

Galatians 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Galatians chapter 2 To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

And from those who seemed to be influential, what they were makes no difference to me, God shows no partiality, those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles.

And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles.

But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with them, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

[1 : 45] But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not. For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God. For if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

[2 : 58] In Galatians chapter 2, Paul continues to recount his biography. He is continuing to emphasise the divine source of his message, and the confirmatory recognition of the Jerusalem apostles to its veracity.

Various proposals have been advanced for how to tally this with the narrative of Acts. Many believe that the visit to Jerusalem after 14 years occurs in Acts chapter 15, at the Jerusalem council.

I am far more inclined to believe that it occurred in Acts chapter 11, verses 27 to 30. Now in these days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world.

This took place in the days of Claudius. So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

This fits far more neatly with Paul's claim that he went up because of a revelation. However, it does present challenges in other respects, because if this was 14 years after Paul's conversion, it presses the date of that event back to around 30 AD, which, while not impossible, is extremely early.

[4 : 11] I still think it's a much neater fit, though. While in Jerusalem, for the purpose of bringing relief to the saints there during the famine, Paul privately presented the gospel he had been preaching, before certain leading figures there.

14 years after his conversion, and many years since he had started preaching, he was confirming his message with the leaders there, ensuring that he had not preached in vain. Now, Paul clearly knew that he had received his gospel by direct revelation, as he made clear in chapter 1.

However, confirmation that he was on the same page as the leaders in Jerusalem was very important. Disagreement at this point would be a most serious matter. Indeed, if Paul and Jerusalem were not in agreement, Paul's ministry would struggle to affect the union of Jews and Gentiles that he believed was inherent in the gospel message.

The Jews would follow the Jerusalem leaders, and the Gentiles would look to Paul. So the agreement that occurred at that meeting, a meeting that's not recorded at all in the book of Acts, where we are simply told of Barnabas and Saul going down to Jerusalem, and then returning from Jerusalem, was of truly immense significance.

In principle, it established the fact that the church was defined not by the exclusive marks of Judaism, but by the death and resurrection of Christ, and that Gentiles could be members of this community no less than Jews.

[5 : 31] While he was in Jerusalem, Paul's companion Titus, although an uncircumcised Greek, was not expected to be circumcised, and the Jerusalem leaders recognised the calling of Paul and did not call for him to change anything of his message.

Indeed, the leaders also recognised, quite remarkably, a symmetry between Paul and Peter. In verse 7, Paul represents to the Gentiles what Peter represents to the Jews, their counterparts.

Peter was clearly the leading apostle, which is why he is singled out as the one to whom this ministry is committed. In Matthew chapter 16, verses 17 to 18, Peter was a pillar, and interestingly, it is only in the context of speaking of Peter's apostolic vocation that Paul speaks of him as Peter.

Everywhere else, he is always Cephas. Peter, like Paul, received his understanding, not from flesh and blood, but directly from God. The leaders of Jerusalem give Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, and they tell them to go to the Gentiles, while they will go to the circumcised.

And this suggestion that Paul and Peter are counterparts implies that the uncircumcised Gentiles are not second-class members of the kingdom of God. The Jerusalem leaders ask Paul and Barnabas to remember the poor, which might seem to be a strange detail at this point.

[7 : 13] However, it is not an extraneous detail, and it makes a lot of sense in the context of Acts chapter 11 and 12. The poor here are likely not the poor in general, but more specifically the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Paul had just been sent with Barnabas on a mission to bring aid to the poor in Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem leaders are asking him to make sure that he does not forget them. And throughout Paul's epistles, we see his concern to gather funds for the saints in Jerusalem.

The collection for the poor Judean saints is a task with a theological impulse to it. It expresses the concern of the Gentiles for the Jews, and is a very powerful manifestation of the unity of the church as a single body of mutual concern.

Gathering for the poor in Jerusalem became a central element of Paul's apostolic practice. He describes the reasons for this in Romans chapter 15, verses 25 to 27.

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem, for they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.

[8 : 19] For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. We learn in 1 Corinthians chapter 16, verses 1 to 4, that the Galatians had also participated in this gathering for the saints in Jerusalem.

However, in Antioch, Paul has a confrontation with Cephas. This, I believe, occurs at the beginning of Acts chapter 15, after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch at the end of Acts 14.

Acts 15, verses 1 to 2, describes the conflict. But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

The details here tally were details of Paul's description of the events in Galatians 2, that it occurred in Antioch, that it was sparked by men coming up from Judea, and that there was considerable debate and division as a result.

[9 : 22] Cephas presumably arrived in Antioch just before the events of Acts chapter 15, and when the men from Judea, from the church that James oversaw, came on the scene, he changed his practice of eating with the Gentiles, so as not to get into conflict with a powerful group in the Jerusalem church.

This change in his practice immediately created a practical breach between apparently first-class Jewish Christians and second-class Gentile Christians. And this breach would have been most powerfully felt in the context of the Lord's Supper, where Jews and Gentiles would not be able to eat together.

It is not entirely clear who the circumcision party are here. Are they Jews more generally, or are they Christians from Judea requiring circumcision of Gentiles? It seems to me it's more likely the latter.

Paul saw Peter and other Jews like Barnabas who went along with the circumcision party as hypocrites. They weren't acting according to their personal convictions, or in a consistent manner, but through fear in a manner calculated to keep the peace.

More seriously, they were compromising the gospel, in which Jews and Gentiles were now to constitute a single body. The outcome of this incident is described in Acts chapter 15, verses 3 to 11.

[10 : 33] So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them, and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples, that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

[11 : 40] Paul, however, does not record the Jerusalem Council, the event of Acts chapter 15, at which Peter's speech suggests that Paul's argument won the day. Rather, in verses 15 to 21, Paul presents the argument that he made to Peter at the time in Antioch, an argument that presents the message of the rest of the book of Galatians in outline.

By withdrawing from fellowship with Gentiles, Peter had re-established Jewish law as the framework over that of the new people established and defined by the rule of the Messiah.

The point here is not ethnic exclusivism, but a practical denial and overturning of the reality brought in by the gospel. A single Jew-Gentile people under the reign of the Messiah defined by Christ, not by the Jewish law.

Paul argues that while he and Peter would once have regarded themselves chiefly in terms of their Jewish birth, with Gentiles being thought of as outsiders and sinners, they now know otherwise.

People are not ultimately shown to be in right standing with God on the basis of things like circumcision, through the dietary laws, through temple sacrifice and Jewish rituals, through Sabbaths and feasts.

[12 : 50] These practices were the markers of Jewish identity, the signs of covenant status. This is what Paul primarily means by the expression the works of the law. The works of the law that Paul speaks of here are not the actions required by the moral law, so much as they are Torah observance in a more specific sense, the practice of the more distinctive practices characteristic of Jewish identity.

Many have read Paul's statements here as a denial of what has been called works righteousness, the attempt to earn salvation through good deeds, something that was very rightly and importantly challenged in the Reformation.

Now that point is true enough, and it's an exceedingly important one that's taught elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. However, much of Paul's theology isn't making this point. It's making a slightly different one.

His focus is not on moral deeds done to merit our standing before God, but on something more subtle. It's about the practice of the Torah in the belief that observant Jewish covenant identity is what marks people out as being in right standing with God.

The point is not earning salvation in such a manner, but receiving it in this way. But Paul makes it clear that this is not the way that the grace of Christ is received.

[14 : 08] Recognising this truth, Peter, like Paul, had believed in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, so that they could enjoy right standing with God on that basis, not through Jewish covenant identity and Torah observance, but through the faith of Christ.

Now what does this expression faith of Christ mean? Typically, it has been taken to mean faith in Christ, and most translations of the Bible have faith in Christ at this point. What has been called the objective genitive reading.

A few decades ago, the work of Richard Hayes and others reignited the case for what has been called the subjective genitive reading, that it refers to the faith of Christ, generally understood as Christ's faithfulness in going to the cross for us.

Others have ventured mediating suggestions, such as a genitive equality, an example being speaking of Christ faith, a faith exercised by believers' independence upon and defined by Christ.

And I believe that something along these lines is probably to be preferred over the other options, although at points I would lean slightly more to some of the senses highlighted by the subjective genitive, without believing that the subjective genitive is the best way to translate it.

[15 : 20] The expression is, I believe, similar to that of the faith of Abraham in places like Romans chapter 4 verse 16. The faith of Abraham is Abraham faith.

It's both the faith of Abraham personally and the faith of the sons and daughters of Abraham who walk in his footsteps. In verse 16, it's juxtaposed with the works of the law.

The works of the law are ordered around the reality of the law, while our faith is ordered around the reality and work of Christ. In verse 17, Paul's argument proceeds, if Paul and Peter, in their commitment to enjoying right standing with God on the basis of Christ, seemed like those they formerly categorised as sinners, Gentile outsiders to the covenant, as they lived like Gentiles and fraternised with Gentile Christians, does this make Christ someone creating a sinful and unclean body of people?

Certainly not. However, if they re-erect the division between Jews and Gentiles established by Torah observance, that division that they had just dismantled, this is exactly what would appear to be the case.

Paul ends the passage with a startling and beautiful declaration of how his existence is now entirely defined by Christ, no longer by the Torah. The Torah, the Jewish law, hasn't ceased to exist, but it no longer plays the normative role in Paul's life.

[16 : 44] He has died to the Torah, through the Torah. There's a sort of paradox here, as the Torah plays a role in its own destruction. I take this to refer to the fact that the Torah was always designed to serve a limited purpose, and that, as it fulfills its purpose through the cross of Christ, it releases us from itself.

Paul's old existence, defined by the Torah, ended at Christ's cross, and now he has a new existence, defined by Christ and his life. Paul has died, and risen again.

The old Paul, the Torah-observant Paul, zealous for the traditions of his fathers that he describes in chapter 1, verses 13 to 14, he's died, and the new Paul lives his life out of the life of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, Christ is living in him by his Spirit. To turn back to Torah observance, as that which defines those in right standing with God, would be to nullify the death of Christ, and the immeasurable grace of God that is expressed in that event.

A question to consider. In verses 18 to 21, Paul switches from the more general we statements that he has been making earlier, to some of the most powerful I statements in the entirety of the Scriptures.

[18 : 03] Why might this shift be so important and illuminating?