

Galatians

2. Acceptance (Gal 2:1-10)

Recap - Galatians written to a people who were turning away from the Gospel to something else - not idolatry but towards Judaism and taking on the requirements of law. They were being influenced by a Jewish party who had taken on some of Christianity known as Judaizers. We know from Acts that there was resistance amongst many in the church to those Gentiles who were becoming Christians without becoming Jewish proselytes.

Paul is clearly answering his critics in this letter although we don't quite know what the precise criticisms were. However we can infer from the passage that Helen dealt with last week and that I am looking at this week that they may have been suggesting that his message was not of God and that his message had been shaped by the Jerusalem church who it seems that the Judaizers were also criticising. The suggestion seems to have been that they were in cahoots over the development of the message that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jewish proselytes. In tonight's passage in verse 6 he commented that the leadership in Jerusalem had nothing to add to his message. Paul effectively was saying that they were in agreement. They had been divided for 14 years but as these four great men got together they realised that God had spoken to them in the same way.

Verses 4-6 we read tonight gives us some indication of the fact that Judaizers had infiltrated the churches Paul had planted and they were trying to establish legal Judaism again. *4 [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. 5 We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.*

Paul refutes this criticism here in Galatians and Luke is even more strident in Acts by showing how the apostles in Jerusalem and James struggled with this whole notion of Gentiles becoming Christians without taking on Judaism but came to the same conclusion as Paul. The Council of Jerusalem which Paul is referring to here resolved this issue and the apostles accepted what God was doing in Antioch, Cyprus and Asia Minor as a work of the Holy Spirit. However as we shall see from next week, Peter still found it a difficult issue to deal with when facing Jewish believers and having to justify himself.

As we open chapter 2 Paul is anxious to stress that he was already fixed in his ministry to Gentiles and that the Jerusalem people were heading in the same direction quite independent of him. This was demonstrated by their not objecting to Titus being with him. He is at pains to stress that apart from good reports, most people in Jerusalem were quite unaware of what he had been up to and taught.

This is a passage about acceptance. Here were people who had hitherto had nothing much to do with one another but each had a strongly influential role in the church and this meeting was a meeting of minds.

I believe that passages like this have much to tell us about the church today. A great feature of churches is their tendency to insularity and to dismiss somebody who disagrees just a little with them. It's what is called exclusiveness - we are right and you are wrong so we don't have fellowship with you.

I remember a few years ago that we were doing a survey for a new church that the LBA was setting up in Docklands on an estate where there was no place of worship.

Obviously, people on the estate went somewhere to church which would have been a car ride away. We wanted to find out the beliefs of people and where they went to church. We arrived at one house and the lady of the house was explaining that they were Christians when the husband came up and asked us who we were representing. We explained that it was the new Baptist Church and he said "We go to St Lukes. We don't have anything to do with your sort, now please leave." Strange that as the local minister knew the vicar well. We were wrong and out of order because we weren't the same denomination. I've found that in Norfolk in some places too. It's a case of us finding barriers. "We don't have anything to do with them because..."

We learn a lot from the encounter Paul had with the church leaders in Jerusalem, 14 years Antioch and a missionary journey later. There were plenty in Jerusalem who were concerned at what Paul and Barnabas had done - reaching Gentiles and not inducting them into the Jewish law. But in respect of the Jerusalem leaders like Peter, James (Jesus' brother) and John, he found no antipathy at all.

■ Acceptance

They accepted one another unconditionally in Christ as fellow-workers in the gospel because it was the gospel that united them.

7 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. 8 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. 9 James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. 10 All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do

We can learn a lot from this passage. We know from Acts 15 that recalls this incident, that these people carefully listened to one another and discerned what God was doing. We looked at the passage last year and found that

*they listened to testimony of what God had done
they listened to leaders whose authority they accepted as being of God
they heeded God's written Word*

<http://www.reidinternet.co.uk/sermons/firstcontact5.pdf>

Here were people ready to ask whether God was working within a person or ministry and accepted Paul readily when they realised that they were serving the same gospel.

As many of you know, I have been networking with other church leaders in Norfolk since I came. They have been over a wide variety of traditions, denominations and doctrinal stances. I don't like what one or two of them do or I don't like the way they do it, I don't think much of denominations because of the way in which so often they don't promote the extending of God's kingdom and I'm sure one or two of you have raised your eyebrows at some of the people I regularly meet and pray with.

But the ones I regularly meet and pray with all have one thing in common - the gospel and a desire to see people come to Christ. That's what unites us. We get together and we have discerned the way God is moving in Norfolk and seek to follow. I'm impressed at the Prayer in the Park event next Saturday has evolved. The diversity of believers there is enormous.. God is starting to move in Norwich in new ways that would have been inconceivable a few years ago. The reason? Not to be good ecumenicals but out of the gospel and a desire to see God's kingdom extended in Norfolk.

I say this because we have a diversity of people in this church. We come from a variety of backgrounds and have probably been well set in our ways over the years. And someone comes along and does and says something else. How do we deal with it? Do we follow past form and give that person a wide berth or accept them in Christ as brothers and sisters?

As for Paul, James and Peter, they accepted that they were different but that their difference was to do with their background, gifts and calling. *7 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.* And they listened to one another and the church in Jerusalem started to come to terms with what for them was a massive sea change in how they understood the gospel and the world over that which they had been brought up to believe.

Like them we need to be people who don't just rely on our past experience or past teaching. Life is a learning process for the disciples of Christ and one of the hardest things I have found is to listen to what God's Word is saying and see what God's Spirit is doing when it is at odds with what I have been taught and held to.

That I believe is the challenge for us as a diverse church - to recognise our one-ness in Christ, to accept one another, to discern what God is saying and doing, and recognise that within that gospel we have different functions.

■ Affirmation

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

6 And the great leaders of the church who were there had nothing to add to what I was preaching. (By the way, their being great leaders made no difference to me, for all are the same to God.) 7 In fact, when Peter, James, and John, who were known as the pillars of the church, saw how greatly God had used me in winning the Gentiles, just as Peter had been blessed so greatly in his preaching to the Jews--for the same God gave us each our special gifts--they shook hands with Barnabas and me and encouraged us to keep right on with our preaching to the Gentiles while they continued their work with the Jews (TLB)

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

A key to acceptance in the case of these leaders was not just an agreement in the gospel but also an acceptance that God had given them authority. As we can see from verse 6 they agreed his message but they recognised and affirmed one another's roles and we read that in verse 6 to 10 although I must say that in verse 6 that he wasn't over-awed by them. Perhaps that's a verse to explore again in a sermon or seminar on leadership! All I'll say at this point is that it is God who makes leaders and gives authority, they don't generate it by birth or association. In the end Paul accepted Peter and James from a call of God point of view not because one was a disciple of Jesus, however close and the other was His brother. Authority comes from the call of God, not from human association

Part of the process of networking with other people from a leader's point of view is to affirm one another as we work together as people called by God to be leaders.. As I watched the Prayer in the Park tape yesterday, I recognised "all the usual suspects" - people whom I have got to know over the last two years. The good thing about the leaders these major Norfolk events at the moment is that they openly accept one another in the gospel despite huge differences in theology. It's not just an acceptance

but an affirmation that we are called to work in the same field. And they want to pass that throughout God's people in Norwich and Norfolk.

When I became a minister, it wasn't just down to me to approach the LBA and say "God is calling me to ministry, make me a Minister". It was down to them, my church and Spurgeons to test that call and affirm me. And you as a fellowship affirmed me too. And what did you affirm? That I was a good guy or that the BU had accredited me and the EBA said I was OK so I must be a cool guy. No, you as they discerned that God was calling me to Swaffham. Affirmation recognises the affirmation of God in a believer's life. That is the basis of all Christian service. If anything else in the church is so, then it is not of God but of men.

And it works right through the church of God. We are all people who are called to something. It doesn't have to be leadership. But we are all called to serve God and His people. It's not just our own personal whim but part of being in a church is that as a body we recognise and affirm that call. We actually did that last week as we appointed a new Deacon.

If you believe God is calling you then always seek the affirmation of the church fellowship either informally or formally because it is in that process, our call is affirmed by others as being of God. It's vital for us and the church to get it right and not take it lightly. I have come across too many churches that run themselves like a golf club and not prayerfully, seeking God's face as they identify ministry and the people to do it. I have been brought up with the maxim - "no ministry without a minister". If God has not called and raised up somebody to do a ministry, then we shouldn't do it or continue something without adequate leadership. To many churches try to shoe-horn unsuitable or unwilling people into roles for which they are not called. The result is usually disastrous.

I have also come across too many Christians who think they should do ministry without reference to their church fellowship. It usually peters out or comes to grief quickly. Unless you are a Gladys Aylward or Jackie Pullinger, don't do it!

If we are wanting to go forward as a church, then we need to learn to accept one another in the Lord. Unity in the gospel is the most important principle we should hold to. He has made us part of the same family so we accept one another.

We need to accept that God has made us different and affirm one another in Christ. This isn't just because we have different callings and giftings, but that in being different we should be like Peter, James and Paul, to seek what God was doing and understand what He actually says in His word, not what we think or were taught. God has given us one another to succeed in that task, not to confuse.

And why? So as in Paul's day, the gospel will go out with new vigour. And as in Paul's day, in having discerned truth, we can smell untruth a mile off. The Council of Jerusalem determined truth and from that day on the Judaisers were shown for what they were - exclusive, divisive, legalistic and counterfeit. In 2 Corinthians 11 and Philippians, Paul says of them:

2 Cor 11: 13 (C) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 15 It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

Phil 3: 2 (C) Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 (C) For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh-- 4 (C) though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 (C) as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. 7 (C) But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

I think that our forefathers put it well on our foundation stone and we need to remember it again as maybe our church's long standing motto as we accept and affirm one another.

*In things indifferent - liberty
In things essential - unity
In all things - charity*



Preached by Mark Reid, Swaffham Baptist Church, 05/09/04.
Scripture Quotes NRSV
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