

GALATIANS 2

Jerusalem Conference

Defending the Gospel (cf. Acts 15:1-21)

Galatians 2:1-2

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. 2 And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.

As might be expected, when the gospel went to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), dissension followed pitting Jewish Christians against Gentile Christians. Acts 15:1-2 describes the circumstances surrounding Paul’s trip to Jerusalem:

And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Thus Paul and Barnabas (with Titus) went to see the elders and apostles in Jerusalem about the false teachers who were binding circumcision on Gentile converts.

Galatians 2:3-5

3 But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. 4 But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. 5 But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

Rather than make a public display, Paul determined to go privately to “those who seemed to be leaders” in the Jerusalem church. This passage alone shows that there were no structured connections between churches; rather they were each autonomous. Those who use the Jerusalem conference to justify ties between churches at a hierarchical level and justify denominationalism ignore that Paul did not even know who the leaders were.

In Acts 15:4, it was the apostles and elders who with the church welcomed them:

4 And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

At this point those binding the law on Gentiles asserted that Gentiles should be required to obey the Law of Moses. Acts 15:5 reads:

5 But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

It is important to note that the issues went far beyond circumcision to the much broader issue: “to observe the Law of Moses.” Later Paul was still confronting this broader issue when he returned to Jerusalem in Acts 21:20-21:

20 And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, **and they are all zealous for the Law**; 21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all

the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.

The Jerusalem Council

Galatians 2:6-10

6 But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. 7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised 8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), 9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. 10 They only asked us to remember the poor — the very thing I also was eager to do.

These leaders of the church—apostles and elders—agreed with Paul, adding nothing to what he taught and recognizing that he was an apostle to the Gentiles. God worked through Paul just as he had done through Peter. Therefore, James, Peter, and John gave Paul and his cohorts the “right hand of fellowship.”

The detail of their consideration in Acts 15:6-11, shows Peter making the main argument on Paul’s behalf:

6 And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, 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. 8 "And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

However, in Acts 15:12-21, James delivers the final word, offering a path to unity between the Jewish and Gentile Christians:

12 And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 'After these things I will return,

And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen,

And I will rebuild its ruins,

And I will restore it,

17 In order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,

And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,'

18 Says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old. [Amos 9:12-21]

19 "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

The Jerusalem Decree

In Acts 15:22-29, the apostles and elders composed a letter to the Gentile churches and determined to send men with Paul and Barnabas:

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them,

"The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings:

24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

Principles of the Letter in Application

While the truth of the scriptures regarding the keeping of the Law of Moses was settled for the time being, it continued to create issues among the early churches. According to Luke, as seen above, the issue arose later when Paul returned to Jerusalem for the last time in Acts 21:20-25:

Acts 21:20-25

0 And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all **zealous for the Law**; 21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 "What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23 "Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses in order that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, **keeping the Law**. 25 "But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication."

It is interesting that "many thousands" of Jewish Christians continued to keep the Law of Moses. This separated the Jews and Gentiles on the basis of fundamental practices, implying that cultural differences—even those with religious connotations—were allowed to exist in the early church. Paul dealt with some of these in Romans 14:5-7:

5 One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

In the context, these days might have been Jewish or pagan days and the meat could have been offered to idols. The key to Christians is that they must be assured in their own minds and do what they do unto the Lord. Romans 14:22-23 offers the final test:

22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Thus, one must do the act without doubting. On the other hand, we cannot impose unauthorized acts on others, according to Paul in Colossians 2:16-17:

16 Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — 17 things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

No Return to the Law

Galatians 2:11-13

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. 13 And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

The cultural differences between Jews and Gentiles created tensions in the early church. One example was when Paul had to go through the purification rites of the Law to satisfy the cultural needs of the Jewish Christians of Acts 21:20-25, cited above. More negative but still an act that might be describe as cultural confusion was when Peter withdrew himself from eating with the Gentiles in this passage. Embedded in Peter's error must have been the long standing attitude of Jews toward the Gentiles, voiced by Peter himself when God led him to Cornelius and his house in Acts 10:27-29:

27 And as he talked with him, he entered, and found many people assembled. 28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. 29 "That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me."

After preaching to this household, Peter asserted in Acts 10:34-35:

34 And opening his mouth, Peter said:

"I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.

In the gospel preached by Paul and Peter, when culture and truth collide, truth must always triumph. In this case and in most cases, the truth is self-evident, as Paul wrote Galatians 3:28-29:

8 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

No Justification under the Law

Galatians 2:14-16

4 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? 15 "We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; 16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.

In this passage, justification by observing the law of Moses is contrasted to justification by faith in Christ Jesus. We are justified by faith and not by observing the law or by the works of the law.

Galatians 2:17-21

17 "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! 18 "For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 "For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. 20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. 21 "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

While we are justified in Christ, we are still sinners. The rhetorical question—"does that mean that Christ promotes sin?"—is reinforced: "Absolutely not!" Two laws are explained side by side here. The Law of Moses, which Christ nailed to the cross and the law of Christ—the new law dedicated by his blood shed upon the cross. Of the first and old law, Paul wrote in Colossians 2:13-14

13 And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Of the second law, the law of Christ, Jesus said in Matthew 26:27-29:

And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; 28 for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. 29 "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

The Hebrew writer affirmed this same teaching concerning the superiority of the law of Christ in Hebrews 8:6-7:

6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. 7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second.

Christ lives in us; and we live by faith in Christ, the son of God. If we are saved by the law, Christ died for nothing.