

Who Has Authority?
Galatians 1:10-2:10

Here at Faith we understand from Scripture that a person enters into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. When He died on the cross, He died for our sins; He was our substitute; He died in our place. When you accept His payment for your sins, God no longer holds your sin against you. You actually become a “new creature” in Christ with new appetites. You can’t become a new creature in Christ through hard work or through good behavior. It is a gift that can only be received by faith.

But imagine with me that you showed up here to Faith one Sunday morning and I made the following announcement:

*We still believe everything we always have about entering into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. But if you **really** want to be pleasing to God, you need to do quite a few other things. These things are so essential that if you don’t do them, we doubt that you’ve really put your faith in Christ in the first place. Here’s a partial list:*

- *You need to read your Bible for 25 minutes a day – first the Old Testament and then the New. Afterwards, you need to pray for 25 minutes a day – first for yourself and your family, then for the church, then the state, then the country, then the whole world. Then you need to spend ten minutes in silence. That’s an hour; we think God is worth at least an hour a day.*
- *You need to have at least one Bible verse on the wall in every room of your house (see Deuteronomy 6).*
- *You can only listen to Christian music. It doesn’t matter whether it’s good or bad Christian music; it’s just got to be Christian (see Philippians 4).*
- *You can only watch one hour of TV a day (see Psalm 103).*
- *No R-rated movies (not even the Passion of the Christ).*
- *If you really want to please God you must exercise 3 hours a week. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 6:19).*

Never forget that Jesus died for your sins, but if you’re really serious about pleasing God, you’ll not only believe; you’ll do these things too.

What would be your reaction to that announcement? If I went to a church that honestly made that announcement I’d head for the exit as fast as possible. Why? Because since the Bible doesn’t impose those specific laws upon people, a church shouldn’t either. It’s not that those are bad laws or rules; you may agree with and practice every single thing I said. The issue is one of **authority**. No Christian or pastor or church or denomination has the authority to impose its own brand of Christianity on anybody else.

That was really the issue among the Galatians. Some Christians from Jerusalem had come to the Galatians teaching that it’s fine and good to put your faith in Jesus, but if you really wanted to please God, you needed to keep the OT law – circumcision, the dietary restrictions, etc. (probably not the sacrifices). For 1500 years the Law had described what obedience looked like. Even though they believed in Jesus, they couldn’t imagine that the Law was no longer in effect. They honestly thought that it was best for the Galatians to begin observing the Law.

In Galatians 1 and 2 Paul argues that these Christians simply didn't have the authority to impose their brand of Christianity on anybody else – even though the Law was originally from God and even though they were from Jerusalem (the mother church). In later chapters Paul will argue that imposing such laws on others may seem spiritual, but it's really impotent to change your life. Instead of the Law, Paul will say that the *Spirit* can guide you and change your life. Instead of living by the works of the Law, we now live by faith.

Brian taught the first nine verses of chapter 1 last week. As he explained, Paul's conviction was that these Christians from Jerusalem were actually teaching a different gospel – one that nullified the cross of Christ. Paul said that if he or someone from Jerusalem or even an angel from heaven preached another gospel, he is to be accursed (*anathema*).

[By the way, I played it safe with my mock announcement. I could have made up laws about alcohol use, educating your children, politics, or “going green.” I could have offended almost everybody in the room. In other words, we all have deeply-held convictions that we tend to think everybody should have if they're serious about God.]

In one sense our passage today (1:10-2:10) is all about Paul: Paul's motivation and Paul's independence from Jerusalem. But this passage isn't merely a history lesson. This passage makes clear that nobody has the authority to impose their brand of Christianity on others in any generation. Nobody has the authority to revise, edit, or supplement the gospel of grace.

The motivation behind the gospel of grace: pleasing God alone. (1:10)

Paul seems to be responding to the accusation that his message was really motivated by the desire to “please men”: “Paul, the only reason you don't require people to follow the Jewish Law is because you're trying to make the Christian life more acceptable to people. You're just trying to please men.” To that type of accusation, Paul asks the following questions in verse 10:

10 For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

Paul wasn't opposed to “pleasing men” in an absolute sense (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-22). There were times when he actually became “like” people in order to gain a hearing from his message about Jesus. But he would never strive to please people if it meant compromising the very message that could bring people life in Christ. Paul's main objective was to please God. The way to please God in his preaching was to be faithful to the gospel of grace that God had revealed to him.

With simplicity of logic Paul writes, “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.” *Before* coming to Christ Paul was “trying to please men” in the sense that he sought to please his superiors in the Jewish hierarchy. But now he was a bond-servant of Christ; his sole loyalty was to Jesus Christ. And that lifestyle inherently meant disappointing people and offending people who didn't agree with his message – whether Jewish or Gentile, religious or pagan. (You might experience this same antagonism if you've come to Christ later in life. If

your highest priority is now to please God, you won't always be able to avoid displeasing other people, especially people who are challenged or threatened by your new life.)

The same charge that was made against Paul might be made today: "The reason you don't impose rules on people is because you don't want to offend them. If you were really serious about following Christ, you'd tell people exactly what they can do and what they can't do. You'll tell people what they should think and how they should vote. You're just soft on sin. You're just trying not to ruffle feathers."

With Paul, our response should be, "If people are offended because we aren't more strict than Jesus, so be it. We will not place demands on people just because of the strong convictions of some. Our sole motivation is to please God alone. Therefore, we only demand what God has revealed in the Scriptures – nothing less and nothing more." This is a huge topic to which we'll return throughout this series. But Paul's conviction was that adding onto the gospel doesn't make people more obedient; to the contrary, it breathes new life into the flesh. Obedient people are those who keep in step with the Spirit and who live by faith (see 3:7 and 5:16).

The source of the gospel of grace: Jesus Himself. (1:11-12) Beginning in verses 11 and 12 Paul makes a point that he will then support in great detail. Paul writes that he ***received his gospel directly from Jesus (not from men)***. The implication will be that his gospel therefore isn't open to review or revision. Jesus alone has authority to impose demands on people.

11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul's gospel said that our sin required the sacrifice of the sinless Son of God and that all we need to do is acknowledge our sin and accept Jesus' payment. His point in verse 11 is that this message wasn't "according to man" (NIV "not something that man made up"). A man-made gospel would be something like, "You're basically a good person. Doing the best you can is good enough for God." Or, "Here are seven things you need to do to clean up your act and to be pleasing to God: pray, give, recycle, share your toys, etc . . ."

In verse 12 Paul makes two other disclaimers about his gospel. First, he "didn't receive it from man." Paul had probably at some point heard the message of the gospel when he was persecuting the church. Here he's saying that his gospel wasn't formally transmitted to him from a teacher or rabbi – the way religious instruction normally happened in that day. Second, neither was he "taught it." The vast majority of people who've ever believed the gospel were taught it by someone. In Romans 10 Paul even argues, "How will people believe if they don't hear the message?" But Paul was an exception to this rule. He wasn't taught the gospel by another human.

Rather, he "received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." A revelation is something that is ***revealed*** – something that is uncovered or laid bare that wouldn't otherwise be known. Our interpretive decision here is whether Paul is referring to a revelation ***about*** Jesus Christ or a revelation ***from*** Jesus Christ. Both are ultimately true: Paul's gospel was a revelation both from

Jesus Christ and about Jesus Christ. But since Paul is arguing that he received his Gospel independent of other men, it's best to understand Paul as saying that he "received it through a revelation *from* Jesus Christ." Because Jesus Himself had revealed the gospel to Paul, he didn't have the liberty to edit or supplement it with *anything* (not even something as epic as the Jewish Law); he simply didn't have that authority.

In the following three paragraphs Paul reviews his own testimony, specifically his interaction with influential people and prominent churches in his day. He recounts all of this to emphasize that his message wasn't dependent upon Jerusalem – either its surrounding churches or its leaders. Paul didn't have any animosity toward Jerusalem, but he needed to establish his independence from Jerusalem in order to refute the claims of his opponents who said, "Since we're from Jerusalem (where Jesus died and rose again), we have the authority to insist that the Gentiles keep the Jewish law." Since these three accounts are each emphasizing the same basic point, we'll consider them all today (rather briefly).

Paul's gospel was independent of the other apostles. (1:13-17) Paul first briefly recounts his conversion. He mentions how zealous he was about keeping the Law and about persecuting the church. But when he came to faith in Christ, everything changed. In a most ironic twist, God gave him the assignment of preaching Christ among the Gentiles (non-Jews). Look at verses 15 through 17:

15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.

Paul wanted the Galatians to know that after believing in Jesus, he "did not immediately consult" with other people. Nor did he go to the other apostles in Jerusalem to have his message confirmed. Rather, he went away to Arabia and then returned to Damascus. Even the original apostles (who had known Jesus) didn't shape Paul's understanding of the gospel.

Paul's gospel was independent of the churches surrounding Jerusalem. (1:18-24) In these verses Paul continues to emphasize that his message wasn't derived from Jerusalem. Remember that he's arguing that the representatives from the Jerusalem church didn't have the authority to review and edit his gospel.

18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; 23 but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." 24 And they were glorifying God because of me.

The churches surrounding Jerusalem actually appreciated how God was using Paul.

Paul's gospel was independent of the "pillars" at Jerusalem. (2:1-10) In the first ten verses of chapter 2 Paul describes the time he *did* go to Jerusalem. Many New Testament scholars believe Paul is describing the trip that's recounted in Acts 15 (known as the Jerusalem Council). There was a time when Paul faced a situation very similar to the one faced by the Galatians: some were trying to take away their freedom/liberty by imposing the Law upon them again (see verse 4). In verses 7 through 10 Paul points out that those in Jerusalem actually acknowledged the validity the gospel Paul preached to the Gentiles.

7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised 8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), 9 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, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They only asked us to remember the poor-- the very thing I also was eager to do.

The apostles in Jerusalem actually endorsed Paul's message and mission. They acknowledged that Peter had been called to preach primarily to Jews and Paul primarily to Gentiles. If anybody were going to challenge Paul's gospel to the Gentiles, it would have been them.

Paul recounts all of this because some from Jerusalem were asserting that they had authority to impose the Jewish Law on the Gentiles. Paul argues that they simply didn't have that authority because Jerusalem *never* had authority over the gospel of grace to the Gentiles. Since Paul received his gospel "through a revelation from Jesus Christ," nobody had the right to edit or supplement the gospel of grace.

That's really the simple point I'm making today. Nobody has the authority to impose their brand of Christianity on other believers.

Let me make a couple clarifications so that you don't hear me saying something that I'm not. [These aren't in your bulletin, but this manuscript will be posted on our web site this afternoon. So if you don't want to frantically write these down, you can get them from the Podcast area of our web site.] The truth that ***nobody has the authority to impose their brand of Christianity on other believers. . .***

. . . doesn't mean you shouldn't have convictions about issues not specifically addressed in the Bible. For example, the Bible doesn't tell you how much TV you can watch; it doesn't tell you whether you can watch R-rated movies; it doesn't tell you whether or not you can subscribe to People magazine. That doesn't mean you shouldn't have convictions about your intake of entertainment media. Just because Faith E Free isn't going to make a bunch of rules about these things, doesn't mean that it's fine to consume anything you want. The Scriptures say things like, "Whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely. . . let your mind dwell on these things. . ." (Philippians 4) We need to live in light of such Scriptures. Actually we need to allow the Holy Spirit Himself to lead us in regard to our intake of entertainment

media. The Holy Spirit can do a much better job than Faith E Free when it comes to this area of your life.

. . . doesn't mean that it's wrong for a believer, a church, a denomination, a ministry, or a family to have distinctives. Every church, for example, has all sorts of distinctives that go beyond what's taught in the Bible. Here at Faith (and at many churches) we celebrate the Lord's Table on the first Sunday of the month. Some churches have the Lord's Table every single week. Both types of churches have good reasons for their practice. It's absolutely fine to have such distinctives. A church crosses a line, I think, when it says, "Unless you observe the Lord's Table like us, you're really not honoring God." (I realize I'm wandering into a minefield here with some people, but it seems clear to me that Scripture gives lots of latitude on how you engage in practices such as the Lord's Table.) There's a sense in which every believer, every church and every family practices a certain "brand" of Christianity. There's not one single unified way to live out a relationship with Jesus Christ. By God's design there's not a single expression of biblical Christianity that transcends cultures and generations and personalities.

Why does it matter that nobody has the authority to impose their brand of Christianity on other believers? It matters because the Holy Spirit Himself wants to mold and shape and lead our lives. The Judaizers taught that if you don't have some system or some set of rules in place, people will wander off into all sorts of sin. Paul knew that the Law couldn't keep people from sinning. In the new covenant, Paul wrote, we walk by the Spirit so that we don't carry out the desires of the flesh.

Sometimes we may be tempted to say, "That's too vague. Keeping in step with the Spirit takes too much effort. Just give me a list of do's and don'ts so that I know if I'm pleasing to God." Sometimes we don't want to deal with God. We want a system that works. But God wants us to have a grown-up relationship with Him. We rightly give small children a list of rules because they don't yet know right from wrong; they don't know what's dangerous and what's safe. But there's something wrong if have to tell your 25-year-old son, "Don't touch the stove or you'll burn yourself. Look both ways before crossing the street. . ." God wants a grown-up relationship with us whereby we think the way He thinks and whereby we want the things He wants. He wants to guide us into this maturity through His Holy Spirit who indwells us.