

Galatians 2:1-10

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 May 2016

Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0:00] I wonder if you recognise these words. Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do, nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too.

Imagine all the people living in peace. You can probably all join in here, I won't sing it. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will be its one. I love the fact in the first verse, Lennon writes about, imagine no possessions while he's sitting behind a Steinway piano in his mansion somewhere. But it's a popular song. It still is, 40, 50 years I guess, or 40 years after it's written.

Because people long to have unity. They long to be one, don't we? And it also contains a popular sentiment that religion is one of the things that divides us. Religion and nationality.

People believe religion to be divisive, don't they? We turn on the news, we hear about IS, we hear about Boko Haram, we see the bloodshed propagated in the name of religion. And we can see why people think religion is the problem.

[1:02] And I don't know how you felt as we read these words from Galatians chapter 2. But at first hearing it can sound like religion is divisive. Here is this ancient argument 2,000 years ago, people arguing about whether someone should be circumcised or not.

It sounds like typical religious trivia when we first hear it, doesn't it? And yet as I said in the introduction, what I hope to persuade you of, is that actually the outcome of this meeting was of eternal importance.

More important than life and death, to me and to you and to all of us here. So let's say a little bit about the setting. The setting was Jerusalem, about 47 AD. The meeting was set up by God, we're told in verse 2.

Paul went to Jerusalem because of Revelation. In attendance, on one side we had Paul, Barnabas, who was a Jew, and Titus, who was a Gentile.

A non-Jew. As well as Peter, James, John, the apostles and influential leaders in the church in Jerusalem, and some false brothers, who we'll hear more about in a moment.

[2:12] Now what was the presenting issue under discussion? Well, Paul tells us in verse 3, basically. The issue was circumcision, or the presenting issue was circumcision. Even Titus did not have to be circumcised.

Now, what was circumcision all about? Well, if we think ourselves into Jewish sandals for a moment, circumcision was very important. It was something God commanded their forefather Abraham to do 2,000 years ago.

It was a sign. A sign of belonging to God's people. A sign of being in relationship with God. You might say it was a badge of membership to God's people.

Funny place to wear a badge? I know. But it was a badge nonetheless. And for 2,000 years they've been practicing this. And so now we're faced with this question.

When a Gentile, someone who's not a Jew, someone like Titus, exhibit A, sitting in the corner of the room, when he becomes a Christian, does he have to be circumcised? Now, the heart of that issue really, is what is required for someone to be part of God's people?

[3:17] What is required for somebody to be part of God's people? What is required for somebody to be loved, forgiven, and accepted by a holy God? Is it faith in Christ Jesus?

Or is it faith in Christ Jesus plus being circumcised, obeying Jewish laws, doing certain things?

See, that's the real issue. What does it take to be accepted by the living God? Now, if Titus had to be circumcised, if Gentiles had to be circumcised, then what that would be saying is, to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus Christ, you need to do certain things.

Yes, you need to believe in him, but then also, you have to fulfil a whole series of laws. And that would have a knock-on effect as well.

That would mean that if someone like Titus did not agree to be circumcised, then in the church, you have a two-tier church. You have the true believers who'd gone all the way, who'd embraced Jewish identity and Jewish law.

[4 : 24] You have these sort of second-class ones who didn't really, weren't really fully committed. So that's what's at stake at this meeting. In the one corner, you've got Paul, a Jew, Barnabas, a Jew, Titus, a Gentile believer, a non-Jew believer in Jesus Christ.

In the other corner, you've got these false brothers Paul speaks about in verse 4. They were probably very committed to the traditions and teachings they'd had. They were probably culturally conservative.

You almost hear the arguments. What's the damage? We've circumcised people for 2,000 years. We shouldn't just throw that out now, should we? They're probably proud of their heritage.

So the question was, which way would it go? Who would win this discussion? Let's think through what would have happened if those traditionalists, those culturally conservative false brothers, as Paul calls them, had won.

Well, for any of us men here, when we profess faith in Christ, we have to go down to the local hospital, have something done. We have to embrace the whole Jewish law. No more bacon butties for lunch.

[5 : 38] No more prawn and avocado sandwiches from M&S; if that's what you prefer. Our cultural identity would have to be Jewish. Do you see why Paul is so firm about this?

See, more importantly, it wouldn't just mean no more bacon sandwiches. It would mean we were saying our status before God depended on what we did. Depended on how well we kept certain laws and rules.

And that's why Paul stood firm on it. Look at verse 5. See what he says. And see why he stands firm on it. To them, the false brothers that is, we did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel, the truth of the good news might be preserved for you.

See, Paul had huge foresight. As he looked ahead he saw this was a big issue. And he stood firm on it. Well, for the sake of the Galatians, the sake of the Gentile believers he was preaching to, but also for the sake of you and I here, if you are assuming you are not for a Jewish background.

Now what was the outcome of the meeting? Well, there were several outcomes. Look at verse 3. Titus didn't have to be circumcised. Verse 6. Even those who seemed influential added nothing to Paul.

[6 : 56] In other words, they said, yes, the message you are preaching really is God's message. Now, what are the implications for us? There are the implications then. What are the implications for us? I want to briefly run through three.

the first is it's only the true good news that creates unity. It's only the true good news message about Jesus Christ that creates unity between different people.

It's a message that's for all peoples, all cultures, every language, every background. And it's a message that is, first of all, deeply humbling. Because it says, you have no hope of being accepted by God.

because you're a sinner, you're a rebel against him. It doesn't matter how smart you are, it doesn't matter how religious your background is, you are a rebel against God. And the only way to be accepted by him is through his son Jesus Christ, who died to pay the penalty for your rebellion, arose to new life to give you new life.

So that's the heart of a good news message. And it humbles us all. It doesn't matter if, like me, you've brought up a Christian home, being a church or your life, or whether you've just wanted it off the streets to hear what Christianity is about for the first time.

[8 : 07] We're all in the same boat. Everyone's on a level playing field. No culture, no race, no individual has anything to contribute to this rescue.

And that means it's deeply humbling, doesn't it? We all stand on a level ground, a level playing field before the cross of Jesus Christ. Now think about what would happen if that were not true.

If somehow my obedience, or my background, or my learning, or my culture, contributed something to me being right before God, then what would that lead to?

It would lead to pride, wouldn't it? It would lead to pride, it would lead to looking down on other people. That happens in almost every religion, almost every sphere of life. I don't know if you've followed the news recently, that, for example, with the whole transgender debate and discussions, Germaine Greer, the famous feminist, has been barred from speaking at certain universities because she doesn't want to call men who become women women.

Now leave aside all those issues for a moment. What fascinates me is that some people have now decided Germaine Greer, this ardent feminist, is beyond the pale.

[9 : 28] She doesn't measure up to standards. Why? But she's not speaking the same things that the four or five of the trans-gender debate are speaking. See what they're saying? You do not measure up.

It doesn't matter about things you've done in the past, you do not measure up, you're out. So even in a secular, atheistic environment, you get these in-groups and out-groups. Because it's all based on what people have done, whether people believe the same as me, whether they're as zealous as I am.

And every religion does the same thing. So the gospel of Jesus Christ is completely different. It says none of us have any hope, none of us measure up.

It is only through Jesus we're put right. See, the gospel creates unity. The gospel creates unity. It says it's only through Jesus we can come. Now probably none of us have ever worried about whether someone's circumcised or not.

and yet even today, even in our churches, there's always a danger we end up creating new rules that people have to submit to, to be a fully fledged member of the church.

[10 : 35] So I think there's some churches that say, you have to have been baptised in our church to be a member. Well, that creates a, that adds to the gospel. It's not the gospel, it's Jesus plus, that's no gospel.

It creates division, not unity, it makes second class citizens within the church. Or I think of other churches that say, you have to have certain spiritual gifts before we know you really are a believer. You must be able to speak in tongues, for example.

But what's that doing? It's causing division. It's saying you've got to have Jesus plus, that doesn't create unity, it creates division. Or I think of other churches where if you don't hold to a certain understanding of Genesis chapters 1 and 2, then you're probably not really a Christian.

Now don't get me wrong, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying it doesn't matter what you believe about Genesis 1 and 2, I believe it does. We should all reach biblical conclusions about that.

However, as soon as we say you have to agree with me on this particular issue, then what do we say? We're saying you need Jesus plus, and therefore we destroy the gospel.

[11 : 46] We destroy the unity, and we create a kind of two-tier church. those who are in, and those who aren't quite in. See, because the gospel creates unity, we must be careful to preserve the gospel, not requiring anything in addition to faith in Jesus Christ, to be a believer, either explicitly or even implicitly.

What's the first implication? The gospel creates unity. But secondly, we look at this meeting, we see the gospel defines the boundaries of our unity. So it's not just everybody's in, the gospel defines the boundaries of our unity.

You can see that in verse 4. Paul talks about these people who are false brothers. They're claiming to be true, they're claiming to be faithful to Jesus Christ, but actually weren't. Why?

Verse 4. They slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so they might bring us into slavery. In other words, so they might create new rules for us, force us to follow their ways.

Now, if we'd met these people, I'm sure we'd have found them very sincere, I'm sure we'd have found them very plausible, probably very loving in their attitude, probably they knew the scriptures very, very well indeed.

[13 : 04] But they were false brothers, Paul says, because they were not holding to the gospel that creates unity. They were saying you need Jesus plus circumcision. And if you add anything to the gospel, you destroy it.

Imagine for a moment, visiting the Louvre in Paris, I've used this illustration before, it's the only one I can think of. Imagine you're standing there in front of that great masterpiece, the Mona Lisa. And you get to the front of the queue, it looks great, there's thousands of tourists behind you.

You think, you know what, Leonardo may have been a great man, but that smile is pathetic. You get your pen out of your pocket, assume somehow you can get there and add a little smile onto Lisa so she looks a bit happier.

Now, apart from the fact, all the alarms would go off, and you'd be arrested in milliseconds, would you have added to the masterpiece or would you have destroyed it? Destroy it, right? Same with the gospel, you add to it, you destroy it.

And it doesn't matter how sincere people are, it also doesn't matter what their status is. Do you notice how many times in this, verse 2, verse 6, Paul talks about those who seemed influential, the pillars of the church who seemed influential.

[14:12] influential. What Paul's saying is it doesn't matter how influential people are, how powerful they are, what's important, what's vital, is they stick to the true gospel. That's why if you look over the column to chapter 1, verse 8, he says there, even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached, let him be accursed, let me cut off from God.

The standard of what is right is not whether people are sincere and zealous, it's not whether they're respected and have authority. The standard of what is right is what God has revealed, the gospel message he has revealed.

So you see this gospel that creates our unity, that brings us together whatever our nationality and background, is also the gospel that limits our unity. There cannot be unity in Christian mission between people who do not believe this good news message about Jesus Christ.

So the message unites us and defines the boundaries of our unity. Why is that so important? Why is it so important we don't say, well yeah Jesus plus a bit of this will be alright, Jesus plus agreeing with me on this doctrine, Jesus plus obeying these certain ways in our church.

Why is it so important we don't add to the gospel like this? Well I'll give you three reasons very briefly. First of all as soon as we do it robs the church of its unity. It allows room for human pride and looking down at other people.

[15:41] Here it would have meant the Gentiles are second class Christians. So it robs the church of its unity adding to the gospel. It also robs God of his glory. It robs God of his glory because the gospel is all about what God has done not what we do.

And thirdly it robs believers of our security and joy. It robs believers of our security and joy. In other words it always has thought of have I done enough?

Have I been circumcised fully? Have I kept all the rules? Do I fail to do this? Am I lost?

We end up with massive insecurity in the legalism that comes with it. That's why it's so important.

So the gospel creates our unity it defines the limits of that unity and thirdly the gospel propels us forward in unity with a purpose.

So you look at that in verses 7 to 10. There's this discussion they realise that Paul has been sent to the Gentiles. Peter, one of the other apostles has gone to the Jews and they look on they hear what's happened.

[16:50] Verse 9 When they perceived the grace that was given to me they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me. In the Roman world that was a way of sealing a contract. Shaking hands, the right hands.

It was a way of sealing a contract. They're saying yes you've got a mission from God to go preach this good news message to the non-Jews around the Roman Empire. Go for it.

Get on with that purpose. Meanwhile, Peter and the others, verse 8, will keep going to the Jews around us in Jerusalem. So this unity was kind of a unity in mission.

A unity to make the good news of Jesus known. Unity in purpose. Unity united in preaching to lost people, but also united in sharing with the needy people in God's family.

Look at verse 10. I can find verse 10. Here we go. Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. This is a practical outworking of being saved and loved by a God who is generous, by the Lord Jesus Christ who was rich yet gave himself, became poor and gave himself so we and him might become rich.

[18:02] A natural expression of that, extension of that, is that Christians should be generous people. We can be generous because we're joyful. Because our identity is not in the money we have, but in the Saviour who has rescued us.

So you see the Gospel creates unity amongst diverse people. It defines the unity amongst diverse people. And it propels us forward in unity. In the message, in the mission God has given us. The mission to preach to the lost people. And to share with the needy in God's family. Which is what that is particularly referring to. Now not everyone in this room is going to be a Gospel preacher in the sense that I am standing up here talking to a room full of people.

Yet we all have opportunities day by day to talk about the Lord Jesus. I remember a few years ago I talked to a friend of mine who was in his late twenties. He was a bit sad really.

He was doing very well in his job. His wife had two children at that stage. I think we've got three now. He said, Stuart, when we were at university, my wife and I, my fiancé she was then, we really thought the Lord would send us off as missionaries somewhere to preach the Gospel in some far off land.

[19 : 12] And we now feel we're like second class citizens. I said, Mike, tell me about your day. Tell me what you do. His wife was very involved in the mothers and toddlers group.

Mike was working hard at work but working in a way that dawned the Gospel. He built up relationships with his colleagues. He was often praying for his friends and work colleagues.

So Mike, you're doing what God has called you to do. You are seeking to share the Gospel where you are. You're seeking to share with needy people in God's family. Don't feel second class.

Just rejoice in this good news message that you're saved not because you're a missionary in Thailand or wherever, not because you're a good person, but because Jesus died at Christ died on the cross for you.

The Son of God loved you, gave his life for you, and now you are his. So in gratitude preserve this Gospel which brings unity. Preserve this Gospel which defines and limits our unity.

[20 : 13] And preserve this Gospel which sends us forward in unity to do the work God has given us to do. Let's pray. Let's pray.