

## Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: Galatians: I Want to be Free

Sermon Title: "The Religious Struggle for Freedom"

Sermon Text: Galatians 2

Listeners journey: I want my listener to understand that our Christian religious traditions will inevitably experience conflict and reformation when there is an awakening of conscience that cultural expressions, rituals, and theologies exclude a group of people.

### Unique Quotes from Sermon:

The "false believers" as Paul called them, were Christians from Jewish cultural background that demanded, "Unless the men among you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, they cannot be saved." We learn from Paul's experiences with this group at the Jerusalem Council that the full weight of their views were likely connected to the subgroup of the religious teachers who believed that not only were Christians to be circumcised, but they were required to keep the entire law of Moses, thus being fully Jewish culturally. Thus, this group was called "the Judaizers." To be clear, to follow the Law of Moses meant much more than the Ten Commandments. It included hundreds of laws spanning moral, social, food, purity, holy day, offering, and temple practices.<sup>1</sup>

The reason Paul came into such sharp debate with the Judaizers was because, as Paul wrote about in today's Scripture, *many* of the Early Church leaders had promoted a less culturally Jewish Christian faith for years. And, in fact they had informally adopted a framework for cultural inclusion that set aside the Jewish practice of circumcision in favor of the new practice of Christian water baptism, and placed the theological concept of Hebrew "law" in tension with the New Testament theological concept of grace, with grace being given greater emphasis over law.

Why did Paul, James, Peter and John, and other early Christian leaders and theological thinkers give grace the advantage? Because, Jesus, gave grace the advantage. In John's biography of Jesus he wrote: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> To be fair to the Judaizers, what might have been at stake for them was not so much an argument about law and grace, but a matter of socio-religious identity. The practice of male circumcision is mentioned over a hundred times in the Bible and dates back to at least 2,200 B.C.<sup>3</sup> This wasn't collecting snow globes. This was a deeply religious and culturally framed practice of identity. They may have feared that discontinuation of circumcision and setting aside most of the laws of Moses would cause their faith to degenerate into meaninglessness. So, their opposition to Paul in many provinces and cities was epic. After all, religious conflict is typically at its most intense when people fear loss. Humans fight most fiercely to protect what conflict theorists call "lifespace," or the field in which we operate as we are making our way to our goals.

For some of the Early Christians, their Jewish cultural and religious heritage were primary lifespace, and belief in Jesus, a Jewish man born into a Jewish family in a Jewish village, came alongside their shared heritage to strengthen that lifespace. Therefore, as we can read in the book of Acts during the time period that Paul would have written his letter to the Galatian church---what Paul, Barnabus, Titus, Peter, James and John were doing was in effect keeping culturally Jewish minded Christians from their lifespace goal of keeping Jewish culture as preeminent.

I share this because it is often easy for modern readers to simply write such groups as the Judaizers as ridiculous and underestimate the internal struggles that ultimately are little different than what many are fiercely clinging to various American cultural versions of Christian religion today. And, now, as with the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law\\_of\\_Moses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Moses) (accessed 8-21-15)

<sup>2</sup> John 1:17.

<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.logos.com/2017/03/whats-deal-circumcision-bible/> (accessed 10-6-17)

Judaizers then, the struggle has very little to do with love of Christ, and Christ's teachings, and more to do with cultural and tribal commitments, that typically manifest themselves in the exclusionary spirit of the first century Judaizers.

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Apparently Peter was doing "the bad boyfriend or girlfriend thing." Maybe you have never had it happen to you, but I had it happen to me back in my high school years—someone who I thought was really into me would affectionately hold my hand when we were alone, and then when approaching other people or a crowd, they would drop it so no one knew we were a couple! Do any of you know what I am talking about?! It stinks. So, Peter would eat pork chops with new non-Jewish Christ followers...well, maybe not pork chops, but even eating with non-Jewish people was a serious cultural difference. And, when more Jewish culturally committee Christians would come around, he would back off of his relationships with non-Jewish Christians. Paul confronted Peter about this hypocrisy and, thankfully, Peter came around to being inclusive across cultural and traditional religious differences.

It was Luke, the writer of the New Testament early church history book called "The Acts of the Apostles" who tells us:

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Practically speaking the Covenant denomination offers freedom on forms of baptism and has tackled matters of race and gender equality with vigor. And, it also *beginning* to work on the topic of human sexuality with fits and starts, but it needs to do it none-the-less. One Covenant publication framed the Covenant at its best this way:<sup>4</sup>

"Covenant freedom operates within the context set by other principles the Covenant Church regards as primary, particularly the authority of Scripture...with a modesty born of confidence in God, we offer to one another theological and personal freedom where the biblical and historical record seems to allow for a variety of interpretation of the will and purposes of God. This at times led to controversy over such matters as baptism, the second coming of Christ, the precise nature of (scripture) inspiration or how the atonement may be understood, and various matters of life and practice...(but) This commitment to freedom has kept the Covenant Church together when it would have been easier to break fellowship and further divide Christ's body. To some such freedom is no freedom at all. They would rather have the marching orders clear and an unimpeachable source of authority to bear the whole burden of responsibility. It is not easy to be free. But such limitations of freedom show not wisdom, but immaturity. The Covenant Church cherishes this freedom in Christ and recognizes, as one of our forebears put it, that freedom is a gift and the last of all gifts to mature. In the meantime, there will be questions and conflicts...and we offer freedom to one another, since for Covenant people freedom is not something that we claim for ourselves, but offer to the other. In this we are simply sharing the gift of freedom God has given us in Jesus Christ."

Three Discussion Questions:

1. How have you experiencing the religious struggle for freedom in Christ in your personal life and perhaps conflict in church life? (Personal sharing)
2. What were some possible dimensions of struggle and personal doubt that Paul may have had in all of the cultural and theological shifts that took place in his life since his conversion to Christ? (He mentions 14 years of time at the opening of today's scripture) (Exploring the text)
3. What are some ways that you can advocate for freedom in Christ in your spheres of influence? How might freedom in Christ change your relationships with others? (Direct application)

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<sup>4</sup> Covenant Affirmations Booklet. Pages 18-20.