

**“PRESERVING THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL”**

As we continue our study of this biographical section of the letter to the Galatians, we see Paul shifting his emphasis just a bit as he continues to defend himself against the charges that were being brought against him by the Judaizers, the false teachers who were troubling the Galatian churches. Up to this point, Paul has focused on carefully showing his independence from the Jerusalem apostles. He has said that he did not receive the gospel that he preached from the other apostles, nor from any man, but through a revelation from God. Paul’s reason for emphasizing his independence was to refute the Judaizers’ accusation that his gospel was inferior to that which was preached by the twelve. In this text, however, Paul focuses not so much upon his independence from the Jerusalem apostles but upon his essential unity with them, a unity that was demonstrated by what took place during the visit that he describes in these verses. And the theme that stands out very clearly in these verses is the supremacy of the gospel. In the events that Paul describes here, everything is made subservient to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The visit to Jerusalem described in this passage took place fourteen years after Paul’s conversion, or possibly fourteen years after his first visit to Jerusalem since the text does not specify the starting point of the fourteen years. From the book of Acts, we know of at least four trips that Paul made to Jerusalem. The first was made shortly after his conversion (Acts 9:26-30). This is the visit that Paul describes in Galatians 1. The second visit was made to bring a relief collection to Christians who were suffering from a famine (Acts 11:27-30). The third visit is described in Acts 15 and was for the purpose of

what is sometimes referred to as the Jerusalem Council. And the fourth visit was the one in which Paul was arrested and sent to Rome (Acts 21). Of these four visits, the second and third are the only possibilities for the visit that Paul is talking about in this passage. At first glance, the Jerusalem Council might seem the most likely, especially since that council was called in order to settle the issue that is Paul's chief concern in this letter: the status of Gentile converts to Christianity. Specifically, the council addressed the question of whether or not Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised. Acts 15:1 says that there was a group at the council that was saying "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." That sounds very similar to the teachings that Paul was confronting in this letter, and this has led a few commentators to conclude that the visit being described here is the one that took place during the Jerusalem Council.

However, there are a number of reasons why this is highly unlikely. First of all, the Jerusalem Council was a public council; but Paul says that this meeting with the apostles was a private one. Second, Paul attended the Jerusalem Council because he was sent as a delegate from the church in Antioch; but in this text Paul says that he went to Jerusalem because of a revelation. This fits well with the famine relief visit in Acts 11, where Luke tells us that Paul went to Jerusalem in response to a prophecy that foretold the coming of a great famine. Third, if the visit described in this chapter was the Jerusalem Council, then it is extremely odd that Paul does not mention the official decree that was made at that council, the decree that said that Gentile believers do not have to get circumcised. Citing that decree would have ended all discussion on the matter. It would have left the

Judaizers without a leg to stand on when it came to their criticisms of Paul. So it is highly unlikely that Paul would not have made more explicit mention of that momentous decision if he was writing this letter after the Jerusalem Council took place. For these reasons, it is most likely that the visit described here is the one that is mentioned in Acts 11, the famine relief visit.

If this was the case, it explains why the apostles made special mention of caring for the poor in verse 10. It was a time of famine, a famine that was especially difficult for the poor churches in Judea. The largely Gentile churches to whom Paul ministered were generally in better financial condition than the churches in Judea. For this reason, Paul took up special collections for the poorer saints in Jerusalem on a number of occasions. This is something from which we can draw an important lesson. We Christians in America enjoy a far greater degree of material prosperity than believers in many other parts of the world. We should not forget our poorer brothers and sisters in the Lord, but should follow Paul's example in doing what we can to provide help to fellow believers in need.

Paul says that he took Barnabas and Titus along with him on this visit. Barnabas was a Jewish Christian. He was the man who had first introduced Paul to the other apostles shortly after his conversion. Titus, however, was a Greek, a Gentile. It seems that Paul took him along on this visit in order to see if he would be accepted by the Jerusalem apostles. He was a "test case." Perhaps this was Paul's way of putting a face on this

matter. What would Peter and his companions say about Titus? Did they think that it was necessary for him to be circumcised?

It is interesting to note that, on a different occasion, Paul went ahead and had another of his co-workers in ministry, Timothy, circumcised. This took place in Acts 16, as Paul was preparing for one of his missionary journeys. He wanted to take Timothy with him, but he knew that there were going to be a lot of Jews in the towns he would be visiting. Timothy was half-Jewish, but he had not been circumcised yet. In that instance, Paul was willing to make a concession on this matter and have Timothy circumcised. But he refused to do so when he brought Titus to Jerusalem. What was the difference? Was Paul being inconsistent?

There was a difference. Circumcision itself was a matter of indifference to Paul. In itself, it was neither bad nor good. His decision to have Timothy circumcised in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts during his missionary journey is an example of the policy that he elaborates in 1 Corinthians 9, where he writes,

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might

win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. [1 Cor. 9:19-23]

Now it needs to be pointed out that this is a passage that is easy to misapply, and there are plenty of examples in our culture of how Christians have done so. Paul was not saying that he was willing to do anything to win a hearing for the gospel. He certainly would not have been willing to trivialize the gospel in the way it is often trivialized today in hopes of making it more appealing to people. He would not have been willing to pattern the church's worship and ministry after the idolatrous worship and immoral lifestyle of his pagan neighbors. Paul was no compromiser. But he was willing to be flexible on matters that were indifferent to the gospel. In the context in which he decided to circumcise Timothy, he determined that circumcision was an indifferent matter.

This was not the case, however, when Paul brought Titus with him to Jerusalem. There were men there, the false brothers mentioned in verse 4, who wanted to replace the freedom of the gospel with slavery to the law. In this context, circumcision was not a matter of indifference. It was a threat to the gospel, because these men were saying that you could not be right with God without it. Were it not for those men, Paul probably would have been willing to have Titus circumcised. As Calvin says, it was as if Paul said, "I would have been prepared to circumcise Titus if higher matters had not been

involved.” The gospel was at stake in this matter, and for this reason, Paul could not yield.

And the Jerusalem apostles agreed with him on this. Titus was not forced to be circumcised. This was incredibly significant for Paul’s response to the Judaizers, because they were accusing him of not being faithful to the message that was being proclaimed by the other apostles. But Paul tells that Galatians that the Jerusalem apostles were in agreement with him on the matter of circumcision. Their acceptance of Titus as a brother, without requiring him to be circumcised, demonstrated their solidarity with Paul in upholding and proclaiming that justification comes by faith alone, and not by works of the law.

Another thing that is important to note in this passage is the fact that Paul does not hesitate to call people false brothers. These men had proven themselves to be un-Christian by their teaching, and Paul was not about to allow them to continue to go by the name Christian when they were denying what was most fundamental to the Christian faith. This reminds us that the church always has to be on the lookout for false teachers in its midst. The Scriptures warn us that they are going to be present. This is why it is of the utmost importance that we keep our understanding of the gospel fresh. We need to be able to detect falsehood when it arises. If we fail to do this, we will one day find that we have lost the gospel altogether. And if you doubt that, just look around at those churches that still call themselves Christian but have allowed false teaching to take root in their midst. You may hear about following Jesus’ example if you go to those churches. You

may hear about caring for the poor and downtrodden. You may hear about the importance of doing all sorts of good deeds and being a kind-hearted person. You will hear all about whatever moral attributes are valued in the secular world. But you will not hear the gospel of justification by faith alone. You will not hear Christ proclaimed as the only hope for wretched sinners. You will not hear about the freedom that can only be found in Christ. And the reason why you won't hear it is because those churches decided, at some point in their past, that they were not going to get bent out of shape over matters of doctrine. They refused to follow Paul's example in calling false brothers what they really are, and now they have lost the gospel.

The Jerusalem apostles did not add anything to Paul's message, not even circumcision. They recognized his gospel as the true gospel, the same gospel that they had been called to preach. And so when they parted with Paul, they offered him the right hand of fellowship. They were co-laborers for the same cause and the same Master, though they had different fields in which to labor. Paul's ministry focused more upon the Gentiles, while Peter's focused more upon the Jews. But the gospel that they preached was the same.

The reason why Paul was so rigid and inflexible on this matter with the Judaizers was because he understood what was at stake. The gospel was at stake. And the gospel has to be preserved at all costs. It has to be defended against all forms of attack and distortion, because it is only through the gospel that we can know and receive Christ. And receiving Christ is everything. His saving work will not do us one bit of good if he remains outside

of us. We have to receive him, and he can only be received in truth when he is received as he is presented in the gospel. Calvin puts it this way:

“This, then, is the true knowledge of Christ, if we receive him as he is offered by the Father: namely, clothed with his gospel. For just as he has been appointed as the goal of our faith, so we cannot take the right road to him unless the gospel goes before us. And there, surely, the treasures of grace are opened to us; for if they had been closed, Christ would have benefited us little.” [*Institutes*, 3.2.6]

We can only receive Christ by receiving him as he is presented to us: clothed with his gospel. Any other gospel is a false gospel, a gospel that leads to a false Christ, a gospel that produces false Christians. This is why Paul was so vigilant in preserving the truth of the gospel. And it why we must exhibit the same vigilance in the church today.