

What's worth fighting over? Galatians 2:1-14 Discussion Guide

One of the saddest statements about the American church in recent years is that we are mostly known for arguments and disagreements with other Christians. Some of these disagreements are over important matters, but others of them appear stupid and petty to everyone who is not directly engaged in the argument.

One of the great characteristics of Paul in his letter to the Galatian churches is that he has no problem disagreeing with others. The important thing to note, however, is that the reason Paul is willing to be polemical (given to open disagreement) is that he believes the glory of God and salvation are at stake in the issues over which he is disagreeing.

Compromise is a skill that is sorely missing in the political life of America today. We desperately need politicians who are more skilled than the current set is in giving up things that might be of value to one side to receive things that will be of more value to their side. This is the only way to find a peaceful solution to political problems in a place like America.

But theological issues are quite different from political issues. By its very nature, theology deals with how to rightly know and obey God. God's will is the only opinion that should matter in a theology debate, and by his very nature his will cannot oppose itself. For this reason Paul understood that he could not afford to compromise in key areas as they regard the Gospel given to him by God. Listen for those "lines in the sand" over which Paul refused to yield in Galatians 2:1-14.

Galatians 2:1-14

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. ³But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— ⁵to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. ⁶And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. ⁷On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised ⁸(for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), ⁹and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Austin in his sermon put forward three key Gospel issues over which Paul refused to compromise.

- 1) Paul did not yield to legalism. (Galatians 2:1-5)
- 2) Paul did not yield his calling. (Galatians 2:6-10)
- 3) Paul did not yield to bigotry. (Galatians 2:11-15)

We should consider Paul's example when we consider the things in our own day that are worth arguing over in the church. I was taught in seminary that church leaders should categorize things that we might disagree with other Christians over. We must do this because Christ's goal is for his church to be unified. If we are to be unified, then everything can't be an argument. But at the same time some things should be an argument. Here is a helpful rubric to follow.

Primary Issues- These are issues in which you would not consider someone who disagrees to be a fellow believer in the Gospel of Jesus. In other words, these are the things over which we would pronounce "anathema." Someone who disagrees over a primary issue cannot be treated as a Christian by the church.

Secondary Issues- These are issues over which we would want the local church to which we belong to agree over. There is not a clear Biblical reason, however, to declare that someone who disagrees on a secondary issue is not a Christian believer. A secondary issue, while you should not declare somebody "anathema" over, you might be willing to leave a particular church over.

Tertiary Issues- These are disagreements that we can (and perhaps we should) have within a local church. We each should be reading Scripture and constantly trying to discern what God is saying through Scripture. There will be many times that we come to different conclusions about what God is saying. This is healthy, because it should indicate that we care enough to read the Bible in a community. Tertiary issues, however, should not in any way affect our ability to serve and worship together in the local church and to be on the exact same mission of bringing the Gospel to our community and the world.

Discussion Questions

- **Is there anything that is shocking to you that Paul was willing to argue about?**
- **Do you think there were arguments in the early church that were unnecessary and harmful?**

- **Why were each of the three issues in Galatians 2:1-14 important for the preaching of the Gospel?**
- **What are some primary issues that churches should draw lines in the sand over today? What makes them primary issues?**
- **What issues should you be willing to leave a church over? Why would you not remain in a church while disagreeing on this issue?**
- **What issues do we need to learn to agree to disagree over?**
- **How can you be charitable and willing to disagree at the same time?**