

Study: Galatians 2:1-10, To Be or Not to Be Circumcised'

Pray for your time together in God's Word.

Read to the Group: Take a few minutes to read through Galatians 2:1-10, writing a rough outline of the passage as you do so. Highlight Paul's main points. This will help us keep the "whole picture" in mind as we move through the passage in pieces.

Read Galatians 2:1-10 as individuals.

¹ Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. 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. ³ Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. 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. ⁶ As for those who seemed to be important--whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance--those men added nothing to my message. 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 recognized 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.

Questions for Discussion:

Leader's Note: You may wish to discuss what everyone wrote out as their main points from the passage here, or use it as a tool to wrap up your discussion at the end.

Paul is astonished. The Galatians are about to abandon the Gospel because some professing Christians had come among them preaching the need of circumcision for salvation. Salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone was at stake, and Paul could hardly believe what he was hearing.

The main points in this passage are:

- *The narrowness of the Gospel - nothing should be added or taken away from the true Gospel example: requirements of the law*

- *The breadth of the Gospel – The true Gospel says that we have salvation by Christ alone: therefore, we should accept other Christians fully without requiring anything additional of them (ie: circumcision).*
- *Christians are to meet the needs of the poor with a generous sharing of resources.*

Ask the Group: In the first four verses of this passage, we see Paul express doubt about the work he's done—after 14 years of ministry! Have you ever felt called to do something?

Possible Answers: Take a job, have a hard conversation, form a relationship.

- Did you ever face doubt about that calling?
- How did you respond?
- How does Paul respond?

Possible Answers: He confronts his doubt directly and seeks resolution.

Ask the Group: What is the Gospel Paul proclaimed among the Gentiles?

Possible Answer: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 and many other scriptures...Jesus + Nothing = Everything.

Not Jesus + Judaism. Doubtful this is first time they heard it. Most certainly Paul shared the Gospel he proclaimed when he was with Peter many years earlier (Galatians 1:18).

- How was Paul both strategic and intentional about how he proclaimed the Gospel in this passage?

Possible Answers: Paul is talking about those of influence, how they didn't add anything to the Gospel or to him. He was strategic and intentional to meet with them privately and individually before presenting things publicly, etc. He doesn't meet with them because he honors their authority/influence, out of favoritism or because he thinks they're better than others, etc., but because he understands how a community works. He understands how change happens and ideas travel in a community and what it would take to make change happen (so that he "was not running or had not run in vain"). He is seeking their fellowship so that the Gospel will have quick and purposeful influence in a community.

Ask the Group: What is the Gospel you are preaching? Do your words and/or your lifestyle differ?

Possible Answer: What I say and how I live often diverge. The Gospel I preach with my life is often, Jesus + me cleaning my self up or performing for acceptance. I also, in my sinfulness, neglect the utter holiness of God and imagine that it is even possible for me to clean myself up for Him or that some of my sin is excusable.

Who are Barnabas & Titus?

Barnabas

Given the nickname, "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36). Convinced other apostles of Paul's legitimacy (9:27). Travelled together on the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). Defended a law-free Gospel at the Jerusalem Council (15:1-29).

Titus

A Gentile (Gal 2:3) & one of Paul's coworkers, who played a major role in Corinth (cf. 2 Cor 2:13; 7:6, 13, 14; 8:6, 16, 23; 12:18). Paul later wrote a letter to him (cf. 2 Tim 4:10).

Ask the Group: What was at stake at this meeting? How might the Gospel have been lost (2:5)?

Possible Answer: Paul was saying, "the Gospel is for every culture" and salvation is through Christ alone. That's why Paul says that the very "truth of the Gospel" was at stake (vs.5) and in particular "the freedom that we have in Christ" (vs.4). Had this split occurred, the false teachers would have hijacked much of the church into a legalistic religion that was foreign to the Gospel. The stakes could not have been higher!

Ask the Group: Who are "those who seemed to be leaders" (influential) and is there a point in noting this?

Possible Answer: Paul did not doubt the position of these leaders but also wanted to caution against overestimating their authority. Final authority does not reside in any person but only in the Gospel (1:8). Leaders are to be respected but not venerated, honored but not exalted above the Gospel

- Who are "the influential" in your life? How does this passage speak to how you allow those people to influence you?

Possible Answer: We are to filter everything thorough the truth of the Gospel.

Ask the Group: What does it mean that God does not judge by external appearance (2:6)?

Possible Answer: Paul will not overestimate anyone's power or position. Status does not matter under God. Christ is our common denominator. Christianity is about who I am in Christ not what I do for him.

Ask the Group: Why was it significant that Titus (a non-Jew) was not required by the Jerusalem leaders to take on the Jewish mark of circumcision in Galatians 2:3-5?

Possible Answer: This shows they agreed that it is faith in Christ alone and not any other action or practice that is necessary for salvation. Only in Christ can we become "holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col.1:22). Titus was a radical, live case and public demonstration of the implications of the Gospel! People can be worshippers of God without becoming Jewish in custom or culture.

What is Circumcision All About?

According to the Old Testament, circumcision was a requirement to be part of God's people. Those who refused circumcision did not belong to God's covenant people (Gen 17:9-14; 21:4; Lev 12:3).

Is circumcision merely a physical act? No! Deuteronomy 10:16 states the people are to circumcise their hearts as a spiritual response. This response involves fearing, serving and holding fast to God. Jeremiah encourages the people to ensure that they are acting in a spiritual way as a corollary to the physical act of circumcision. Jer 9:25-26 shows the limitations of a mere physical act. A Jew with an uncircumcised heart is no different from a Gentile whose nation practices circumcision.

What was the view of circumcision in the New Testament? Was circumcision still required for Gentile converts to Judaism in Paul's day? A majority in that time said yes to its requirement. John the Baptist, Jesus and Saul of Tarsus were all circumcised (Luke 1:59; 2:21; Philippians 3:5). Even some Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah insisted that Gentiles were required to receive circumcision and to observe the law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). They believed that what God was doing in Christ was part of what he had done in Abraham. John 7:22-24 may show Jesus casting doubt on its importance, implying that the blessing he brings is far greater than that of circumcision (healings make people completely whole). Stephen reinforces the OT idea that the mere physical act is of no value (Acts 7:51). Though the majority said yes to circumcision early on, others in Acts 10:44-49, when they saw the uncircumcised Gentiles filled with the Holy Spirit, rejected this view. Clearly God had given the Gentiles the "repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). Controversy followed Paul throughout his ministry. Paul argues in Galatians 3:1-5 that the Spirit in the lives of Gentiles indicated that keeping the law was unnecessary for membership of God's people. Paul supports his argument against the need for circumcision by reference to Abraham. Genesis 15:6, he says, shows that Abraham was justified by faith, not by his performance of the law (Gal 3:6-9; Rom 4:1-8). Abraham was already righteous in God's eyes before he was circumcised (Rom 4:9-12). So for Paul those who think they can become righteous before God by receiving circumcision (Gal 5:2-6), which is a work of the law, are deceived. As far as Paul was concerned, "We are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh" Philippians 3:3. The only circumcision that matters is circumcision of the heart through the Spirit (Rom 2:29).

Ask the Group: In the church today, what do you see as forms of "circumcision"?

Possible Answers: This can be viewed both in a negative and positive light—from an Old Testament perspective or New. Baptism, communion, other religious rites, etc.

Ask the Group: In what ways does the Gospel give us freedom? In what ways do you try to add to the Gospel (vs. 2:6)?

Possible Answer: The Gospel only asks us to trust in Christ. It doesn't ask or require anything more. It is not based on our merits. It allows for true freedom, because there is nothing we can really do to deserve or obtain salvation and it allows us to "let go". We often add by insisting we must believe in Christ plus be baptized or plus be a member or plus ... If traditions of a church are raised to a place of being "non-negotiable", you create legalism, not worship.

Ask the Group: What is our community application of this passage?

Leaders' Note: You may choose to create your own application question as a group based on your discussion, or highlight a question from this study.