

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON SIXTEEN)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL” (PART 2)

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 our previous Lesson, we began our study of chapter 2 of Paul’s letter to the believers living in Galatia. We noted that in chapter 2, Paul continues his defense of his apostolic authority and message, 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 there in order to get acquainted with Peter. On that trip, 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.”*

The visit to Jerusalem mentioned in **Galatians 2:1** was in all probability made at the time of the **Jerusalem Council** which was convened in A.D. 49 or 50. In **Acts 15** we have a record of the deliberations and decisions of this council of Apostles and elders who met to address a controversy that arose in a single city but would affect the church around the world and across the ages.

The issue confronting the Jerusalem Council was whether or not the Gentiles who converted to Christianity, should be required to be circumcised and observe the ceremonial regulations of the Law of Moses? The heart of the controversy concerned the Gospel itself: Are sinful people, whether Jews or Gentiles, justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Or should they be circumcised and observe the Law in addition in order to be saved?

The position of the Judaizers was that the Gentile believers must be circumcised and come under the provisions of the Old Testament law. If

they failed to do so, the ongoing process of salvation in their lives would be jeopardized. By this they implied that Gentile believers would lose the salvation they had already received if they did not become Jews and undergo circumcision.

The Judaizers were asking for more than moral and ethical purity from the Gentile converts. They insisted that it was a necessity that the Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Circumcision was the sign of entry into covenant relationship with God; the visible mark of being a Jew. The Judaizers were demanding that Gentile converts reject their own culture and heritage, and adopt both the name and lifestyle of the Jew to be accepted as true Christians! The requirement that the Gentiles believers convert to Judaism and the teaching behind this requirement constituted a serious threat to the Authentic Gospel.

The church in Antioch, which had emerged as the headquarters of Gentile Christianity, deputed Paul and Barnabas along with others to represent them at the council. In **Galatians 2:1**, Paul specifically mentions the names of two of the men who accompanied him to Jerusalem. These were Barnabas and Titus. Barnabas was a Jew who preached the Gospel of grace to the Gentiles as did Paul. He had accompanied Paul on the first missionary trip, and had witnessed God's blessings on the Gospel that was proclaimed 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 the Apostles and elders.

In verse **2** Paul writes, *“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.”*

Paul's statement that he went to the council, *“because of a revelation,”* does not contradict the statement in **Acts 15:2** that the church at

Antioch, “*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.*” The phrase “*because of*” is a translation of the Greek word **kata**: (**kat-ah**’), which means, “down, against, according to, in conformity with.” The opening clause of verse **2** may quite appropriately be rendered, “I went there in accordance or in conformity with a revelation.” That is, the church at Antioch commissioned Paul to go to Jerusalem, and in addition to that, the Holy Spirit spoke directly to him to the same effect. **Acts 15:2** speaks of the outward cause, while **Galatians 2:2** speaks of the inward impression made by the Holy Spirit. Paul emphasizes the revelatory reason for his going to Jerusalem in his letter to the Galatians, because he wants to make it clear to them that he did not go to there because he was summoned by the Apostles.

We must bear in mind that in the early church, before the canon of Scripture had been completed, revelations from God were very important in the life of believers, not as mystical experiences but as indications of the will of God.

John MacArthur argues that Paul emphasizes the divine commissioning of his visit in order to refute any suggestion by the Judaizers that they had sent Paul to Jerusalem to have the Apostles correct his doctrine. He says that, “During the previous seventeen years he had preached the Gospel without any human instruction, his message having been given to him entirely by God’s direct revelation.”

Paul informs his readers that when he went to Jerusalem he “*presented*” to the Apostles the Gospel that he had been proclaiming to the Gentiles. The word “*presented,*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to set forth in words; to impart; to communicate with a view to consultation; to set up a thing for the consideration of others.” He did so, he says, “*in a private meeting with the influential people, to make sure that I was not running—or had not run—in vain.*”

It is apparent that the first concern of Paul upon arriving in Jerusalem, was to secure a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders of the Jerusalem church with a view to outlining the Gospel which he, Barnabas and others had been preaching to the Gentiles. The phrase, “*the influential people,*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to seem, to be accounted, reputed.” Thus the phrase could be rendered, “to those who were reputable men of recognized position.” In verse **9**, he specifically mentions Peter, John and James, the half-brother of the Lord.

John Phillips makes the following comments in respect of this private meeting: “This was simple common sense. It is far easier to arrive at a consensus when a few fair-minded and intelligent people sit down together to discuss an issue than it is to carry the day with a crowd. Paul, Barnabas, Peter, John, and James, the Lord’s brother, in conference together, could pray, meditate, wait upon the Holy Spirit, reason, discuss, disagree, and seek calmly and rationally to find common ground.”

Paul informs his readers that his reason for meeting first with the acknowledged leaders of the Jerusalem church was to make sure that he, “*was not running—or had not run—in vain.*” This athletic metaphor of a stadium foot race is a reference to Paul’s missionary efforts among the Gentiles and reminds us of his words to Timothy in **2 Timothy 4:6-7**. **Kenneth Wuest** in his expanded translation of the New Testament renders the passage as follows:

“For, as for myself, my life’s blood is already being poured out as a libation, and the strategic time of my departure is already present. The desperate, straining, agonizing contest marked by its beauty of technique, I like a wrestler have fought to the finish, and at present am resting in its victory. My race, I like a runner have finished, and at present am resting at the goal. The Faith committed to my care, I like a soldier have kept safely through everlasting vigilance, and have delivered it again to my Captain.”

But how are we to understand Paul's concern about whether or not he was running, or had run, in vain. We can be certain that Paul does not mean that his past fruitful labours which resulted in the conversion of many Jews and Gentiles, and the establishment of churches would be rendered null and void simply because they would not have the approval of the Jerusalem church. Paul was in no doubt whatsoever about the authenticity of either his message or his ministry. His conduct on the way to the conference is a clear indication of this. In **Acts 15:3** Luke records, "*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.*" (**New English Translation**).

What he was concerned about was the future of the Gospel among the Gentiles, because this was his specific ministry from Christ. If the Apostles in Jerusalem sided with the Judaizers, or tried to compromise the purity of the Gospel, then Paul's ministry would be in jeopardy. He wanted to get their approval before the issue was discussed at the general assembly.

If, while Paul was preaching the Gospel of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, without the works of the law, the other apostles, though in principle agreeing with him, would have been compromising in their attitude toward those who were seriously questioning the rightness of his convictions and of his preaching, the cause of mission work among the Gentiles would have been seriously undermined.

We must not think for a moment that Paul went to this private meeting in with fear and trembling. He was quite confident in the Gospel which he preached, for according to **Galatians 1:12** he had "*received it by a revelation of Jesus Christ.*" Paul was not concerned about his Gospel preaching as much as he was concerned about what was being preached in Jerusalem! He wanted to make sure that he and the leaders at Jerusalem were "running" together in Gospel proclamation. He did not

fear his Gospel preaching was in vain, but he was concerned that his work of bringing the two groups together would be in vain.

Brothers and sisters, the message of the Gospel centres on what God has done in Jesus Christ to deliver sinners from the justice of divine wrath. We receive all that Christ accomplished through faith alone in Him and His finished work. Nothing can be added to this, nor is anything else necessary, for Jesus Christ finished all that God demanded for our eternal salvation. Neither circumcision, nor baptism, nor church membership, nor observance of the sacraments, nor adherence to the rules and regulations of an organization can add one drop of righteousness to our standing with God. In Jesus Christ, our standing is complete! We are justified before God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

It is possible for believers to disagree about many things within their local churches and within the broader scope of their denominations and organizations. But there is no room to disagree about the Gospel. This was the essence of what Paul was addressing at the Jerusalem Council. We may not be able to agree with other genuine believers concerning many non-essential issues. But the Gospel of grace is an absolute essential and therefore all believers must stand together for the Gospel!

When, like the First Century Judaizers, we require more of persons for salvation than faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning death, we are deviating from the truth of the gospel. When we require that persons pray a particular prayer, or “tarry” at an “altar,” sometimes, for months or even years, in order to ensure that they speak in tongues as the “initial evidence” that they have received the Holy Spirit, or observe extra-biblical standards, in order to be saved, we are detracting from the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross and we are promoting “another” Gospel!