

The Unity of the Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 2:1–14, 1 Cor. 1:10–13, Gen. 17:1–21, John 8:31–36, Col. 3:11.*

Memory Text: “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (*Philippians 2:2, ESV*).

Protestant reformer John Calvin believed that disunity and division were the devil's chief devices against the church, and he warned that Christians should avoid schism like the plague.

But should unity be preserved at the cost of truth? Imagine if Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, had, in the name of unity, chosen to recant his views on salvation by faith alone when he was brought to trial at the Diet of Worms.

“Had the Reformer 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*, p. 166.

In Galatians 2:1–14, we find the apostle doing everything in his power to maintain the unity of the apostolic circle in the midst of attempts by some believers to destroy it. But as important as that unity was to Paul, he refused to allow the truth of the gospel to be compromised to achieve it. Therefore, while there is room for diversity within unity, the gospel must never be compromised in the process.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 15.

The Importance of Unity

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10–13. What does this passage tell us about how important Paul believed unity in the church was?

Having refuted the allegations that his gospel was not God-given, Paul directs his attention in Galatians 2:1, 2 to another charge being made against him. The false teachers in Galatia claimed that Paul's gospel was not in harmony with what Peter and the other apostles taught. Paul, they were saying, was a renegade.

In response to this charge, Paul recounts a trip he made to Jerusalem at least fourteen years after his conversion. Though we're not totally sure when that trip took place, no trip in antiquity was an easy affair. If Paul traveled by land from Antioch to Jerusalem, the three-hundred-mile trip would have taken at least three weeks and would have involved all kinds of hardships and dangers. Yet, in spite of such difficulties, Paul undertook the journey, not because the apostles had summoned him but because the Spirit had. And while he was there, he set his gospel before the apostles.

Why did he do that? Certainly not because he had any doubt about what he was teaching. He certainly did not need any kind of reassurance from them. After all, he already had been proclaiming the same gospel for fourteen years. And though he did not need their permission or approval either, he highly valued the other apostles' support and encouragement.

Thus, the accusation that his message was different was not only an attack on Paul but also an attack on the unity of the apostles and on the church itself. Maintaining apostolic unity was vital, because a division between Paul's Gentile mission and the mother-church in Jerusalem would have had disastrous consequences. With no fellowship between the Gentile and Jewish Christians, then "Christ would be divided, and all the energy which Paul had devoted, and hoped to devote, to the evangelizing of the Gentile world would be frustrated."—F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 111.

What are some issues that threaten the unity of the church today? More important, after we define them, how do we deal with them? What issues are more important than unity itself?

Circumcision and the False Brothers

Why was circumcision such a focal point in the dispute between Paul and certain Jewish Christians? (See *Gen. 17:1–22; Gal. 2:3–5; 5:2, 6; and Acts 15:1, 5.*) Why is it not that hard to understand how some could have believed that even the Gentiles needed to undergo it?

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant relationship that God established with Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. Although circumcision was only for Abraham’s male descendants, everyone was invited into the covenant relationship with God. The sign of circumcision was given to Abraham in Genesis 17. This occurred *after* Abraham’s disastrous attempt—by fathering a child with his wife’s Egyptian slave—to help God fulfill His promise to him of a son.

Circumcision was a fitting sign of the covenant. It was a reminder that the best-laid plans of humans can never accomplish what God Himself has promised. Outward circumcision was to be a symbol of circumcision of the heart (*Deut. 10:16, 30:6, Jer. 4:4, Rom. 2:29*). It represents a stripping away of our confidence in ourselves and a faithful dependence on God instead.

During Paul’s time, however, circumcision had become a prized sign of national and religious identity—not what it originally was intended to signify. About one hundred fifty years before Jesus’ birth, some overly zealous patriots not only forced all uncircumcised Jews in Palestine to be circumcised, but they also required it of all men living in the surrounding nations who fell under their jurisdiction. Some even believed circumcision was a passport to salvation. This can be seen in ancient epigrams that confidently declare things such as, “‘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), p. 172.

It would be a mistake to assume that Paul was opposed to circumcision itself. What Paul objected to was the insistence that Gentiles had to submit to circumcision. The false teachers said: “‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (*Acts 15:1, NKJV*). The issue, then, was not really circumcision but salvation. Salvation is either by faith in Christ alone, or it is something earned by human obedience.

Maybe today circumcision isn’t the issue. But what (if anything) do we as a church struggle with that parallels this problem?

Unity in Diversity

Read Galatians 2:1–10. Paul says that the false brothers “slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery” (*Gal. 2:4, ESV*). What are Christians free from? (Read *John 8:31–36; Rom. 6:6, 7; 8:2, 3; Gal. 3:23–25; 4:7, 8; and Heb. 2:14, 15.*) How do we experience for ourselves the reality of this freedom?

Freedom, as a description of the Christian experience, is an important concept for Paul. He uses the word more frequently than any other author of the New Testament did, and in the book of Galatians the words *free* and *freedom* occur numerous times. Freedom, however, for the Christian means freedom *in Christ*. It is the opportunity to live a life of unhindered devotion to God. It involves freedom from being enslaved to the desires of our sinful nature (*Romans 6*), freedom from the condemnation of the law (*Rom. 8:1, 2*), and freedom from the power of death (*1 Cor. 15:55*).

The apostles recognized that Paul “had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised” (*Gal. 2:7, ESV*). What does this suggest about the nature of unity and diversity within the church?

The apostles acknowledged that God had called Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, just as He had called Peter to preach to the Jews. In both cases, the gospel was the same, but the way it was presented depended on the people the apostles were trying to reach. Implicit in the above verse “is the important recognition that one and the same formula is bound to be heard differently and to have different force in different social and cultural contexts. . . . It is precisely this oneness which is the basis of Christian unity, precisely as unity in diversity.”—James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993), p. 106.

How open should we be to methods of evangelism and witnessing that take us out of our “comfort zone”? Are there some forms of evangelism that bother you? If so, what are they, why do they bother you, and might you need to be more open-minded about these things?

Confrontation in Antioch *(Gal. 2:11–13)*

Some time after Paul's consultation in Jerusalem, Peter made a visit to Antioch in Syria, the location of the first Gentile church and the base of Paul's missionary activities described in Acts. While there, Peter ate freely with the Gentile Christians, but when a group of Jewish Christians arrived from James, Peter—fearful of what they would think—changed his behavior entirely.

Why should Peter have known better? Compare Gal. 2:11–13 and Acts 10:28. What does his action tell us about just how powerfully culture and tradition can be ingrained in our lives?

Some have mistakenly assumed that Peter and the other Jews with him had ceased following the Old Testament laws about clean and unclean food. This, however, does not seem to be the case. If Peter and all the Jewish Christians had abandoned the Jewish food laws, a major uproar in the church certainly would have followed. If so, there would surely be some record of it, but there is not. It is more likely that the issue was about table-fellowship with Gentiles. Because many Jews saw Gentiles as unclean, it was a practice among some to avoid social contact with Gentiles as much as possible.

Peter had struggled with this issue himself, and it was only a vision from God that helped him to see it clearly. Peter said to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, after he entered his house, “ ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean’ ” (*Acts 10:28, ESV*). So, although Peter knew better, he was so afraid of offending his own countrymen that he reverted to his old ways. Apparently, that is how strong the pull of culture and tradition was in Peter's life.

Paul, though, called Peter's actions exactly what they were: the Greek word he used in Galatians 2:13 is *hypocrisy*. Even Barnabas, he said, was “carried away with their hypocrisy” (*NKJV*). Strong words from one man of God to another.

Why is it so easy to be a hypocrite? (Do we not, perhaps, tend to blind ourselves to our own faults while eagerly looking for faults in others?) What kind of hypocrisy do you find in your own life? More important, how can you recognize it and then root it out?

Paul's Concern *(Gal. 2:14)*

The situation in Antioch surely was tense: Paul and Peter, two leaders in the church, were in open conflict. And Paul holds nothing back as he calls Peter to account for his behavior.

What reasons does Paul give for publicly confronting Peter? *Gal. 2:11–14.*

As Paul saw it, the problem was not that Peter had decided to eat with the visitors from Jerusalem. Ancient traditions about hospitality certainly would have required as much.

The issue was “the truth of the gospel.” That is, it wasn’t just an issue of fellowship or dining practices. Peter’s actions, in a real sense, compromised the whole message of the gospel.

Read Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11. How does the truth in these texts help us understand Paul’s strong reaction?

During Paul’s meeting in Jerusalem with Peter and the other apostles, they had come to the conclusion that Gentiles could enjoy all of the blessings in Christ without first having to submit to circumcision. Peter’s action now put that agreement in jeopardy. Where once Jewish and Gentile Christians had joined in an environment of open fellowship, now the congregation was divided, and this held the prospect of a divided church in the future.

From Paul’s perspective, Peter’s behavior implied that the Gentile Christians were second-rate believers at best, and he believed that Peter’s actions would place strong pressure upon the Gentiles to conform if they wanted to experience full fellowship. Thus Paul says, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (*Gal. 2:14, ESV*). The phrase “to live like Jews” can be more literally translated “to judaize.” This word was a common expression that meant “to adopt a Jewish way of life.” It was used to describe Gentiles who attended a synagogue and participated in other Jewish customs. It was also the reason that Paul’s opponents in Galatia, whom he calls the false brothers, are often referred to as “the Judaizers.”

As if Peter’s actions weren’t bad enough, Barnabas got caught up in this behavior, as well—and he was someone who also should have known better. What a clear example of the power of “peer pressure”! How can we learn to protect ourselves from being swayed in the wrong direction by those around us?

Further Thought: For additional study on the issue of unity and diversity in the church, read Ellen G. White, “Investigation of New Light,” pp. 45, 47, in *Counsels to Writers and Editors*; “An Explanation of Early Statements,” p. 75, in *Selected Messages*, book 1; “Tactfulness,” pp. 117–119, in *Gospel Workers*; and “Manuscript Release 898,” pp. 1092, 1093, in *1888 Materials*, vol. 3.

“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 Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1108.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Very few people enjoy confrontation, but sometimes it is necessary. In what circumstances should a church condemn error and discipline those who refuse to accept correction?
- ② As the Seventh-day Adventist Church grows around the world, it becomes more and more diverse at the same time. What steps can the church take to make sure that unity is not lost in the midst of such diversity? How can we learn to accept and even enjoy the diversity of cultures and traditions among us while maintaining unity?
- ③ When sharing the gospel in a different culture, what are the essential elements that should not change, and what can be changed? How do we learn to distinguish between what must remain and what we can, if necessary, let go?

Summary: The insistence by some Jewish Christians that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to become true followers of Christ posed a serious threat to the unity of the early church. Instead of letting this issue divide the church into two different movements, the apostles worked together to ensure that the body of Christ stayed united and faithful to the truth of the gospel.