

THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GRACE UNITES WILDLY DIVERSE PEOPLE

Galatians 2:1-10

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Brainstorm a list of the criteria that people might use in the U.S. when looking for a church. Get a phonebook and look through the yellow pages section for churches. Make a list of the various reasons churches give in their ads for why people would want to come to their church. Why did you come to this church? Why do you stay?

There are scores of things around which you can organize and seek to unify a church. Many churches are unified around certain programs or certain models of "doing church". Other churches are unified around particular tasks or causes. Still other churches are unified around particular lifestyle preferences. However, it seems clear that the NT as a whole and the apostle Paul in particular argues that the church must be intentionally organized around the gospel of Jesus Christ. The only thing that can unify diverse human beings is the gospel of Jesus. Every local church must fight to keep the law free, God exalting, man humbling, grace motivated good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection for sinners at the center of everything that is done and said in the church. That is the unity for which we must fight as a church and as individuals. That is the point of what Paul says in these ten verses.

STUDY

1. Review and summarize Paul's point in chapter 1, especially what he says in vv. 8-9, 11-12 & 16-17.

Paul says in vv. 8-9 that the gospel he preached to the Galatians is the only true gospel and that if anyone; whether he or even an angel disagreed with any part of the gospel he preached they would go to an eternal hell. Then in vv. 11-24 he emphasizes that he did not consult with anyone, especially not with the original 12 apostles in Jerusalem about the content of the gospel he preached. He received the gospel directly from Jesus, just as the original apostles received it directly from Jesus. He knew they were both preaching the same gospel because the same Christ had given the gospel to them and to

he. In chapter 1 Paul makes clear that the gospel he preached to the Galatians came from God, not humans and was the only gospel that could save people.

2. As you read 2:1-2, what appears to contradict his claim in chapter 1?

Paul says that after 14 years of preaching the gospel with absolute confidence that he was preaching the only gospel and it was the same as that given to the original twelve apostles, that he went to Jerusalem and explained his gospel to James, Peter and John. He did it because he wanted to know if he had run or was running in vain, to no purpose. This sounds as if he has doubts about what he was preaching. It sounds as if he is checking in with men to see if he had it right.

3. Why did Paul go to Jerusalem according to 2a?

He says the reason he went to Jerusalem is because of a revelation. In other words, he would never have gone to Jerusalem except that God told him to go. Not only did God tell him to go to Jerusalem but he also told him to explain the gospel he preached to the apostles in Jerusalem. That is exactly what he did. He went to Jerusalem and he explained, in a private meeting with James, Peter and John the gospel he was preaching to the Gentiles and the results he was seeing as he preached. (NOTE: He went to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus. This journey is recorded for us in Acts 11:27-30. It took place after Paul, who at the time was still called Saul, his Hebrew name, had worked with Barnabas for a year in preaching the gospel in Antioch where the first non-Jewish, Gentile church had been formed. We find out in Acts that the journey had more than one purpose. Not only did God tell Paul to go there to tell the other apostles his gospel but they also went with a contribution to help the poor in the church in Jerusalem.)

4. Compare Philippians 2:16 and 1 Thessalonians 3:5 with Galatians 2:2. In light of these other passages what is a more reasonable explanation of what Paul means by saying "I was afraid I was running in vain?"

In Philippi and Thessalonians his concern is not that he did not preach the true gospel but rather he is afraid those who received the gospel will not continue to believe it and live in accord with it because of persecution or false teaching or some other temptation. Paul's fear in this passage is this: he knows that if the apostles in Jerusalem are preaching a gospel that includes circumcision and the keeping of the Jewish laws in addition to believing in Christ, then it is only a matter of time until the churches he has

helped to found are destroyed. All the work of the last 14 years will be vain if the original apostles are preaching a different gospel. He has preached a gospel that promises acceptance with God and inclusion in the church based upon trust in the living, dying and rising of Christ from the dead for every believing sinner. Therefore, his fear in setting the gospel he preaches before these apostles is that he will discover that they are preaching Christ plus something else and thus all his work of preaching a law free gospel and establishing churches made up of Jew and Gentile will be overthrown. The church of Christ will be destroyed if the leaders of the church in Jerusalem are preaching that faith in Christ is not the condition for going to heaven. His fear is not that he is wrong but that they are wrong and because of who they are, all of his work of preaching the true gospel will be destroyed.

5. Paul is writing this letter to the Galatians during the time period recorded in Acts 14:26-15:2. He is writing when the controversy over whether or not Gentiles must become law-keeping Jews in order to be saved has erupted in the church. What does God's sending Paul to Jerusalem for this private conference tell us about God's wisdom and God's view of the unity of the church?

When Paul went to Jerusalem, as recorded at the end of Acts 11 there was only one known church that was made up of mostly non-Jewish people in Antioch (Acts 11:19-21). Up to this point, most everyone who had trusted Christ and who were in the church were already law keeping Jews. But God knew what was coming and in order to preserve the unity of the church around the purity of the gospel he sent Paul to Jerusalem so that he and the other apostles could settle the matter in private, prior to the eruption of the controversy and thus present a united front in the fight to maintain the unity of the church around the law free gospel. When Paul went to Jerusalem for this private interview he was not aware of how great the problem was going to become, but God did. God was working in ways that the apostles did not fully appreciate. God wants the church to be united by the gospel of Jesus and so he was working in advance to make sure that the church was not perverted and destroyed by a false gospel.

6. What should be the ultimate and foundational reason we join a church or a small group or pursue a friendship with another Christian?

Why do you come to church? Why are you involved in this church? The answer that we all ought to give to those questions is because I have found here a place where the man humbling, God honoring, Christ exalting, law free gospel of Jesus Christ is kept at the center of everything. This is the only

thing that God wants a church to be united around. We dare not choose our church, nor be committed to a church for any other reason. A church dare not seek to organize and unite around any other thing. What makes us a church of Jesus Christ is that we are gathered together as sinners who deserve to be sent to hell but who have discovered, by God's grace, that God has poured out his wrath against our sins upon his only Son. We have discovered that Jesus Christ did what we will never be able to do, he has kept God's law perfectly for us so that God can justly count us perfectly righteous with the righteousness of Christ. We are here to grow up into Christ, not to find support for our particular lifestyle choices, not to be with people who think just like me on social or political issues, not because a particular method of "doing church" is employed, not because they play my kind of music. We are here to know Christ in all of his saving mercy for sinners like us. He is the center, nothing else.

7. Honestly, how strong is the motivation in your heart to develop relationships with other Christians because they are Christians and not for some other reason? How can our common faith in Christ become a greater motive for belonging to this church and loving one another?

We must fight to be a church united by the one gospel and not by anything else because God wants a church united by the gospel.

8. Notice that Paul stops off telling about the private interview with James, Peter and John at the end of v. 2 and resumes it in v. 6. Verses 3-5 are an interruption in his retelling of that visit. What happened on that visit that now causes him to digress from the main story line of the interview?

While he recounts the story he suddenly remembers something that at the time did not strike him as important but as he writes this letter it dawns on him what God has done without his awareness. Titus, a Greek, non-Jewish believer from the primarily Gentile church in Antioch where he and Barnabas have been working is with Paul during this interview. Paul did not bring Titus with him on that journey to use as a test case. He was merely a traveling companion, probably sent as a representative of the Antioch church with the financial gift for the poor in Jerusalem. However, God sent Titus along for a different purpose. He wanted Paul to use the fact that Titus was not required to be circumcised by the Jerusalem apostles as an important piece of evidence to show that the Jerusalem apostles did not teach a different gospel than Paul. The apostles accept him as a brother in Christ without any question and without urging him to be circumcised. They treat him as an equal simply because he has faith in Christ, not because he has

faith in Christ and is also living like a Jew! His logic is simple. If the apostles believed that living like a Jew was necessary for going to heaven then why did James, Peter and John treat Titus like a Christian, eat meals with him which Jews are forbidden to do and not require him to be circumcised and obey the Jewish traditions?

9. Verse 4 is Paul's explanation of why he is bringing up the example of Titus and why he is writing this letter. The event he is referring to in this vv. 4-5 is also recorded in Acts 15:1-2a. Why does Paul bring up Titus and write this letter?

What he is saying in vv. 4-5 is this, "I bring up this example of Titus because what has happened now is that false brothers, under false pretenses, have slipped in among us in order to spy out our freedom in Christ and to take us back into the bondage of sin, death and hell by saying that human effort is required to gain heaven. However, when their agenda became obvious to us recently in Antioch, we, Barnabas and I, did not give into them for a moment so that the sin forgiving, law free, grace expressing gospel might be kept pure for you and all the other Gentile churches." The time period he is referring to in vv. 4-5 is not when he was in Jerusalem for this private council but the recent debates he and Barnabas have engaged in Antioch with certain men who have come from the Jerusalem church teaching that Gentiles must become Jewish to be saved. Paul knows that false teachers have slipped into the church under false pretences and are seeking to destroy Christ's church and so he is recounting what happened to Titus (or what didn't happen to him) and the whole report of his interview with the Jerusalem apostles to expose the deceitfulness of these false teachers.

10. Compare v. 4 with Matthew 7:15, Acts 20:29-30, 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 & 1 Timothy 4:1-2. What is the danger that the church always faces? What do all false teachers share in common?

The church is always threatened by false teachers who are sent by Satan to deceive and destroy Christ's body. False teachers and their teaching do not look or sound like false teachers. They look and sound like sheep, like servants of righteousness, like real pastors and elders in the church. If you are going to make a counterfeit dollar bill your goal is to make it as close as you can to the real one. So when false teachers and false teaching arise in the church they and their message look and sound a lot like the real thing. No false teacher believes he or she is a false teacher. False teachers use the Bible and talk about Jesus and share many of the same concerns that true gospel preachers share. They care about morality and opposing evil. They

want to promote healthy marriages and families. They use spiritual language and talk about loving God and trusting Christ. They say they are preaching the gospel. However, they change the gospel in serious ways by either adding to it or taking away from it or replacing the gospel with some other topic or issue as the central concern of the church. All false teaching is directly prompted by Satan himself. Satan's goal is to destroy the church, to bring dishonor and disrepute to Christ. It is his goal to obscure the glory of Christ's work on behalf of sinners and tear the church apart. There are many ways for Satan to destroy the church and false teaching stands at the head of his preferred methods.

11. Compare v. 5 with 2 Timothy 2:24-26, 4:1-4, Titus 1:9, Acts 20:28 & 31. What is God's primary antidote to false teachers?

God opposes false teaching through the true teaching of his apostles, pastors and teachers. This is why one of the primary characteristics of elders is that they know the gospel well and are able to teach it to others. Paul tells this same Titus whom was eventually the lead pastor of the church in Crete that when he selected elders for the church that an elder "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." When the false teachers showed up in Antioch that is exactly what Paul and Barnabas did. Listen to how Luke records this same event in Acts 15:1-2, "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them." They refuted those who opposed the gospel of grace by showing from the OT scriptures that salvation can be had only through faith in Christ alone. There is a place for sharp dispute and debate in the church. However, that dispute is to be over the gospel, not about the color of the carpet.

12. According to Ephesians 4:12-15 who else is to be involved in resisting false teaching and promoting true teaching?

A well taught congregation teaches itself so that the entire church grows up into the fullness of Christ, so that false teachers do not lead us astray. It's not only through the biblical teaching of elders that the church is protected from false teaching. It is also through a congregation in which each individual and each family is growing in their understanding of the gospel. This letter to the Galatians ought to terrify all of us. Here are a group of churches that were founded by the apostle Paul and yet, shortly after he left they are in danger of abandoning the law free gospel he preached for the

bondage of legalism and a gospel that requires an obedience that humans cannot perform. Doctrine matters. You must be reading your Bibles and you must be reading books or listening to tapes that discuss the doctrines that are central to the gospel. Learn the catechism. You cannot afford to be ignorant. When you stand before God on the Day of Judgment it will do you know good to tell Jesus that I just did what my pastor said. You can be certain that every false teacher will experience greater torture in hell than those he misled but those who are misled are accountable for being misled. In the church the best defense is a good offense. We are to learn the true gospel so well that we can spot a false gospel a mile away.

13. How well do you know the gospel? What are you doing to learn it better?

We must fight to be a church united by the one gospel and not by anything else because Satan is out to destroy the church by false teaching.

14. In vv. 6-10 what do James, Peter, John and Paul recognize about each other?

What happened at this private meeting is that James, Peter and John came to see firsthand that the same God who was at work in them was also at work in and through Paul. God entrusted both Peter and Paul with the same gospel but to different primary audiences. Peter's primary audience was Jewish and Paul's primary audience was Gentile. God was working through Peter to the Jews and he was working through Paul to the Gentiles. The three Jerusalem apostles, without reservation, accepted Paul's apostleship and gospel as being the same as theirs and embraced him as a brother in Christ and a fellow worker in the gospel. They recognized that they were all on the same team but with different assignments. They were all working to the same end with the same message but in different contexts. They recognized the grace given to each one. James, Peter, John and Paul saw in each other's message and motives and ministries the evidences of the grace of God. They knew that in spite of the differences in method and emphases that they were all the recipients of God's unmerited favor and the work they were doing was the work of God, not the work of humans. The primary evidence of their unity was their common allegiance to the law free gospel of Christ. They did not talk about what man does but about what Christ has done and is doing. What these four men recognized is that what they shared in common was infinitely greater than what divided them. They are all sinners who deserve hell but who have been rescued from hell, made sons of God, promised

eternal life not because of anything they have done but because of what Jesus Christ has done. They have been given their ministries by God and by his grace and not because of anything in them. There is no pride or competition among them as they rejoice in God's saving work in and through them as God himself has determined.

15. When you look at other Christians what is more obvious to you, the ways they are different from you or the grace that God has given to them and to you? Why is that?

16. What are some ways we can "recognize the grace of God" in each other? What difference would it make if we did so?

We must fight to be a church united by the one gospel and not by anything else because God gives different people different gifts and ministries to accomplish the same mission.