

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

Galatians 2:1-10

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.

Outline/Main Points:

Questions for Discussion:

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?

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

- How does Paul respond?

What is the Gospel Paul proclaimed among the Gentiles?

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

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

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).

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

Who are “those who seemed to be leaders” (influential) and is there a point in noting this?

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

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

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?

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).

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

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

What is our community application of this passage?