

## **Mission Barriers**

Let us pray together.

*Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for this day, for the brightness of the sunshine and so much that is lovely, as You commit Yourself to this world to bring newness back into everything. Father, we thank You for Your commitment to us, and we pray that You will teach us through this session. That is Your desire, that is Your promise. And Father, we cling to that promise that we will be those who are taught by God through Your Word, by Your Spirit, and by each other. We ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Now in preparation for the next section of the class, I want you to read very carefully the accounts of Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13 and 14, and the account of Paul going to the city of Athens in Acts 17. We are going to be studying those three sections for the next few sessions of our classes. So I would like you to read them very carefully. In Acts 13 Paul addresses a group of Jews and Gentile God-fearers in the synagogue in Pisidia in Antioch. In Acts 14 Paul is in the pagan city of Lystra where the people want to worship him and Barnabas as if they were Hermes and Zeus. And in Acts 17 Paul is in the city of Athens and ends up addressing the Areopagus council. We have these three different messages. One is to Jewish people, who are thoroughly soaked in the Old Testament, and Gentiles, who also have aligned themselves with the synagogue to worship the God of Israel as the one true God. That is the first message there in Acts 13. The second is to a group of completely uncultured pagans, typical pagans of the day. And the third, in Acts 17, is delivered to a group of more educated pagans in the city of Athens. And Luke has very carefully just given us one example of each of these three addresses in the book of Acts. And obviously Paul gave hundreds, probably thousands, of talks like each of these in different settings over the years of his ministry. But Luke has given us these three examples, and we need to take them very seriously because they teach us a lot about communicating the Gospel in different settings. But we are going to be looking at those three passages over the next few sessions. So I would like you to read those words of Paul in those three different settings: in the synagogue, to uncultured polytheists, and to more educated pagans. Read those three messages very carefully and reflect on what is similar about them and what is different, because we are to be instructed by these just as much as by any other part of Scripture. They are not just there for our historical interest, and to say, "Oh that is interesting. Paul said this." But Scripture is written for our instruction, whether it is a narrative account or theological instruction in one of Paul's letters. These are part of God's Word to us, and they teach us how we should communicate the Gospel today in our own very different setting.

Last session I was talking about my own conversion and using it as an illustration of God's infinite variety of means. In my case, He used the wonderful example of my parents teaching me about what was good, honorable, kind, and loving in human life; the literature my father had read to us, particularly Lewis and Tolkien; and then my own encounter with postmodernism, really, at university. Just the absurdity of so much that is taught in the intellectual culture of our time, that there are no answers whatsoever to the human condition, brought me to a position of complete despair. And some of the movies that I saw at the time and some of the music I listened to had the same impact. I used to listen to a lot of rhythm and blues at that time, much of which is extremely depressing in its message about the human condition. And I listened to some classical music from the early part of the twentieth century by people like Strauss and Marlow, much of which is also extremely depressing, because most of them communicate a lot about the futility of human existence. And then there was the glory of God's creation, even in the middle of winter, which God used to prevent me from committing suicide. And then there was the friend I met at university, Mike Timshack, who is a Canadian, and the beauty of his life as a Christian, his righteousness, hospitality, and kindness, and his preparedness to answer my questions.

And God used the ministry of Francis Schaeffer, because Mike used to play tapes by Schaeffer on Saturday nights in his apartment and have discussions around them. And then God used His Word itself in the book of Ecclesiastes. God used all these things, and others, too, to draw me to Himself and bring me to faith.

Now my wife's story is completely different. Vicki grew up in a Christian home in rural California, and she has no recollection at any point in her life of not believing. She has had faith in Christ since her earliest memories. She loved her parents and trusted them, and she loved the Lord and trusted Him. That has been her life. Some of you are probably like that. When you look back you have no memory of not believing, loving Christ, and desiring to serve and honor Him. She has wonderful parents who are some of our very dearest friends. They are just really marvelous people. And of course, she went through periods of questioning, doubt, and struggle later on, but we all do. All of us continue to. There are none of us who rest in perfect assurance every moment of our existence. We all struggle in one way or another at the various challenges we face from life.

But as we look back at this section, what we are really talking about is the way God draws people to Himself by the work of His Spirit, who uses all sorts of means. We could write a list of all the means that God uses. One is the glory of creation and His work in providence as He cares for us. That is one of the things Paul appeals to when he is talking to the pagans in Acts 14. He says God has not left Himself without a testimony; He sends you your crops in their seasons and He fills your hearts with joy. What Paul is saying to those pagans is that it is God's providential care for the human race as He gives people their harvests and as He gives them gladness in their hearts: the gladness of married life, family, delight in the beauty of spring, the arts, or whatever. These are gifts of God and are a testimony to who He is. God has not left Himself without a testimony. The Holy Spirit uses these things. God's providential rule over history is something that the Holy Spirit uses, too. It might be the history of a person's individual life, and we saw in the life of Manasseh how judgment and being taken in shackles with a hook through his nose to Babylon is God's means of humbling him. It is the same in the case of Naaman. His experience of leprosy is something that God used. God used His providential hand in Naaman's history to draw him to Himself. And we see that today. Earlier I told you about the example of a friend of mine who was converted when he broke his neck as a gymnast. God spoke to him in those circumstances, as his heart kept stopping, his life ebbed away, and he was brought back.

God uses His providence over the lives of individuals to draw them to Himself, and He uses His providence over the lives of nations. You can think about how, through the fall of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and a country like Mongolia, God has used His rule over history to bring the Gospel to millions of people who had no opportunity of hearing it before. Or take another example. Think about what happened in Tiananmen Square, that dreadful massacre in China several years back. God used that in the lives of many, many Chinese people to make them so deeply unhappy and dissatisfied with the rule of their government that it caused many people to ask very serious questions about the human condition. And many people in China came to Christian faith after the massacre in Tiananmen Square. No matter how wicked the things are that the devil does and no matter how dreadful the things are that wicked human beings do, God's power is greater, and He is able to use what seems to be a victory for wickedness to bring about salvation. That is exactly what happened in the work of Christ. It looks like the greatest victory of Satan. Some of the early church fathers used to use the image of Christ as a little fish on a hook, as a bait, to catch the devil. And, of course, the devil was caught and defeated. That is exactly what the New Testament says. It does not use that image, but says that God led the principalities and powers in triumph by the cross. He defeated them by the cross. They thought they had won, but God defeated them. And this is true all the way through history. We see dreadful things like Tiananmen Square and how God defeats the purposes of Satan and wicked men and

draws people into His kingdom, because God rules over history for the sake of the Gospel. So God's providence in history, in the lives of individuals and in the lives of nations, is a means the Holy Spirit uses.

God uses the lives of His people individually. Many of you will have become Christians primarily through somebody who loved you, befriended you, and cared for you, who was a believer. And you saw the quality of their life as a person, just as with me at university. This person Mike was just a man who was filled with kindness. I knew at least a dozen people, maybe 20, who were converted through him during the time I got to know him. And it was primarily because he was so kind and hospitable, and he just opened his life and his apartment to many people like me. His remarkable kindness and graciousness was a display to me, and to many others, of the beauty of the Christian faith lived out in practice. And the Spirit uses the life of the Church in which people see the reality of community and the beauty of relationships and love. That is, of course, exactly what Jesus says, that all people will know you are His disciples by the way they love each other. People will know that the Father sent the Son because they see the reality of community among Christians.

Of course the Holy Spirit uses God's Word directly as people read it. I have a dear friend who was converted in this way. He grew up in a home in Los Angeles where his parents never went to church and never taught him anything about Christianity; he did not know anything about it at all. His parents got divorced when he was a young teenager, he was left alone a lot, and they had a Bible in the house which nobody ever read, just like so many other people do. And he was bored, and he just started reading the New Testament. He became a Christian by the time he got halfway through the book of Acts. He had never heard anybody talking about Christianity, and he did not know there were other Christians. He became a Christian simply by himself. And then he felt, as he read through the New Testament, that he ought to do something useful with his life now that he believed in Jesus Christ. So he went to Guinea Bissau in French West Africa to work with the Peace Corps, because he thought this would be a useful thing to do, to go and serve people. And that is how he ended up coming to L'Abri and how we got to know him. The guy who was heading up the work in Africa had been a worker in one of the branches of L'Abri, and he encouraged him to come and get some solid teaching, because he had never had any. Until he met that guy in Africa, he had never met another Christian.

God uses His Word directly. He even uses little fragments of His Word. I spoke about my friend who was paralyzed from the neck down. He became a Christian that night that he died several times, when the Holy Spirit spoke directly to his heart. But his wife became a Christian in a remarkable way, too. She and a friend were living on a little island called the Island of Sark, between England and France in the Channel Islands. They were living in a ruined house and taking LSD and speed every day. And in that ruined house they found a copy of *Daily Light*. They started reading it every morning and evening, those little fragments of pieces of Scripture, and they were both converted. They were taking speed and LSD and then reading these little pieces of God's Word. And that is how his wife became a Christian. And they decided they should try to find some more Christians. So they went to a church and they turned up at this little Pentecostal church where there were just a bunch of elderly ladies who had been praying that God would bring them somebody. They did not expect somebody quite like these two women, because they were rather counter-culture, to say the least. This was right around 1970, and you can imagine what they looked like at that time. They were very much into the drug culture. And these little old ladies just welcomed them with delight, without a moment's hesitation despite the bizarreness of their appearance. And my friend's wife eventually came to L'Abri and studied there. And she met this guy, he was paralyzed from the neck down, and they got married and have been pillars of that church there ever since. But God uses all sorts of amazing means, little fragments of His Word like that, to draw people to Himself.

God also uses, of course, the writings of believers and commentaries on His Word. God used Luther's commentary on Galatians or Romans (I cannot remember which one) to bring John Wesley to faith. That is when Wesley understood the Gospel, reading that commentary. He was already a minister who did not understand the Gospel at all. And God uses all sorts of other books. I have met all sorts of people who have become Christians through reading C. S. Lewis' children's stories.

And of course, God uses the proclamation of His Word—by us as individuals and by sermons and in evangelistic meetings. The Holy Spirit uses all sorts of means, and the Holy Spirit also is constantly speaking to the heart of people directly, because He is the witness *par excellence*. I know people who have become believers without any contact with Christians at all, but just through God speaking directly to them. You might think that is kind of strange, but I know a guy who is a pastor in a Presbyterian Church in Australia who became a Christian just like that. He had had no contact with Christianity at all. Australia is a very pagan society. He was a farmer, and he was plowing his field one day, and God just spoke directly to him. He got out of his tractor, knelt down in the field, and gave his life to the Lord. And now he is a pastor. He had no contact at all with believers. Now God does not usually save people that way, but the Holy Spirit is always working through all these other means to testify to the Gospel of Christ and to draw people to Him. God has these wonderful ways of saving people.

That brings us to our next section here. We are going to look at the section I have entitled, "Through the Wall," or "Letting Go of Our Culture for the Sake of the Gospel." We have spoken about the way proclamation of God's truth to the Gentiles began in earnest, first in the city of Antioch, and that is recorded for us in Acts 11. That is Syrian Antioch, not the Antioch Paul goes to in Acts 13, but Syrian Antioch. And then missionary journeys begin from that church with the sending out of Paul and Barnabas. The question here is this: why was the church so reluctant to go to the Gentiles? And why were there such obstacles once they were reached? In the book of Acts, of course, we read about their reluctance to go to the Gentiles. Even when they were reached, we read that there were still all sorts of problems. We saw in Acts 10 how Peter himself asks the question, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized?" And we saw the first response of the believers at the beginning of chapter 11. Now these are not unbelieving Jews, but this is the first response of Jews who have put their faith in Christ. The circumcised believers criticized Peter and said in Acts 11:2, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Now, if we turn further on, we discover that the problems did not stop there. They did not go away. If you read Acts 15, we read about the council at Jerusalem and why it takes place: "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'" So the problem did not go away. The problems of communicating the Gospel to the Gentiles, accepting them as members of the Church, and dealing with the issues of Judaism, continued.

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses."

So this causes a huge problem. The first major church council addressed this issue, because it was causing such tension and dispute in the church. And so Peter has to give his account again, the account

that he has already given several times, of how he happened to go to Cornelius' house and what happened there. And you notice how he finishes up. Verse 8 says, "God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us." And you see again the importance of that visible, audible sign of the Spirit's presence that took place in Cornelius' house. "He [God] made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." We are saved by faith in Christ, not by observing these requirements of the laws of Judaism. We are saved in the same way that the Gentiles are. And then they hear Paul and Barnabas, and then James gives his word, and they all come to an agreement that they should encourage the Gentiles not to do things that will be offensive to the Jewish believers. They are to abstain from strangled things, from blood, and so on. They encourage the Gentiles in the new church to be sensitive to the sensibilities of their Jewish brothers and sisters who are believers in Christ. And so they sent a letter out to all the churches.

But of course this is not the end of the problem. We read about the problems in the church in Galatia. In Galatians 2 Paul tells us that it became such a serious problem that Peter and even Barnabas, one of the first to go from Jerusalem to the church at Antioch, stop eating with Gentile believers. And of course what that meant was that they could not share the Lord's Supper together, because the Lord's Supper is a meal. And so the church becomes divided. People cannot go to each other's homes anymore, there is not a reality of community at all in the church, and it is such a serious problem that Paul has to rebuke Peter, the leader of the apostles, publicly about the issue. But again, that is not the end of it. You read the letter to the Colossians, and you find the same problems there in the Colossian churches up in the area near Ephesus, in the center of western modern-day Turkey. There, too, there are teachers who come in and tell people that they have to observe the Jewish food laws, laws about circumcision, laws about the holy days, and very strict views of the Sabbath in a Jewish manner, and many other things as well. Paul has to address that issue there.

Now when you read the pastoral letters, they are still having problems much later. When Paul writes those letters, just in the year or two before his death in the early 60s, he is writing from prison in Rome to Timothy and Titus. And he is again addressing these issues of people seeking to impose the laws of Judaism on Gentile believers. So it was an enormous problem in the life of the church.

The question is why was the church so reluctant to reach the Gentiles, and why did there continue to be such obstacles once the Gentiles were reached? The fundamental answer to that question is the wall that had been built by Judaism between itself and the Gentile world. There were food laws, and it was especially the food laws, that kept them completely separate. They could never eat together or visit in one another's homes because of the problems of uncleanness associated with their food, the preparation of the food, and what was done within their homes. It was impossible to eat with Gentiles or even visit with them. You remember how Peter says, "You are well aware that it is against our law to eat with a Gentile," to associate with a Gentile, or to visit with a Gentile. There are the Sabbath and festival laws which, in their particular interpretation at the New Testament period, also set them completely apart. There was the law of circumcision which very few adults were prepared to undergo. There are a few examples of Gentile converts who were prepared to be circumcised as adults and join themselves more fully to the synagogue, but the vast majority of Gentile converts never went that far. And that is what they described as God-fearers in the New Testament. Those are Gentiles who have not been circumcised, who will not join themselves fully to the Jews. There were ritual laws, which covered issues of cleanliness and purity about every aspect of life. Remember how we referred to Mark 7 and Matthew 15 where the Gospel writers talk about this, the endless laws they had about ritual cleanliness.

Some of these laws, of course, were part of the Law of Moses. But the original intent of the laws was forgotten, and there were thousands of laws that had been added to them. The original purpose of the food and ritual laws was that they would be outward expressions of a separation of the heart to God and a separation of the moral life of God's people to Him. But when we read the Gospels and the book of Acts, we see that often the heart and intent of the law was forgotten. And the effect was that the Jews had become completely separated from those around them by these laws that had been expanded, with incredible detail, to cover every circumstance of life. So the Sabbath laws, for example, told you exactly how far you could walk on the Sabbath without breaking the rule of work. They told you just what you could actually do, in terms of having a meal that was prepared beforehand on the day before, and that it would not involve work. They applied it to absolutely every detail. You knew how much to tithe, not just in a sort of general cent, but your mint, rue, and cumin. You have to make sure that every little thing that you have is taken care of. And you remember I mentioned that they had taken the laws about the temple and the work of the priests and applied them to people's own eating habits and to the washing of their dishes in their kitchens. The law was applied to every aspect of life. We are going to be holy, we are going to be set apart to the Lord, and we are going to be pure in every single little detail of everything we do.

So the original intent was forgotten; the effect was that the Jews had become completely separate from those around them, and also the result was a back-breaking and soul-breaking legalism with which the Pharisees bound the conscience of every Jew. You know Jesus talks about that. He says, "You put enormous burdens on men's shoulders, and then you do not lift a finger to help them." You just impose all these rules on their lives. Everyone has to be constantly thinking, every moment of her life, about what she is going to do. You remember how they criticized the disciples when they are rubbing grain in their hands as they walk through a field on the Sabbath day. That is work. You have all done that if any of you have lived in the country. You walk through a field at harvest time, pick off a grain, rub it, and eat it. I was brought up in the country; we would do that all the time. But the disciples are criticized for working on the Sabbath when they do that. These laws touched absolutely every little detail of life. So it was a back-breaking and soul-breaking legalism.

The grace and forgiveness of God had been replaced by works righteousness. At the very heart of the Law of Moses is grace. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods apart from me." It is grace. God is the deliverer, the Savior of His people; that is the heart of the law in the Old Testament. And of course, that is what the sacrifices taught as well. Everyone needs God's forgiveness, and everyone needs their sin atoned for. The heart of the law is grace, but that grace was completely forgotten, and it was totally replaced by works righteousness. We will do these things and earn a relationship with God, and we are doing them better than anybody else so we have the best relationship with God. That was exactly the mentality. Think of that Pharisee that Jesus speaks about in the temple, saying, "Thank you, God. I am not like other people. I fast...I give a tenth of everything, including my herbs. I do this, I do that, I am doing all these things, Lord, and I am a great servant of yours." That is works righteousness; it is not what the Old Testament teaches at all. Humility before God is the purpose of the law. The law is a pedagogue to lead us to the grace of God and to teach us our sinfulness, among other things. That is the intent of the law; that is why there are all the sacrifices, and that is why the law is applied to the heart, so that nobody should think, "Well this is just an external thing. I am doing these things so God will love me." But it is talking about coveting, about lust, and about hatred. They had made it to be pride in ritual purity and pride in observing traditions. The moral law, that is, the true requirements of the moral commandments of God, have been made null and void by the traditions that set them aside. See, much of the Law of Moses is about justice, mercy, faithfulness, and integrity. It is not about whether I have cleaned a dish or gone through some ritual

before I eat my food, or anything like that. That is not what it is about. It is about justice, mercy, kindness, integrity in work, and all of those things. And that is just forgotten. That is completely emptied by this works righteousness.

You can think, for example, of Jesus' comments on the setting aside of the command to honor your parents. It is a very interesting one. There is a commandment at the heart of the law, respect and honor for parents, and the laws that expand it talk about the need to care for them and look after them as they become elderly. And Jesus addresses that question in Mark 7 and Matthew 15. He speaks about how the Pharisees avoided that responsibility. What the teachers of the law decreed is that anybody could say, "I am going to dedicate my property to God." It sounds very holy, does it not? My property is Corban. That is, it is offered to God. I am going to leave all that I possess to the Lord and His temple, for the worship of God and the spread of His Word. It sounds very spiritual. But then what the law said was this. The person who left all that they possessed to God, to His worship, to the temple, and to the spread of His Word could live on the proceeds of his estate until he died. And then when he died, everything would go to the temple or to the Lord. But it set them free from their obligation to care for their parents as they got old and needy, because their wealth was offered to God, and this was a more holy thing to do. I will give all that I possess to the Lord rather than care for my parents or give it to my children. Now it sounds very spiritual. We have lots of similar things in the church today. Some of the most hurt people I have ever been involved in seeking to minister to in my life were the children of ministers and missionaries who said, "Our lives are dedicated to God; God will look after our children."

I was talking with a student recently, and he was saying that he has spoken to many pastors who say that they do not take a day off. Do we think we know better than God? He has called us to work six days and to rest one day a week; He gave His people several weeks of holiday each year, where they would refrain from their work completely and gather to celebrate, rejoice, have fun, sing and dance, worship at the temple, and just take a break from their lives; and He gave them one year's rest in seven. I really want to challenge you as you go out into ministry—as many of you already are involved in ministry—and are at the same time building your marriage. I remember that a dear pastor friend of mine told me a deputation of his deacons' wives came to him one day and said, "We are widows. We might just as well be widows. We never see our husbands; they always have obligations in the church, and our children are orphans without fathers." That is not what God's Word teaches us to do. Of course He calls you to dedicate yourself to His service and say, "Here I am, Lord; send me." But He does not ask you to set aside the responsibilities His commandments give you to love your wives, to love your husbands, to care for your children, to care for your parents, and to honor them. Now we sometimes have to make difficult decisions and go and serve God far away from our parents. I already mentioned that to you earlier. But we cannot set aside our responsibilities.

Let us turn to Mark 7. See how Jesus puts it when the Pharisees and teachers of the law challenge Him and His disciples. He says in verse 6, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites." That is a very strong word to use here. "As it is written, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they worship me in vain. Their teachings are but rules taught by men.'" When we substitute our ideas of what is holy, what it means to dedicate ourselves to the Lord, for what God says, Jesus says our worship is in vain, because it is just the teachings taught by men. And then in verse 8 He says, "You have let go of the commands of God and instead are holding on to the traditions of men," and then He says again, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" Then He talks about this issue of Corban that I have been addressing, and then He finishes off in verse 13, saying, "thus you nullify the word of God." This is His strongest expression yet. You make God's Word completely nothing. "You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, and you do many things like that." We need to hear God's Word, obey that Word,

delight in that Word, and never think that we know better than He does, because that is really the issue. By adding to God's Word, we end up destroying it, and that is what Jesus says—no matter how spiritual or devout we think our motivations are.

The command to love your neighbor was hedged around with so many restrictions that it prevented people from loving their neighbor. Think of how Jesus is criticized for healing somebody on the Sabbath. He is doing work. But actually the Law of Moses itself says, you know, if somebody's ox or ass falls into a ditch on the Sabbath, you get it out, help them out, and you love your neighbor. If you are supposed to help your neighbor's animal, how much more are you to help your neighbor in his or her need?

The command to love enemies and strangers and to be hospitable to them is at the heart of the Law of Moses. There are innumerable commandments about loving your enemy, about loving strangers, and about being hospitable to the aliens. There are lots of laws about that. And they were made of no effect by the laws of separation. That was the effect of them, to make it impossible to really love an enemy, an alien, or a stranger, because they are unclean. So a huge section of the law is set aside. Jesus is not teaching something new in the Sermon on the Mount when He says, "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you." He is reaffirming something that is at the heart of the Law of Moses. They were to indeed love their enemies and to be hospitable to strangers. The consequence of their legalism was that there was a religion that bore no relationship, or rather only a superficial relationship, to what God had given to His people in the time of Moses and in the years onward. It bore only a superficial, outward relationship to the Word that God had taught His people. And that is why Jesus denounces the teachers of the law so passionately. Let me give you a few references: Matthew 6:5,16; Matthew 9:10-13; Matthew 15:3,19-20; Matthew 23:3-5,23-25. Jesus basically tells them, "You have another religion," like that passage in Matthew 15 and Mark 7. Your worship is just rules taught by men; it is not what God taught at all.

Now this tradition in Judaism influenced the early Christians, and that is why we read about the problems in the passages we have looked at in Acts 10, with Peter saying what he did in Cornelius' home, and in Acts 11, with those believers criticizing Peter. And we have it in Acts 15, Galatians 2, etc. So there are many examples of the way the early church was influenced by this tradition.

The apostle Paul is the one who appears to understand the issues most clearly. Peter did as well, of course, and that is evident if you read Peter's words that we read earlier in Acts 15:5-11. Peter's words at the council of Jerusalem at the beginning of Acts 11 and in Cornelius' home show us that Peter really understood. But the pressures were so great on that one occasion that he backs off from them. But it is Paul who appears to have the clearest insight into what the Gospel meant for this dilemma, because as long as the early church was shaped by this heritage of Judaism, then mission to the Gentiles was impossible. Happy churches were impossible, in which Jews and Gentiles could live side by side, could visit each other's homes, and could really grow into the family of God. It is Paul who has the deepest understanding of the issues and who spells it out for us.

An important point I want to make here is this: what is our identity as believers? That is, where do I get my source of self-worth; where do I get my sense of security? This is who I am. This is what makes my life really precious. Who am I at the very heart? Paul addresses this issue in Philippians 3:4-9. It is a very interesting passage. Paul is addressing the problem of the Judaizers requiring circumcision of the Gentiles. And look how strongly he puts it in verse 2, "Watch out for those dogs." That is what he calls them, "those men who do evil." That is a very strong word for people who are requiring Gentile believers to observe the laws of Judaism. "Those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the

circumcision, that is, the true circumcision, those who worship by the Spirit of God who glory in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in the flesh.” Now with “in the flesh” here, he is obviously taking off from the fact that circumcision is done to the flesh, the cutting off of a piece of flesh. You put no confidence in the flesh, but then Paul expands the meaning of the term “flesh” here. And sometimes this term means the sinful nature, like in Galatians 5 for example, where he talks about the Spirit and the flesh fighting against each other. But here he is talking about those things in which we put confidence as human beings, those things from which we get our sense of identity and self-worth. That is really what he means by “flesh” here. “Though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more...” Paul is setting out the things that once gave him a sense of self-worth and a sense of identity. “This was me; this was who I was. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I was an Israelite, a true Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin,”—one of the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin that were not taken captive.—“A Hebrew of the Hebrews, I was the model of everything a Jew should be. In regard to the law of Pharisee,” and he adds elsewhere, “of the strictest sect, full of zeal persecuting those who I thought of as heretics. As for righteousness, to every detail of the law, I was faultless. I devoted my life to this; this is who I was.” But then Paul says, “But, whatever was to my profit I now consider a loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish,” and actually the Greek word is much stronger. It is just dung, manure. That is what he says. “I consider all that just dung in comparison with knowing Christ. That is what really matters to me. That is who I am now. I am a man who is in Christ; that is my identity. That is where I get my sense of self-worth, my sense of dignity. That is what makes me tick.” Use whatever expression you want to use. Where is your sense of self-worth, where is your sense of identity? Is it in your race, in your cultural heritage, in your church heritage, or that you belong to the best Church of all? Where is our sense of identity? And Paul says our sense of identity must be in Christ.