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International
Baptist Church
in Cologne Ger-
many.

Sermon Brief

Gal. 2:15-21

God's Church: A Believers' Congregation

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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION¹

God's Church. How is it put together? What materials make up its structure? Last June, I addressed that issue in part with the first sermon I preached before this church on the church as "A Fellowship of Sinners." Today I want to step back a bit to speak on the compositional nature of the church.

For many people, the issue of how to join a church is a mystery. This is in part due to the multitude of approaches that exist among many different Christian groups. In European Christianity, often it is simply a matter of being sprinkled as a baby and being confirmed as a youngster. But is that based on scripture? Absolutely not! From the middle 1500s on, the so-called Radical Reformers, such as Meno Simons, insisted on church membership being based upon confession of faith in Christ and believer's baptism. With this emphasis a return to biblical principles emerged in Europe and we Baptists are one of the products of that movement. The Brethren Church in Germany is another group coming out of this movement centuries ago.



Later on during the year, we will plan an anniversary service as a part of the four hundredth year anniversary celebration of the beginning of Baptists in Europe. In a few weeks, I will be participating in a German Baptist Union celebration of this anniversary in Berlin. Out of that seminar meeting of Baptist scholars from all over Europe will come some of the plans for our own celebration. July 24-26 will be the Amsterdam 400 Conference that is the major event of the European Baptist celebration in 2009.

Now for four centuries Baptists have been in the forefront of Christian groups insisting that a biblically grounded church can only be made up of people who have consciously chosen to confess faith publicly in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and who have then submitted to believer's baptism as the public confession of that faith in Christ. Children too young to understand a faith surrender to Christ can't be baptized. Only those who know what they're doing are able to publicly confess faith in Christ. Their baptism stands as a public testimony and symbol of the spiritual transformation produced by the Holy Spirit down inside their heart.



A transformation based upon the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as God's means of salvation. All this is pictured in the immersing of the believer underneath the water and bringing him back up again. In a subsequent sermon on believer's baptism we will explore the details here in greater depth.

Thus how does one join the church biblically? Scripture is clear at this point. First, you must confess faith in Jesus Christ. And then you must be scripturally immersed in water as an act of public baptism. Consequently, the church of Jesus Christ is made up of baptized believers.

This morning I want to focus on the confession of faith aspect of joining the church. In Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, he provides some profound insight into the nature of saving faith. Read with me in your Bibles, Gal. 2:15-21.

¹ Greek Text: ^{2:15} Ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἐθνῶν ἁμαρτωλοί· ^{2:16} εἰδότες δὲ ὅτι οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεύσαμεν, ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου, ὅτι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ. ^{2:17} εἰ δὲ ζητοῦντες δικαιωθῆναι ἐν Χριστῷ εὐρέθημεν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἁμαρτωλοί, ἄρα Χριστὸς ἁμαρτίας διάκονος. μὴ γένοιτο. ^{2:18} εἰ γὰρ ἃ κατέλυσα ταῦτα πάλιν οἰκοδομῶ, παραβάτην ἐμαυτὸν συνιστάνω. ^{2:19} ἐγὼ γὰρ διὰ νόμου νόμῳ ἀπέθανον, ἵνα θεῷ ζήσω. Χριστῷ συνεσταυρωμαι· ^{2:20} ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ζῇ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός· ὁ δὲ νῦν ζῶ ἐν σαρκί, ἐν πίστει ζῶ τῇ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀγαπήσαντός με καὶ παραδόντος ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ. ^{2:21} οὐκ ἄθετῶ τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ· εἰ γὰρ διὰ νόμου δικαιοσύνη, ἄρα Χριστὸς δωρεὰν ἀπέθανεν.

NRSV: 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. 17 But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18 But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

These verses stand as the climax of the first major section of the Body of the letter. As such, they summarize his essential point of the gospel message on salvation in Christ that Paul defends in chapters one and two of the letter. More precisely, they bring to a climax his recounting of the confrontation he had with the Apostle Peter at Antioch, described in 2:11-14. Peter came to Antioch from Jerusalem while Paul and Barnabas were there after the first missionary journey in the late 40s of the first century. Under the influence of Jewish believers from Jerusalem he stopped participating in the fellowship meals of the church because they involved both Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul sternly rebuked Peter publicly for his hypocrisy in saying that salvation is by faith alone and then for refusing to live out the implications of that conviction in fellowship meals with non-Jews. Somewhere in the words of Paul between verses 14 and 17, Paul moves from recounting what he had said earlier to Peter at Antioch and addressing his Galatian readers directly with a summation of his points in chapters one and two. A clear shift away from the Antioch address to his Galatian readers comes at either verse 15 or 17. I suspect it begins in verse 15 and is completed by verse 17, as I have argued in a publication years ago.²

From Paul's emphasis upon justification by faith, apart from works of Law in these verses, I want to stress two basic points about the nature of saving faith.

BODY

I. Faith, the only way to acceptability before God, vv. 15-17

In verses 15-17,³ Paul is focusing on the basic principle of salvation. Here salvation is pictured under the image of 'justification.' In reminding Peter of why he had chosen to follow Jesus in the beginning, Paul asserts in basic axiomatic declaration: *οὐ δικαιοῦνται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* ("a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ"). Then in verse 16, he reaches out to Psalm 143:2 as scripture proof: "no one will be justified by the works of the law."⁴

What does he mean by justification? This term has a rich image underneath it. *Δικαίωω* is the verb form used here four times in our text. In the context, Paul denies the possibility of being justified from "works of Law" and contends that justification comes only through "faith in Jesus Christ." One noun form of this verb is *δικαιοσύνη* and means "righteousness." As a religious image, the idea is to become acceptable to God. In Paul's first century Jewish background, he grew up thinking that becoming righteous before God was a matter of rigidly obeying the Torah of God set forth in the "books of Moses" in the Old Testament. Specific applications of these rules for righteous living had developed over the centuries through scribal tradition and they were as authoritative guidelines for righteous living as the Law itself. Thus the responsibility fell completely on the individual to "lift himself up by his own boot straps" in strict adherence to all these rules and regulations.

But when Paul met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus,⁵ he discovered the utter impossibility of ever becoming good enough for God to accept.⁶ Instead, he came to realize that Jesus Christ had died for his sins on the cross, and that through the shed blood of Christ, God would forgive Paul of his sins and make him righteous. All that Paul needed to do was to surrender his life to Christ in a faith commitment. His life was changed that day forever, and the apostle spent the remainder of his life giving witness to the difference that Christ makes. A few days later after arriving in Damascus, Paul publicly gave witness to this conversion through being baptized by Ananias (Acts 9:18).



The Christian church is therefore to be made up of people

²Lorin L. Cranford, "A Rhetorical Reading of Galatians," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Fall 1994

³NRSV. 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. 17 But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

⁴Psalm 143:2b (NRSV): "no one living is righteous before you." Paul's use of the Psalm reflects his interpretive understanding of it as implying that justification before God cannot be achieved by works of Law.

⁵Acts 9:1-9, NRSV.

⁶Gal. 3:10-11 (NRSV): "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.' 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"

who have experienced this radical transformation of their lives in conversion. By biblical definition, church is *ἐκκλησία*, the ‘called out ones.’ It is to be made up of folks who have been called out of the world in order to serve God as His people.⁷ Into that community of believers comes the Heavenly Presence of God, the Glory, through the indwelling of Christ by the Holy Spirit, as John 1:14 declares:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

We, as a congregation of believers, become the new temple, the new dwelling place of God on this planet. Jesus Christ, as head, stands as the source of our existence,⁸ and we are His body through which He works to carry out His continuing mission on earth. Thus our task is to strictly carry out His mission of disciplining all the nations.⁹ Only people redeemed by the grace of God can do this work. Thus the church is to be made up of saved people.

What does this say about our church? Our church constitution at present defines membership as follows in Article IV:

Membership is open to all who confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who are in agreement with the purpose of this church, and who affirm the spirit of its Covenant.

By definition we are a believer’s congregation. And we have taken our stand squarely in the center of the four hundred year old Baptist tradition of a church made up of believer’s who have professed faith in Jesus Christ.



Regarding baptism, our church constitution in Article IX states:

The pastor shall administer the ordinance of baptism in the traditional mode of immersion to those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and who wish to unite with the church as Regular Members. Baptism is understood as the decisive testimony of a person’s experience of salvation, of the movement from disbelief to faith. The time for this symbolic action is the beginning of the new life in Christ. Baptism is also offered to those who have had a previous experience of faith in Jesus Christ in another church but have not experienced believer’s baptism, if they feel it would be meaningful for their Christian life.

Once more we have defined ourselves clearly within scriptural principle and historic Baptist belief. We practice believer’s baptism, as Baptists have done for several centuries.

Thus as a congregation we say to any and all: *Come follow Christ with us.* We are on mission to serve Jesus as the Lord of our church and as the only means of salvation. Profess faith in Him and submit to baptism as did the Apostle Paul and the new converts at Pentecost that we looked at last Sunday from Acts 2:41-47. In Him

alone is salvation. And saved people band together in a church to serve Christ as Lord.

II. Faith, the only way to live in this world, vv. 18-21

The second point of the apostle Paul in our text comes in vv. 18-21.

But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who

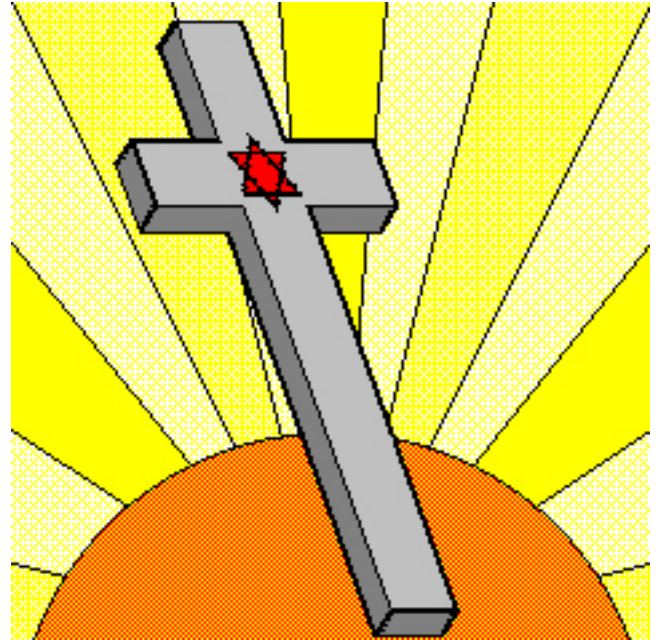
⁷John 1:12-13 (NRSV): “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

⁸Eph. 5:23b (NRSV): “Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.” Also, cf. Col. 1:18 (NRSV): “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”

⁹Matt. 28:16-20 (NRSV): “16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Whereas in vv. 15-17 the dominating frame of reference was “we” including Peter and Paul, in verses 18-21 Paul shifts to the first person “I” in order to illustrate personally the implications of saving faith on the way we live and serve. Because Paul was dealing with a false Judaizing interpretation of the gospel in his letter to the Galatians,¹⁰ his illustration stresses the sheer folly of returning to religious legalism after experiencing the saving grace of God in Christ. The Judaizers who came to Galatia tried to say that one could not be saved until he converted to Judaism as a part of Christian commitment. In their view, salvation came when one first was circumcised and pledged to obey the entire Torah of God. Then he confessed faith in Christ as Savior. Paul exploded in intense opposition to this twisting of the Gospel. In fact, in 1:9 he went to far as to ask God to “burn in Hell” anyone preaching this false gospel.



In 2:18-21, he makes the point that were he to adopt this Judaizing version of the gospel, he would prove himself to be a despicable “transgressor of God’s law” since he would be “tearing down” the faith that he had built up in Christ. Right the opposite was his actual situation. God had used the impossible demands of the Law to drive him to turn loose of everything in faith surrender to Christ. This was a personal death to everything dear to him all his life. He had to turn loose of his entire religious orientation of Torah obedience. For Paul it was the Law that led to his death to the Law (v. 19).

Coming to Christ is not always easy to do. For Paul it was terribly difficult. How about for you? Coming to faith commitment to Christ today could mean turning loose of family. Of a long time religious heritage. Coming to Christ always means death! Death to any and everything that stands in the way of full surrender to Jesus of Nazareth.

But turning loose of his Pharisaical background meant gaining life, real life that was profoundly satisfying and abundant. Paul found in his mystical union with Jesus Christ the essence of true life and living. Gal. 2:10-20 is one of the most profound declarations of the entire Bible: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Paul asserts that faith commitment begins with climbing up onto the cross of Christ and undergoing death with him. Death to self! Death to the past! Death to anything standing in the way of serving Christ! And in God’s spiritual economy, death is followed by life, not the other way around. Coming out of that dying with Christ on the cross comes the living of life day by day. But it’s a different kind of life. It is the life of faith. The real presence of the resurrected Christ permeates one’s life through the leadership of the Holy Spirit. This faith is focused on the Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us on the cross. Our relationship with the living Christ is a love relationship. He profoundly loves us and we deeply love Him and thus seek to serve Him. What Paul discovered in this new spiritual life was vastly superior to anything he had ever experienced as a Pharisee. Thus he concludes in v. 21 with the question of why anyone could conceive of walking away from this kind of life to go back to the old, death producing patterns of religious legalism. “I do not nullify the grace of God,” he declares to the Galatian Christians. I will not do anything to undo what God’s grace accomplished in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, he says.

The apostle challenges us here to live by faith on a day by day experience. Not faith as optimism or blissful hope that everything will get better. No! A thousand times no! Rather, faith riveted in Jesus Christ as our Savior and God’s Son! This is the only way to live as Christians. We become so passionate in our devotion to Christ that His presence and leadership shape every aspect of our lives. We walk with Him through good times and bad times, always rejoicing at His blessings. We get up and come worship Him with fellow believ-

¹⁰Gal. 1:6-10 (NRSV): “6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! 10 Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

ers even when we don't feel like it and when it's not convenient. We commit ourselves to serving Him even though we don't know just how we can do it. But we know that under His leadership we can! And we can do it well. This is living by faith. From his conversion until his dying day, the apostle found this life vastly better than the one he had before. He was happy! His life was purposeful. Every day was a new adventure with the Lord.

What about your living? On the streets of Cologne and in the trains, I notice many sad faces. No joy! No brightness of life! Just a sad expression that suggests an empty life with little direction or purpose. That's not the Christian way! That's certainly not how God intends us to live.

CONCLUSION

What's the church made up of? Paul's declaration to us is this: the church is comprised of genuinely transformed believers. People who have met Jesus and had their lives changed forever. My dear friends, this is what IBC Cologne needs to be made of. I already know that there's a core of such folks who make up the bulk of our membership today. The testimonies that were given from this pulpit last summer gloriously affirm the transforming power of Jesus to change a life forever.

My challenge to you who don't yet know Christ is this. Give yourself to Him today. Let Him change you, inside and out. Then begin living the life of faith in the community of believers call IBC Cologne. We stand committed to help you on this faith journey. We are on it ourselves. To be sure, we stumble now and then. But our commitment remains strong: we walk by faith every step of the way.

Come join us! Walk with us under Jesus' leadership.

