

GALATIANS

Lesson 4

The Importance of Theological Controversy Galatians 2:1-10

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an age which detests theological controversy. The big emphasis in our day is on love. So often I hear people say, “What good does it do to stuff your head full of doctrine? Doctrine isn’t important because the more the church stresses doctrine the more it divides. The all important thing is that all Christians get along and this can only be done by setting aside theological differences.” These same people go on to say that we must love all professing Christians whether they be liberal Protestants, Unitarians, Mormons, Roman Catholics, Jehovah Witnesses or whatever. They feel that what we believe is not essential to salvation but how we live is the important thing.

I would agree that all true Christians ought to love one another even when there are differences in secondary theological issues, such as ways of baptism, church government, millennial views and so forth. But when it comes to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, there can be no compromise. One of the fundamentals is that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. The true gospel of grace is that men are saved through belief in Jesus Christ alone, apart from any human works. Salvation in Christ is a gift from God and can only be appropriated by trusting in Jesus Christ alone.

There can be no watering down of the true gospel, for men are saved by grace through faith in Christ or they are not saved at all.

In Galatians 2:1-10, the Apostle Paul is going to show the importance of standing for the truth of the gospel even though it may cause some people to get ruffled and divide from the true church.

Doctrinal division is sometimes necessary to bring the truth to the surface and to mark out those who hold to false doctrine (1Cor.11:19 **“No doubt there have to be differences [divisions] among you to show which of you have God’s approval.”**).

There are groups of Christians today who are trying to unite all Christians. One group of evangelicals are attempting to call a Church Council to discuss major or theological issues dividing evangelicals. This council will include Charismatic Christians. The Church Council will meet in 1994, 1995, 1996.

Just recently another group has sprung up called Evangelicals and Catholics: Contending Together Into The Third Millennium. This movement seeks to affirm areas of agreement, recognizing some differences. Both groups have agreed not to proselytize (sheep steal) one another. The movement seems to trivialize the Reformation, especially a major doctrine like justification by faith in Christ alone. Catholics agree that people are saved by faith in Christ, but not alone—there must be works. What is happening is Protestants are losing their theological distinctives while Catholics are maintaining theirs.

The irony is that many evangelicals like Charles Colson, J. I. Packer, Os Guinness, John White and Bill Bright have signed this document. Again it shows that this generation does not want to contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints but wants unity, love and togetherness at the cost of compromising major Christian doctrines. **THE PRICE IS TOO HIGH!**

The false teachers in Paul’s day were called Judaizers. Judaizers said that one had to believe in Christ AND keep the Mosaic Law to be truly saved. They believed in salvation by works and Paul taught salvation by grace. The Judaizers attempted to discredit Paul’s gospel by claiming that he was preaching an off-brand gospel not taught by Peter and the other Apostles in Jerusalem. These Judaizers taught that there

were two gospels being preached, one by Paul and one by Peter. They felt that no one should follow Paul's gospel of grace because it was in contradiction to Peter's gospel of law-works. The Judaizers were cleverly trying to disrupt the unity of the Apostolic circle so they could put in their poisonous doctrine of salvation by works.

In this section of scripture, Paul will show that his gospel is identical with that of all the other Apostles and his gospel was endorsed by the Twelve in Jerusalem.

SALVATION BY WORKS IS TO BE CHALLENGED 2:1-3

“Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem”

Fourteen years after his conversion to Christ, Paul went up to Jerusalem a second time. Jerusalem was the hub of Christianity and all the original Apostles were there. The chronology of Paul's life becomes a bit blurred here and this may have been at the time of the Jerusalem Council or just before it. Whichever, Paul went to Jerusalem to demonstrate that the gospel he was preaching to the Gentiles was the same gospel the Apostles were preaching to the Jews.

The Jerusalem Council was called to deal with the subject of salvation and the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1 **“Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’”** Acts 15:11 **“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”**)

The issue was salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone or faith in Christ and the Mosaic Law for salvation.

“This time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also.”

Paul took two companions with him for a definite purpose. His purpose was to test or to challenge the Apostles in Jerusalem concerning the real meaning of the gospel of grace. Paul wanted to make sure that false teaching of the Judaizers, who also had their headquarters in Jerusalem, was not rubbing off on the Apostles. One companion was Barnabas who was a Jew and was preaching the gospel of grace to Gentiles, as was Paul, and with great success. The other companion was Titus, who was an uncircumcised Gentile, converted to Christ through the gospel of grace. Paul took Titus to Jerusalem as a test case for the whole issue of salvation by grace apart from circumcision.

With Titus, Paul was forcing the issue of grace to come out in the open so it could be dealt with by all the Apostles. Paul's plan was to have the Judaizers rebuked by all the Apostles for teaching false doctrine. The Judaizers taught that circumcision was necessary for a person to be saved, but Titus was a living example that this belief was totally false.

Paul was a manipulator in a good sense, for he set up the Judaizers by bringing Titus as a litmus test of true salvation. Paul set up a situation which would bring confrontation so the truth of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone would refute the false teaching of salvation through the Mosaic Law.

Leaders often work behind the scenes to bring about a positive conclusion in a large group. This is why leaders are often accused of manipulation. This stigma goes with being a leader.

“I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles.”

Paul went up to Jerusalem because God told him to, not because the Jerusalem Apostles had sent for him in order to rebuke him.

“But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain.”

Paul met with the Apostles in a private, unofficial meeting. He clearly laid before them the gospel he was preaching. Paul had no doubts about his gospel but he wanted confirmation from the Jerusalem Apostles lest the Judaizers render his ministry fruitless. It was to overthrow the Judaizers influence, not to strengthen his own convictions, that he laid the gospel before the Apostles.

Why did Paul fear running in vain? He preached doing away with circumcision, and Jews and Gentiles had to approach God on the same basis—by faith in Christ. If the apostles did not accept his gospel, there would be a separation in the church, making a Gentile and Jewish church, and unity would be impossible. He did not fear his gospel preaching was in vain, but feared his work of bringing the two groups together would be in vain.

“Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.”

The Apostles all agreed that Titus did not have to be circumcised to be saved. They concluded that salvation was by grace through faith in Christ alone. (Acts 13:39 **“And through Him [Christ] everyone who believes is free [justified] from through the law of Moses.”** NASB). No external act could save, not even physical circumcision, for salvation is by a spiritual circumcision of the heart when one believes in Christ.

Paul did not condemn the act of circumcision in itself. But he did protest when circumcision was made a condition for salvation. He was not against the Jewish rite of circumcision if Jews or Gentiles wanted their male children to have it, but he insisted that the act of circumcision had nothing to do with salvation and should not be forced on Gentiles. This is proved in the case of Timothy (Acts 16:3 **“Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.”**). Timothy was circumcised at Paul’s request. Why would Paul do this? Did he have a double standard?

Timothy had a Gentile father and a Jewish mother. Timothy was an evangelist at this time and would often have to witness to Jews. In order not to be a stumbling block to unsaved Jews, he was circumcised. Paul made a concession in the case of Timothy to avoid Jewish prejudices and needless controversy. He permitted the rite of circumcision for Timothy as a matter of racial and social custom and not as a ground of salvation.

The truth arrived at by all the Apostles was that Jews and Gentiles are accepted by God on the same terms, namely through faith in Jesus Christ, and Jews and Gentiles must be accepted in the church without any discrimination between them.

There was no social or spiritual discrimination in the early church. Those who practiced discrimination were siding with false teaching and had no real understanding of the gospel of grace. The gospel of grace is the great equalizer of men, for all who trust Christ. no matter what their race, religion, social standing or education, are simply sinners saved by grace.

We hear much today about building churches around socioeconomic factors. The theory is that churches grow faster when everybody in them is alike. So you have upper-middle class, middle class, lower middle class, poor class, urban and suburban churches. Also Black, Hispanic, Korean and other ethnic groups grow faster when they do not mix cultures. It is a proven fact that these churches grow faster, but are they biblical?

The New Testament church was unique in that Blacks, Browns, Yellows and Whites got together in the same church. The greatest prejudice ever known to mankind is Jew and Gentile. Yet they got together in Christ, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, slaves and masters got together in the same church. This blew the minds of pagan Romans because there was love among Christians in such diversity of cultures.

Today our churches need to show the world that in Christ we can overcome socioeconomic barriers. We need to stop producing cultural social clubs and show the world that Christ overcomes racial, social, economic and cultural barriers. If the church can't do it, it can't be done!

SALVATION BY WORKS IS TO BE REJECTED 2:4-5

“This matter arose, because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.”

Apparently the Judaizers had spies at the private conference between Paul and the other Apostles. The Judaizers were unbelievers for they are called “false brothers.” They were sham-Christians or pseudo-Christians who wormed their way into the meeting to propagate their legalistic poison. They came to take away the liberty and freedom Christians have in Christ and to put the back under bondage. In particular, they tried to have Titus circumcised.

Any system that teaches salvation by works brings people into spiritual bondage and slavery, and this system must be rejected as false doctrine. Christ came to give men a free and gracious salvation through faith alone. To mix grace and law-works for salvation is to pervert the gospel.

There are many people in our day who are just like the Judaizers of old. They believe intellectually in Christ but know nothing of salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. These people cling to a salvation by works and understand nothing at all about the grace of God in salvation.

“We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.”

Paul saw the issue plainly. The truth of the gospel was at stake. It was not just a question of circumcision and uncircumcision or the difference between Gentiles and Jewish customs. It was a matter of fundamental importance concerning the gospel. The question as to whether Christianity was to be merely a modified form of legalistic Judaism or a system of pure grace was at stake. Justification by grace through faith alone was on trial.

The issues in this controversy were: (1) Christian freedom versus legalistic bondage; (2) salvation by grace versus salvation by law-works; and (3) acceptance before God through faith in Christ alone versus acceptance by the keeping of laws and regulations.

When the truth of the gospel was at stake, Paul was ready to put down the false teachers and split the church if necessary. In this case, Paul's love for the truth was greater than his love for men. Doctrinal controversy was important to Paul in order to get the real truth of the gospel. Suppose Paul would have said, “Well, the Judaizers aren't so bad, for they do believe in Christ. So they teach the necessity of law keeping to be saved, and circumcision is essential to the new birth. After all the Judaizers are brothers and what they teach is not the important thing but our love for them is the important issue. Surely a little false teaching can't hurt that much.” Had this been Paul's attitude, the church surely would have split into Jewish and Gentile church, and perhaps the legalistic teachings of the Judaizers would have been triumphant in the whole church. Thank God for men who do not back away from theological controversy.

In our day, I hear well meaning people say, “I know that there are groups which teach: ‘Believe and confess’, or ‘Believe and surrender’, or ‘Believe and be water baptized’, or ‘Believe and join the church’, or ‘Believe and beg God to save you’, or ‘Believe and give up something’, or ‘Believe and be circumcised’, or ‘Believe and keep the Ten Commandments’, but those who teach these things are sincere people and we should not criticize them or their teaching because we are to love the brethren.

This illogical and emotional reasoning to add anything to salvation is to take away from true salvation, and the result is no salvation at all. To trust in anything but Christ for salvation is no salvation. We enter into theological controversy with men who add to the gospel of grace because the very souls of

men are at stake. To add anything to the work of Christ in salvation is not salvation by grace through faith alone, but salvation by works, and salvation by works is no salvation at all.

SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST IS THE TRUE GOSPEL 2:6-10

“As for those who seemed to be important--whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance--those men added nothing to my message.”

Paul acknowledged that the Jerusalem Apostles were men of repute, but they were no more an apostle than was Paul himself. Paul was not trying to be disrespectful to the Apostles but the Judaizers were trying to make them superior to Paul. As far as Paul was concerned the Twelve Apostles were of no more importance than he was, for both had been commanded by Christ to preach the gospel of grace.

On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.

There were not two gospels, the gospel for the Jews and the gospel for the Gentiles, but there was one gospel with different spheres of ministry. God was working supernaturally in and through Peter to reach Jews for Christ and through Paul to reach Gentiles for Christ, but they preached the same gospel.

It was the same gospel because Peter often preached to Gentiles and Paul to Jews. It was the same gospel with accommodations to the culture of those to whom they preached. There is a place to make the gospel of grace culturally relevant but there is no place to compromise the gospel of grace merely to gain numbers.

“James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognize the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and then to the Jews.”

The outcome of this theological controversy was that the Apostles accepted Paul’s gospel as from God and declared themselves in total agreement with Paul. The Apostles did not contradict, modify, edit, trim or supplement Paul’s gospel of grace. They changed nothing, added nothing and subtracted nothing, and the Judaizers with their claim of salvation by works were routed. The Apostles were united one hundred percent and the Judaizers were defeated by the keen theological insight of the Apostles.

“All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

The Jerusalem Apostles only required Paul and his Gentile converts to remember the poor Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering because of famine and social persecution from the unbelieving world.

One of the many social responsibilities of Christians is to take care of other Christians who are down financially. Personally I do not believe it is the Christian’s responsibility to take care of the poor of the world although we must certainly minister to all poor people. It is our God-given responsibility to take care of poor Christians in our church, city, state, country and the world.

In his *Commentary of Galatians*, Luther says,

Next to the preaching of the Gospel, a true and faithful pastor will take care of the poor. Where the Church is, there must be the poor, for the world and the devil persecute the Church and impoverish many faithful Christians.

Speaking of money, nobody wants to contribute nowadays to the maintenance of the ministry, and the erection of schools. When it comes to establishing false worship and idolatry, no cost is spared. True religion is ever in need of money, while false religions are backed by wealth.

CONCLUSION

In this section of scripture, we have learned that there is only one gospel in the church and that is the gospel of grace. This gospel has not changed through the centuries. Men may pervert the gospel but it is clearly revealed in the Bible.

The gospel is that God saves sinners by His grace through belief in Jesus Christ, His Son. Salvation cannot be acquired by works but is a gift of grace from God to men. Christ died for sinners and was resurrected from the dead to declare sinners righteous before God. All who trust in Christ alone shall be delivered from the guilt and penalty of sin and shall escape eternal judgment. The gospel of grace is effective for those who receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. There is only one gospel of grace and you cannot and will not be saved until you commit yourself to it. To commit yourself to the gospel of grace is to commit yourself to Christ, for salvation is found only in Christ.