share this with?

In Galatians 1:6, Paul seems to say that those who are embracing a false understanding of the gospel are turning away from the one who has called them in grace. This suggests that, for Paul, ‘grace’ is an essential element of the gospel. So… did your summary mention the word ‘grace’ at all? And what does ‘grace’ mean, anyway?

Gavin McGrath described grace in these terms: ‘Grace is free and undeserved; our slavish efforts at a moral life do not win God’s attention and favour. We are at peace with God, adopted through his glorious pardon in Christ. On account of God’s sovereign grace we are intimate with God.’ Has McGrath missed anything of importance here?

In Galatians, Paul was countering a false gospel that replaced, or supplemented grace with the law (Galatians 2:21; 5:4). You can understand the temptation to do this: after all, if grace means that our sins are freely forgiven, what is to stop us sinning with impunity? In Romans 6:15, Paul poses the question, ‘Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?’ And his answer is an immediate, ‘By no means!’ But if our lives are not to be regulated by the law and its list of do’s and don’ts, how do we know what kind of lives we should be living, and how does the gospel of grace inspire or enable us to live that way in practice?

How clearly do see the grace of Christ revealed in Brighton Road Baptist Church? In what ways is this grace apparent? Are there ways in which we fail to manifest or to live out the good news of God’s grace in Christ? What should we do about this?

Two different writers have complained about different ways in which the church (in general) has sometimes failed to display the grace of God (*The Monarch Book of Christian Wisdom*). Reading their critiques, do you feel that they have a point?

Richard Holloway wrote, ‘There is more than a whiff of justification by works in the energies and apparent competitiveness of some evangelical groups; and in their moralism…there is a tendency to turn the gospel from grace to law, to give people the impression that their salvation is something they have to win for themselves, whereas the good thing about Christianity that makes it *good* news is that God saves us through Christ by grace. “Amazing grace” used to be the great love song of evangelicalism. What happened to it?’ (‘Missionary energy laced with moralism,’ *Church Times* 28 August 1992).

Richard MacKenna wrote, ‘If we are to give you love, says the church, then you mist first deserve it…when treated like that, we realise in the end that we are not loved but *conned*’ (‘God for nothing,’ *Churchman* 1984/5).

In his book, *What’s so amazing about grace?* Philip Yancey famously wrote, ‘Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less... Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.’ Reflect on that for a moment or two: it’s quite profound.

‘I am happy because you have accepted me, dear Lord. Sometimes I do not know what to do with my happiness. I swim in your grace like a whale in the ocean. The saying goes, “An ocean never dries up”, but we know that your grace also never fails. Dear Lord, your grace is happiness. Hallelujah!’

(A prayer from West Africa, *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*)