

GALATIANS AND YOU

Studies in the Epistle of Paul
to the Galatians

by

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Chapter Three

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

Confirmation by Council (2:1-10)

Having established the fact that he had received his apostleship and the Gospel he was to preach directly from the LORD JESUS Himself, Paul now turns in 2:1-10 to his second line of defense, which is to show how his ministry to the Gentiles had been fully endorsed by the leaders of the mother church at Jerusalem. In this chapter we shall study some of the factors contributing to the endorsement. The student will be helped to a better understanding of the full meaning of the proceedings of the conference if, along with the passage in Galatians, he reads the fuller account contained in Acts 15. The two records supplement each other to give us a well-rounded picture of what transpired. Luke gives us an outside and Paul an inside view of the happenings.

Message explained to council (vv. 1, 2)

"Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also." The facts stated in this verse are of weighty significance. It is to be borne in mind that during this period Jerusalem was the headquarters of the apostles. Denial by implication that he had been in Jerusalem since the visit with Peter mentioned in 1:18 was an effective way of denying that during the intervening period he had had any communication with the Twelve. Barnabas is mentioned to show that Paul was accompanied by one whose orthodoxy no Hebrew Christian doubted. And there can be no question that Titus was taken along to be made a test case for this whole issue of the circumcision of Gentile converts.

"And I went up by revelation." In the second verse of the fifteenth chapter of Acts we read that Paul and Barnabas, together with other delegates, were appointed by the church at Antioch to go up to Jerusalem. Is this at variance with what Paul writes? By no means. The two statements are not contradictory but are complementary. The SPIRIT, most likely in answer to earnest prayer for guidance on the part of the apostle, made it clear to Paul that the Antioch church was led of GOD in its decision to send its representatives to Jerusalem to try to effect a settlement of the matter that was playing havoc with the peace and unity of the Church: **"And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the**

manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15:1, 2). The LORD confirmed the action of the Church. Religious leaders must not be too sure that the voice of a church on any momentous question is necessarily the will of GOD. Disastrous consequences are too likely to follow in the train of assumptions which have not been checked and counterchecked by prayer.

Nor, on the other hand, can personal disinclination to fall in line with an ecclesiastical policy or plan of procedure be regarded as proof that the church is wrong and the objector right. It is more than probable that Paul did not relish the prospect of attending and participating in what promised to be a stormy session. Why not let well enough alone? Why bear the lion in his den? Why head into a cyclone? Discretion is the better part of valor. The trouble will lie down if given time enough to run its course. It is not at all inconceivable that Paul might thus have reasoned within himself. But the SPIRIT of GOD saw otherwise and must have revealed to the apostle that far more was involved than could be seen on the immediate horizon. The future of Christianity hung upon the outcome of the council. In going up "by revelation" Paul was able to swing the convention in favor of Gentile freedom and thus, in the providence of GOD, to save the day for Christianity as a great world religion; for, had Gentile believers been required to come into the new life by way of Jewish rites in addition to faith, it is doubtful whether the Gospel would not have shriveled up into a mere school of Jewish religious thought. With its channels choked by prejudice, the water of life, instead of swelling into a mighty river of blessing to all mankind, would have shrunk into a tiny trickle of sectarian Judaism.

All this is not without a very pertinent, practical application. Again and again trifles have determined the course of Christian history. One can never know when a seemingly unimportant choice may prove to be a continental divide in the spiritual realm. How imperative it is, then, for those in the service of JESUS to follow in even the minutest details the leading of Him who knows the end from the beginning! Let us not, if we have reason to think GOD is going to ask us to do something that runs against the grain of our personal preferences, be like the small boy who makes himself scarce and gets out of earshot whenever he suspects he is going to be sent to the store. Such conduct is shortsighted and may mean the forfeiting of the opportunity to fill a strategic role in promoting the kingdom of our LORD and SAVIOUR. Revolutions for good are brought about by men and women directed by revelations from GOD in making known His will for them.

"and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles." The word "them" refers to the apostles and elders of the church. Now it is important to keep in mind that Paul did not have to explain to these pillars of the church at Jerusalem *what* the pure Gospel was, he simply proved to them that the Gospel which he had been proclaiming to the Gentiles was the orthodox faith held by all true believers. Alas, that so often in our day the story of the Cross has become for many who stand high in ecclesiastical affairs an idle and forgotten tale in an unknown tongue. It is but too tragically true today that the preaching of the old Gospel is sometimes the occasion for exclusion rather than for endorsement by church leaders. Pillars of the church should be holders of the truth. How carefully our mission boards ought to be not to send out to heathen lands missionaries loaded down with quack remedies of human concoction instead of the one and only message of salvation through a divine REDEEMER!

"but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain." Paul was a practical man. While his head was often up in the clouds, his feet were always on the ground. He was possessed of a sanctified common sense that Christian workers of our day and age may well covet for themselves. The apostle wisely went before the leaders and officers of the church before presenting his case to the membership at large. If we are under the impression from a surface reading of the latter part of this second verse that Paul was not sure of his message, not certain of being on the right track, we should at once disabuse our minds of any such idea. Rather, he was sensible of a danger lest his work be rendered ineffectual by the opposition of the mother church at Jerusalem, and particularly by the strong disapproval of its most influential leaders. And so, as a wise kingdom builder, he proceeded to do everything within his power to remove unnecessary hindrances to progress. The Word of Life is too precious and indispensable for its spread to be blocked by obstacles and opposition that can be avoided by the employment of a few grains of ordinary intelligence. We all too often permit willfulness and self-sufficiency to limit the circulation of the Gospel, so far as our personal ministrations are concerned. Stubbornness, masquerading as backbone and rock-ribbed conviction, has caused many a wreck on the Gospel highway. Obstructionist tactics in the work of CHRIST are unworthy.

Freedom Preserved at Council (verses 3-6)

"But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised." We need to get the full force of this waiving of circumcision in the case of Titus. Paul was not against circumcision as such. He even permitted Timothy to be circumcised (Acts 16:3) because his mother was a Jewess. But to insist upon Jewish usages for Gentile converts would be to make them essential parts of Christianity. And this Paul would not, and could not, do. The non-circumcision of Titus was really a decision in favor of Gentile freedom from the yoke of Judaism. There may have been three parties at Jerusalem: (1) those standing for freedom; (2) those who insisted upon circumcision; and (3) those in favor of an appeasement policy, who urged the Paul should lay aside his scruples and permit Titus to be circumcised. When Paul states that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, he is not denying to the attempt at compulsion but the success of that attempt.

The apostle, however, refused to compromise, for he realized that the principle of liberty in CHRIST was involved. How easy it is not to see that additions to the Gospel are subtractions from it! While the Christian leader is not to go around with a chip on his shoulder looking for controversy, he must not, when vital Christian doctrines are involved, love peace more than truth. It is true, of course, that while we are to be firm as rock in standing for principles, we are to be tolerant, ready to give and take, when the disagreement has to do only with nonessentials. But it is the LORD who is to draw for us the line between what is fundamental to the faith and what is a matter of minor consequence. Men are prone to relegate into a back corner as unimportant whatever is foreign to their own interest. Those who set little or no value upon the things of GOD will naturally consider doctrinal distinctions as a mere tempest in a teapot. Dare we yield to such indifference? Sacrifice of principle with regard to the essentials of our faith is too big a price to pay for the good will of our opponents.

"and that because of false brethren unawares brought in." Since these false brethren could

not come in the front door, they were - as someone has aptly expressed it - sneaked in the back door. Someone in those days must have taken advance lessons in the infiltration tactics of our own time! Very likely these false brethren were unsaved Jews who had, as K. S. Wuest suggests, accepted the LORD JESUS as their MESSIAH, but who knew nothing of salvation through His precious blood.

"who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage" The future tense tells us that it was not merely their intention, but that they thought they had assured hopes of success in bring the Gentile believers under the yoke of Judaism. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." We may depend upon it that Satan and his minions will do everything within their power to induce believers to substitute a Gospel of works for trust in the all-sufficient merits of JESUS' blood shed upon the Cross of Calvary. Let not the enemies of the Gospel spike our guns by robbing us of reliance upon grace alone to save and keep us saved.

"to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour." Paul refused to compromise. He would not hedge an inch. Too much was involved. There is in many religious quarters today altogether too strong a tendency to substitute a subjection of conscience through fear of man for a subjection to conscience through fear of GOD. Such substitution on the part of leaders jeopardizes the spiritual welfare of souls that look to them for help and guidance. Forbid that we should ever permit enemies of the faith to dictate or tamper with our message.

"But of these who seemed to be somewhat." Appearances to the contrary, Paul is not in these words seeking to discredit the apostles and elders of the church at Jerusalem; for, as we see elsewhere, he held them in highest regard. It is probable that the Judaizers had been exalting the other apostles at the expense of Paul by virtue of their having been with JESUS during the years of our Lord's earthly ministry. In the words, **"God accepteth no man's person,"** Paul implies that not even having known CHRIST after the flesh gives the other apostles pre-eminence over him, so far as the authority of his message is concerned.

Mission Endorsed by Council (verses 7-10)

The apostles and other leaders at the Jerusalem council were impressed not only with Paul's statement as to the orthodoxy of the Gospel he had been preaching to the Gentiles; they were, if possible, even more powerfully convinced, by his recital of God-wrought miracles accompanying his ministry, that the LORD had as definitely commissioned him to the Gentile apostleship as He had called the other apostles into their peculiar spheres of labor.

"But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter." It goes without saying that Paul does not mean that there are two different gospels, one for the Gentile and one for the Jew; he has reference here to the distinctive and divinely appointed fields of service. The LORD makes a key to fit the lock of every door He wants opened - and when and where. Let each and every servant of CHRIST stick to his own post of responsibility. Some Christian workers seem to labor under the delusion that they are skeleton keys the LORD can use to open whatever doors of service they may happen to want for themselves. Gate-crashing in the Lord's work is an idle and wicked pursuit.

"(for he that wrought effectually in Peter . . . was mighty in me toward the Gentiles." The blessings of GOD had been resting richly upon the labors of Peter and of Paul in their respective fields in making their preaching effective, not only in the working of miracles, but also in the secret ministrations of the SPIRIT in the hearts and lives of those that received the message. And the leaders in the Jerusalem council were wise enough to interpret this fact as proof that both apostles were engaged in the special ministry to which the LORD had commissioned them. Today, as in the first century, it is to the Lord's interest to work effectively through instruments wholly yielded to Him. If we carelessly let ourselves get out of tune spiritually, we put our LORD in a position similar to that of an expert pianist who is asked to give a concert upon a piano half or more of whose keys are broken and out of tune.

"And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship." It is not known whether the decision to recognize Paul's right of leadership was based on his statement of the contents of the Gospel he preached, or on the story of how he received it, or on the recital of its results, or in part on the spirit he himself manifested at the conference. Probably all of these factors played a part in bringing about the agreement which was at the same time an acknowledgment of his apostolic authority. James, Cephas and John, **"who seemed to be pillars"** (as we have already indicated, this clause is not to be understood as in any sense derogatory), showed their real caliber in endorsing the work of apostles whom GOD had called into a field of service so distinctly different from their own. True pillars of the church today are boosters rather than critics of men whom GOD is manifestly using in a large way to further the name of JESUS; they are more concerned about the promotion of the Gospel than over the maintenance of their own prestige. How regrettable it is when jealousy among leaders hampers the progress of the kingdom!

"They gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship." The fellowship indicated a partnership in preaching of the saving Gospel. And after all, how trivial can be the things that divide alongside of those which unite us in the Lord's work!

"Only they would that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward to do." Just a word or two on this verse will have to suffice. Doctrinal discussion should not blind to practical service. But let it be remembered that, while practical service should be the consequence of soundness in the faith, it cannot be a substitute for it.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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