

March 2, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Contending for the Truth of the Gospel*

Galatians 2:1-10

*1 Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.*

This was the second time after his conversion that Paul went to the center of influence as it were of the Christian church – Jerusalem. He'd been there before for 15 days and by his account, stayed with Peter and met briefly with James, the Lord's brother. Now here he goes again, and the whole point of this narrative is to show the Galatians two things: the gospel he preached was not created out of Bible studies with the apostles in Jerusalem, but was directly handed down through revelation by God. And that those in Jerusalem who were leaders in the church were in unity over what he had been preaching.

*2 It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.*

Paul did not go to Jerusalem because he'd been called on the carpet by the apostles. **He went in response to a revelation.** We're not sure what this revelation looked like – Paul doesn't say anything about another Damascus road experience – but we are sure that the revelation he is talking about is a revelation from the same God that he said in chapter one, *'...was pleased to reveal His Son in me.'* **It is important to understand that we ought to live our lives according to revelation.** I'm not talking about weird visions in the night and spooky sounds in the attic and warms fuzzies or chills up and down our spines in the service. It is the kind of revelation Jesus lived by when He was on the earth.

In John 5:19, Jesus says, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner."* In other words, He operated according to revelation – He wasn't responding to events – He didn't get His marching orders from the Sanhedrin – the Father gave Him revelation of what He was doing and the Son simply operated in response to that vision. There was a popular saying years ago: WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? I think a much better acronym would be WIJD – What IS Jesus Doing? The truth is that God is at work in this world whether we see it or not – He is at work whether we know it or not. Just up from verse 19 in John Jesus told those blind Pharisees that, *"My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."* **He is at work and we need to get connected with what He is doing.**

And for that to happen we need a revelation from Heaven. Perhaps He is calling you to a mission of mercy here at home – or a mission to an unreached people group abroad. Perhaps God is asking you to join Him in funding His work at home or on some foreign shore. There is no option in the kingdom to do nothing. You are a goer – a sender – or disobedient. But we need revelation. Revelation is good – revelation is right – this is not spooky stuff – the last word in the book IS the Revelation of Jesus Christ and it shows us how it has been at work, is at work, and will be working in the future.

**It takes a revelation from heaven to break into our little worlds that are filled with the stuff of ordinary life and ignite our hearts for the purpose of God.** At any rate, Paul had a revelation that compelled him to travel down to Jerusalem. And at least part of what he heard from God was that he was supposed to present what he had been doing – the gospel he was preaching among the Gentiles – to those who had the reputation in the church – so that his work would not have been in vain.

Don't think though, that Paul was entertaining the thought that whatever he had been doing would prove in the end somehow, to be vain. Paul had no doubts about the authenticity of his gospel. Paul was submitting his ministry to the leading men of the church so that his gospel preaching would not be hindered by any misunderstandings about the truth of the gospel. He said that he met with these guys in private. I imagine he was talking at least about some of the original apostles who were still in Jerusalem, and for the sake of unity, if there were some among them that were inclined to link some Jewish rites and traditions with salvation, they could talk through those things unhindered in private. Paul knew that for the church of God in the world, it was crucial that both the Gentile and Jewish believers understood that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ and not with any additional requirements.

This also highlights the implication here that we ought to care about unity – especially doctrinal unity on crucial issues. ***It matters what we say about the truths of the gospel.*** There are certain things that are non-negotiable. There are truths that are central to the gospel that cannot be compromised. Now we know there are peripheral doctrines that are not central to the message of salvation that we can safely differ on. ***But there are doctrines of the faith, that once removed, will allow the whole structure to fall.***

Doctrines like the deity of Christ, the Trinity, justification by faith, the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of hell, to name a few. And believe it or not, that doctrine is coming under increasing skepticism and doubt. The doctrine that says that there is a real place of eternal judgment and everlasting torment that is reserved for those who reject Christ in this life is increasingly seen as antiquated, medieval, and even hostile to the gospel itself.

Clark Pinnock and Delwin Brown, co-authored a book in the 90's called ***Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue.*** In that book, Pinnock, a Canadian theologian who styles himself an evangelical wrote this about the doctrine of hell: ***'I was led to question the traditional belief in everlasting conscious torment because of moral revulsion and broader theological considerations, not first of all on scriptural grounds. It just does not make any sense to say that a God of love will torture people forever for sins done in the context of a finite life...'*** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990) 226-227

The only problem here is that this is a non-negotiable doctrine as far as Christ was concerned. It was He who taught it. It is seen in the Old Testament in types and shadows; it is present and real all over the New Testament and gospels and in the parables and teachings of Christ – it is one of the last negative things mentioned in the Bible in the book of the Revelation – and if you remove this because you don't like it, the gospel of grace falls to the ground. It makes a difference what we believe and teach about hell. ***It makes a difference in our lives – it covers all of life with a seriousness and sense of urgency that would not otherwise exist. It causes us to walk with trembling and tears – it makes sin more sinful – holiness more holy – life and death more personal – and the gospel more precious. It matters what we teach and believe about the gospel.***

***3 But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.***

This is kind of a curious statement that immediately tells us that there is more to the story than just Paul having a talk with the Jerusalem elders. In verse two he is talking about a private meeting discussing his ministry to the Gentiles and then he says, ***'But...not even Titus was compelled to be circumcised.'*** Paul had brought Titus along with him to Jerusalem, perhaps as evidence of what God was doing through his ministry to the Gentiles. Titus, Paul says, was a Greek – and as such had a certain aversion to mutilating the body beautiful. For a Greek to undergo circumcision would have been unthinkable. But evidently there was pressure on him to do just that because Paul explains that there were forces at work trying to distort the gospel of grace.

***4 But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.***

Evidently, either at the private meeting, or during their time in Jerusalem, the faction that was promoting circumcision in addition to grace made their influence felt. Paul calls this group the 'false brethren'. He doesn't say they are misguided Jewish Christians – he says they are *pseudo* brothers – they have the appearance of truth – but they are not of the truth. And apparently they did not come in through the front door – openly, but rather they sneaked in. They sneaked in by appearing to be Christian brothers, just like the rest, but they came with an agenda – ***to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.*** Essentially, I believe Paul is saying this: 'These guys came in looking like the real deal, but they were really enemy saboteurs looking to ruin our freedom in Christ and bind us up in the same chains with which they are bound.' ***There are at least two major implications here.***

***Don't be afraid to confront wrong teaching.*** I am not advocating contentiousness. That is, the indiscriminate confronting of people who disagree with in us general. But a boldness to confront those who are mangling the gospel of grace in some fashion. There is an atmosphere in the world today of something called tolerance. But those who use this term don't mean what the word tolerance really means. Tolerance implies that there is a right way and a wrong way – a right thought and a wrong thought – but you graciously allow the existence of the wrong where it is not an immediate threat to life, liberty or the integrity of the truth. Just as we tolerate childish behavior from children, but not from adults who know better. But in today's language, tolerance means that you not only allow wrong thinking, wrong acts, wrong lifestyles, but you must affirm them. In fact, it is fast becoming a criminal offense to say that certain lifestyles are morally wrong. I see a day in the not-so-distant future where a pastor like myself will find himself in jail because he dared to say that homosexuality is deviant and wrong; or that to kill an unborn child through abortion is wrong; or even that any faith besides faith in Christ is a doctrine of hell and will land you in hell. ***Don't be afraid to confront wrong teaching.***

**The gospel is confrontational.** The gospel confronts us with the fact that we are sinners and in need of salvation – and it confronts us with the terrifying end of sin away from the presence of God in eternal torment – and the gospel confronts us with the wonderful strains of the sweet song of amazing grace and invites us in to everlasting joy. We should not be afraid of this kind of confrontation. Unfortunately, in the Christian world today there is more emphasis on compromise than confrontation. **Many churches in the user-friendly, seeker-friendly movement have decided that doctrine is divisive--peace is more important than sound teaching.** Wanting to appeal to a modern age, they have framed their message as a friendly, agreeable, and relevant conversation, rather than as a confrontation with the gospel of Christ. The hot topics of our modern age—radical Islam, abortion, feminism, homosexuality, and other politically charged moral issues—pose the most obvious threat for these churches. Their undefined theology and seeker-sensitive philosophy do not permit them to take a firm biblical stance on such matters, because the moment they defy the spirit of the age, they forfeit their marketing appeal. They are therefore forced to keep silent or capitulate. Either way, they compromise the truth. **Don't be afraid to confront wrong teaching.**

**Don't trade your liberty in Christ for bondage under the law.** In other words, don't be easily compelled to abandon grace. Paul says that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised – that is he did not give up his freedom in Christ for bondage under the law. The great truth of the gospel is *'Whom the Son sets free is free indeed.'* John 8:36 Jesus said this in relation to our being freed from the slavery of sin. Before the glorious news of the gospel impacted our souls – we were slaves to sin and headed for hell.

But the gospel comes and frees us from that path of sin and death and we are liberated forever. And instead of bondage to sin it is a freedom to righteousness. And I think it is important to understand that this is not a libertarian freedom – that is, a freedom to do those things that are contrary to righteousness. Paul gives us the boundaries of this freedom in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians: *All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.* 1 Corinthians 6:12 In Christ we have been set free – free to practice righteousness – free to not sin – free to love God unreservedly and completely – free to choose life and not death – free to love one another. And in one sense we are free to do all things – that is what Paul said after all – but in the same way Peter tells us: *'...do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond slaves of God.'* 1 Peter 2:16 **This is a freedom with boundaries and those boundaries extend just as far as righteousness reigns.**

The implication here is powerful as well. The implication is that Titus was free not to be circumcised – and equally free to be circumcised. In fact, later on we find that Paul takes Timothy, whose father was a Greek and whose mother was Jewish, and has him circumcised. **What Paul was fighting against is not that you shouldn't be circumcised – but the doctrine that you must be circumcised.** And that is an entirely different thing. **Must be circumcised** puts circumcision on par with grace – **may be circumcised** puts it in the realm of freedom in Christ. Titus wasn't circumcised because Greeks just didn't do that sort of thing. Timothy on the other hand was considered a Jew – Jewish descent is always figured from the mothers line – and both his mother and grandmother were devout Jews – and obviously he felt it would be beneficial to be circumcised to minister among Jewish Christians. But it was not a matter of **must** but rather **may**. In Christ we may do things that look like must, but it is all within the wide boundaries of the field of grace.

Because we are contrasting liberty in Christ with bondage under the law, I want to spend just a moment here talking about the law of God. This is important for us to know and I think a little time spent here will help you in the rest of the book of Galatians. Paul says that those who teach that you must be circumcised according to the law as a means of salvation are really preaching a gospel of bondage. So he contrasts the liberty in Christ with the bondage under the law. But, you say, isn't the law of God good? And the answer is an unequivocal yes! But the function of the law was never meant to free us from the slavery of sin. In fact Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:56 that *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;*

Practically speaking, that means that the harder you try to keep the law, the more you sin instead. God never intended that apart from His grace we would keep His holy law. Or to say that another way, He never intended that apart from His grace we would be justified in His sight. Paul tells us in Romans 7:7 *What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET."* Romans 7:7 **It is the perfect law of God that leads us to the knowledge that we are sinful, fallen people in need of a Savior. And so for those false brethren to insist on law-keeping as a requirement for salvation meant bondage for those who followed them.**

And Paul says, 'Don't trade your freedom for slavery. Don't try to please God by doing something.' *For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.* Romans 10:4 That is in Christ, all the righteous law of God is completed. **So the thing to do is not get into the Law – but get into Christ.** The function of the law of God is to bring us to Christ – not as a laundry list of do's and don't's. *Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.* Galatians 3:23-24

And so Paul says - *5 But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.* Paul contended fiercely for the truth of the gospel because truth matters. There was no compromise here – no toleration of differing viewpoints – no relativistic philosophizing. Paul was unyielding on this point, because the gospel of grace was at stake. And we need to be just as passionate about the gospel ourselves.

And just because someone has some position or reputation we should not compromise the truth of the gospel. Paul goes on to say, *6 But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)--well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me.*

Paul is saying a couple of things here. **One is that God is not impressed with someone's rank.** 'God shows no partiality' Literally the term here means God does not accept the face one presents to the world. And by inference – we ought not to do that either. God looks at the heart and although we do not have that capability, we should not judge merely by the appearance, or let the truth of the gospel be garbled because these guys have a big name.

The second thing Paul is saying is that **Paul's gospel was the complete gospel** and did not need any tweaking. These apostles in Jerusalem did not consider that they should add anything to the gospel Paul had been preaching and had laid out before them there in that council. That was another strong argument to the Galatians that those preachers of a perverted gospel were wrong – wrong about the gospel and wrong about Paul.

*7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised 8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), 9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I also was eager to do.*

What came out of this time together was a unity of mind and purpose that saw the spread of the gospel of grace throughout the world. It was vindication for Paul – he had not run in vain – the preachers of a perverted gospel were not supported in Jerusalem – the church was not split into circumcised and uncircumcised – the truth of the gospel had been upheld and it has come down to us.

And this morning the truth of the gospel confronts us right where we live. Without Christ we are lost and headed for hell. And if that is your case, I would urge you by the mercies of God to respond to His call this morning to be set free from the slavery of sin that leads to death into the glorious freedom of Christ that leads to everlasting joy and life eternal. And I also pray that we all would have our hearts ignited for the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world and we would be found working where He is working.

*Our gracious God and Redeemer Lord,*

*May the truth and beauty of the gospel penetrate our hearts and illuminate our lives and draw us to everlasting joy in You. O that all men might love and praise and worship You and make much of You in every place. Break the chains that keep us slaves to sin and set us free to walk in holiness and truth. May we who adore You as Sovereign Lord and our everlasting joy, long that others should know it, feel it, and rejoice in it. Grant that we might be fully engaged in Your great cause to set up Your kingdom in every place where Satan reigns and live to make the nations glad in You, for Your glory and Your name's sake we pray in Jesus name, Amen.*

**May the Lord bless you and keep yourselves  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto You.  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.**