

Conclusion

Before we can move to this question, some words of conclusion about Paul's gospel. My proposal has been that 'the gospel' is not, for Paul, a message about 'how one gets saved', in an individual and ahistorical sense. It is a fourfold announcement about Jesus:

1. In Jesus of Nazareth, specifically in his cross, the decisive victory has been won over all the powers of evil, including sin and death themselves.
2. In Jesus' resurrection the New Age has dawned, inaugurating the long-awaited time when the prophecies would be fulfilled, when Israel's exile would be over, and the whole world would be addressed by the one creator God.
3. The crucified and risen Jesus was, all along, Israel's Messiah, her representative king.
4. Jesus was therefore also the Lord, the true king of the world, the one at whose name every knee would bow.

It is, moreover, a double and dramatic announcement about God:

1. The God of Israel is the one true God, and the pagan deities are mere idols.
2. The God of Israel is now made known in and through Jesus himself.

Each aspect of this announcement is, I believe, vital if we are to understand what Paul means by 'gospel' at all. It is because Paul sees his Galatian opponents failing to grasp this whole sequence of thought that he accuses them of being seduced by 'another gospel'. It is because Paul wants his Roman readers to get things as clear as possible before he arrives there that he writes his greatest (and densest) letter, a letter which, by being all about Jesus, is even more so all about God.

The 'gospel', then, is, as Paul says in Romans 1:16, 'the power of God for salvation'. The word for 'power' here is *dynamis*, from which we get 'dynamite'. To understand Paul's meaning, we may invoke a further technical term. Paul speaks in Acts (20:24) of 'the gospel of the grace of God'. But what is grace? Grace is not a 'thing' – a heavenly gas, a pseudo-substance, which can be passed to and fro or pumped down pipelines. The word 'grace' is a shorthand way of speaking about God himself, the God who loves totally and unconditionally, whose love overflows in self-giving in creation, in redemption, in rooting out evil and sin and death from his world, in bringing to life that which was dead. Paul's gospel reveals this God in all his grace, all his love.

But it doesn't just reveal all this so that people can admire it from a distance. It reveals it precisely by putting it into action. The royal proclamation is not simply the conveying of true information about the kingship of Jesus. It is the putting into effect of that kingship, the decisive and authoritative summoning to allegiance. Paul discovered, at the heart of his missionary practice, that when he announced the lordship of Jesus Christ, the sovereignty of King Jesus, this very announcement was the means by which the living God reached out with his love and changed the hearts and lives of men and women, forming them into a community of love across traditional barriers, liberating them from the paganism which had held them captive, enabling them to become, for the first time, the truly human beings they were meant to be. The gospel, Paul would have said, is not just about God's power saving people. It is God's power at work to save people.

When Paul announced this gospel message, it carried its own weight, its own authority, quite independently of the rhetorical or linguistic skill of the herald. But if the heralding of this gospel was the authoritative summons to allegiance, it could not but pose a challenge to all other 'powers' that claimed human loyalty. That is why to retain, or to embrace, symbols and praxis which spoke of other loyalties and other allegiances was to imply that other powers were still being invoked. And that, according to Paul, was to deny 'the truth of the gospel'.

Paul, then, had grasped the truth: the one true God was now made known in Jesus (and in the Spirit). And, grasping that, he knew that he was himself grasped, held, sustained and saved by the faithful love of the faithful God. Being so grasped, he found himself 'a servant of Christ, set apart for God's gospel'; in proclaiming this gospel, he discovered again and again that it was indeed God's power for salvation.