

15. Healthy Churches Practice Godly Flexibility

In our last two topics, we have talked about developing godly flexibility and understanding godly flexibility. Today, we will look at some examples of how we can practice godly flexibility in the situations we face in our lives and service for the Lord. This is essential if we are going to become healthy reproducing Christians and churches, especially when we are reaching out to people of various cultures and religions.

In Galatians 2:9-14, we read, “And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do. Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?’” Here, we see that Paul helped Peter gain a better understanding of godly flexibility.

Peter was the first apostle, that we read about, to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. Peter had a very difficult time when God called him to take the Gospel to the house of Cornelius. He had earlier shared the Gospel in the Samaritan villages, but the Samaritans had some Jewish roots in their background, so that was not like taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. Acts 8:25 says, “So when they (Peter and John) had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.”

God had to give Peter a vision before Peter was willing to take the Gospel to the house of Cornelius. One day, Peter was very hungry, so God gave him a vision in Acts 10:11-15, which reads: “And saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.’ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’” While Peter was trying to figure out the vision, Acts 10:19-20 says, “While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.’” Peter had to receive these special instructions before he was willing to take the Gospel to the house of Cornelius.

However, Galatians 2 shows that Peter still had some lessons to learn from Paul, because Paul had already learned these things. First, Galatians 2:9 shows that Paul and Barnabas knew that they were called to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. That verse says, “And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and

Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” Paul had been given grace to go to the Gentiles. The word that is translated “grace” means *the merciful kindness by which God exerts His holy influence upon people and turns them to Christ*. God had shown that grace to Paul on the road to Damascus and called him to the Gentiles while he was in Damascus. (Acts 9:1-16) That call was a call that would require flexibility for someone who had been a Pharisee of the Pharisees.

Second, Paul practiced godly flexibility by having a concern for the poor. Galatians 2:10 says, “They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.” James, who was one of the pillars mentioned in verse 9, wrote in James 2:2-9, “For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or, ‘Sit here at my footstool,’ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” Paul had learned to show a concern for the poor, because the cities had many poor. Today, many Christians neglect the cities, especially the poor of the cities. If we are really going to impact the world, we must have a concern for the poor.

Third, Paul practiced godly flexibility by standing firm for Christian liberty. Galatians 2:11-12 says, “Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.” Peter was showing the very favoritism that James said was sin. He ate with the Gentiles when there was no one else from Jerusalem there. However, when some Christians came from James (the very same James who wrote the book of James) Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles.

Paul saw that Peter was violating the principle given in Galatians 5:13, which says: “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Peter was using his liberty as an opportunity for the flesh. We see why this was true when it says that Peter withdrew himself because he feared those who were of the circumcision. When we act out of fear, we will become rigid and satisfy the flesh, instead of exercising godly flexibility. Today, many Christians are being driven by fear, instead of being led by the love of Christ. Paul was willing to stand firm for Christian liberty, and practiced godly flexibility, as he withstood Peter to his face.

Fourth, Paul practiced godly flexibility, because he recognized hypocrisy. Galatians 2:13 says, “And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.” Because Peter sinned as a leader, by showing hypocrisy, because of

fear, the rest of the Jews followed his example and sinned also. Paul saw how the wrong actions of Peter influenced all of the other Jews and brought division between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul knew that this division, between Jews and Gentiles, must be stopped immediately.

Fifth, Paul practiced godly flexibility by rebuking hypocrisy when he saw it. Galatians 2:14 says, “But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?’” Paul made it clear that Peter was violating the truth of the Gospel by his hypocrisy. Peter had to learn that flexibility in order to become effective in ministering to the Gentiles. That also meant that he had to learn to start acting out of love, instead of fear, in his relationship to the Gentiles.

Sixth, Paul went on, later in Galatians, to explain the purpose of the law. Galatians 3:24-25 says, “Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” “The purpose of the law” means that *Christ, and the Gospel, have removed the barriers between Jews and Gentiles, between those who are slaves and those who are free, and between men and women.* Galatians 3:26-28 says, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Here, we see that the Gospel breaks down the barriers between cultures.

Paul explained the implications of this tremendous change in Ephesians 2:13-18, where we read: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.” Here, we see that when we practice Biblical flexibility, we will truly break down historic barriers, because of the law, since Christ has freed us from the law. This is the liberty that we preach in Christ.

It is important to understand the importance of godly flexibility in order to learn to share the Gospel with people of other backgrounds and cultures. It is even more important to understand that this flexibility makes it possible for us to help people of various backgrounds become one in Christ. May the Lord richly bless you, as you grow in your understanding of godly flexibility and learn to practice it in your daily ministry for Christ, so that all you do brings glory to Christ.