

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FIFTEEN)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL”

GALATIANS 2:1-5

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

1 Then after fourteen years I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, taking Titus along too.

2 I went there because of a revelation and presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did so only in a private meeting with the influential people, to make sure that I was not running—or had not run—in vain.

3 Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, although he was a Greek.

4 Now this matter arose because of the false brothers with false pretenses who slipped in unnoticed to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, to make us slaves.

5 But we did not surrender to them even for a moment, in order that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.

In this Lesson, we will begin our study of chapter 2 of Paul’s letter to the believers living in Galatia. In this chapter, Paul continues his defense of his apostolic authority and the Gospel that he preached, but his focus shifts from the **source** of his message to the **content** of his message. Further, whereas in chapter 1 he had emphasized his independence from

the other apostles, he now demonstrates that there was a basic unity between himself and them.

In the previous section of his autobiography (**Galatians 1:17-24**), Paul spoke about the nature of his relationship with the original Apostles in Jerusalem. He did so in order to show that he had not been commissioned by them to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. It was God Himself who had commissioned him. He had laboured independently from the Jerusalem Apostles. In fact his contact with them had been minimal. He did not visit Jerusalem until three years after his conversion; and then he spent only two weeks with Peter in order to get acquainted with him. On that trip to Jerusalem, the only other apostle he saw was James. After that time, he remained unknown to the churches in Judea except for the good reports they heard about his evangelistic work in the provinces of Syria and Cilicia. He did not meet again with the Apostles in Jerusalem until about eleven years after his first visit. He speaks about this later visit in verse **1**: *“Then after fourteen years I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, taking Titus along too.”*

This may in fact have been Paul’s third visit to Jerusalem after his conversion. There is evidence to suggest that he had gone to Jerusalem on one occasion between his visit there to meet with Peter and the visit described in verse **1**. He had gone there with Barnabas in order to bring alms to the poor saints in Jerusalem. In Acts **11:27-30** Luke informs us of the circumstances that occasioned this visit:

27 At that time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

28 One of them, named Agabus, got up and predicted by the Spirit that a severe famine was about to come over the whole inhabited world. (This took place during the reign of Claudius.)

29 So the disciples, each in accordance with his financial ability, decided to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

30 They did so, sending their financial aid to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

(New English Translation)

Paul does not mention this second visit in his letter to the Galatians because his presence in Jerusalem at that time had nothing to do with the issues that he deals with in the letter. In his letter to the Galatians, he is only interested in his visits to that city which involved his relation to the original Apostles.

The visit to Jerusalem mentioned in **Galatians 2:1** was in all probability made at the time of the **Jerusalem Church Conference** which was convened in A.D. 49 or 50. We have two records of this Conference in the New Testament, one by Paul in **Galatians 2:1-10**, and the other by Luke in **Acts 15:1-29**. I believe that it will be helpful for us to read both these accounts in full, in order to acquaint ourselves with the controversy that led to the convening of the Conference, as well as to get an overview of the Conference itself. We will read both reports from the **New English Translation**:

Galatians 2:1-10

1 Then after fourteen years I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, taking Titus along too.

2 I went there because of a revelation and presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did so only in a private meeting with the influential people, to make sure that I was not running—or had not run—in vain.

3 Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, although he was a Greek.

4 Now this matter arose because of the false brothers with false pretenses who slipped in unnoticed to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, to make us slaves.

5 But we did not surrender to them even for a moment, in order that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.

6 But from those who were influential (whatever they were makes no difference to me; God shows no favoritism between people)—those influential leaders added nothing to my message.

7 On the contrary, when they saw that I was entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter was entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised

8 (for he who empowered Peter for his apostleship to the circumcised also empowered me for my apostleship to the Gentiles)

9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who had a reputation as pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we would go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

10 They requested only that we remember the poor, the very thing I also was eager to do.

Acts 15:1-29

1 Now some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

2 When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement.

3 So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they were relating at length the conversion of the Gentiles and bringing great joy to all the brothers.

4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all the things God had done with them.

5 But some from the religious party of the Pharisees who had believed stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the law of Moses.”

6 Both the apostles and the elders met together to deliberate about this matter.

7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to preach to the Gentiles so they would hear the message of the gospel and believe.

8 And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,

9 and he made no distinction between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith.

10 So now why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

11 On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are.”

12 The whole group kept quiet and listened to Barnabas and Paul while they explained all the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

13 After they stopped speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me.

14 Simeon has explained how God first concerned himself to select from among the Gentiles a people for his name.

15 The words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written,

16 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the fallen tent of David; I will rebuild its ruins and restore it,

17 so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord, namely, all the Gentiles I have called to be my own,' says the Lord, who makes these things

18 known from long ago.

19 "Therefore I conclude that we should not cause extra difficulty for those among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

20 but that we should write them a letter telling them to abstain from things defiled by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.

21 For Moses has had those who proclaim him in every town from ancient times, because he is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath."

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

23 They sent this letter with them: From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings!

24 Since we have heard that some have gone out from among us with no orders from us and have confused you, upsetting your minds by what they said,

25 we have unanimously decided to choose men to send to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul,

26 who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas who will tell you these things themselves in person.

28 For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules:

29 that you abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from doing these things, you will do well. Farewell.

Paul's and Luke's reports differ in some of the details, but they are both in agreement about the important facts. This is not surprising when we remember that the two records are independent accounts, and that Paul was drawing certain facts from that which transpired at the council for the purpose of using them in his argument, while Luke is approaching the matter from the viewpoint of an historian who is mainly interested in recording the facts as he finds them. **Galatians 2:1-10** seems to describe a **private** meeting that Paul had with the leaders of the Jerusalem church, while **Acts 15:1-29** describes the **public** meeting held with the entire church over the matter of Gentile conversion.

In **Acts 13-14**, Luke gives us a description of the first missionary journey undertaken by Paul and Barnabas. Following their tour, the two men had returned to Antioch with a wonderful report of God's saving work among the Gentiles. In **Acts 14:27**, we read the following: "*When they arrived and gathered the church together, they reported all the things God had done with them, and that he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles*" (**New English Translation**).

What was the reaction of the Judaizers to this supernatural move of God among the Gentiles? **Warren Wiersbe** answers the question in the following way:

"But the Jewish legalists in Jerusalem were upset with their report, so they came to Antioch and taught, in effect that a Gentile had to become a Jew before he could become a Christian (**Acts 15:1**). Circumcision, which they demanded of the Gentiles, was an important Jewish rite, handed down from the days of Abraham (**Gen 17**).

Submitting to circumcision meant accepting and obeying the whole Jewish Law...The true Christian has experienced an inner circumcision of the heart (**Colossians 2:10-11**) and does not need to submit to any physical operation...

When Paul and Barnabas confronted these men with the truth of the Gospel, the result was a heated argument (**Acts 15:2**). It was decided that the best place to settle the question was before the church leaders in Jerusalem...Paul, Barnabas, Titus, and certain other men from Antioch represented the Gentile believers who had been saved totally apart from Jewish Law; but there were no representatives from the churches Paul had established in Gentile territory.

When the deputation arrived in Jerusalem, they met privately with the church leaders...The Lord gave him [Paul] the wisdom to meet with the leaders first so that they would be able to present a united front at the public meetings."

Paul specifically mentions the names of two of the men who accompanied him to Jerusalem. These were Barnabas and Titus. He mentions them because they accompanied him for a definite purpose. The purpose was to test the Apostles in Jerusalem concerning the real meaning of the Gospel of grace. Paul wanted to make sure that the false teaching of the Judaizers, who also had their headquarters in Jerusalem, had not affected the Apostles as well.

Barnabas was a Jew and was preaching the Gospel of grace to the Gentiles as was Paul. According to **Acts 11:19-24**, when the Gospel came to the Gentiles in Antioch, it was Barnabas who was sent by the

leaders of the Jerusalem church to encourage them in their faith. So Barnabas had been associated with the Gentile believers from the earliest days. It was Barnabas who had gone to Tarsus to enlist Paul to help with the work in Antioch, and the two of them had worked together, not only in teaching, but also in helping the poor. He had accompanied Paul on the first missionary trip and had witnessed God's blessings on the Gospel that they preached among the Gentiles.

The other associate Titus, was an uncircumcised Gentile, converted to Christ through the Gospel of grace. By taking Titus with himself and Barnabas, Paul was forcing the issue of grace to come out in the open so it could be dealt with by all the Apostles. Paul's plan was to have the Judaizers rebuked by all the Apostles for teaching false doctrine. The Judaizers taught that circumcision was necessary for a person to be saved, but Titus was a living example that this belief was totally false.

Paul was a manipulator in a good sense, for he set up the Judaizers by bringing Titus as the decisive test of authentic salvation. Paul deliberately set up a situation which would bring confrontation so that the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone would refute the false doctrine of salvation by works.

We must bear in mind that at the heart of the Galatian controversy was the teaching that grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone was not sufficient for salvation. The Judaizers contended that a Gentile convert must also be circumcised and observe the law in order to be saved. These Judaizers obviously claimed that this was the authoritative Gospel taught by the Apostles in Jerusalem. So just in case there was a question mark about the power of the Gospel to save those who were not circumcised, Paul took **Titus** along with him to Jerusalem. The teaching of circumcision for salvation was not really an issue among the Jewish converts because they had already been circumcised. But now the addition of Gentile converts created a problem with those Jews who had superficially embraced the Gospel. They still clung to circumcision and

obedience to the ceremonial law as part of their righteousness before God.

As far as Paul was concerned, his own spiritual liberty in Christ and that of the Gentile believers was worth far more than popularity or even security. And he was willing to fight for that liberty. Had Paul not been willing to contend for the authentic Gospel, the First Century church might have become a Jewish sect, preaching a mixture of Law and grace.