

Relationship not ritual (Galatians 4:8–11)

Because Gentile believers in the Galatian churches came from pagan backgrounds, their turning from idols to Christ was an obvious, radical change. Most of all it meant a changed relationship to God. They became sons of God, known by God. The Spirit of Christ was in them, crying “Abba, Father.” This was not their pagan experience, nor the experience of O.T. believers. Both pagan religion and O.T. practices involved ceremonies that were a type of bondage. But when Christ came, faith in Christ changed that for the believer. To turn to the Mosaic Law, as false brethren were urging, denied the believer’s relationship with God. It was both unreasonable and very unsettling to Paul.

1. *Turning to law was unreasonable: It contradicted their new relationship with God (4:8–10).*

a. Their new relationship to God was in sharp contrast to their former life.

- In their former life they did not know God and as slaves served non-gods. People suppress available knowledge about the Creator-God and instead worship what is created (Romans 1:18–21). Such pagan worship enslaves, controlling the worshiper’s life, time, and possessions. Slavery to idolatry was foolish (cf. Isaiah 46:6–7), but so was reliance upon human wisdom, wealth, and strength (cf. Jeremiah 9:23). There was no true knowledge of God.
- In their new life they both knew God and were known by God. Through faith in Jesus Christ, they had become sons of God, indwelt by the Spirit. This is a personal relationship with God, not merely knowledge about God. It is the relationship which the Good Shepherd has with His sheep. He knows them and they know Him (John 10:4, 14, 27).

b. Their new relationship to God made their desire to re-enter slavery senseless.

- They showed what seemed to be their desire by having begun Jewish calendar observances: Sabbath days, new moon celebrations, seasonal annual feasts, and perhaps the Jewish new year. A Jew could continue these without obligation, but for a Gentile to begin these implied a wrong reliance upon them to be accepted by God.
- These observances belonged to the O.T. “elements”, which had in their time an important function, but were essentially “weak and poor”. They had no power to save and they were insufficient to pay the redemption price of sin or grant any inheritance.
- Reliance upon these “elements” was no better than returning to paganism, because both embraced an external religion with an outward conformity to rituals. In Christ the O.T. rituals and the entire Law had been fulfilled. A mandated return denied that fulfillment.
- To embrace even O.T. ritual was to re-enter slavery. The false brethren were pushing for circumcision, which would have required submission to the whole law (Galatians 5:3). It would have denied the sacrifice of Christ, without which there is no freedom from the Law.

Current circumstances challenge us to re-examine our practices and the reasons for them. Requiring what the Bible does not, or practicing them without thought, is a sign that paganism is creeping in.

2. *Turning to law-keeping was unsettling: It put in question their relationship with God (4:11).*

- a. Paul labored intensely, at great personal price, to proclaim Christ and see believers mature in Christ (cf. Colossians 1:28; 2 Corinthians 11:23–28).
- b. Paul feared perhaps his own loss by their turning (cf. Philippians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; Romans 15:16). But much more the well-being of the Galatian believers (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11).
- c. At the least their spiritual growth was endangered, proving themselves “bewitched” (3:1) and no longer feeling blessed (4:15). In the worse case, they might show themselves unconverted, though Paul in the letter appears unconvinced of that. Either they did not have the relationship with God as their Father or they were not appreciating the relationship which they had.

Paul was not satisfied with the Galatian Gentile believers merely “naming the name of Jesus” and then continuing in paganism or embracing Judaism. To be truly Christian means experiencing and living out that true relationship which the believer has with God.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- What enslaves people today and replaces a true knowledge of God? Were any of those your experience?
- What evidences of being known by God do you experience?
- What “Christian” rituals have been challenged by the pandemic? Are there ways in which the relationship to God could have or should have been strengthened?
- Paul labored for eternal fruit in others. In what ways are you laboring for eternal fruit?