

DID PAUL BREAK HIS WORD?

Galatians 2:9 records Paul's own account of the agreement reached at the great conference in Jerusalem in this manner:

"And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; THAT WE SHOULD GO UNTO THE HEATHEN, AND THEY UNTO THE CIRCUMCISION."

While this seems clear and straightforward, Paul's subsequent actions as recorded in the book of Acts have raised questions as to his sincerity and honesty in this regard. Take Acts 17:1-3 as an example:

"Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, WHERE WAS A SYNAGOGUE OF THE JEWS:

"AND PAUL, AS HIS MANNER WAS, WENT IN UNTO THEM, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,

"Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ."

Clearly there is a problem: If Paul entered into an agreement that the Jerusalem apostles should go "unto the circumcision" and he "unto the heathen," how could he so regularly go to the Jews in synagogues that Luke declares it to be "as his manner was"-implying it was a well-known and consistent procedure for him to do so?

If he agreed to go only "unto the heathen," how could he honestly go so habitually to the Jews? Did he simply break his word? Was he really so willing to be "all things to all men" that he would thus violate his solemnly given oath?

Surely we can dismiss dishonesty on Paul's part as the answer. But what then? We feel that a more accurate understanding of the terms "circumcision" and "heathen" at the time this agreement was made will shed real light on the nature of Paul's ministry and of God's working in the Acts period.

THE CIRCUMCISION

If the circumcision in Galatians 2:9 is simply a reference to "the circumcision in the flesh made by hands" (i.e., physical circumcision), then clearly Paul violated the agreement repeatedly. But is this really all there is to it? We think not. In fact, Paul himself declares that there was a far more important circumcision for a son of Abraham to have:

"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:

"But he is a Jew, which is one INWARDLY; AND CIRCUMCISION IS THAT OF THE HEART, IN THE SPIRIT, and not in the letter; whose, praise is not of men, but of God" (Romans 2:28,29). [\[footnote 1\]](#)

There was "the circumcision in the flesh made by hands" but there was also the necessity of the circumcision that was inward, "that of the heart, in the spirit."

It cannot be questioned that physical circumcision plays a vital part in God's program for the nation Israel. Two passages concerning its institution help us understand this:

"And ye shall CIRCUMCISE THE FLESH of your foreskin; and it shall be a TOKEN of the covenant betwixt me and you" (Genesis 17:1 1).

"And he [Abraham] received THE SIGN OF CIRCUMCISION..." (Romans 4:11).

A token is a "signal" or "obvious evidence," as in Genesis 9:12,13 and Exodus 12:13. A sign is an "indicator," as John 20:30,31 demonstrates. Physical circumcision, then, was instituted as the "obvious evidence" or "indication" of Israel's very special spiritual status. It was a token and of a far more important circumcision available to the believers in that favored nation. Consider, for example, these exhortations:

"CIRCUMCISE therefore the foreskin of YOUR HEART, and be no more stiffnecked" (Deuteronomy 10:16).

"If they shall confess their iniquity ... if then their UNCIRCUMCISED HEARTS be humbled ... Then will I remember my covenant..." (Leviticus 26:40-42).

"CIRCUMCISE yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of YOUR HEART..."(Jeremiah 4:4).

"...behold, their EAR IS UNCIRCUMCISED, and they cannot hearken..." (Jeremiah 6:10).

"...and all the house of Israel are UNCIRCUMCISED IN THE HEART" (Jeremiah 9:26).

Plainly Israel's outward, fleshly circumcision was to be the token and sign of their inward circumcision. In other words, it was to be the outward profession of an inward possession. Looking forward to the coming kingdom age, Moses had promised:

"And the Lord thy God will CIRCUMCISE THINE HEART, AND THE HEART OF THY SEED, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

God Himself will one day do for and in His chosen nation what they themselves pitifully failed to do under the Sinatic covenant. This will be the operation of Ezekiel 36:26,27---one of Israel's "new covenant blessings."

Simply being a physical descendant of Abraham did not make one a true child of God, for the sons of Abraham were the sons of Adam too. Hence our Lord declared to those who were bold to claim, "Abraham is our father": "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do..." (John 8:44).

Physically, these leaders of Israel were indeed Abraham's sons-they had the outward profession; but spiritually they were the children of the devil-they lacked the inward possession! Physical circumcision was never the core of God's concern for Israel, it rather was a token, a sign of the real issue-their internal, spiritual condition (see Psalms 51:16,17).

In this light, Stephen's declaration to the leaders of Israel in Acts 7:51 becomes far more significant. In view of their continued rejection of their Messiah, he proclaims them to be:

"Ye stiffnecked and UNCIRCUMCISED IN HEART AND EARS ..."

Clearly, then, there was an "uncircumcised in heart and ears" group in the nation---one which was being rejected and upon which God's wrath was set to fall (see Luke 11:47-51; Acts 2:34-36,40; I Thessalonians 2:14-16). It was because of their rejection of Him that our lord had declared to this same group: "Therefore I say unto you, THE KINGDOM OF GOD SHALL BE TAKEN FROM YOU, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43).

We are not left in doubt as to the identity of the nation to whom the kingdom was to be given - the nation that would indeed bring forth the fruits of the kingdom. In Luke 12:32, Christ tells His disciples:

"Fear not, LITTLE FLOCK; FOR IT IS YOUR FATHER'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM."

This "little flock" comprised the true circumcision, the believing remnant-those who inwardly possessed what they outwardly professed. They were the "Israel of God."

Thus, at the time of the Galatians 2:9 agreement, "the circumcision" would have clearly been a reference to the Little Flock--the true circumcision. In light of the interruption of their program, the Jerusalem apostles agreed to confine their ministry to the little Flock while Paul would go to the heathen.

1. This verse is often used to teach that when we become a member of the Body of Christ we become "spiritual Jews." That this is impossible is demonstrated by Galatians 3:28 where we are told that in the Body of Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek". It would thus be impossible to place us into the Body-where there is no status of being a Jew or Gentile-and at the same time make us so-called "spiritual Jews." We can't become something God has done away with! Romans 2:28,213 is simply identifying who is a true son of Abraham (see 9:6,7).

THE HEATHEN

The term "heathen," of course, refers to the Gentiles-the "nations." It also carries a deeper significance in that it identifies those who found themselves outside the sphere of God's blessings. Its use in Galatians 2:9 is of particular significance in this light, for with the appearance of Paul's ministry the favored status of the nation Israel changed:

"I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather THROUGH THEIR [ISRAEL'S] FALL SALVATION IS COME UNTO THE GENTILES, for to provoke them to jealousy.

"Now if the FALL OF THEM BE THE RICHES OF THE WORLD, and the DIMINISHING OF THEM THE RICHES OF THE GENTILES; how much more their fullness?"

"For it THE CASTING AWAY OF THEM BE THE RECONCILING OF THE WORLD, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?"

"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that BLINDNESS IN PART IS HAPPENED TO ISRAEL, UNTIL THE FULNESS OF THE GENTILES BE COME IN" (Romans 11:11,12,15,25).

Thus at the time of the Galatians 2:9 agreement, the term "heathen" included not only the uncircumcised Gentiles but also the "uncircumcised in heart and ears" among Israel. Plainly, any unsaved Jew living at the time of Israel's national blinding would be in the same situation as the Gentile on the outside looking in! Not being part of the true circumcision, they were outside God's "sphere of blessing," being no more than a mere heathen.

Thus when Paul went into the synagogues to preach Christ to his unsaved kinsmen, he did so not because they still enjoyed the special privileged position of not being "reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9), but rather he preached to them because national Israel's special status was now done away. The middle wall of partition having been broken down, Paul could now proclaim:

"For THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE JEW AND THE GREEK: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him" (Romans 10:12).

Paul's commitment in Galatians 2:9 was that he would preach to both "the uncircumcised" Gentile and the uncircumcised in heart and ear" Jew. Hence we can understand his custom of going into the synagogues to preach the good news of salvation to his lost kinsman according to the flesh.

MORE HELP

There are a number of further issues which have a helpful light shed on them by properly identifying the circumcision and heathen of Galatians 2:9. We briefly suggest a few for our readers' further study and consideration:

First, the Galatians 2:9 agreement makes it obvious that the fall of Israel and the change in their national position did not take place prior to Paul's ministry--otherwise, there would be no purpose to the agreement at all. The ministry of the Jerusalem apostles was going forward on schedule prior to the raising up of Paul. Indeed, it is only with Paul's ministry that their program began to break down.

Beyond this, however, there is help on at least two issues with which those who recognize that the dispensation of grace began subsequent to Pentecost must wrestle: (1) Did the Pentecostal, kingdom saints become members of the Body of Christ when the dispensation of grace began (usually termed the "Twelve in or out" question)? And (2) Did the dispensation of grace begin before or after Acts 28?

The first question is clearly answered in the negative by Galatians 2:9. Both Paul and the Jerusalem apostles plainly understood that the Little Flock had not become a part of the new mystery program introduced through Paul.

One helpful ramification of this is that we can thus understand that the books written by these brethren (i.e., Hebrews through Revelation) are directed to the Little Flock both then and in the "ages to come" when their program will finally be brought to fruition.

As to the contention that the dispensation of grace began at or after Acts 28, Galatians 2:9 deals it a devastating blow. The simple fact is that the middle wall of partition had been broken down, the fall of Israel had taken place. The nation Israel had lost its position of honor and had been reshaped by God into a position of dishonor. Having interrupted His program with them, the unsaved Jew was thus outside the sphere of blessing and thus counted in unbelief among the heathen (Romans 11:30-32).

That Paul knew the truth of the setting aside of Israel in the earliest days of his ministry is clear from the record (see Acts 26:16, 22:18). He built the whole of his efforts on this basic change in God's dealings. The simple fact is that after the raising up of Paul, the only way an unbelieving Jew could have any hope of salvation was through the mystery program revealed by Christ to Paul.

This is no doubt why Paul declared to the Jewish leaders at Rome that "for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain" (Acts 28:20) and yet also wrote to the Ephesians and Colossians that he was in bonds for proclaiming "the mystery" committed to his trust (Ephesians 6:19,20, Colossians 4:3).

When we compare verse with verse we cannot avoid the conclusion that after the raising up of Paul the only hope Israel had lay in the new message and program committed to him.

There is more--much more--that could be said about all this, but we must conclude here. The reader will, however, find much helpful light from Galatians 2:9 when the circumcision and heathen are properly identified. Far from later breaking his word, Paul's conduct and ministry were totally consistent with both his agreement and God's working in the new program he proclaimed. Little wonder he sought so vigorously

"...to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation" (Romans 15:20).

by Richard Jordan