

Galatians 2: Establishing the Premise

Having written of his credentials and greeted his target audience, the Apostle Paul now moves into the main thrust of his letter to the churches in Galatia. His background as a Jewish devotee allows Paul to make an ethical appeal; these Christians are struggling to stay true to this “different gospel” and to separate themselves completely from the ways of the Law. Galatians 2 serves as a springboard from which Paul will further his exposition of truth throughout the letter, regarding the differences between the old and new covenants.

THE DIFFICULTY OF CIRCUMCISION (vv. 1-5)

Read the passage, and answer the following questions:

- To whom does Paul preach in public? To whom does Paul preach in private?

- What did the false brethren seek to do when infiltrating the churches in Jerusalem?

Returning to the great Jewish capital of Jerusalem, Paul is mindful of several difficulties. First, his God-given priority is to preach to the Gentiles—those who are not of Jewish descent, being joined to the bloodline of Christ by spiritual means. Paul spends much of his letter to the Ephesians discussing this matter: the mystery of the gospel has been revealed “...that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel...” (Ephesians 3:6).

Secondly, Paul realizes that this revelation, which greatly contrasts with the old covenant, needs to be taught carefully and privately “to those who were of reputation” (v. 2). Many scholars believe this reference is to Jesus’ inner core: James, Peter, and John—these apostles held great sway with the church in Jerusalem. Paul describes them as “pillars” of the church (v. 9). In order to present a unified front in their preaching, Paul wants to make sure they are on the same page. This harmony will significantly increase their defense against the false teachers who are insisting on Gentile adherence to the practices of old. If opposition were to be found among the apostles, Paul would then be running “in vain” (v. 2).

- How might Titus' Greek heritage have been helpful to Paul's defense of the gospel in Jerusalem (v. 3)?

Perhaps another ethical appeal is that this Gentile preacher remained unswayed by the false brethren. Paul writes that they seek to "bring us into bondage" (v. 4). Galatians 6:12-15 sheds light on the actions of these wolves in sheep's clothing. They seek to enforce the Old Law of circumcision as a mark of the covenant upon these new Gentile Christians (Acts 15:1). God initiated this mark in Genesis 17:9-14 where He made a covenant with Abraham that "every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you."

To bring this situation into modern day thinking, imagine you've been recently baptized and become a member of a congregation. When you sin publicly for the first time and desire to make confession before the congregation, several of the brethren refuse this gesture. Instead, they require you to sacrifice a lamb as a sin offering (Leviticus 4:27-35), an old covenant practice made obsolete by the sacrifice of Christ and the ratification of the new covenant.

These false brethren of whom Paul speaks in Galatians 2 are enforcing old covenant practices in the Christian Age! They do not recognize the "liberty" (v. 4) or freedom that is found in Christ. Thankfully, Paul, Titus, and Barnabas are able to stand firm for the truth of the gospel.

THE DIVISION OF LABOR (vv. 6-10)

Read the passage, and answer the following questions:

- What is meant by Paul's statement, "God shows personal favoritism to no man" (v. 6)? See Acts 10:34-35.
- _____ took the gospel to the circumcised, and _____ took the gospel to the uncircumcised.

- What is the significance of the “right hand of fellowship” being extended to Paul and Barnabas (v. 9)?

Paul begins this portion of the chapter by identifying those “who seemed to be something” (v. 6). It appears that the brethren in Jerusalem held several of the church leaders and apostles in higher esteem, exalting these men and their teachings. As Luke writes in Acts 10:34-35, there is no partiality with God. All men and women can become His disciples (Matthew 28:19). Of course, the apostles are often esteemed greater because of their eyewitness testimony and gifts of the Holy Spirit; however, the message they bring is not their own—it is from the mouth of God (2 Timothy 3:16). Paul writes that these esteemed men “added nothing” to him, likely meaning they delivered no new truths or revelation to him at that time.

With verse 7, Paul contrasts this lack of new revelation to the message he has been tasked to bring forth, something absolutely new in regard to the grace of the gospel (v. 9). With the Gentiles gaining access to the spiritual inheritance of Christ and the abundance of opposition to this new branch of Christians, Paul has his work cut out for him. This “gospel of the uncircumcised” is uniquely assigned to Paul, much like Peter’s preaching among the Jews in the early chapters of Acts. Realizing this divine mission, Peter, James, and John extend the “right hand of fellowship” as an illustration of approval. This practice is likely similar to the way we shake hands in business transactions and formal greetings today.

THE DISTINCTIVE MARKS OF THE GOSPEL (vv. 11-21)

We now arrive at the final section of Galatians 2. After all the work Paul has done to establish this premise of standing firm in the impartial truth of the gospel, we find the Apostle Peter called out for his hypocrisy in refusing to share a common meal with Gentile brethren.

Read the passage, and answer the following questions:

- With what action of Peter does Paul take issue (vv. 11-13)?
- Why is it that no works of the law can justify the flesh (v. 16)?

- What implication does v. 20 give for our lives?

The strong language of Paul's withstanding Peter "to his face" is justified because of Peter's inconsistency. Though we previously noted Peter's preaching against partiality (Acts 10:34-35), we see that Peter has distanced himself from eating with the Gentiles in the presence of the Jews on this occasion. Interestingly, Peter had no problem with Gentile company when the Jews weren't around. In Acts 11, those of the circumcision accuse him of spending time with the uncircumcised, to which he responds with the vision he received from God. Ultimately, Peter asks, "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17).

An even greater problem arises in how Peter's actions in Antioch affect those around him. Since Peter is an apostle, people look to him as an authoritative spiritual leader. We find that both Barnabas and the Jews with Peter follow suit in this feast of hypocrisy (v. 13). Men in the Lord's church are given a great responsibility to lead and someday shepherd the congregation (as appointed elders and deacons). This is a grave reminder of our need to "be diligent to present [ourselves] approved to God...worker[s] who do not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Our example as Christians (both salt and light) speaks volumes to the world around us.

Paul presses forward in his case against Peter. He points out that "a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ." Is this an argument for salvation through faith alone? A drive-by reading might make it appear to be such, but we must look at the context. The "works of the law" to which Paul refers are the marks of circumcision—a sign of the old covenant. Since Jesus died and fulfilled this old covenant, it is no longer in effect; and, therefore, we have no reason to be circumcised as a sign of New Testament Christianity. Instead, we profess obedience to the new covenant through our faith.

Can faith stand apart from the works it ought to produce? No amount of righteous deeds will ever cause us to merit our salvation or obtain the absolute righteousness of God; however, the Scriptures do point us toward an answer for this question.

- What did Abraham *do* by his faith (Hebrews 11:8-10, 17-19)?

- How are demons and Christians alike (James 2:19)?

James asks, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?” (James 2:14). Our words are so often betrayed by our actions, and we can see this situation even in the Apostle Peter’s struggle to eat amidst the Gentiles. We can be justified only in Christ, but the faith of which Paul writes in Galatians 2:16 is not empty: it is an active, obedient faith that produces righteous works. He makes this abundantly clear when he writes, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (v. 20). Can God the Son live in us when we choose works of lawlessness (sin)? 1 John 1:5 gives us the answer:

“God is _____ and in Him is _____ at all.”

Christ’s sacrifice fulfilled the old covenant and brought righteousness through new law—the gospel. Paul brings the severity of this point to light in verse 21, saying that he does “not set aside the grace (the gospel) of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.” Under the new covenant, we have a circumcision “made without hands.” Paul writes in Colossian 2:13-15 that God has “made [us] alive together with Him...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” By the waters of baptism, our trespasses are forgiven!

CONCLUSION

It is clear that circumcision and the systems of the Old Law are a hindrance to the churches in Galatia. In this study, we have learned about this circumcision, the unique division of labor given to Paul, and the distinctive marks of the New Testament Christian who lives after the time of the Mosaic Law. As Paul has introduced the premise of his teaching in this chapter, he will continue this letter by magnifying these details and proclaiming the need for adherence to the New Law that was brought by Christ.

Discussion Questions

- What Old Testament practices do religious groups still observe today?
- What other passages can we reference to defend against a “faith only” argument?
- Peter is not alone in his hypocrisy. What are some areas in which we struggle to keep our words and actions aligned?