

Further Reflections: Rethinking Galatians

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In the post-reformation era, the evangelical church looks at the book of Galatians as a referendum on *justification by faith*. I would argue that, actually, Paul is building on that well-known truth. Yes, the Galatians were confused by the Judaizers. Many did not have “faith” in their background. So, to all, Paul was saying: Yes—salvation is by grace through faith *and* as the gospel of Christ comes to new cultures, you (Galatians, Jews and us!) should *not* add to it. The book is a strongly worded treatise against Jesus plus anything.

Paul clearly shows the idea of faith alone way back when he says (Gal. 3:8 ESV), “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’”¹ It was not new. Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abram, “believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” I could go on.

Remember, these believers did not have the NT yet. Jews who believed might be tempted to fall back on what they “knew” God wanted in the past. At first, they didn’t trust Paul. He never really was an “insider” with the other Apostles. And, he was called cross-culturally to the Gentiles, who were a very

¹ As a side point we have talked about many times: Paul includes the nations being blessed with the gospel.

different culture—at odds with the Jews. Paul could bridge that gap because of his combined Roman and Jewish upbringing—and the fact that he was transformed by Christ and the power of the gospel.

So, Paul confronted Peter’s actions in Galatia because those actions, and the actions of the Judaizers, meant they were adding to the gospel. It *is* faith that justifies, and it *is* just as important we *not* add anything to that. That is why, post-reformation, we now add the words “alone” to it.

What do *we* add to it? Historically, if we don’t watch ourselves, Christians have mentally “expected” certain behavioral change. And, of course, we do change. Like Paul, our lives are transformed. But sometimes we move those changes into being requirements to coming to Christ instead of something that the Holy Spirit does. Lifestyle changes are the result of people coming into the Kingdom by faith, but they are not conditions for it.

As we see the gospel spreading to the Unreached Peoples, we can do the same. Do new believers need to call themselves “Christians?” Is it okay if Muslims who believe in Jesus Christ still pray 5 times a day (or more!)? Or that Hindus worship at different, special times of the week, month or year? Some of these are not things that must change—they are not clear biblical directives for believers. The hard thing to ask for a worker out in a culture where the gospel is just penetrating is: How should I come alongside these new, Holy Spirit directed believers and help them

without adding to their load like the Judaizers were doing when they tried to “help” the Galatians.

In our individualized world in the West, we tend to think that certain activities will demonstrate faith, and sometimes for good reason. But, we don’t really know people that well, so we don’t know what is happening in their lives, home, business—or when they are alone.

And, after we come to faith having seen what a mess our lives were, we tend to extrapolate those on every new believer. We want those coming to faith after us to go through the same process we did. Since our identity and significance are so closely tied to faith in the Lord, we can’t always see how that identity might be lived out in another culture.

People, all of us, are always in a process in their movement towards God and His kingdom. What are the characteristics of those who are true believers? What would we want to see? One simple way to look at it is that we want to see people: (1) living under the Lordship of Christ, (2) affirming the authority of the Word of God and (3) living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that regulating other things they do or don’t do can easily move into “adding to” the gospel with our own standards.

I encourage you to take a fresh look at Galatians, as I did with one of our boards recently. Then, let me know what you think at: www.missionfrontiers.org (Just click on this issue and my page to make your comments/suggestions). 