



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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29. Jews and Gentiles, Law and Grace

“Much of Paul’s ministry was occupied with extending his gospel to the Gentiles and then defending the churches which sprang into being. A comparison of Acts chapter 15 and Galatians chapter 2 will show that the Jerusalem Jews did not take kindly to the Gentiles being included in the covenant promises. This discloses a deficiency in their understanding of God’s salvific purposes, and the nature of the prophetic deposit. Also they were very cultically Jewish in their Christian faith. However, it is ‘the gospel which I preached among the Gentiles’ which so gripped Paul. He had seen the universal implications of Christ and the cross, and that the gospel was no gospel if were not for all men who would repent and believe. Hence, both in Jerusalem and in his writings, he defends the true nature of the gospel, and this he does in the most brilliant manner. There is scarcely anything written in man’s history which is as brilliant as Romans, or as powerful as Galatians, or as lofty as Ephesians.”¹

1. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

After the conclusion of their first missionary trip, Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch (Acts 14:26-28). During that time, some Christians from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch and began to teach the church there that circumcision in the Mosaic tradition was an essential for inclusion in God’s salvation (15:1). Paul and Barnabas refuted this claim strongly but the issue was not resolved (15:2a). It was decided by the church to send Paul and Barnabas to take the matter to Jerusalem, to the apostles and the elders there to achieve a clear resolution (15:2b). In the journey down, Paul and Barnabas spoke to all the churches about the conversion of the Gentiles in their missionary journey, a report that gladdened the hearts of those who heard (15:3). Again, when they arrived at Jerusalem they reported all that had happened to the apostles and elders there (15:4).

This report provoked the raising of the question of the relation of Gentile converts to the Law of Moses by believers who had come from the Pharisees (15:5). Their assertion in the face of Paul and Barnabas’s report was that there was *necessity* for these Gentiles to be circumcised and to follow the law given by God to Moses. There followed an extensive discussion of the matter by the apostles and the elders (15:6).

Peter then spoke to them. He reminded them (15:7) about how the Lord (and it was clearly the Lord—see Acts 10!) had set him apart to tell the gospel to Gentiles (i.e. the household of Cornelius), so that they might hear and believe. God showed His acceptance of these believers by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He had to the Jewish believers at Pentecost (15:8). No distinction was made between them (15:9). What happened was that their hearts were purified *by faith*. Peter was showing that circumcision was considered a purification ritual. He was saying in effect that the ritual, which was symbolic and exterior, had been superseded by faith, which works a real, interior and more significant cleansing. (Paul made a similar argument in Colossians 2:11-15, although he gave it a more direct connection to the work of God in Christ than

¹ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Salvation History*, rev. ed. 1977, 2008, NCPI: Blackwood, p. 86

Peter does in his statement to the Jerusalem Council.) Peter then argued (15:10-11) that to insist on circumcision and Mosaic Law obedience on the part of the Gentiles was to test God (by refusing to accept all that He had done in the giving of the Spirit to the Gentiles) and to put a heavy yoke on the Gentiles, which Israel had not been able to bear. The whole point that salvation for Israel came not by law-obedience but by the grace of God worked in Christ must surely mean that the same principle applies to the Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas then spoke to the assembly (15:12) about all that had happened among the Gentiles when they proclaimed the gospel to them. Miracles and wonders were done among them. All of the happened, is the implication, without their having been circumcised and without their submission to the details of the Mosaic Law. (Paul used a similar argument in his letter to the Galatians. He pointedly asks them:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: *Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?* Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" (Gal. 3:1-5)

James, the brother of the Lord (Gal. 1:19) and now the leading elder in Jerusalem, then stood up to summarise the discussion and propose a way ahead. His argument is that what has been experienced is also validated by the Scriptures (15:14-15): the prophetic word had looked for the time when God would gather the Gentiles to Himself. He quoted Amos 9:11-12 to demonstrate this (15:16-18). David's tent was ruined and the Lord rebuilt it Himself through Christ. Both the remnant of Israel and all the Gentiles had access through faith into this new kingdom (Jesus Christ himself). His judgment was that things should not be made difficult for the Gentiles (15:19). A list of three requirements is made (15:20)—(1) not eating food offered to idols; (2) not engaging in sexual immorality; (3) avoiding blood, and meat with blood in it (*non-kosher*), which included animals which had been strangled. His reason at the end is "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." (15:21) It seems that by this he meant that by these concessionary acts, Gentile believers would not offend the Jewish communities in the cities in which they lived, or perhaps the Jewish converts within their churches.

Paul and Barnabas were then sent, with two delegates from the Jerusalem church—Judas-Barabbas and Silas, back to Antioch with a letter to the Gentile believers (15:22ff). The letter made clear that those who had come up to teach the necessity for obedience to the Mosaic law had done so without authorisation. It affirmed the fellowship with, and respect for, Paul and Barnabas that the leaders in Jerusalem had. The requirements were set out, and the believers were exhorted, "You will do well to avoid these things." The tone of the letter is not one of necessary submission to the Mosaic Law, in fact the opposite: what is set out is a way for the Gentile believers to love their Jewish brothers and sisters. The church in Antioch was glad for the encouragement that this letter gave them. Judas and Silas had much fruitful ministry among them. And there was a blessing of peace for them when they returned to Jerusalem.

2. Further problems (Galatians 2)

Galatians 2 shows that whilst the problem had basically been dealt with, it continued to cause pain and trouble in the church, by people who refused to accept the decision

reached. The battle with this “Judaising” trend is seen in other letters also. (The whole of Hebrews is argument against it, as well as Galatians 2:8-3:11, 1Corinthians 8 and 10:14-11:1. In other letters the Jewish-Gentile relationship is dealt with, sometimes to remind Gentiles not to be proud or dismissive in their approach to Israel—e.g. Ephesians 2:11-22 and Romans 9-11).

Peter made a visit to Antioch (we are not sure when this was; it is not recorded in Acts) and spent time with the whole church, eating with Jews and Gentiles. However, some men came “from James” (whether sent by James, or referring to their base in Jerusalem) and they are described as “those of the circumcision group”. On their arrival, Peter stopped associating with brothers and sisters from a Gentile background. This was a devastating move, and it led to a growing division in the church (2:12b-13).

Paul confronted him publicly and sternly about it. What they were doing was not in line with the gospel (2:14a). Peter was essentially a hypocrite, requiring (by implication) something of his Gentile brothers and sisters that he himself did not see as essentially applying to himself (2:14b).

Paul had come to see that all human relationships had their true reality in the gospel of Christ. No person is justified by observing the law. Rather all of us are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. So, Jews who have put their faith in Christ are no more or less justified than Gentiles who have done so (i.e., both are fully justified!) and they have also acknowledged that the law has lost *any* claim in justification. Paul says that Jews essentially know this—both their Scriptures through its prophecies, and their experience through failure in the law must have made this clear to them, if they would but have eyes to see it.

It is certainly true that being justified by faith in Christ makes open a fact that maybe the pursuit of law-righteousness tries to hide: we are sinners. Paul asks: does this exposure mean, “Christ promotes sin”? It may mean that he hears people complain that this grace-way relativizes and minimises the seriousness of sin, and maybe even encourages people to sin. Not at all! (his phrase may be translated a little too softly as “Heck, no!”) But a worse thing could happen: by rebuilding the law as a basis for justification, i.e. by reasserting an Old Testament approach to God, Paul would in effect be a law-breaker, for the whole of the Old Testament and its law had been preliminary to the New Covenant and the writing of the law on the heart by the Spirit. To reassert the Law is to oppose God and His purposes. It is sinful! To insist on legal submission to the Mosaic Law is to set aside the grace of God, all of which was anticipated through the whole Old Testament. If some kind of justification is available through the law, then the death of Christ was for nothing.

It seems that the problem of the teaching in Galatia was that salvation is through faith in Christ in its first phase, but then that salvation is maintained and maturity comes through obedience to the customs of the Law of Moses. Paul is saying “No!” Our life with God began by our dying in Christ’s death—the penalty of the law had its full claim at that cross, and having spent its full claim, the law no longer has a claim on me: I have died to the law. So now, my whole life is now lived by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. My life was not simply begun with Christ, but is continued in him. I reach maturity by faith; I end what I began by grace and not by works. To return to works is to set myself under a curse: but Christ has come to redeem from this curse.