

GALATIANS 2: 11-21

Up to this point in the letter (2:10), Paul has established, 1) that what he has taught has been received directly from God and is a revelation about and an encounter of the living Christ; 2) that the 'pillar' apostles (James, Peter and John) only supported and affirmed Paul's teaching and ministry, not taught him themselves or commissioned his work; 3) that Paul was recognized as the apostle to the Gentiles while Peter and others focussed more specifically on Jews; and 4) The pillar apostles supported the view that Gentiles should not be compelled to adopt a Jewish religious lifestyle in order to become Christians.

However, Paul continues to encounter problems. Where are they coming from?

1) The primary source of Paul's troubles is a group that he calls 'the circumcision faction' (1:12). They are conservative Jewish Christians (probably of Pharisaic origins), who are bent on encouraging Gentiles to adopt more elements of a Jewish religious lifestyle, than what Paul has been teaching. Paul claims that what he is teaching has the seal of approval by the powers that be in Jerusalem. This may be so, but we cannot assume the Jerusalem church was all of the same mind. James (the leader of the Jerusalem church) may have achieved a compromise solution for Gentile requirements in the church (Acts 15), but this didn't make it all easy when Jews mixed with Gentiles.

2) And this leads to the second group that Paul is upset with. Evidently, when Peter visited with some of the Gentile churches, and other Jewish co-workers with Paul like Barnabas were around, they approached gentiles as equals. This meant that whatever food was served and whatever ritual cleansing gentiles did or did not adopt, food was eaten and enjoyed without any fuss as to whether it was kosher-prepared or cleaned. Was the meat served part of the pagan market ritual of having been sacrificed to a god (a superstitious way of ensuring its non-contamination)? Was the livestock's blood drained from its body before it was cooked and was it boiled to ensure its cleanliness? By not welcoming the food with thanksgiving and eating it graciously, Jews could make gentiles feel different, inferior, and in need of something beyond their faith in Christ to be made right.

But when members of the circumcision faction came around, Peter and other Jewish Christians were afraid of being criticized as 'pro-gentile' Jews who were contributing to the loosening of religious standards for Jews. And so, they withdrew from Gentile tables and segregated themselves. Paul calls such action hypocrisy because it is dishonest (done out of fear rather than faith), and because it undermines the basis of the gospel in Jesus Christ.

And this brings us to the significant theological reason Paul is concerned about all this. Paul has no problem with Jews being good religious Jews. But he does have a problem when such religious practice becomes a source of moral distinctions within the church. Gentiles should not be made to feel inferior to Jews, requiring the adoption of a Jewish lifestyle as part of their Christianity. Likewise, Jews should not be made to feel peculiar and inferior for having to hold on to their practices as part of their life of faith in Christ (a problem especially addressed in Paul's letter to the Romans). But in Christ, these distinctions are relativized, and additional requirements to faith working itself in love are optional not mandatory. Indeed, Paul resents even the teaching of these requirements because it gives the impression that gentile Christians may be missing something Jews have over them.

When Paul speaks about 'works of the law' he has in mind the Jewish religious lifestyle which affects everything in daily life from the way you eat to the conditions for love and marriage. Paul argues that justification (being right with God and in life as a whole) for the Christian is based on Christ and Christ's perfect self-giving in love. Christ's self-giving offers forgiveness and renewal, and those who trust in his work above anything else, also receive from Christ his loving Spirit so that they become Christ to their neighbour.

Faith in God, Christ living in us, and the works of love as an offering of thanksgiving; this is what is needed of Christians whether Jew or Gentile. Adding other requirements only undermines the absoluteness of what God has done in Christ and accomplished in us as a beginning of love working itself out through all the ebb and flow of life's journey.