

disciples themselves, mindful of what the Lord had told them, appear to have been cautious about accepting undue praise or honour.

Paul wanted to report to the Galatians the truth of what happened when he met the disciples, without giving them any undue status as people, even though they were Apostles. Status was not the point. In truth, said Paul, nothing had happened at the meeting! They 'gave me no further advice' (2:6), and merely 'recognised the grace which had been given to me' (2:9). Paul therefore received from the disciples what he wanted, which was their blessing and the evidence that nothing was wrong with his Gospel. This was proof that nothing more was required for someone to be called a Christian than acceptance of the saving work of Christ, certainly not any Old Testament legalistic ritual such as circumcision.

At the very end of the passage, Paul notes that the disciples did ask one thing of him in his evangelistic work which was that he should 'be mindful of the poor'. If you make an assessment of the life of Paul and his missionary work, you will discover that he did in fact take this charge very seriously, and made it his business to collect money for the poor in Jerusalem during much of his active work (see 2 Cor 9; Phil 4:15, etc.).

Application

Paul fought hard to ensure right from the start of his ministry that the Gospel he preached was the simple Gospel of salvation in Christ alone, without adding any 'burdens' on those who responded and sought to follow the Lord. He maintained this throughout his ministry, and we should be very grateful that he did. For one thing, the consequence of his work is that we do not have to engage in circumcision! It was clearly not God's will for His people, the Church.

What I do find staggering is the sheer number of things which we impose upon people who wish to become Christians today! Although many Christian traditions attempt to keep the requirements as basic as possible, for many, the discipline of a church denomination is just the starting place in requirements of service, teaching and theology which can sometimes be almost suffocating. There are churches today which ban women from office and require people to agree to this, or require speaking in tongues as evidence of the work of the Spirit, or refuse communion to anyone from other churches; and the list goes on, seemingly endlessly. Each requirement has its origins in some Scripture or historic practice, and each is a matter worth debating, but none is part of the Gospel of Christ by which a person is saved. These matters are secondary, and somehow, people of spiritual integrity in the church need to start making a noise about these things and dealing with them. The church is the community of people who have been saved by faith through the mercies of God and the life and death of Jesus, and this is where the emphasis must lie, on preaching this Gospel and making it real to the world which needs to hear it.

Sometimes I think we appear cautious about the Gospel, but bold about our denominational and theological opinions. Pray that God's church will, like Paul, be bold about the Gospel and cautious about its idiosyncrasies!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If the main division between Christians in Paul's day was between Jews and Gentiles, what are the main divisions between Christians today?
2. Discuss the relationship between Peter and Paul. Does this passage indicate a warm or a cool relationship between them?
3. What does Paul mean by 'the grace which has been given to me' (2:9)?

Discipleship

It can be daunting to stand in front of others and have your faith and the way you express it criticised. Preachers who are trying to gain 'accreditation' know what this is like, as well as church leaders who have had to undergo trials in order to be accepted for training, for example. Nevertheless, checking out our faith is an important thing to do, as Paul did in this reading. How many Christians today 'check out' what they believe, so that they can know whether it is 'Apostolic'? If possible or appropriate, try to begin a discussion about this within your church.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may we keep ourselves free from sin by being obedient to Your will, serving the people around us and seeking to honour You through all we do. Then, when we fall foul of evil's trickery and slip up on life's way, may we have the courage to come straight back to you for your help and forgiveness. Keep us on the narrow way, Lord Jesus; AMEN

Prayer

Sovereign Lord, bring Your miraculous power to bear on the lives of those who need you most. Heal those who suffer, liberate those who are in bondage, raise up those who are dead in their sins and declare Your Good News for all humanity. May we be ready to hear Your Word and do Your will, O Lord: AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Gospel

Pray today for all who study theology, and any you know who are doing so as part of training for ministry. Pray that their grasp of the essentials of faith is maintained throughout the stresses and strains of academic study of the Bible and church history and also current approaches to faith. Pray that the Gospel we have inherited be upheld with honour and in all truth.

Meditation

- Do not worry, the Lord will provide for you,
Whatever you do and wherever you go.
- Do not stray, the Lord has shown you His path,
A safe route to follow, tried and tested.
- Do not delay, the Lord calls you onwards,
There's no security if you stay where you are.
- Do not sin, the Lord has warned you before,
Turn to Him if you have trouble, not Satan.
- Do not fear, the Lord will keep you secure,
He has bound all that frightens you.
- Do not weep, the Lord has seen your distress,
The source of your pain has been covered.
- Do not be fickle, the Lord will not change,
Be secure in the One who cares for you.

Bible Study - Galatians 2:1-10

¹ Then after fourteen years I journeyed to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus with me, ² and I went because of a revelation. I presented to them the Gospel that I preach to the Gentiles (but privately, to those who were of good reputation), in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. ³ Even then, Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised even though he was a Greek. ⁴ The matter arose because of false believers who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might make us slaves; ⁵ and we did not submit to them even for one moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might be kept intact for you.

⁶ Now, from amongst those who seemed important (whatever they were makes no difference to me; God shows favouritism to no-one), those who appeared most influential gave me no further advice. ⁷ On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the Gospel for the Gentiles just as Peter had been for the Jews ⁸ (for He who worked through Peter as an Apostle for the Jews did the same through me for the Gentiles), ⁹ and James, Peter and John, the reputed 'pillars', gave Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace which had been given to me; and they agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews. ¹⁰ They only asked that we be mindful of the poor, the very thing I was mindful to do.

Review

The lengths people went to in an attempt to discredit Paul's teaching and the Gospel he preached were quite extraordinary. Not only did his detractors say that he was not a true Apostle, they also said the Gospel he preached was different from that preached by Peter and the other Apostles! So, after explaining firmly that he was indeed an Apostle because the Gospel he preached came

directly by revelation from the Lord (1:13-24), he now had to explain that his preaching was not a different Gospel from that preached by Peter and the other Apostles! Now, if you feel you are being taken around in circles, that is probably because this is what Paul's opponents were trying to do; they were intent on stopping his preaching to the Gentiles by attempting to tie what he said up in knots!

Our reading today tells us that Paul's personal development as a Christian which began as described in chapter 1 (1:13-24), continued for fourteen years (2:1). There was clearly a point at which Paul felt led to start preaching and begin his missionary work; and he went with Barnabas and Titus to check out his preaching with the Apostles in Jerusalem. There were some opponents of Paul around who sought to disrupt his visit (2:4,5), but Paul was delighted to confirm that the Apostles accepted what he said without question (2:7-9). Paul was indeed called to minister to the Gentiles, and although it was a very different ministry than that of Peter to the Jews, there was no difference in the Gospel! The good news of Jesus Christ was the same for Jews and for Gentiles; and that was what Paul wanted the Galatian churches to know.

It is important that we understand all this, because if you read books of Biblical theology today, you might conclude that some believe the Gospel to be different according to the book of the Bible you are reading, and different now to what it was when the books were written! Certainly, few scholars today would accept that what Paul wrote and preached bears much resemblance to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, for example. They would say that you cannot find the teaching of Jesus about the poor or the Kingdom, for example, in the letters of Paul; but the letters are full of discussions about the meaning of salvation which are quite different from what is found in the Gospels. What I would say is this; we should not read this passage in Galatians lightly just because Paul writes about a difference of opinion about the Gospel which is rooted in the past; between Jews and Gentiles. We should read what Paul says because it is here that he explains the connection between his Gospel and what was preached by Peter and the other Apostles (2:6-10). He does not give us a theological reasoning about why his preaching was the same as that of Peter, he simply tells us that both of them agreed, and that should be good enough for us. James, Peter and John honoured Paul by offering him the 'right hand of fellowship' because they recognised the spiritual truth of what he preached.

It is always possible to find logical inconsistencies between Paul's letters and the Gospels, just as we can find quite different descriptions of parts of Jesus' life in the different Gospels. But this has never prevented the Church from accepting that the spiritual heart of the Bible's message is always the same, but described and illustrated in different ways in the different books of the Bible. I, together with many others, would argue that the spiritual truth of our salvation through the unique life and death of Jesus is the essential real truth which unites the Bible, not its lowest common factor. Indeed, if we try to explain any book of the Bible without reading it in the light of the one Apostolic Gospel of Salvation, then we will not discover its true value.

Going Deeper

This passage describes one of Paul's visits to Jerusalem; but which one? He had been there before, of course, but we need to work out when the trip in our passage happened! Then, there was some intrigue about Titus, whom Paul brought as a Gentile, to the largely Jewish church in Jerusalem, and this highlighted Paul's concerns for newly evangelised Gentiles. Lastly, the passage describes the Apostolic blessing which was given to Paul and his preaching. Doubtless, this gave Paul all the necessary authority to pursue his missionary career.

Coming to Jerusalem

If we read the Acts of the Apostles and compare what it says with Galatians, then the story of Paul after his conversion goes roughly like this. Immediately after his conversion, Paul began preaching the risen Lord successfully in Damascus (Acts 9:22). He immediately went back to Jerusalem and attempted to meet the disciples who were too frightened of him to speak with him (Acts 9:26). Barnabas however, spoke up for Paul and this enabled him to gain brief access to the inner circle of the Apostles (Acts 9:27), but shortly after this, Paul's life came under threat because of Jewish opponents, and Paul had to leave Jerusalem and was sent back to his home town of Tarsus (Acts 9:30). It is assumed that after this, Paul went to Arabia and then Damascus (Gal 1:17).

After this, the scriptural records are not clear. Acts 11:22-30 describes a sequence of events in which Barnabas sought out Paul and encouraged him to join the leadership of the church of Antioch, which ended in the two of them going to Jerusalem with a gift for the poor (Acts 11:30). Now, either this was the visit to Jerusalem Paul described in Galatians 1, three years after his conversion, in which he spent fifteen days with Peter and James (1:18); or this was one and the

same visit to Jerusalem described here in our passage today (Gal 2:1) which took place fourteen years after Paul's conversion. Personally, I think the truth lies closer to this second option because it was both close to when the Antioch church commissioned Paul to missionary work, and also had something to do with giving a gift of money to the poor in Jerusalem, and both of these are hinted at strongly in our passage (2:7f. and 2:10)

In this crucial visit, Paul clearly had the intention of obtaining Apostolic agreement for his preaching. If we are right, Barnabas came with Paul as his 'sponsor'. He was the official leader of the church at Antioch (where people were first called 'Christians' – see Acts 11:26) and had grown to value Paul's incisive abilities as a highly trained Pharisee. Paul knew the law so well that he was able to argue with Jews that Jesus was the Messiah in a way which other Christians could not do; and that was probably just the beginning of his skills in evangelism. Both leaders needed to know if they had the blessing of Peter and the others in Jerusalem for Paul's teaching as it developed in the Antioch church which was clearly thriving. The positive response they obtained was part of the preparation of the Holy Spirit for the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas which set off from Antioch (Acts 13:1f.)

As an aside, it would not surprise me if Barnabas wanted Paul to preach to convert Jews first, and then Gentiles, because of his knowledge of the law. I have always wondered whether the rift between Paul and Barnabas (see Acts 15:36-41), whilst set off by Paul's rejection of Mark as a travelling companion (Acts 15:38), was far deeper because Barnabas wanted to mission the world through Jewish synagogues, but Paul, as his future actions show, clearly did not

False believers who disrupt the Gospel

Nevertheless, when Barnabas and Paul went to Jerusalem in our reading today, they took Titus who was a Greek and therefore uncircumcised. It seems that they took him as a 'test case' for their teaching, because the key point about which they needed clarification was precisely whether a Gentile such as Titus needed to be circumcised in order to be a Christian. The passage speaks in a rather 'cloak and dagger' manner about 'false believers' who attempted to undermine Paul's case as it came to Peter and the Apostles (2:4,5). In the end however, Paul was able to brag that these people had not managed to persuade anyone that Titus should be circumcised (2:3), and spoke about these 'Judaisers' highly dismissively, as he does in many of his other letters. Paul described them as guilty of trying to enslave people whom Christ had made free. It was an extraordinarily bold accusation, but it was the truth!

Speaking to the Galatians, these words of Paul were loaded. He took every opportunity to dismiss those who sought to impose any restrictions on the early Gentile Christians; and when he called them 'spies' (2:4) and said 'we did not submit to them even for one moment' (2:5), he was making his position very clear to his readers. As far as the Gospel was concerned, with Paul there would be no compromise! In a remarkably candid addition to this sentence, Paul gave away what was probably the underlying reason for both the visit he originally paid to Jerusalem to have his preaching checked out by Peter, and also his reason for reporting it in his letter to the Galatians. Everything he did was 'so that the truth of the Gospel might be kept intact for you' (2:5). The purity and holiness of the Gospel meant everything to Paul

The meeting with the Apostles

From the way that Paul began his story about visiting the Apostles, it is hard to know what to make of what Paul thought of them. He spoke about them as 'those who seemed important' (2:6), and also, 'those who appeared influential', as well as 'the reputed "pillars"' (2:9)! It is quite clear from later on in the letter that Paul was speaking about Peter, James and John and the other disciples, and the way some of them gave the appearance of being more influential than others. But this hardly seems a very flattering way for Paul to talk about those who were spoken of with great admiration by other Christians.

The disciples, of course, bore testimony to the life of Jesus and of His resurrection, and their place in the early church was unique. Paul gave them due respect by consulting them, yet seems to have had a somewhat egalitarian attitude towards them. He said 'whatever they were makes no difference to me; God shows favouritism to no-one!' (2:6) But the more you think about this, the more you realise the spiritual correctness of Paul's attitude, because his attitude towards their status was hardly different from that of Jesus. Before He died, Jesus had great difficulty in persuading the disciples that just because they were his followers, they would not necessarily have any priority in the Kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). Perhaps, now that Jesus had risen and ascended, other Christians placed the disciples on high 'pillars' (as people are wont to do) but the