

RETAINING THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

SERIES: GALATIANS

By Steve Zeisler

Summit meetings have a certain fascination for us. We pay close attention to gatherings of national leaders as they try to lessen the tensions of our world. We even pay attention to ecclesiastical “summit” conferences; the world looks on as the College of Cardinals gathers to elect a new pope, the puffing signals of smoke announcing their thinking. This morning we are going to study a passage in the book of Galatians that could be regarded as a summit conference of sorts. In Galatians 2:1, the apostle Paul writes:

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)--well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter with the gospel to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I also was eager to do.

We have already identified this occasion as the same one that is described at the end of Acts 11 (though this is a debated point). This trip came about as a result of the revelation given by God to a prophet named Agapes who spoke of an impending famine, so a relief effort was organized and money was sent to Jerusalem in the care of Barnabas and Saul. That is what Paul is referring to in Galatians 2:2 where he says, “it was because of a revelation that I went up.” In no sense was he being called on the carpet by the Jerusalem elders, the apostles of long standing. He was never subordinate to them. He did not come because they insisted that he come and be examined. It was because of a revelation from God of a need for financial relief that he came to Jerusalem.

Three different groups were present at this meeting, and we will identify and talk about each group before we look at the actions and results that occurred at the meeting. The first group is the delegation from Antioch--Paul, Barnabas and Titus; the second group is the pillars of the church in Jerusalem (three of them are mentioned: James, Cephas (Peter), and John); then there is a third group who are identified as “the false brethren” (Gal. 2:4).

We talked at some length about one member of the group from Antioch, the apostle Paul, last week. Let us look briefly at the other two members of this group. To me Barnabas is one of the most sympathetic and wonderful people in the whole New Testament. If Barnabas were sitting here at this service and you wanted to take someone home for a meal (as we

sometimes urge you to do), it would be an absolute treat for you to have Barnabas visit your home. He is forever doing wonderful things for people, courageously taking on prejudices, reaching out to meet those who are in need, and providing stable leadership. All in all he is a gifted and godly man.

Barnabas is first introduced in the book of Acts. He had sold a piece of property he owned in Jerusalem in order to take care of people who were in need. Later we meet him when he is the only one in Jerusalem who would believe that the persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, had become a Christian. When Paul came to Jerusalem everyone was still afraid of him, but Barnabas took him under his wing, introduced him to people and gave others a chance to see that Paul had in fact come to Christ. Later, when Paul had given up (at least temporarily) on John Mark, again it was Barnabas who saw something in a brother that others could not see.

Evidently Barnabas was also a very capable leader. The Jerusalem apostles sent him to Antioch when an explosion of faith took place there and they needed to send someone to monitor what was going on. Yet Barnabas was humble enough to know when he needed help. He asked Paul to be his associate in Antioch, thus there began the process of his own star being eclipsed as Paul's remarkable ministry took off. Soon thereafter, references to "Barnabas and Saul" would become "Paul and Barnabas," as Paul became the leader and Barnabas the lieutenant. Yet this never caused Barnabas to react with jealousy or pique. He was an attractive and Christ-centered man.

Titus is the last of the delegates from Antioch mentioned here. While the Scripture does not tell us as much about him as the other two, we do know that Titus keeps showing up when a cool head and a courageous heart are required to deal with turbulence and hassles in the church. Titus seems to have the knack of putting things right. Paul probably handpicked him for this mission to Jerusalem. The apostle knew that having a Gentile Christian on his delegation would raise the fur on some backs, so he needed a man who could handle that kind of pressure. Titus also ministered extensively in Corinth during the time when the Corinthian church was in turmoil and rife with factions and jealousy on every side. When Paul needed someone to minister in Crete, where he expected some difficult problems to arise, Titus was the man he picked for that assignment too. Thus Titus was a good man to have around in times of problem and difficulty.

There we have character sketches of the group of delegates who had come from Antioch, bringing relief for the famine-stricken church in Judea.

The second group who participated in this meeting were the "pillars" of the church, the apostles whom Jesus had appointed in the days of his flesh, and others, including his brother James. These men had remained in Jerusalem and had headquartered their ministry there. Their beards are somewhat grayer now than in the days before the cross. Following its early ragtag days, the church in Jerusalem had begun to attract priests and other people of means and social weight. It had become a well-rooted and well-known organization in Jerusalem and its environs. Most of the apostles had remained there, and their ministry had become well rooted also.

We need to realize these are godly men, chosen by Christ for their task, and yet we cannot but see the pointed references by the apostle Paul to their "reputations"--so-called pillars, he calls them. Paul says, "Those who have high reputation don't impress me a bit. I'm not sold on human reputation." It is my conviction that he says these things not because he felt any disrespect for Peter and James and John. On the contrary, he loved and respected them very much. But what happened, evidently, in the Galatian churches to whom Paul was writing was that these men had taken on an almost mystical aura. They had an awesome reputation because they had walked with the Lord during his earthly ministry. Paul lacked this privilege, so the Galatians had begun to disregard what he said he was not one of the highly regarded pillars from Jerusalem.

Paul gives a very helpful word in this passage about human reputations. When all is said and done, Christian leaders are human beings. Apostles can fail in their personal decisions, in their trust of the Lord, etc. They do not fail when they declare what God in Christ has given them to declare, but in terms of their personal life they are all capable of weakness. In our next study we will look at one of Peter's outstanding failures as an apostle. Paul is saying that Christian leaders are only human. Their reputations may or may not be deserved. We should listen to those who speak faithfully in the name of the Lord but we should not have an otherworldly, mystical view about Christian leaders. God shows no partiality to those who are revered by men.

Before we go on to talk about the false brethren, the third group of players in our drama, let us set the stage further by looking at the tension and ferment in the air at this meeting. Make no mistake about it; Gentile Christians were a very unsettling group for the long-standing Christian Jews of Jerusalem. These Jews had grown up at the heart of Judaism. Gentiles, they were taught from their early days, were dogs and were beneath contempt. The fact that God seemed to be cavalierly saving Gentiles without first requiring them to become Jews bothered them a great deal. That rubbed against the grain of their long-standing and deeply held prejudices. They regarded these events as dangerous to their cherished and long-held values. It was no pleasure to them to see Paul and Barnabas bring with them a Gentile who had not been circumcised and converted to Judaism, one who did not look like a Jew or comport himself as a Jew.

These men from Antioch were radicals. They were in the forefront of what God was doing in the church outside of Jerusalem. The saints in Jerusalem, the rooted, established, acceptable church did not know what to do about them. Imagine a wild, Christian rock band sitting down to discuss ministry in music with a staid and conservative Christian music association (the Sweet Jesus, Roll Away the Rock, Fire from Heaven Band conferring with the Society for the Advancement of Sacred Symphonies). These men from Antioch made things distinctly uncomfortable. God was saving Gentiles all over Antioch, things were getting out of control, and the pillars of the Jerusalem church were turned to for leadership.

One thing that is often true about pillars of the faith, however, is that they were considered radicals once themselves. Almost every statesman for Christ was at one time in his life a fool for Christ. Every parent I have ever met used to be a teenager himself once!

Some old photographs surfaced the other day at my house. My children thought they were hilarious but I was taken aback somewhat. I thought, "Here I am, a former Jesus freak, standing in front of reputable, well-scrubbed Christian people listening to me on a Sunday morning!" I hardly even realized at the time that that was what I was. But, looking back, I was sure enough what the press all over the country were describing as "California Jesus freaks with hair down to their shoulders and Day-Glo stickers on their cars"--the whole bit! When Leslie and I got married right out of college half of the people I asked to be in our wedding didn't even have sports coats or dress shoes to wear!

What I am trying to illustrate is that these pillars, James, Cephas and John, all had backgrounds that would fit in quite well with the case histories of the radicals from Antioch at the time of the Jerusalem summit of Acts 11. James had denied his brother in the days of his flesh. He resisted his Lord even though he probably knew him more intimately than anyone else. Peter himself had been called by God to preach to the Gentiles and to love them. In his past, John had been just as violent a man as Paul ever was. He had enthusiastically asked Jesus to call down fire and brimstone on those who got in his way. These pillars were once the leaders of that seemingly crazy group of people in Jerusalem who were forever upsetting the religious status quo and getting thrown into jail for their efforts. Maybe these memories contributed to the open and courageous attitude of James, Cephas and John during this meeting.

Let us finally look at the third group in the drama, the false brothers. Galatians 2:4:

But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.

These individuals ought to sound a warning note to us about the nature of prejudice. They called themselves brothers in Christ, they claimed allegiance to the church of Christ, and yet in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary they held on to their restrictions and antagonism toward Gentile Christians. That suggests to me that gut-level, long-standing prejudice can resist the most obvious and logical presentation of the facts; that prejudice can be much stronger than compelling evidence to the contrary.

Let us consider for a moment the powerful evidence these false brethren were resisting. They had been presented with a united declaration of the gospel by the apostles. These apostles whom Jesus had chosen to lead his church had his personal stamp of approval were in total agreement, and yet the false brethren resisted what they had to say. The apostles were men who had had revelations of Jesus Christ. Through their ministry lives were dramatically transformed, and yet despite their clear and forthright statement of Jesus' acceptance of Gentiles these false brethren continued to hold onto their prejudice. This ought to produce some self-examination in us. If these people could resist in the face of that kind of evidence, are we holding on to prejudices of our own despite the clear statement of Scripture?

Secondly, we are told that these false brethren came by stealth, as it were, to "spy out" the liberty that the apostles and the delegates from Antioch enjoyed. That phrase struck me as fascinating too, because of all subjects liberty is least likely to be discovered by stealth. Paul, Barnabas and Titus did not sneak into Jerusalem. They didn't hide the fact that Titus was a Gentile. Their lives were lived in the open. When one is free in Christ that freedom is most obvious.

It seems to me that these men, like many legalists, believed that there was some dark secret to a Christian's freedom; that really free people must have a kind of dark, idolatrous core to them that allows them to live in an open, non-defensive way; that if you could catch them in an unguarded moment you could discover their dark secrets. But nothing could be further from the truth. Free people can be discovered quite easily; they are the most obvious of all people. They don't have anything to hide! There are no dark secrets. When you meet really free men or women in Christ they are exactly who they appear to be.

The third noteworthy thing here is that these false brethren were determined to bring Christians into bondage and imprisonment. As a matter of fact, they did not like seeing people free in the Lord. They had whole categories of formulas that had first to be met before any kind of joy was even an option. This reminds me of the older brother in the story of the prodigal son who was furious that his younger brother was treated with love by the father. It upset him no end to see this man who had sinned and failed be given a chance again. There are many among the church of Christ today who think it wholly unfair for God to forgive sinners, to give them standing in the church, to allow them first class citizenship. They would rather see chains than freedom anytime. The glorious party which the father threw for the returned younger son is totally unfathomable to such people.

Here then are the three groups which made up the Jerusalem council: the radical delegation from Antioch who loved Gentiles and were winning them to Christ; the pillars of the church who had stayed in Jerusalem to faithfully serve the Lord and give roots and foundation to the church as it spread around the world; and the false brothers who were totally in the dark about Christian freedom and who fought it at every turn.

What actually took place at the summit conference? Of first importance is that these leaders were in full agreement that Gentiles did not have to become Jews before they became Christians. They did not have to change themselves externally in order to be internally changed by Christ. Titus left the conference just as thoroughly Gentile as he had been at the beginning of it. Nobody required him to be circumcised, to change his appearance in any way.

Secondly, the leadership in Jerusalem took a united stand in opposing the enemies of the gospel. They acted quickly, courageously and in unison to resolve an issue that could not have been resolved at any lesser level.

The third thing that happened at this summit conference is that each side recognized that God can call men and women to different assignments in ministry. Nobody felt constrained to make everybody else like themselves. God can call some leaders and give them a burden for Gentiles just as he can call others and give them a burden for Jews. Following their example we can still love and appreciate each other in our different ministries and assignments and not feel that we have to make everybody share our walk, share our ministry.

The last thing to note in this conference is that at the end of it the pillars “extended the right hand of fellowship” to Paul and Barnabas. “Fellowship” here is the great Greek word “koinonia.” It means “in common,” a union of spirit that is properly and delightfully expressed physically by a handshake because the reality of the thing takes place in human hearts. A handshake is a physical act, but it is a temporary one that merely witnesses to something that is already true. We are one in Christ. We belong to each other. We are in support of one another. So publicly they shook hands. This is exactly the opposite of circumcision, another physical act, but one that leaves a scar for a lifetime; one that insists on external conformity rather than believing that internally we are one in Christ, we are part of each other, and that cannot be taken away or added to by the way we look or the appearance that we affect.

The final note to this whole thing, in Galatians 2:10, is almost an afterthought. The public handshake has taken place, and Paul says, “They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I also was eager to do.” If this is indeed the famine visit that Paul is referring to, we know that the Jerusalem apostles were ministering all the time to poor, hungry people in their midst. Their churches had an overflow of folks who did not have enough to eat, and every day the apostles were visiting, counseling and praying with them. Paul is almost surprised that the leadership would raise the question of his being concerned for the poor because that is why he was in Jerusalem in the first place. You can almost hear the surprise in his voice when he says, “That is the very thing I was eager to do. I am surprised that that even came up because that is why I am here.”

This aside illustrates clearly and beautifully what it means to be free in Christ, what it means to be Christian from the inside out rather than from the outside in. These men are saying they have a natural, inevitable, eager, undeniable concern for the needy, the poor, for those who do not have the material or emotional resources to make it in life. What a contrast with the approach taken by the legalists! Jesus chided the Pharisees who would tithe to the last seed in their garden, who would literally count out the seeds of their produce so that they got ten percent exactly to give to the work of God and to the poor but at the same time they did not care “about justice and the love of God.” There are legalists today in the Christian cause who have a mechanical approach to being concerned for poor people. Their contribution to the United Way or some other charity is made automatically through a payroll deduction. Their conscience is thus dealt with and they can pat themselves on the back for it.

These people who met in Jerusalem knew poor people. They did not remember poverty, they remembered the poor. This was true of the pillars in Jerusalem and it was true in the eagerness of Paul’s heart. Poor people--those whose material,

emotional, and social resources were depleted--mattered to him. What a beautiful contrast with the mechanical, form-filling, long-distance, check-the-box approach we are familiar with today! These men lived with the needy and the overwhelmed. They prayed for them by name. They knew them because they were involved with them. Sue Lindstedt, who helps head up a ministry to refugees among us, told me this morning what a striking thing it was to have Christians during this Christmas season call and say, "We have some money that is to be given to the poor but we don't know any. Are you in touch with people who have needs this year?" Too often that condition is true of us.

We are at the Christmas season, and we have been singing this morning about a Baby, God incarnate, born in poverty. In this verse in Galatians we have, in a sense, a Christmas commandment: remember the poor. Remember Jesus whose parents did not have anywhere to lodge so that he might be born into the world, who said of himself, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Are our memories, our personal thoughts, filled with concern for people who have needs, not just the fast-track folks, but those who are on the slow track, or off the track entirely, and who, but for the concern of others, would not make it at all?

In Galatians 2:1-10 we are told that the apostles agreed together that conformity in appearance was not required by God. They also confirmed together in their shared concern for the poor that freedom in Christ comes with an eagerness, which arises from within, to share in the burdens that matter to the Lord.

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Galatians 2:1-10

5th Message

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