

The Gospel in Galatians

The Unity of the Gospel

Lesson #3 for July 15, 2017

Scriptures: Galatians 2:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; John 8:31-36; 17:1-21; 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. When we get to heaven, will we all be melded into a single race and single culture? Or, will we find a smorgasbord of different peoples from all cultures and all ages to get acquainted with and to live with for eternity?
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 Aryan, one who did not believe that Jesus had a pre-existence before being born here on this earth. What would have happened if Martin Luther, the father 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? What would they say if they could observe the closer and closer ties now developing between their churches and the Roman Catholic Church?

Had the Reformer [Luther] 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** 166.3. [Content in brackets added.]

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, (See 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! And what would happen if many Gentiles wanted to join the Christian church? Would its distinctive Jewish flavor be lost? For the first more than 15 years after the death of Jesus, the gospel had been preached to Jews only. (Acts 11:19) Is a person more savable if he is circumcised? Their Jewish bigotry would not allow them to attend church with Gentiles or to eat with Gentiles.
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. Read Galatians 2:7. Does this verse imply that there really was a difference between Paul's gospel and that of the leaders like Peter in Jerusalem? If we could listen to Paul and then to Peter, would we see a difference in their gospels? Remember that those Christian leaders were the ones who later asked Paul to take that vow that led to his arrest and eventually to his death. God did not authorize Paul to compromise with them as much as he did! (See *Acts of the Apostles* 405.1.)

6. When Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem for the conference in A.D. 49, there were many questions about which gospel Paul was preaching. What do you think were some of those questions? In order to put all of those questions to rest, Paul presented his version of the gospel to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem. (Galatians 2:2,6-10) Should we consult together with church leaders from time to time to make sure that we are preaching the true gospel? Or, as was true in the days of Paul, could church leaders today possibly be wrong?
7. Don't you wish that you could have a recording of those meetings? What would Paul have to say to the disciples of Jesus about the gospel? Did they meet as equals? How would the former Pharisee, member of the Sanhedrin, and Roman citizen relate to Galilean fishermen, zealots, and tax collectors? How did they feel about Paul?
8. Do you think either Paul or the Christian leaders in Jerusalem personally knew the Judaizers who were causing trouble in Galatia?
9. Where did Paul get his version of the gospel? Had he learned any of it from them? Did he work it out alone while in Arabia, using his understanding of the Old Testament? Or, did he get it from visions? Or, from his fellow church members like Barnabas in Antioch?
10. What do you think of Paul's comments about the leaders (Peter, John, and James—the stepbrother of Jesus) 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 among them. (Compare Acts 15:1-5, 27-29.) The truths of the gospel allow for no compromise.
11. What was the big deal about circumcision? See Genesis 17:1-22; Galatians 2:3-5; 5:2,6; Acts 15:1-5. Was this really a religious issue? Or, was this really only a matter of Jewish prejudice and bigotry? Why had God given circumcision in the first place? What was God's design and purpose for circumcision? See Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:29.
12. 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?
13. 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.
14. 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—male and female—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 against the Gentiles.

15. 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?

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) 172. [Content in brackets is in original.]

16. 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, Titus, also a part of Paul's group, was never circumcised. Why did Paul have Timothy circumcised but condemn Peter in Galatians? Paul was planning to use Timothy in working for Jewish people to convince them of the gospel. If Timothy had not been circumcised, the Jews would have despised him and refused to listen to him. Peter and Paul were both circumcised. That was not the issue between them. The issue was Jewish prejudice and bigotry. Did the Jews realize they were bigoted?
17. 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)
18. So, what is the core issue? Is circumcision 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?
19. As Seventh-day Adventists, what special identifying mark or 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 believing them even today? Or, are they outdated markers to which we cling in order to show our separateness? Would any of these be equivalent to what circumcision was in the days of the apostles? If we believe these things are important in our understand of the gospel, are we suggesting that faith in Jesus Christ alone is not sufficient for salvation? We have a fairly long list of things we think people should do and/or believe before they are accepted into the Adventist Church.
20. 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.
21. Jesus, Paul, and John talked about freedom. See Galatians 2:4; 3:23-25; 4:7-8; John 8:31-36; Romans 6:6-7; 8:2-3; Hebrews 2:14-15; and 1 Corinthians 15:55. What kind of freedom is that? Freedom from what? Are Seventh-day Adventist Christians today free? Do you think the former Pharisees among the Christian believers formed a committee to find out if Titus was circumcised?
22. Some years ago, there was a great argument about whether or not Adventists should eat cheese sandwiches! While that may be a health issue in some cases, is it a valid reason

for causing division within the church?

23. Read again Galatians 2:1-10. 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 freed from their fear of death.

24. 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!

All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us.—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages** 668.3.

25. 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!

Every soul who believes present truth will be brought where he will be required to give a reason of the hope that is in him. The people of God will be called upon to stand before kings, princes, rulers, and great men of the earth, and they must know that they do know what is truth.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* February 18, 1890, par. 23; *TM** 119.1; *1SM** 415.3; *Mar** 23.3; *OFC** 317.3; *YRP** 124.3.

26. 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.

27. 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. (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) 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 his task. In some cases, their messages may have sounded different because of the different audiences they were addressing.

28. 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)

29. Have you ever been turned off by the approaches taken by some others in their attempts to reach out for the gospel? Do we need to recognize that young people are going to be attracted by different methods than are the older adults? Do the use of different types of music or presentation mean that the core issues of the gospel have been changed? If we ourselves are not doing anything to reach out to others with the gospel, do we have any right to criticize those who are trying?

30. 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. That 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 into the church exclusively as a result of some mass campaign. What methods are most successful in our day?

31. 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?
32. So, what is the basis for 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)
33. Read Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; and 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 into groups.
34. Read Galatians 2:11-13. In what ways are we like Peter in this passage? Or, are we like Paul? 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; he did that after receiving that very clear guidance from God. (See 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 make it sound like that was true? Are we following any practices in our church today that might be identified as hypocrisy?
35. In Paul's day, there were Jewish synagogues scattered around the Mediterranean. Those were made primarily for the purpose of worship by the Jews who spread out 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 also followed all the Jewish ceremonial rites including circumcision.
36. 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)
37. 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?
38. Read Galatians 3:28-29 and Colossians 3:11. Do we really believe those verses? We no

longer have to deal with the Jew versus Gentile question or the slave question. However, do we as a church treat women as fully equal with men? When deciding how we should deal with such issues, should we do a careful study of the Scriptures? Or, is a vote at the General Conference session enough to determine what is right?

We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. **The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance.** Satan can sow discord; Christ alone can harmonize the disagreeing elements. Then let every soul sit down in Christ's school and learn of Christ, who declares Himself to be meek and lowly of heart. Christ says that if we learn of Him, worries will cease and we shall find rest to our souls.—Ellen G. White, *Biblical Counsel on Solving Church Difficulties—Letter 29, 1889*.^{*} (Written November 8, 1889, from Battle Creek, Michigan); *11MR* 266.1; *15MR* 150.1; *1888* 1092.1.

Even the best of men, if left to themselves, will make grave blunders. **The more responsibilities placed upon the human agent, the higher his position to dictate and control, the more mischief he is sure to do in perverting minds and hearts if he does not carefully follow the way of the Lord.** At Antioch Peter failed in the principles of integrity. Paul had to withstand his subverting influence face to face. This is recorded that others may profit by it, and that the lesson may be a solemn warning to the men in high places, that they may not fail in integrity, but keep close to principle.—Ellen G. White, *MS 122, 1897*;^{*} *6BC*^{*} 1108.5. [Bold type is added.]

39. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is becoming more and more diverse as we reach out to new groups around the world. How can we avoid falling back into our cultural and ethnic prejudices? Are we very clear on what the core beliefs in the Christian gospel are? What are the most important things that unite us? Are there things that threaten to divide us?
40. Do we ever succumb 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? (2 Peter 3:15-16) Are we more like Peter? Or, more like Paul?
41. Those of us who believe in the larger-view, great-controversy, 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?
42. To the world looking on, do we as the Seventh-day Adventist Church look like the body of Christ? If we were doing all the right things, wouldn't we be in the kingdom by now? What things do we need to change? Is our unity clearly *in Christ*?

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