

A sermon based on Galatians 2 preached at the evening service at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 5 June 2016. This is the second sermon in a series on Galatians, particularly using John Barclay's book *Paul and the Gift*.

Last Sunday, Paul's letter to the church in Galatia said human categorising must not compromise, in any way, God's call on our lives. Our identity as people of God takes priority over every kind of human categorising. That flows into how we see human beings. The prior identity is God's marking of us, God's naming of us, God's identifying of us. And that relativises all other categorising.

Today we turn to Galatians 2.

Story told by Lord Mackay of Claisfern, Lord High Commissioner at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland ...

There is a dispute between Paul and Peter. It is about the implications of what I said earlier.

It has to do with that awkward topic of including Gentiles.

Peter was especially concerned with Jewish Christians.

Paul was especially concerned with Gentile Christians.

Peter started off reaching toward Gentile Christians but he began to have second thoughts, he lost courage.

It focused on the person Titus who though a Greek was not compelled to take up Jewish identity, although there was pressure to do so.

Paul recognises God is active in Peter and in his commitment to enabling people to become Jewish.

But says Paul, it is not crucial to being a follower of Jesus.

A complete turnaround from all they had been brought up to believe to that point.

For people who are Jewish, nothing more is needed.

For people who are Gentile, nothing more is needed.

Both forms of being church are valid, and one is not required to agree with the other.

God is involved in both ways of being Christian.

The human criteria people used to determine faithfulness no longer applies.

In Christ, we are free of cultural traditions, religious traditions, ancestral traditions, of all traditions that require us or expect us or shape us to behave in a certain way.

In Christ we are free to find new forms of life, new ways of being, new practices that enable us to live abundantly, fully, completely.

Peter's emphasis on early Christians becoming Jewish compromises the freedom of the gospel.

It seems it might have been that Peter lost confidence because he was criticised for eating with non-Jews, although it might have been because he ate non-Jewish food.

So Peter withdraws from Gentile company.

The conflict is between people driven by different norms – one relating to the freedom Christ gives, and one relating to the freedom Christ gives plus what is needed for people to live a Jewish way of life.

It is the *and* that is the problem, because it compromises the freedom we have in Jesus Christ.

The way of life specified by a particular tradition must be subjected to the way of life embodied in Jesus Christ.

Nothing is more important than that. It is the sole criteria.

It is the sole criteria for belonging to the community of Jesus Christ.

And at the core of that community is the practice of eating together.

So what is at stake is unity, the fact that if Peter's way takes hold, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians will not be able to eat together, either because the Gentile Christians do not comply with all the Jewish food regulations or because Jews and Gentiles cannot sit at the same table together.

If they cannot eat together, if they do not have deep unity around the table, they cannot bear each other's burdens, they cannot live out their identity in Christ.

For Paul, the only thing that matters is the Christ event, what God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the light of Jesus Christ, unity is the primary experience, and what divides, such as ethnicity, culture, status, socio-economic capacity, all other differentials of worth, are secondary.

We look to God to consider us valuable in Christ, not through obeying the Torah – everything relies on the judgement of God, not on any other person’s judgement, not on any other group’s judgement. Only God’s judgement.

Paul uses his own life as a paradigm –

“I have died to the Torah – it is no longer what constitutes my standard of value – because I have been reconstituted in Christ. My old existence came to an end with the crucified Christ; my new life has arisen from the Christ-event and is therefore shaped by faith in the death of Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

So a person is not considered righteous before God until their lives are marked by faith in Christ. A person’s life is marked by faith in Christ when their life shows they derive their existence, their being, their living, their acting from the death and resurrection of Christ.

This means that the most important thing is to stay loyal to “the truth of the good news” who is Christ himself.

Once a person is recognised as righteous, they are then considered a worthy recipient of salvation, of being made whole by God.

None of this is saying that what we do puts us right with God.

Jewish Christians saw God’s saving them as a gift, not as something earned or in any way prejudged or predetermined, for example, by the keeping of the Law.

It was gift, pure and simple.

It was gift pure and simple, because it had already been given to them in Jesus Christ, regardless of their worthiness or unworthiness to receive it.

And the reception of the gift was evidenced by people trusting in, living in Jesus Christ.

This involved the death of the self and the emergence of a new life, of Christ in me, of Christ living in me, living out his life in me.

This is an entirely new mode of life, like life after death - new life because it is oriented to Jesus Christ, drawing its meaning, its purpose, its way of being, its frame of reference from him alone.

It does not make a person more important or worthy or significant, because it is pure gift.

We only receive it.

So Jewish Christians can eat with Gentile Christians, even though thereby they will look like sinners, compromised, less than faithful.

In this respect then, Paul is willing to be a sinner, a transgressor, for the sake of upholding the freedom people have in Christ, the importance of upholding the free gift of salvation in God.

The transition from one way of being to another is like dying and rising, it is as startling and deep and all-encompassing as that.

It is an entirely new way of being.

Christ is creating me as a new self.

Christ is turning my life entirely to himself, in faith.

The gift enacted in the death of Jesus Christ has fundamentally reshaped every system of values and we must not let another set of values to compromise that system.

If it is not the norm and determiner and criteria we use for our communal life, our life together, then we are in danger of denying it altogether.

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