

Galatians
The Unity of the Gospel

Lesson #3 for October 15, 2011

Scriptures: Galatians 2:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; John 17:1-21; John 8:31-36; Colossians 3:11.

1. This lesson is about unity and diversity within the Christian church. It should be clear from reading Galatians 3:28,29 and Colossians 3:11 how Paul felt about the unity within the church. But, it is also true that as the gospel spreads to new cultures, new nations, and new social situations, a certain amount of diversity is going to be introduced.
2. John Calvin believed that disunity and division were the Devil's chief devices against the church. But, that same John Calvin did not hesitate to stand up against the recognized church of his time. He also thought it was necessary to burn at the stake a Protestant reformer who was an Arian. What would have happened if Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, had chosen to conform for the sake of unity instead of standing up for salvation by faith alone? What do you think John Calvin and Martin Luther would say about the ecumenical movement?

Had the Reformer yielded a single point, Satan and his hosts would have gained the victory. But his unwavering firmness was the means of emancipating the church, and beginning a new and better era.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 166.

3. Read Galatians 2:1-14. In this passage the question of circumcision became a major issue. When Paul and Barnabas were invited to go to Jerusalem for the conference in A.D. 49, (Acts 15) they took with them Titus, a Greek, and refused to have him circumcised. This forced the Jerusalem group to deal with the issue of circumcision. What were the Jewish Christians doing to try to spy out the freedom that Paul and his non-Jewish converts had? Did they form a committee to try to find out if Titus was circumcised? How would you like to be on such a committee? They were not sure if it was safe to eat with him!
4. Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-13. In this passage Paul was adamant that the church must never be divided into groups based on the charismatic characteristics of this or that leader or even the slightly different ways in which they taught.
5. When Paul and Barnabas went down to Jerusalem for the conference in A.D. 49, there were many questions about the gospel which Paul was preaching. In order to put all of these questions to rest, Paul presented his version of the gospel to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem. (Galatians 2:2,6-10) What do you think of Paul's comments about the leaders in Jerusalem. Was he being respectful? Is that a good way to talk about church leaders? Those Christian leaders in Jerusalem listened to Paul and Barnabas and agreed that their gospel was solid and correct. They parted with the understanding that the leaders in Jerusalem would work to evangelize Jews while Paul and Barnabas and others working with them would evangelize Gentiles. There is no hint in these verses to suggest that there remained any controversy between them. (Compare Acts 15:1-5) The truths of the gospel allow for no compromise.
6. Read Philippians 2:2. Is this the basis for ecumenism? Paul was clearly in favor of unity when it did not involve compromise concerning the truth or the core values of the gospel. Wasn't Paul actually acting like a true Christian and a disciple of Christ? (John 13:35)

7. At what point was circumcision no longer a mark of God's true followers? In Paul's day, was it nothing more than a legalistic tradition? Why should being circumcised have anything to do with whom one would eat lunch? Is there anything wrong with being circumcised? Was this such an important issue that Paul needed to oppose Peter in public and to his face over it? Was this issue actually a challenge to the gospel itself?
8. Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign, separating him from his pagan neighbors. It was probably given so that if any male should be tempted to get involved with the rampant fertility cult "religions" surrounding them, it would be impossible for him to hide the fact that he was a member of Abraham's clan.
9. Clearly, circumcision was only intended for the male descendants of Abraham. Nothing in the Bible suggests that any similar ceremony should be performed on females. Yet, all descendants of Abraham were invited into the covenant relationship with God. So, in Paul's day, what was the function of circumcision? Was the outward circumcision always a clear symbol of circumcision of the heart? (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:29) Peter had already had that experience with Cornelius. (Acts 10-11:18) Shouldn't that have ended this argument? Look back at our first lesson on Galatians and review the many efforts Jesus Himself went through to try to rid the disciples of their Jewish biases.
10. Does circumcision represent salvation by works? Does it represent a kind of confidence in what we can do as opposed to a total dependence on what Christ has done and will do for us? What does it have to do with our picture of God? Is this an issue of religious freedom?
11. Clearly, circumcision was a prized sign of Jewish national identity. Approximately 150 years before Jesus's birth, Palestinian Jews forced all males living in their territories and even some in surrounding nations which fell under their jurisdiction to be circumcised. Some believed it was essential for salvation. There are even ancient epigrams declaring, "Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna [hell]."—C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1975), p. 172.
12. But, remember that Paul himself was circumcised. When young Timothy joined Paul's group with the intention of ministering to both Jews and Gentiles, Paul had him circumcised. (Acts 16:3) But, remember that Titus, also a part of Paul's group, was never circumcised. Why did Paul circumcise Timothy but condemn Peter in Galatians?
13. So, what is the core issue? Is this a question of faith alone versus faith plus works? Why is it essential to understand that salvation is by faith in Christ alone? What does faith in Christ alone mean? What does this have to do with Christian freedom?
14. As Seventh-day Adventists, what special identifying marks set us apart from other churches? Sabbath observance? Our beliefs in the nature of man and the state of the dead? Our acceptance of the spirit of prophecy? Tithing? Health reform? Why do we do these things? Do we have legitimate reasons for doing them even today? Or, are they outdated markers to which we cling in order to show our separateness?
15. So, how do we actually determine when it is appropriate to stand up for an essential truth even when it may seem to be divisive in our church group? Do we tend to be lumpers or splitters? In scientific fields there are always those two groups. Biology is an excellent example. Some biologists seek to describe new findings as new species. Others try to lump them in with similar creatures that have been described before.

16. Some years ago, there was a great argument about whether or not Adventists should eat cheese sandwiches! While this may be a health issue in some cases, is it a valid reason for causing division within the church?
17. Read again Galatians 2:1-10. What is Christian freedom? Read John 8:31-36; Romans 6:6,7; 8:2,3; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:7,8; Hebrews 2:14,15. What do these verses tell us about true Christian freedom? Christians are to be free from the slavery to sin—even the law of sin and death. When Christians follow Christ and seek to become more and more like Him, they are freed from slavery to the ruling spirits of the universe. They are also free from their fear of death.
18. What does freedom truly mean to a Christian? Can a Christian do whatever he wants to do? Of course! He can do what he wants because a real Christian understands what is right to do and why it is right, and he chooses to do that because it is the right thing to do! Thus, because he would never choose to do what is wrong, he is free to do whatever he wants to do because it will always be the right thing to do. (See *Testimonies to Ministers* 119) Christians know what is right and why it is right. Is this a case of just obeying the rules? Why do we need the rules? They guide us until we discover the truth for ourselves.
19. While we all want to be more like Jesus, God never intended for us to be cookie-cutter Christians—all exactly alike and all doing exactly the same things. Each of us has been given his/her own gifts and talents. Thus, each of us has a different set of tasks assigned to us by God. Peter was apostle to the circumcised; Paul to the uncircumcised. Each of them had individual skills appropriate to their tasks. In some cases, their messages may have sounded different because of the different audiences they were addressing.
20. Which raises our question again: Are we absolutely sure about the core beliefs and values that compose the gospel so that we can adapt our teachings and behaviors to different situations without compromising the core beliefs of the gospel? Do we have the right to force those beliefs on others? (Revelation 13)
21. What are the most effective ways of Christian evangelism? What should we as Christians be doing to help finish the gospel? Adventists have been almost wedded to the idea of public evangelism by “efforts,” or “crusades,” in the form of mass public meetings. This form of evangelism places almost all the responsibility on the pastor or evangelist which is not at all what God intended. God intends for each of us to find ways to do personal evangelism appropriate to us and our friends. Converts who come into the church this way are much more likely to remain in the church than are those who have come in exclusively as a result of some mass campaign.
22. In this setting, unity in diversity means that each of us is to exercise his or her talents and at the same time praise God for what has been accomplished by others in the church through their talents. Or, does everyone have to do things our way?
23. So, what is the basis of Christian unity? Hasn’t God actually modeled the oneness or unity that He desires to see in the church. (John 17:21; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live and work in perfect harmony, Each with His Own responsibilities. If we lived and worked like that in perfect harmony and love, would the world notice? (John 13:35)
24. Read Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 3:6; 5:23. These verses make it very clear that although we may be different and have different gifts and talents, we are all one in the Christian body. We are described as Christ’s body—each one a separate part. Jewish and Gentile members of all races, cultures, languages, and nations are members

of the same body and share in the promise that God made through Christ Jesus. Christ is Himself the Saviour of the church, His body. We must never let misguided confidence in charismatic human leaders cause us to divide up into groups.

25. Read Galatians 2:11-13. In what ways are we like Peter in this passage? Do we have ingrained prejudices? Do they hinder our personal evangelism? Do we behave in a different manner when we are with other “Christians” than we do when we are by ourselves or with non-church members? What was Peter actually doing in Antioch that caused this controversy? Peter—following God’s instructions—had been one of the foremost Christian leaders to welcome Gentiles into the church. (Acts 10) After that experience, shouldn’t he have been willing to openly eat with Gentiles? (Galatians 2:13) Try to imagine the scene. Everyone was getting along just fine. Jewish Christians were eating with Gentile Christians. Then, some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem arrived; and suddenly, things changed! Paul actually called Peter a hypocrite. Some people think that Peter was the first pope. Does this sound like that is true? Are we following any practices in our church today that might be identified as hypocrisy?
26. In Paul’s day, there were Jewish synagogues scattered around the Mediterranean. Those were primarily for the purpose of worship by the Jews in the Diaspora. But, there were Gentiles who were attracted to the Jewish form of religion and who chose to worship in those synagogues. Many of them did not go all the way and become circumcised. Those people were called God-fearers, but they were always regarded as second-class saints. Should the Christian church have followed this custom? Absolutely not! Some of Paul’s Judaizing opponents wanted to create a kind of super-convert among Christian believers—those who were not only Christians but followed all the Jewish ceremonial rites.
27. Paul correctly recognized that to do that would be to undermine the truth of the gospel. Anyone who wanted to add or subtract from the truth that Paul had presented was compromising the gospel. (Galatians 5:2)
28. Was Paul justified in his criticism of Peter? Would you do what Paul did? Have you ever been criticized as Peter was for some of your Christian beliefs or behaviors?
29. Do we ever succumbed to peer pressure? Customs and practices have changed a lot in our church over the past 50 years. Is this as God would have it? Or, are we gradually being sucked into worldly practices by peer pressure? If Peter had written about his confrontation with Paul in the church in Antioch, what do you think he would have said? Are you more like Peter? Or, more like Paul?
30. Those of us who believe in the larger-view, trust, healing, model of the plan of salvation may be viewed by some as splitters. Is that a fair characterization? Or, is this view of God and the plan of salvation a core, essential part of the gospel?

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