

Text: Gal. 2:1-10

Title: "The perpetrators of a false gospel – false brethren"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: On June 8, 2018, Kevin Mallory of Leesburg, Va., a former CIA case worker, was convicted of spying for the Chinese government. *The New York Times* reported that over a four-month period, "Mr. Mallory, who is fluent in Mandarin Chinese, traveled to Shanghai, had covert communications with [an] operative on a Chinese-provided phone and passed information – including an unclassified white paper on American intelligence policy – to his handlers." Mallory, who was at the time thousands of dollars in debt and behind on his mortgage, received \$25,000 from the Chinese in exchange for classified information.

Spies are a problem for national security. It turns out that they can be a problem when it comes to gospel ministry as well. Paul is clearly focused on gospel ministry in this passage (vv. 2, 5, 7). He describes the problem gospel ministry can face in terms of espionage in verse 4.

That these spies are considered brethren only makes the case that much more dangerous. No spy for the Chinese government openly advertises himself as a Chinese intelligence operative. Mallory seemed to be a first-class patriot. The way the enemy uses false patriots to destroy a nation, and our adversary the devil uses false brethren to destroy gospel ministry.

As we study the first ten verses of Galatians 2 together this morning, we will find that Paul is building a case against these perpetrators of a false gospel – false brethren. Note

with me three problems with this category of so-called brothers in the Lord highlighted by Paul here.

I. False brethren think too highly of men (vv. 1-2, 6-9a; “the ones who seemed”).

Application: Last week we noticed that the goal of a false gospel is always to please men (Gal. 1:10-24). The false gospel has the wrong answer to the questions of 1:10 – we should persuade men and please God, not persuade God to please men.

What we find in our passage this week is a term repeated by Paul for even good men, which indicates that the perpetrators of a false gospel thought too highly of them as they focused on their goal of pleasing men.

Paul begins with the word *then* (2:1; see 1:18). He is presenting a water-tight case that he had been preaching the gospel long before ever discussing it with leaders in Jerusalem. He explains that after 14 years (probably since his conversion rather than since the end of the 3 years mentioned in 1:18), he went to Jerusalem for a second time with Barnabas and Titus (v. 1). He did so privately to allow leaders in Jerusalem to become informed about the gospel he was preaching (v. 2). He was not seeking their approval or additions (v. 6), but unity in the face of some who were creating division. That division would undermine gospel ministry (v. 2b).

I agree with interpreters who see this second visit to Jerusalem mentioned in Galatians as the second visit that Acts records for us as well (Acts 11:19-30, see my handout on the early date for Galatians). Paul is having to recount these visits to Jerusalem because the perpetrators of a false gospel are telling newly planted Galatian churches that their disa-

greement with Paul on the gospel is traceable to the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Their idea was – those leaders disagree with Paul and they agree with us. That was a lie.

Paul's answer is powerful, because he not only says that the Jerusalem leaders agreed with his gospel, but also that whether they agreed really did not matter in the end. They only seemed to have the authority to countermand Paul's gospel, an authority attributed to them by false brethren, but God does not see it the same way (v. 6).

So all of this raises an important question for our lives today: how does God see the authority of Paul and the leaders of the Jerusalem church, and how should we view spiritual authority today? I think we find that answer in Gal. 6:3, "For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself."

That is the way Paul and James and Peter and John would have seen their authority, and it is the way they would have expected us as their church members to see it too.

All of them would have agreed with Paul's humility in 1 Cor. 15:9-10a, "For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am."

James might have said, "I did not even follow Christ, who was my own brother, until after the resurrection – but by the grace of God I am what I am."

Peter might have said, "I denied the Lord three times in His greatest hour of need – but by the grace of God I am what I am."

John might have said, "I fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane when the Lord needed me to pray - but by the grace of God I am what I am."

The problem with false brethren is that they think too highly of men, even good men. Rather than following men, our text gives us an important clue about what we should follow - revelation (v. 2). I believe that revelation was the word given to Agabus in Acts 11:27-30.

False brethren did not hold Agabus in high reputation. He simply did not have the same number of followers on Twitter. You could not download his podcast or hear him on the radio. But Paul and the church at Antioch followed Agabus because what came from his mouth was the word of God. Paul here tells us that God accepts no man's person (v. 6), but the Bible tells us elsewhere that God exalts His word in accordance with His own holy name (Ps. 138:2, "I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name").

Illustration: Paul's lack of appreciation for the reputation of the Jerusalem leaders in this passage does not fit well with the Roman Catholic dogma of apostolic succession. Catholic.com explains: "Apostolic succession is the line of bishops stretching back to the apostles. All over the world, all Catholic bishops are part of a lineage that goes back to the time of the apostles, something that is impossible in Protestant denominations (most of which do not even claim to have bishops). . . . The Church Fathers, who were links in that chain of succession, regularly appealed to apostolic succession as a test for whether Catholics or heretics had correct doctrine. This was necessary because heretics simply put their own interpretations, even bizarre ones, on Scripture.

Clearly, something other than Scripture had to be used as an ultimate test of doctrine in these cases.”

That last statement is, of course, a *non sequitur*. It does not logically follow that we cannot use the Scripture because there are heretical interpretations of the Scripture. There are mistaken interpretations of the U. S. Constitution, but that does not mean we throw it out the window and let the Supreme Court render decisions based on their own opinions.

Paul here argues the opposite of apostolic succession. He says that there are false brethren who are claiming a heritage from men about whom they think too highly who are not to be followed as true gospel preachers because their gospel is not the gospel of the Scriptures. Paul did not dispute their linkage to the Jerusalem apostles. He disputes their unscriptural doctrine.

It is our task to follow the Scriptures, not men, not even great and gifted men who sometimes fail to follow the Scriptures. When it comes to where we find our spiritual authority, Paul is very clear: “Let God be true and every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). Paul, James, Peter, and John would say together, “Hear me if and only if I speak to you the Word of the Lord. And hear your Agabus too!”

II. False brethren think too highly of ritual (vv. 3-5).

Application: The threat to the truth of gospel-freedom was a bondage that came from the rite of circumcision. Acts 15:1 explains where this emphasis on the need for circumcision in Galatian churches ultimately led: “And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren and said, ‘Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.’”

Illustration: The truth of gospel-freedom answers the Philippian jailer's question, "What must I do to be saved?" - "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." If you search the question, "What must I do to be saved?" on catholic.com, the second article that comes up is titled, "The Necessity of Baptism." This article quoted the catechism we noted last week, "Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament."

These false brethren would not have denied the importance of faith in the death of Christ or in His resurrection for salvation, but they added to it religious rites. Paul calls that bondage, a failure to appreciate the freedom of the gospel. The heavy burden of religious rites can weigh down a sensitive person's conscience, so Paul tells believers to "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not again entangled with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1).

Illustration: The sad case of a young mother and her two children lapsing back into Roman Catholicism. Paul could see lapses back into an apostate Judaism, which taught faith in Christ plus the performance of religious ritual for salvation, rather than faith in Christ and His work alone. Where have you placed your faith and hope for salvation? Perhaps you have been saved out of religious ritualism. Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.

III. They think too highly of division (vv. 9-10).

Illustration: Next week I am going to be in Cleveland for the officers meeting of the American Council of Christian Churches. I think that it would be fair to describe the goal of the Council as twofold: (1) earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints by separating from all compro-

mise with a false gospel; and (2) do so with unity that transcends differences of lesser importance. It is an effort that seeks wisdom about when to and when not to extend the right hand of fellowship in gospel ministry.

Application: That wisdom was part of the council meeting that Paul enjoyed with these three brothers. He mentions that James, Peter, and John gave him the right hand of fellowship, no doubt, because false brothers were denying him that. Paul is certainly writing as a vigilant separatist. He vigorously warns that there are some who need to be anathematized, allowed to be separated from Christ. We have seen that. But here he indicates that false brethren would not give him the right hand of fellowship either, and that it was their goal to create division where it should not exist.

At this juncture of their ministries, God had called Paul and Barnabas chiefly to Gentiles, and the others chiefly to Jews. This was plain to these men because God had performed miracles through Paul while he was with the Gentiles and through Peter while with the Jews.

Those separate fields of ministry were not absolute, and they would shift over time, but the constant that remained was that they all together were recipients of God's grace to make known the good news and to care for the needs of the poor among their congregations. We need to work hard to see the grace that God has given to others in gospel ministry, though we may not agree with them on every detail of ministry. Division among brothers who should be ministering together can undermine faithful gospel preaching (v. 2).

Conclusion: At a certain level the zeal of those who opposed Paul is commendable. At least the false brother who

perpetrates a false gospel is willing to live what he believes. At a certain level, we must give Jehovah Witnesses, for example, some credit. As we discern the danger of false brothers perpetrating a false gospel, should we not lament even more our silence about the true gospel?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching