

Sunday September 19, 2021  
 Lesson 3: Opening the Door To Christ  
 Scripture: Galatians 2: 11-21

**Context:**

The 2021 fall series is titled “Belong.” Each unit will focus on a way the people of God are called to seek community and discover how God has connected us to one another. The first unit focuses upon hospitality and the role hospitality should play in our Christian formation. The third lesson, “Opening the Door to Christ,” invites us to discover how responsible freedom in Christ shapes our lives as Christians in today’s world.

The lesson is set in the book of Galatians in the New Testament. The book of Galatians is attributed to Paul as he writes to the church(es) in Galatia. Yet this percipoe tells a story to make theological points and instruction. Paul takes a historical account and explores its implications to help the community understand conflict and what is healthy.

Paul places the setting in Antioch, where for some time Gentiles had been welcomed into the church, even to the point of sharing common meals with Jewish Christians with no divisive debate on whether this was appropriate or not.<sup>1</sup> All seems fine until, Cephas, or as we know him, Simon Peter, shows up and initially engages in the practices at Antioch. However, when several emissaries from the church in Jerusalem come to Antioch, Peter ceases from eating meals with Gentile Christians. This leads to several other individuals like Barnabas to cease from the meals.<sup>2</sup> A rift forms within the community.

While one might be quick to judge Peter and the others, we must always remember we can never assign feelings to people in the biblical texts. We especially remember this as we only hear from one party in the story. However the details went down, or the actual motivations of the individuals, Antioch experienced a moment where values and practices had to be assessed.

For Paul, this becomes a theological conversation about law and the grace of God. For Paul, the law as important as it may be, is not the redemptive authority in this new era for the life of the church.<sup>3</sup> What holds authority is the crucifixion with Christ, the mutual life shared in and with Christ.<sup>4</sup> To be justified by Christ is to be freed from the burden of self-righteousness and to have faith as the trust in the accomplishments of God.<sup>5</sup> This is

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<sup>1</sup> Cousar, Charles B. “Galatians” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 55

what is to unite the Christians of Antioch, Galatia, and all of Christendom. The Christian church is to focus on their faith and supporting each other on their journey.

### **Application**

There has always been an interesting relationship dynamic between Paul and Peter. Both shared many similarities to one another, and yet they were also vastly different. In the Christian religion, one could say Peter and Paul as leaders comes in sync right behind Jesus as one of those “Christianity 101” facts everyone knows. In this case, we see them in conflict, and we have the benefit of knowing the relationship did not end and we saw how Gentiles continued to become an integral part of the Christian body. Everyone in the end became a part of the Christian church and the gospel continued to flourish.

One might read this today and say: “Oh I wish this could happen today; someone coming in and just laying down the law!” And one’s scroll on social media might even reveal people thinking they are doing such as everyone has an opinion on every single little thing and share not to invite a conversation, but to begin a sparring match. Those who like taking stands might enjoy reading this passage and think their views are far superior than to those around them.

Yet I think what we miss in this passage is how Paul and Peter were in conversation and relationship with each other. They had been in ministry and saw the goal as the same: to unite and teach the body about their identity in Christ. This of course meant they had to process all their “stuff” and figure out how to be faithful to their convictions and the ideals of others.

Nothing about this passage suggests each one of us knows the right thing and way of being in the world. Instead, we are invited to reflect on how we have been given the freedom in Christ to figure it out, both on our own and together as a body. No one is chief supreme in understanding every little detail about who God has called us to be or what it means to do the will of God. It is a learning curve for all of us.

Perhaps this week’s lesson seems strange to pair with hospitality at first glance. Of course, there is the obvious reason it appears as now the Gentiles will realize they are not to be excluded and the Jewish Christians need to revisit how they understand the gospel. They are called to look to Jesus for how they are to treat others.

Yet these same tenets are to go for us as well. Often, we come up with traditions or beliefs based on one way of understanding a passage of scripture or a particular act of worship. We know the right way and we might even have solid exegesis or reasoning.

However, where we get ourselves into trouble is when we think that one-time experience or exposure means we got it exactly right. This especially comes into fruition either when someone new enters our church or we have people completely new to the faith express either frustration or question something we have deep seated beliefs upon. The reaction can go either way. We can become defensive and let them know this is how things will always be, or we can listen and dialogue with them. We can see how the Holy Spirit is leading us to think or believe in a new way.

We saw what happened in both Antioch and Galatia when the people allowed their minds to be opened when the freedom found in Jesus Christ was fully embraced. God took those churches and individuals to new heights in their relationship with Christ and with one another. The church was able to become something new.

As Christianity finds itself with so many changes in a rapidly developing world, I hope we too can embrace the freedom in Christ. I hope we can be open to the Spirit inviting us to reread scripture and hear from others who might be different than the norm. I pray we might be the body of Christ who see beauty and awe in the diversity of the people of God.

How have you seen conflict resolved where everyone felt heard and included in the process? Why do you think it is so easy to believe one thing when you first read a passage? Have you seen God reveal something new to you in scripture as you read it in different seasons of life? Who is God calling you to welcome and love in your life who is different from you? What are ways the Holy Spirit has helped you grow and develop?

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