

**Anglican Church Noosa**  
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**Galatians – Law | Life | Freedom**  
**Called to Freedom – Galatians 2**  
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## **Legalism is dangerous**

Given that Christianity arises from a long Jewish history, it was inevitable that some questions would arise. *Does the gospel have cultural conditions? Does a gentile have to become a Jew to be fully acceptable to God? Does he have to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law? Or – is a Gentile believer acceptable on the basis of his faith alone?* That's what Galatians is dealing with.

That's why God sent Peter to the house of the Gentile Cornelius, to prove that Gentiles and their cultures are acceptable in the Christian church. Peter told Cornelius that faith alone is required – *“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean ... I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right”* (Acts 10:28, 34-35).

But the lesson was not learned easily. Accepting Gentiles into the church remained a problem for some time. We can understand the difficulty for the Jews. For centuries Gentiles and their culture were off-limits for Jews. They were not to marry Gentiles, or eat and dress like them, or adopt their cultural habits. But these were not permanent moral laws. They had just **one** purpose – to keep the Messianic line intact until the great *“seed of the woman”* came, the promised saviour for all nations. Ephesians 2 calls these laws the *‘barrier’* between Jews and gentiles ... the *‘fence that separates’*.

Now that Christ has come they are redundant. They have served their purpose (Peter's visit to Cornelius removed the last plank in that fence). From now on acceptance with God depends on one thing only – faith in Christ. God doesn't care if Jews marry Gentiles now. God doesn't care if you eat kosher food or 'Hungry Jacks'. All that matters is your attitude to Christ. Anyone with true faith in Christ is approved by God – whatever their culture.

But in Galatia some legalistic preachers from Jerusalem had disturbed them and they were moving away from the true gospel ... *“ some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment”* (v 4-5). They'd been bewitched into thinking faith alone is not enough. It must be *‘faith plus obedience to Jewish laws’*. And **that** is the error Paul is fighting.

Galatians is all about two things ...

1. The danger of legalism
2. The answer to legalism

## 1. The danger of legalism

Paul says it was God who insisted this issue was to be put on the agenda in Jerusalem: *“I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles”* (v 2). Why? Why raise that issue with the leaders in Jerusalem? *“I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain”*. He was concerned that the legalists might undo the good work he was doing. No sooner does Paul preach freedom in Christ than they preach bondage to the law. No sooner does Paul put out the fires of legalism than they rekindle them.

So Paul took Titus along with him, an uncircumcised Gentile, a Greek man. This made the question very provocative in the best sense. It forced everyone to ask the question: *‘Is this man okay as a Gentile? Is he fully acceptable as a Greek? Or does he have to repudiate his culture? Does he have to be circumcised and become a Jew? Is faith in Christ enough or not? Does the gospel have **cultural** conditions?’* (No it doesn’t!)

All forms of legalism demand human merit. Acts 15:1 sums up their false doctrine ... *“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved”*. You need to obey laws to be saved! Friends, let us follow Paul’s example and never give any form of legalism the time of day! Don’t make allowances for legalists – don’t give them room to move and spread their slavish doctrine.

Legalism is not just a trifling thing. It is thoroughly anti-gospel. It is sheer cowardice for church leaders to avoid confronting legalists. So Paul tells us the reason for so strongly resisting the legalists, namely *“so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you”* (v 5). Christ is robbed of His glory if saving faith is not enough: *“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all”* (5:1-2).

The other apostles and leaders in Jerusalem agreed 100% with Paul. They did not apply the slightest pressure to have Titus circumcised: *“Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek”* (v 3). This was a major victory for gospel missions. Circumcision is irrelevant. Hairstyle, and clothing, and dietary matters are irrelevant. A man is acceptable to God by **faith alone**.

The gospel transcends all cultures. The gospel is suitable for people in every tribe, and nation, and tongue on earth. This is the important message of Galatians. Every form of legalism denies this. Let us do whatever we can to weed out all legalism from the church as soon as it appears. The only alternative is to sit back and allow Satan to attack the gospel without our protest. Our duty is ... *“contend for the faith once for all delivered to God’s holy people”* (Jude v 3).

## 2. The answer to legalism.

The big argument against all forms of legalism is that it makes Calvary pointless. Paul says it is so serious that *“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong”* (v 11). Verses 12-13 tell us what that means ... *“Before certain men came from James (i.e. from Jerusalem) Peter 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”*.

Peter behaved like the Jewish legalists (Scribes and Pharisees) even though he knew they were wrong. Peter acted hypocritically. So, at the surface level, it is a cultural issue. But in reality it is a theological issue, and not a minor one. The big issue is ...

*How are men saved? How are we justified before God? How are we made acceptable?* There are only three possible answers – (i) by faith alone, (ii) by law-keeping alone, or (iii) by both faith and law keeping.

**The first** alternative is the gospel truth. We are **made** and **kept** right with God by faith alone in Christ alone. That faith did not come from us ... *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”* (Ephesians 2:8). Note *“this is not from yourselves”*:

It means **nothing we do** inclines God to accept us. Paul repeats it again in chapter 5 – *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love”* (5:6). The old hymn puts it beautifully ... *“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling”*.

**The second** alternative openly denies the gospel. It makes man his own saviour ... he righteously keeps the law. This makes Christ unnecessary. Dreadful error!

**The third** alternative is held by the legalists. Salvation is a team effort – a mixture of *faith* and *law* – we do our part and God does his. That means a Gentile cannot be right with God if he remains a Gentile. He must renounce his Gentile culture. He must be circumcised and eat kosher food. He must obey the law and become a de-facto Jew.

So Paul gets right to the heart of the issue: *“if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”* (v 21). That’s the issue at Antioch, and the issue in Galatia. And it is still the same issue here in Australia 2000 years later. People still think you have to be ‘good’ to go to heaven – a good mate, a good neighbour, a good mother. It is the same old legalism of human merit ... salvation by good works!

But salvation by law-keeping is impossible ... *“Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless: there is no one who does good, not even one”* (Romans 3:9-12).

And again ... *“We who are Jews by birth ... know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law **no one** will be justified”* (Galatians 2:15-16). In other words ...

‘You know that Peter! You know that a man is acceptable to God by faith alone. You know that observing the law has nothing to do with it. That’s what you and all Apostles preach! I know your experience at the house of Cornelius proved that to you. So why are you acting contrary to what you preach? *“How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”* Look at the damage you’ve caused? Think of the long-term consequences of your actions. You have voted for the legalists – voted against the gospel’.

This would have been an unpleasant and difficult experience for Paul. Thank God for his courageous defence of the gospel. If only we saw more of this in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church. There is nothing honourable about silence on such big issues.

Peter received Paul’s correction humbly and graciously. He had no grudge, no axe to grind, no haughty pride to protect. This is the impression we gain from Peter’s pen when he wrote later ... *“Our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction”* (2 Peter 3:15-16). What a commendation!

Peter insists that Paul is not only a dear brother, but wise in all he writes, and what he writes is Scripture! And though he deals with some weighty matters, the meaning is plain enough to all except *“the ignorant and unstable”*. They will distort anything in the Bible. Let’s close with the last words in this chapter.

We depend entirely on Christ alone – *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (v 20).

He is saying ... *I’m a free man, but not because of anything I do – it is because of what Christ did for me! Legalism is deadly but the gospel is life-giving.*

Let’s make sure that is our conviction!