

Gospel, Faith and Freedom (Studies in Galatians)

Freedom by Gospel, not Church

Galatians 2:1-10

Three main things are happening in this passage, leading to a conclusion.

- Paul insists that, in Christ, we are free from law as a means to salvation and he takes steps to preserve this truth.
- False brothers, sneak and spy and seek to subvert this freedom and appeal to a church hierarchy.
- The apostles stand together so the church remains 'one'—as Jesus prayed (John 17:11).
- Freedom in Christ secures the church, not the other way around.

To help the Galatians understand where they stand in Christ, Paul narrates an earlier episode of false teachers disturbing Christians and subverting the gospel (1:7).

- His own story is central to this. He has been on both sides!
- By way of reminder, he has preached the gospel in Damascus, perhaps for three years, visited Jerusalem and then preached in Syria and Cilicia for perhaps a decade. Barnabas 'sees the grace of God' at Antioch (Acts 11:23) and calls Paul to join this dynamic fellowship of Jews and Gentile believers, identified now as Christians (possibly by the community).

Paul makes a second post conversion trip to Jerusalem.

- He goes because of a revelation.
- This may be the trip where he represents the Antioch church with famine relief—because of a revelation about a general famine (Acts 11:28).
 - Whatever the occasion, he is not summoned as though he was a subordinate.

Paul moves boldly to secure Christian freedom for the church.

- He does not want to run in vain—that is, with no result (v. 2).
 - He does not doubt his gospel, or the freedom that has come to many believers.
 - He does see the damage that will come to the church if the truth of the gospel is not held by all the apostles.
 - At a practical level, believers will be confused if they discover the message they received is regarded as invalid by other apostles.
 - Paul's work will be undermined if apostolic messengers say Paul is out of order.
- The presenting issue is now opened up—someone is urging Galatian Gentile Christians to be circumcised. Paul tells them what happened in Jerusalem.
 - He has Titus with him, an uncircumcised Gentile Christian—probably deliberately.
 - Paul is adamant about him not being circumcised—he 'did not yield for an hour' (v. 5; cf. 1:6-9).
- Circumcision marks out Jews racially, but more importantly, it signifies law keeping as the key ingredient in being acceptable to God. Circumcised people are obliged to keep the whole law (5:3).
- Those who insist on it are saying that the work of Christ is incomplete. Christians have been circumcised in Christ (Col. 2:11). Through this, a Christian *begins* by being declared righteous.
- As such, we are ready for obedience to God's law (5:22-23; cf. 1 Cor. 9:21).

- Everyone who believes in Christ is freed from sin in a way the law could never provide (Acts 13:38-39). Nothing other than a free entry into God's presence can qualify as true Christianity.
- The old covenant is a fading glory, as Moses knew (2 Cor. 3:7-13).
- Paul exposes a common thread of opposition to the gospel.

False brothers act as traitors—as spies, 'secretly brought in'.

- Disdain for grace is powerful and persistent and forces people into unreasonable actions.
- Those who are circumcised are undertaking to keep the law in order to be saved.
 - The matter is not merely cultural or communal but moral.
 - These false teachers maintain that Christians must do something to be saved (as in Acts 15:1).
 - This is slavery because the law is absolute and the flesh is hostile to it. It binds the conscience in hopelessness and keeps people out of the kingdom.
- The frequency of this matter arising in the teaching of Jesus and Paul shows the persistence of sinful desire to take some credit for our salvation or justification.

The apostles stand together in the truth

- False teachers make false claims about the church's leaders. The apostles 'seem' to be leaders—he repeats this four times (vv. 2, 6, 9).
 - Paul doesn't disrespect the other apostles but uses this to question an inordinate appeal to their authority.
- There can only be one church if there is one apostolate, so he wants to ensure they all trust one Christ and one gospel.
- The apostles, including James, Peter and John, do not require Titus to be circumcised. Circumcision is not necessary for salvation—that's official!
- This is confirmed at the first-ever Church Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1, 8-11, 19).
 - Alternatively, this account in Galatians is referring to this Church Council.
- The gospel is the authority for the apostles (cf. 1:8) as for the church.

The church's authority is not a 'magisterium' (whether Roman Catholic or Protestant) but the freedom of the gospel proclaimed by the apostles.

- Cf. the church being built on Peter—the Peter who confesses that Jesus is the Christ (Matt. 16:16-19).
- Numbers, including Luther, have observed that the doctrine of justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stand or falls.

We need to pray that this freedom will grasp our conscience and our affections and make us alert to attempts to subvert the freedom we have in Christ.