

Lesson 3

"The Unity of the Gospel"

The unity of the church is a precious fruit of "the truth of the gospel." Jesus is the Truth. "The most precious message," which uplifts and honors the sacrifice of Christ, unifies. So-called "gospels" derived from the old covenant--man's power to be saved--divide the church.

The issue of circumcision threatened to split the early church. The rites and ceremonies of the law of Moses as a means of salvation assumed an idol-status in the minds of certain "false brethren" (Gal. 2:4) who came to the Antioch church from Judea (Acts 15:1). They taught "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1, NKJV). "They insisted that the Jewish laws and ceremonies should be incorporated into the rites of the Christian religion. They were slow to discern that all the sacrificial offerings had but prefigured the death of the Son of God, in which type met antitype, and after which the rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic dispensation were no longer binding" (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 189). They succeeded in gathering to themselves the support of the Jewish Christians in Antioch, creating no small stir.

The Apostle Paul felt obliged to confront this matter head-on, for it was an issue over "the truth of the gospel." Is it the power of God's grace that saves sinners; or, is it circumcision that saves, and hence the power of man's obedience to the whole law that saves?

It had been some time since Paul had paid a visit to Jerusalem. The church of Antioch thought it would be a good thing for him to go and discuss this matter with the other apostles and brethren assembled there (Acts 15:2).

Paul's visit to Jerusalem was a divine mandate--"by revelation" (Gal. 2:2). God's purpose for him going was to preserve the unity of the church leadership regarding the gospel. Obviously the "false brethren" were intentionally seeking to unsettle the minds of the apostles and create a division between the churches and an internal conflict among the apostles over the gospel. Paul's purpose in going was not to see whether his gospel was in harmony with the brethren. He was clear that "the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the *revelation of Jesus Christ*" (Gal. 1:11, 12). His purpose in going to Jerusalem was to proclaim the gospel to the apostles in order to preserve the unity of the church. That

which creates disunity in the church is "another gospel" which is not the real gospel, Satan knows this and seeks to bring in the principle of the old covenant self-reliance, and self-sufficiency, in every possible way to create dissension and disunity.

The entourage that accompanied Paul to Jerusalem were Barnabas and Titus. Paul brought Titus into the church without circumcision. The significance of this detail is that the apostles in Jerusalem didn't require Titus to be circumcised in order to fellowship with them. This was a confirmation of the unity which prevailed among the apostles.

The "false brethren" conspired to enslave the Gentiles to the yoke of bondage--the old covenant. Peter said: "Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" (Acts 15:10). "Peter here referred to the law of ceremonies, which was made null and void by the crucifixion of Christ" (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 193). Whoever induces people to trust in the law for righteousness without Christ simply puts a yoke upon them and fastens them in bondage.

Those who "seemed to be pillars" (Cephas, James, and John) in the church, "perceived," "the grace that was given unto Paul" (Gal. 2:9). They finally relented and humbled their hearts and extended to Paul "the right hands of fellowship" (vs. 9). In effect the apostles said, "Paul, thank God, you are preaching the true gospel. You must go to the Gentiles and we will go to the Jews." Even with this the apostles didn't go far enough.

What the apostles should have said was, "Paul, we want you to go to the Gentiles, but go to the Jews also; and we will go to the Gentiles also." So Peter, James, and John still weren't clear that it was their job to go to the whole world as is indicated by the incident which followed.

At Antioch Peter was accustomed to eating in fellowship with the Gentiles. When he saw a delegation from Jerusalem headquarters sent by James, he got up from eating with the Gentiles. He went to another table and the Jewish Christians followed him. Peter's action was prompted by "*fearing* them which were of the circumcision" (Gal. 2:12).

Paul had brought these Gentiles into church fellowship with the knowledge that Christ was their Messiah. Now Peter's actions sent the wrong message to the Gentiles. The Gentiles might be led to think, "We are lost because the Messiah is only for the Jews." Paul was not afraid of these "false brethren." So Paul confronted Peter publicly over the issue "because he was to be blamed" (Gal. 2:11).

Paul "saw that they [Peter and the "false brethren"] walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). Peter was sending the message to the Gentiles that in

order to be saved they must be circumcised. In other words, believing that Christ is the Messiah is fine; however, the power of man's obedience to the whole law must be added to this in order to be saved. This false gospel had the potential of dividing the church.

The 1888 message brings to the forefront the principles of the two covenants. The old covenant is manifested by many different so-called "gospels," all based on *self-sufficiency*. "All that the Lord hath spoken *we* will do" (Ex. 19:8). God's new covenant promise is the "much more abounding grace" of Christ crucified and resurrected. It is this true gospel which unites the church. The old covenant "gospels" generate bondage to sin and are the very source of disunity.

There is only one "truth of the gospel" that is in harmony with all God's ten commandments and that is the "most precious message" which uplifts and honors the sacrifice of Christ. It is "present truth" in the setting of our cosmic day of at-one-ment-with God. That is, it is God's love revealed in the ever-present cross, that reconciles alienated hearts to Himself by means of Christ's High Priestly ministry. This gets to the taproot of unconscious sin so that the soul identifies with the crucified One. Justification by faith and the cleansing of the sanctuary truth become one grand truth which lightens the earth with God's glorious true character of self-denying *agape*-love.

--Paul E. Penno.