

DEFENDING FREEDOM

SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS

By Steve Zeisler

Perhaps you saw this summer's film *The Patriot* set in the time of the American Revolutionary War. Mel Gibson plays a Southern farmer who had been a soldier but didn't want to fight again. Eventually, however, the call of duty, honor and responsibility for his children overcame his reluctance and compelled him to fight.

In some ways, that is the argument of the book of Galatians: There are truths worth fighting for that should overcome our reluctance to be freedom fighters.

The difficulty with both the movie and the book of Galatians is that we are far removed from the circumstances they portray. In the movie we see a family on a Southern plantation, and their world is completely different from anything in modern life: the pace, the formal manner in which people carry on their business. Even participatory democracy, without spin or media influence, is something few of us have ever experienced. Yet once we look deeply, we realize that the issues of the human heart--integrity, honor, purpose, and what's really valuable--have a bearing in every time and place.

In the book of Galatians we are being asked to go back not just two or three hundred years, but almost two thousand years to the time of the Roman Empire, as we read another dramatic story of freedom fighters who are engaged in honorable, crucial, and dangerous concerns. Passions are high in this book, as we have noted before. Its language is visceral and powerful. It is an explosive book in many respects. That is particularly true of the section we'll be looking at in this message.

Two cities, two stories

Two cities are the respective settings of two stories: Jerusalem in the first, and Antioch in the second. The issue in the first story is whether Titus should be circumcised. In the second story the issue is with whom Peter should have dinner. Neither of those clicks with most of us. Circumcision now has no symbolic or spiritual connotations for non-Jews. And I don't think I've ever felt that anything serious was at stake concerning where I sat at a church dinner. But we'll find that the heart of the matter in each case is pertinent to our circumstances.

In 2:1-2 Paul begins the first tale:

Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. 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.

Let me stop to observe some background information to help in picturing this scene. First of all, the translation in a couple of points is unhelpful. Paul speaks of "those who seemed to be leaders." We'll see a similar phrase in verse 6: "those who seemed to be important." In verse 9 he speaks of "those reputed to be pillars." These translations soften what Paul is saying. They didn't just seem to be leaders; rather, in the wider community they had the standing, the title, or the secure reputation of leadership and prominence.

Three men took this journey from Antioch to Jerusalem. Titus was a Gentile, a relatively new believer. Barnabas had deep roots in the Jerusalem church. And Paul was the oddest of them in many respects: at one time a persecutor of the church, a man of enormous genius and overflowing vitality, who had been changed utterly by an encounter with Christ and who was now an apostle to the Gentiles. They were coming from Antioch with steel in their gaze, firmness in their step, sure of their calling and confident about their testimony. But they did not know what sort of reception they would get. "I worried," says Paul, "about coming and telling the story of what God is doing, and encountering distance, rejection, difficulty, and misunderstanding."

It's also worth noting the character of the two cities themselves. These three men traveled to Jerusalem from Antioch, and we will see in verse 11 that Peter takes the opposite trek. The two cities were very different. It was in Jerusalem where the gospel had first been explosive, new, vital, and uncontrolled. The day of Pentecost and the Spirit's descent led to widespread witness and glorious expressions of love. People were coming to Christ in large numbers, and the opposition to the gospel was no barrier to the growth of the church. But these events had occurred more than fifteen years earlier. In the interim, the believers in Jerusalem had suffered tremendous persecution. It had become a very poor church. The cutting edge was now in Antioch. There Gentiles were coming to faith, and a commitment to missions was beginning that would send gospel travelers across the Roman Empire. It was Antioch that had now become the center of fervent Christian witness, where new life was springing up every day.

So imagine now Paul, Barnabas, and Titus coming to tell of God's work among the Gentiles, of a heaven-born apostleship given to Paul. How will the leaders of the older, struggling Jerusalem church receive them?

Let's continue in verses 3-10:

Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

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. 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. 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. 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. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

A meeting of minds

We read in verse 2 that Paul came to Jerusalem by revelation. He wasn't called by headquarters to come and give a report. He wasn't coming to be examined by his superiors. Paul didn't recognize superiors, in fact. Rather, it was the Lord who indicated that he should go. It was time for the exciting work of evangelism and church-planting in the outer areas to be openly connected with the church in Jerusalem.

Judaism historically had concentrated its authority in Jerusalem. The early church had followed suit, until later events caused the original apostles to travel widely to other locations. When Paul came to the revered city to speak with Peter, James, and John, he acknowledged a tension: he was certain of his apostolic calling, but lacked stature in dealing with the senior figures in Jerusalem. He determined not to rely on the estimation of human observers, but on God who goes beyond what can be seen on the outside (see 2:6).

As events unfolded, Peter, James, and John extended to Paul, Barnabas, and Titus the right hand of fellowship. Both parties observed that the gospel message was the same in content from both sources, and understood differences in assignment (ministry to Jews and to Gentiles) to be complementary. They genuinely appreciated one another as co-workers and fellow servants of Christ.

And their agreement went further: all recognized the importance of remembering the poor. Paul noted, “We not only believed the same things, we looked at people the same way, winning converts and caring for the destitute. Peter was called to preach to the Jews, and I was called to preach to the Gentiles, and there was a wonderful sense that God was at work. The good news was available to people whatever their background.”

Finally we should take note of those who opposed the truth. There were people Paul calls spies who were trying to worm their way into discussions among leaders. These were people who were afraid of liberty. They had a predictable religious agenda in which folks were measured by how well they performed. Love that was given freely by God and experienced among Christians was frightening to them. Paul declares, “They were trying to undermine what we preached in order to hold on to what was predictable, and we didn’t let them for a minute. Titus did not have to be circumcised. It is of no advantage to have the look, background, standing, or the sensibilities of a Jew. None of that matters to God.” The apostles, committed to each other, seeing the same thing, defeated these enemies who wanted to change the truth of Jesus’ love.

When the scene shifts to Antioch, different issues are at stake. This time Peter was the traveler. Verses 11-14:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

The Gospel wins the day

Remember the important challenge of 1:10: Whom do you want to please, human beings or God himself? Here we observe that distinction in a practical context. Jews observed religious restrictions regarding cooking utensils, what they could eat, and so on. In Antioch Christians were in the habit of sharing meals without making an issues of these dietary laws. They had kosher tables and non-kosher ones. Peter freely ate at the latter until narrow-minded Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem (they were associated with James, though he would not have endorsed their antagonism to table fellowship with Gentiles).

Like modern politicians with diverse constituencies, Peter faced a public-relations problem. Most believers in Jerusalem were traditional in their lifestyle choices. Peter wanted to avoid the “hassle” of questions and whisperings among these immature (narrow-minded) Jewish Christians when he returned to Jerusalem.

But action taken for the sake of convenience became an assault on love. Others, including Barnabas, changed their behavior so that Gentile believers were made in effect second-class citizens.

So Paul stood up in the middle of a meal with a public challenge: “This is wrong! Peter, why aren’t you over at this table? You know better! Barnabas, what in the world do you think you’re doing?” The earlier council

described in verse 2 was in private because it was about theology. But here Paul had to make a public stand so that the people who had been publicly hurt would find themselves publicly accepted again. The clear implication of this passage is that Paul won the argument, and Barnabas, Peter, and others apologized--ashamed, perhaps, for the hurt their actions caused.

Verse 5 sounds a wonderful note: "that the truth of the gospel might remain with you." The truth of the gospel wins regardless. When the apostles agree together and resist spies and enemies, the gospel wins. When leaders fail and give way to expedience, the gospel still wins, because they are corrected by the very message they preach. Paul says in verse 14, "They were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel...." Whether in good or bad circumstances, what ends up carrying the day is the message of the love and acceptance of Christ.

We need to fight for freedom. It can be lost. To fight for freedom is to insist that the cross of Christ paid for our sins--plus nothing. To fight for freedom is to insist that the love of God for us is absolute, that becoming a new creature in Christ cannot be tampered with by anybody else's opinion about it. It is not derived from human instrumentality, not mediated by a priest, not enhanced by accomplishments, not earned by disciplined effort. If you are a Christian you are a beloved child of God, a servant of the King, the temple of the Holy Spirit. That is true not because anybody says so but because of who Christ is and because you are his.

A treasure to keep and pass on

Now, as compelling as these stories are in their own setting, what about our setting? Let me suggest three issues to consider. The first is that of credentials. Who is allowed to speak authoritatively? Who makes the rules? Who should be respected? Paul is uncompromising about this. He came into Jerusalem and didn't care who was considered important and who wasn't. The gospel is the source of the authority; it is not people who prop up the gospel message.

Moses was an outcast. David was a shepherd boy left behind by his own father when Samuel came to look for a king. The majority of the prophets were farmers, slaves, and wanderers. The apostles were fisherman, tax collectors, and even a persecutor. The Savior himself was a Galilean carpenter.

It is the Bible itself that gives us authority. Are we saying what it says? Do we love it for what it is? Do we listen carefully and grow wise? That's what makes any declaration authoritative. It's not human accomplishments or levels of accredited expertise.

Karl Barth was one of the towering intellects in twentieth-century Christian history. He was asked near the end of his life to summarize what he had learned. And the heart of his answer was this, essentially:

*Jesus loves me! this I know,
For the Bible tells me so... (1)*

The second issue is that of a contemporary analogy to circumcision. By what means will you be given credit for being a totally committed Christian? Some will say that there are ordinary Christians and then there are the devoted, serious kind. In some settings the sign of being a committed Christian is going out into the mission field, living with the poor, abandoning your former life--radical discontinuity with how you were raised, giving yourself away (whether God is in it or not).

I think in our church it has a lot to do with how many Bible studies you go to, how many programs you attend, what circles you belong to. Every time the door opens you find yourself wanting to be noticed as having been there. There are some settings where worship is the mark of devotion. How many hours can you keep your hands in the air? How long can you sing, how full are your tears, how frequent the tongues, how far do you fall?

Every group has some measure of being totally committed. But the question is, does God really care? Are you doing whatever you're doing with an honest enthusiasm for God, or are you doing it to receive credit for it?

The third issue is that of a contemporary analogy to table fellowship. Peter curtailed his freedom and withdrew from his friends, as if denial equaled godliness. That's a frequent experience for us. Too many folks in churches like ours attempt fewer things than they used to. It is common to observe that the longer you're a believer, the narrower your life gets. After you've been a Christian for a while, you have few if any non-Christian friends anymore. Your tastes in music, art, and literature are much narrower than they used to be. You have more things that you are afraid of and not as many that you enjoy. People who are really worth listening to comprise a much narrower group than they used to. There are formulas for behavior and they grow increasingly comfortable. Any change should be greeted with suspicion. And the mentality that less is better, fear is good, and rejection has its place is one that, if we are not careful, we will engage in without any reference to God at all.

Almost two years ago we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of this church. Obviously my generation now has the responsibility to say not only where we have been, but also where we are going. Paul, writing to his friend Timothy at the end of his life, said, "Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you...And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2, NASB). What is the treasure? What are the things that we should be doing now to make sure, by the grace of God, that we're not near the end of our usefulness to him here? The temptation is to want to pass on the style, the programs: "Well, this is how we did it twenty years ago, and this is how we ought to do it now." But that is not what Paul is arguing for. What allows any congregation or group of Christians to stay vital is the gospel. It is the extraordinary good news of the presence of God with us: his power by the Spirit, his glorious engagement with the world we live in, the risk-taking and freedom that come from knowing him, the godliness, the depth. I pray that will become what's compelling to all of us--to live and believe and give away the good news of the love of Jesus. Wherever that leads there's going to be life.

NOTES

1. Anna B. Warner, *Jesus Loves Me*.

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