

# Defending the Gospel of Salvation

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The video version of this teaching is available at <https://youtu.be/ZgcWykfDUSw>

The scripture reading is Acts 12:25, Galatians 2:1-18

In our teaching two weeks ago, we discussed the dilemma the Apostles faced with the question of Gentiles joining the body of believers. There were questions as to what level of fellowship between the Jewish believers and the God-fearing believers would be allowed. Should the God-fearers be required to fully convert to Judaism to fully participate or not?

The Apostle Paul was specifically called and commissioned by Yeshua to be the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” Paul taught the community in Antioch that Gentiles need not convert to Judaism to fully participate and fellowship with their Jewish counterparts. Peter himself, who was commissioned to head the council of the twelve disciples in Jerusalem, had a personal encounter with this subject with his visit to the house of the Gentile Cornelius. But questions remained and the issue was far from resolved. Paul returns to Jerusalem fourteen years after his encounter with Yeshua on the road to Damascus and eleven years since he last met with Peter and James.

Galatians 2:1 NKJV 1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me.

Now, after Paul’s experience with the believers in Antioch and elsewhere, he was returning, this time to reconcile his gospel message of full Gentile inclusion with the Jerusalem leadership of The Way.

There are many questions which will be revealed with this short teaching. Most of which we will not be able to answer at least for now. Not because we don’t wish to, but because the answers are not as simple to contextualize as the questions. As we continue to study, we will address these questions further.

Among the biggest questions facing the body of believers in these early years is, “Was it necessary for one to become a Jew in order to be a full member of the community of believers?” There were many who believed that full conversion was necessary. But there were a few things that had happened during these intervening years that were counter to this position. First was Peter’s vision and subsequent visit to the home of the Gentile Cornelius, which we discussed a couple of weeks ago when we covered Acts chapter ten. Then there were the massive number of Gentiles believing the gospel in Antioch.

Previously, we have introduced the concept of “Paul’s gospel.” Is what Paul preached, different than that of the other apostles? In the opening chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul relates his call from Yeshua.

Galatians 1:11-14 NKJV 11 But I make known to you, 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 it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

The key difference in Paul's gospel was his position that the Gentiles can receive this same salvation and remain as Gentiles. The opinion of many of the other apostles was that conversion to Judaism was necessary in order to participate in the community including the feast day rituals and Temple worship practices.

Paul finds support for his gospel to the Gentiles in the Torah and the prophets.

Isaiah 56:1-3a NKJV 1 Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come, And My righteousness to be revealed. 2 Blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who lays hold on it; Who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil." 3 Do not let the son of the foreigner Who has joined himself to the LORD Speak, saying, "The LORD has utterly separated me from His people";..."

Paul is firm in his commitment to the gospel and his commission to go to the Gentiles, yet he recognizes the authority of the Jerusalem council headed by Peter and James, the brother of Yeshua. Paul had yet to confirm his unique message of salvation to the Gentiles without full conversion with the Jerusalem authority.

Paul was a brilliant and spiritually gifted teacher and apostle of Yeshua. He would have remembered the words of his rabbi and teacher, Gamliel.

"Do not rely on your own interpretation. Take upon yourself a teacher and remove all doubt."<sup>i</sup>

As a result of these words, Paul chose to submit himself and his gospel to the authority of the Jerusalem council.

Galatians 2:2 NKJV 2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain.

Did Paul have doubts about his gospel message to the gentiles? Why did he lament that he may have "run in vain?" Would his gospel be rejected by Peter, John, and James? Would his instructions to the Gentiles that they didn't need to be circumcised be "in vain?" Paul's message of Gentile inclusion was certainly controversial and faced some serious opposition. Paul continues in his letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 2:3-5 NKJV 3 Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. 4 And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), 5 to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

The "false brethren" that Paul referred to had come to Antioch while Paul was teaching there and returned a bad report to the apostles in Jerusalem. At Antioch, these "spies" observed that the Gentiles, although believers of Yeshua, were co-mingling with the Jewish believers. We may find that situation difficult to understand, but at that time and culture, this co-mingling was just not done. It was a radical departure from the kind of orthodox Judaism practiced by the majority of followers of The Way.

The strong counter argument to Paul's gospel is the Torah requirement of circumcision found primarily in Genesis seventeen and is the sign of the covenant. Circumcision was required for all males of Abraham's household; his own sons, as well as the sons of his servants and slaves.

Because of the Torah requirements, Paul's opponents argued that allowing Gentile believers to fully participate without conversion created a serious problem for the entire community. But Paul stood his ground, presented his case, perhaps even mentioning Peter's own experience. Paul eventually prevailed. Paul

received the endorsement he sought, but the controversy over Gentile inclusion would not so easily go away as we will see in the years to come. Not only did Paul receive their endorsement, he received assistance in taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

Galatians 2:7-10 NKJV 7 But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter 8 (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), 9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

Paul points out in Galatians two verses seven through ten that Peter and the other apostles were charged to take the gospel of repentance to the Jewish people specifically.

Paul referred to James, Cephas (or Peter), and John as “pillars.” This metaphorical language by Paul calls to mind pillars of buildings that carry the weight of the structure. Paul recognized these three men as those who carried the weight of the community of believers. James, Peter, and John were in the position of authority in the spiritual temple of the body of Messiah.

Paul came out of this meeting with far more than he expected. He received a kind of ordination. Paul was accepted into the exclusive circle of apostles even though he was not an eyewitness to Yeshua, and despite his involvement in hunting many of them down and persecuting them.

Paul’s mission and calling of God to the Gentiles was now an official part of the community of believers. From now on Paul spoke of himself as “the apostle to the Gentiles.” He used this terminology in Romans as well as in his letter to Timothy whose mother was Jewish and his father a Greek.

1 Timothy 2:7 NKJV 7 for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle--I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying--a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

It wasn’t long after this that Peter went to visit the community in Antioch, and the controversy of Gentile inclusion continued.

Galatians 2:11-13 NKJV 11 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; 12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. 13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

In Antioch, Peter would have observed an amazing, unified community of Gentile and Jewish believers. They worshiped together; they kept the Sabbath together; they fellowshiped, ate and drank together. The Gentile believers of Antioch were not just guests in the synagogue but were brothers and sisters in Messiah!

Peter should have had no objection to this because of his own vision and experience with Cornelius. Peter was the first to preach the gospel to God-fearers and to break the taboo of entering a Gentile’s house and eating a meal with them. But there were still many who objected!

The issue of ritual purity was still in the forefront in the believing community at large. The believers of The Way, especially those in and around Jerusalem, were practitioners of an intensely orthodox form of Judaism.

Ritual purity was of paramount importance because of their continual meeting in the Temple courts among other things.

According to the standards of this time, Jews were not supposed to consume food, even otherwise kosher food, prepared by a Gentile. Many believing Jews, including many in leadership positions, felt that this separation between themselves and God-fearing Gentiles should remain in place.

When Peter came to visit the community in Antioch, he saw first-hand the result and application of his vision and experience with the Gentile Cornelius on a community wide scale. At Antioch, Peter observes Jewish believers and God-fearing Gentile believers freely mingling, eating together, and fellowshiping together with one heart and in one accord! Peter did the same until other emissaries from Jerusalem showed up and Paul calls Peter out on his apparent hypocrisy.

Galatians 2:14 NKJV 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

This is a difficult passage of scripture to understand. There is a long-standing traditional teaching that Paul, the Jewish believers with him, and the entire community in Antioch had abandoned Judaism and the practice of Torah. This tradition says that when Paul observed Peter backing away from fellowship with the God-fearers when the other emissaries from Jerusalem arrived, he accuses Peter of backsliding by returning to Torah and Judaism and leading others to do the same. In other words, Judaizing.

When we understand clearly the culture and history of the day, there is another interpretation that makes better sense. The commentator Magnus Zutterholm summarizes this perspective.

“Such a basic presupposition is far from self-evident – It is not at all certain that Paul’s intention was that all Jews in the Jesus movement should stop observing the Torah. Furthermore, if the non-Jewish adherents of the Jesus movement were recruited from the group of non-Jews that already took part in the activities of the synagogue (i.e., God-fearers), it is likely that they previously had adopted a Jewish lifestyle, especially with regards to food.”<sup>ii</sup>

We need to understand that Paul’s statement that Peter was “living like a Gentile” was not an accusation of abandoning Torah. Paul only meant that Peter, based on his own experience and revelation, freely associated with the Gentile God-fearers setting aside the halachic rules that precludes such fellowship and consumption of foods prepared by the God-fearers.

Peter, being from the Jerusalem community of believers, would not have been exposed to the likes of the Antioch community consisting of a majority of Gentiles. Peter backed off from fellowship in Antioch when the other emissaries arrived, not out of a fear as the English would suggest, but out of reverence or respect as the Greek word can also be translated. Peter understood what he was doing; he was respecting that these others from Jerusalem did not yet comprehend the implications of full Gentile inclusion in the body without conversion.

However, when Paul said “I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel,…” He is stating that these emissaries who came to Antioch from Jerusalem were out of step with the truth of the gospel. It appears that they were attempting to reinstate the policy of segregation and separation. Did they not understand? Did they not see that this would be contrary to the already established and approved halachic practice and norms of the believing community? Paul took a very firm stand with his message of

Gentile inclusion. In rebuking Peter for backing off when the emissaries arrived, Paul was perhaps suggesting that Peter should have taken a firmer stand himself regarding the truth of the gospel.

Paul's statement and account of this incident in Galatians can be interpreted as rhetorical and phrased in such a way as to speak to the issues Paul was addressing to the community in Galatia. In that light, the next two verses of our Galatians passage give an answer to the problem.

Galatians 2:15-16 NKJV 15 "We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, 16 "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

This entire situation suggests the question, if Gentiles can fully participate in all aspects of the Jewish community without conversion, then what is the role of the Gentiles in the community? Is there a different role for Jew and Gentile in the greater commonwealth of Israel and the kingdom of God? And what are those roles?

This was a new legal status for the Gentile believers and quite difficult for many to accept given long-standing halachic rules and traditions in the broader Jewish community. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles summarizes this:

"The Gentile disciples were no longer "Gentile sinners" and pagans. This new quasi-legal status enabled Jewish and non-Jewish believers to mingle freely, fellowship freely, worship together, and most importantly, eat together. Simon Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem had first established the matter after the incident with Cornelius. (And) They had confirmed it during Paul's recent visit."<sup>iii</sup>

Our reading this week ends with another difficult to understand statement by Paul.

Galatians 2:17-18 NKJV 17 "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! 18 "For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.

If the Jewish believers were to once again remove themselves from the table of fellowship with the Gentile God-fearers, then they are rebuilding the barrier that Yeshua Himself tore down! He tore it down for Peter when He gave Peter the vision of the sheet containing unclean animals and his subsequent visit to the house of Cornelius. Yeshua tore it down when He commissioned Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul's words in verse eighteen indicate that if he were to back up and agree to limiting the social and table interaction of Jewish and Gentile believers, he would be acknowledging an error in his gospel and proving himself to be a sinner and transgressor.

How did Peter receive the rebuke from Paul? What was Peter's answer? This conflict of Gentile inclusion isn't over yet and, unfortunately in many ways continues just as strong today in much of the Messianic community. Ultimately Paul was correct regarding Gentile inclusion in the body of Believers and the greater commonwealth of Israel. Peter does eventually take a strong stand for the gospel of inclusion. I leave you with Peter's words found in Acts fifteen verses seven through nine.

Acts 15:7-9 NKJV 7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 "So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by

giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 "and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

#### Study Questions:

1. Aside from the desire to remain ritually pure, why was it so difficult for many believers to accept the Gentiles as full members of the community?
2. Although not fully addressed in the teaching, the Torah specifically requires that one be circumcised, at that time taken to mean full conversion to Judaism before partaking of the Passover sacrifice. Is it possible to reconcile this Torah requirement with Paul's gospel of Gentile inclusion and participation in the community?
3. In what ways is the issue of Gentile inclusion manifested in today's world, in both the Jewish community at large and in the Messianic community?
4. How is the community of believers in Antioch a model for how we should structure our communities today?
5. To borrow a question proposed in the teaching, what is the different roles of the Jews and the Gentiles in the greater community of believers and in the kingdom of God? Is there a difference when the Gentile is "in the household" of the Jew? Is there a difference when in the land of Israel as opposed to the rest of the world?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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<sup>i</sup> m.Avot 1:16

<sup>ii</sup> Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2009), 27

<sup>iii</sup> FFOZ, *The Chronicles of the Apostles*, D. Thomas Lancaster, Vol 2 p403.