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| Topic | The Truth of the Gospel |
| Reference | Galatians 2:1-21 |
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31st October 1517 was the time when Martin Luther famously nailed his ‘Ninety-Five Theses’ on a wooden door of a church, officially kicking off a protest against the official church of his day, the Roman Catholic church, which today we remember as the Reformation. It has been 500 years since the Reformation. All over the world there have been all kinds of events to commemorate and to celebrate the Reformation.

Why do we celebrate Reformation?

For me the Reformation is primarily about preserving the truth of the gospel, to guard the truth, what is the gospel that must be passed on from generation to generation in a church even today. We celebrate the Reformation because thanks to the work of the reformers under God the Bible was once again opened in the churches the way it hasn’t been for many years. Back then if you walked into most of the Catholic churches the preachers were not preaching about the gospel of Christ crucified. Instead, they will be preaching about giving money to the church, about indulgence. If you read church history, you will know that at the time the pope was in the massive cathedral building project and they didn’t have enough money and so they thought of an ingenious way to do fund raising in the church. They said, if you pay an offering to what is called indulgence it will lessen the amount of years that you have to undergo what is called purgatory. That means after you die you have to be purified by fire and you will be purified for X number of years before you can actually enter into heaven. The period of time that you will be purified by fire, you can lessen it because the church got credit to offer. You give money to the church in exchange for credit from the church and with credit you can lessen the amount of years you spend through purgatory. And not just for yourself even for your loved ones you can buy credit in purgatory for your loved ones in the church.

Sadly, it is not the gospel and when you go into the church they will be preaching that and that’s why Martin Luther and gang protested, “that is not the gospel” and thanks be to God through their initiative under God the Bible was restored to the center place of the church. So today when you come to the church you expect at the center of the church the word of God to be preached.

Friends, while we have much to give thanks for the Reformation we must not for a single moment think that the worst is now behind us, it is not. Actually, again if you read history you will know that Martin Luther was 16th century, in 17th century we have the Enlightenment where people not only questioned that whether you need to preach the Bible only but you can also have all kinds of Pope saying all the things, the sufficiency of scripture, but in the Enlightenment

people began to question the reliability of the Bible. Enlightenment means my reasoning is number one, my ability to reason, my logic trumps everything else. So when it comes to the Bible about Jesus walking on water, for Jesus healing a paralytic who can't walk after 30 years, no way, Jesus rising from the dead, all those things are all myth. So we ignore all of those things and we just focus on all the ethical teaching of the Bible. All the things that are helpful to help us to live a more meaningful life and we retain them, because my mind tells me that those are meaningful, but all those things that my mind cannot explain, that science cannot explain cut them off.

So the Reformation is far from telling us that the worst is over. On the other hand, as we watch church history closely, we would know that the gospel is always in danger of being corrupted. We are always only just one or utmost two generations away from losing the gospel if we are not watchful.

Apostle Paul wrote the letter to Galatians because the church was not being watchful. They have a lot other to come in soon after Paul brought the gospel to them and soon after Paul left there were lot others to come in and draw them away from the gospel, to actually start to listen to all other kinds of fancy stuff and apostle Paul wrote to urge them, 'no return to the gospel'. There is only one gospel, there is no other. In Galatians chapter 2 Paul begins to unpack for them that this danger is ever present for us to slip away to fall away from the gospel and he mentions two instances where his own church in Antioch also face such challenges.

The first challenge he shared about was over the issue of circumcision, whether circumcision still applies to Christians. The second issue was over food. Paul mentioned these two events because he wanted to show the Galatians from these events that it is big issue as on both occasions the truth of the gospel was being undermined and he wanted the church to begin to recognize these things for what they truly are. Because if we do not recognize these challenges for what they truly are, if we are not being watchful slowly but surely we will end out with a different gospel which is no gospel at all.

The Test Concerning Circumcision

In chapter 2 verse 1 Paul mentions about a trip that he made from his home church to Jerusalem, roughly about 14 years after his original conversion. This incident probably correspond to what was recorded in Acts chapter 11. In Acts 11 we read that a prophet came from Jerusalem to Antioch. His name was Agabus. He went to the church and he prophesized that the great famine was coming upon Jerusalem region and the Judean region and so the church responded by sending relief through Jerusalem through Paul and Barnabas. It was likely that trip that Paul was referring here to the Galatians when he and Barnabas were bringing relief to the Jerusalem church. When he was in Jerusalem, Paul met with some of the key leaders privately. Apparently at that time his home church was going through a particularly challenging period. His church in Antioch was the first church where large number of gentiles became Christians. It was the first

church were a lot of Greeks first heard the gospel. They were at the forefront of cross-cultural ministry of what we call missions today and there were so many of them so actually they didn't know what to call them and they started calling them Christians. But as so often is the case where the gospel prospered so came challenges. In verse 4 Paul mentions that as the gospel prospered some false believers that infiltrated our ranks, to spy on the freedom we have in Jesus Christ and make us slaves. They were beginning to impose on Christians not only you must believe in Jesus you must also be circumcised and not only circumcised but also obey all the Old Testament laws. Now for Paul whether a Greek Christian choose to be circumcised or not is not an issue. It is actually a matter of freedom. Paul said this in chapter 5 verse 6

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

That is what matters as far as Paul is concerned but for these false believers circumcision was big. They say Christians, Jews or Greeks, you must be circumcised, you must still obey all the Old Testament laws. Paul and Barnabas knew they couldn't allow this to be taught in their home church, so they stood their grounds saying no, absolutely not. They realized what was going on. It is not just a matter of being respectful to the Jews but rather they realized the truth of the gospel was being undermined and so while they had the opportunity to go to Jerusalem they brought this matter up with the leaders in Jerusalem.

6 As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism—they added nothing to my message.

He was not trying to get stamp of approval from the apostles on this matter, rather his concern was that the truth of the gospel should be preserved wherever you go whether in Jerusalem, whether in Antioch, Christians wherever you go you will hear the same truth of the gospel being expounded, being preached. There should be no difference and by God's grace their discussion, their private meeting ended on a very positive note. Paul says in verse 3

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

Imagine Jerusalem full of Jews and here we have Titus a Greek walked into the church, supposed to be in fellowship with all of them. Even Titus was told that if he wants to hang around with us you must be circumcised. Verse 6 is key Paul says, Jerusalem leaders added nothing to my message. They totally agreed with Paul and Barnabas. There is only one gospel. Circumcision is a matter of freedom, it shall not be imposed and so they affirmed Paul's ministry. Thanks be to God the church passed the test with flying colors on that day.

It is important that the church understands what is the basis of our unity. Though we have different denominations in our world today we not necessarily hold the same understanding on everything or our belief and yet it is clear we understand what is the truth of the gospel and we

are united in the gospel of Christ crucified. When we are clear about the basis of our unity it enables us to be flexible about things which are not essential to the gospel. The apostles were clear on the basis of their unity in the gospel and so they could see clearly therefore circumcision actually doesn't matter.

The Test About Food

If we think the battle is over think again because Paul, then goes on to talk about the next test in verses 11 onwards. The test about food and this time apostle Peter is in the limelight. The scene of action this time took place in Antioch, Paul's home church when apostle Peter visited the church.

12 For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. **13** The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. **14** When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

Jews observe special food laws. They only eat Kocheer foods, just like Muslims who eat halal food. The question is this, when Jewish Christians are in a church like Antioch where majority are Greeks should they continue to observe food laws?

It is a practical problem. When Peter first arrived at this church, when they came to food time he said, guys no problem. We are all one in Christ, we eat together, no need for Kocheer or non-Kocheer food. Until a group arrived from Jerusalem and then Peter began to sing a different tune because he was afraid. Because of Peter starting to withdraw other Jews in Antioch also began to follow and this time even Barnabas was led astray.

Antioch church was the mother church of all the churches. Antioch is going to set the pattern for all the gentile churches going forward, so every church will then have two different foods for two different groups. Sermon time we are all together but at the food time they separate. Paul says it is hypocrisy, say one thing here practice something else the moment we leave the church door. So Paul knew that he had to confront Peter and he had to confront Peter in front of everybody which is exactly what he did. The truth of the gospel must not only be upheld in our preaching and teaching, but it must especially be upheld in how we live and how we conduct ourselves in our life. Not even the great apostle Peter must be allowed to pervert the gospel and to lead others astray through his hypocrisy. Other areas that we are tempted to bend a little from the truth of the gospel especially when the pressure begins to build, hypocrisy in the church continues to stumble many today. There is no perfect church and we cannot use this excuse to be a hypocrite. We have to ask God to help us, to grow, to become more watchful not just about what we say, but especially in how we conduct ourselves in our lives.

In the final section Paul begins to explain even more fully, how exactly has the gospel being perverted in both the examples that he cited. The Jews when they begin to impose things like circumcision and food laws, when you think about it they actually sound quite pious. People who take spiritual discipline seriously, they actually can be very impressive and it cause us to wonder as how have we taken our faith seriously in our own ways. When these Jewish leaders when they came to the church and when they started to tell the Christians, “hey you are Christians wonderful, let me show you what the bible actually ways. Read the Old Testament, look carefully, look at all these laws. Now I know you are a Christian but if you really want to be a good Christian you would take all these things seriously, start by being circumcised”. It can be actually very attractive. They give the impression that they are very serious about God but Paul says, hang on, be careful, spiritual disciplines may be impressive but when they become what it is a law, a command, a rule that must be obeyed, when that begins to happen you are actually perverting the gospel. You are preaching another gospel and Paul shows that the gospel is being perverted in at least three ways.

Firstly, verse 15. These Jewish leaders they seem to conveniently overlook the fact that actually whether you are a Jew or a gentile all believers have been declared right with God on the same basis through faith in Jesus Christ that is why Peter also had to become a Christian, had to respond to the gospel, that is why any Jew also needed to respond to the gospel in order to be saved, obeying the law alone is not enough or rather obeying the law is not going to bring them righteousness, rather verse 16, they know that by the works of the law no one will be justified. So Paul says if Jewish Christians know that, why do you still want to impose the law on gentiles when you know by the works of the law no one is going to be justified, why you are trying to impose something that you know doesn't work. That is the first problem.

Secondly,

17 “But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!

Paul also found that these people are also confusing people about what sin is really about. Paul says, that is not what sin is all about. We no longer look to the law to actually keep us from falling into sin, rather the one who sins is the one who keep insisting that Christians are still living under the law. Because we have overlooked what Jesus has done on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, all the requirements of the law have already been met in him, met by him on our behalf and in that way Jesus has brought an end to the chapter to the rule of the law. The law no longer has authority or any power to condemn a believer, because actually we have all being condemned when we were crucified with Christ. We have all died and instead the life we now live Paul says in verse 20 we live by faith. That is how we live. We live by his love, him who loved us. We live by what he has done for us. He who gave himself for us that is the basis of our living, that is the basis of our forgiveness. Therefore, if you still try to impose the law on believers you are actually trying to reopen the chapter that Jesus has closed. The gospel says,

believe in the Lord Jesus and the law has no hold on you. The leaders were actually denying the effectiveness of the work of the Lord Jesus in a believer's life. Now for a believer to continue to insist on that process, now that is really sinning against the law. The law is supposed to prepare us for Jesus and we come to Jesus and we still want to go back to the law we have just totally missed the whole point of the law altogether. Therefore, in verse 21 Paul spells out the bottom-line.

21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Paul says if you try to add to the gospel of Jesus Christ, His death is no longer of any value to you, because you say it is not enough for Jesus to die on the cross, I must still do all these things. Your relationship with God will no longer be by grace, actually you have just lost the gospel. So friends it is crucial for us to be clear about these things.

Are we still imposing rules on each other? Do we actually start to associate God's blessing with things that we do and so to experience God's blessing it is going to be conditional? Is it happening in our groups?

We are always just one to two generations away from losing the gospel.

Baptism is not the assurance of going to heaven. Anything we add to the gospel we just distort the gospel, it has become a different gospel.

When apostle Peter when he began to withdraw from the people from table fellowship in Antioch, he didn't think that he is twisting the gospel. He had no clue, but he perverted the gospel and even the great apostle Peter, the one on whom the apostolic gospel was passed on that much of the Bible today that if even Peter the rock needed to be rebuked, to be reminded to keep you watchful in his conduct, how much more you and me have to be watchful. Friends, we need to be vigilant because if we are not slowly but surely we will end up with a different gospel which is no gospel at all. The Roman Catholic church didn't just one day decide to preach something different like indulgence, but over the years slowly but surely when people no longer read the Bibles, when we start to only rely on what we here from the preacher. After years and years of doing that, they preached indulgence and no one of them was able to pick it, is it from Bible or not. Slowly but surely the gospel is lost.

As a reformers did back then for the church we have to make a commitment to keep the Bible open in your lives in a fresh way, even in a more committed way as it was before this. Keep your Bibles open when your youth group gathers. Whenever we come together make sure that we are hearing what God is saying to us through His spirit from His word. Keep our Bibles open when we meet for committee meetings as well.

Work hard in thinking through, how does the gospel inform us as we wrestle with these issues, but perhaps most importantly and I speak with a heavy heart as well, it is not easy to keep the Bibles open in our homes. When level of interest is low, it is challenging to pray every day.

Friends don't just read the bible though anyway we like. Remember these people who turn up into the Church in Galatia, they came with their Bible, they came with the Old Testament and yet they were preaching a different gospel. The catholic church in 1517 they had the Bible, they claim to be teaching the Bible and yet they were preaching a different gospel and today sadly you can walk into a Christian bookshop and pick up a Bible reading material and there is no guarantee that you will not be getting a different gospel, sadly but true. So we need to be watchful in how we read the Bible, cultivate good habits, so that we read the Bible in such a way that we will always be better prepared to appreciate who is Jesus to us. So when we read the Bible in such a way it will truly make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It will not make us slaves again like what happened to the Galatians. It not makes us hate the God and fearful of the God that we want children to be punished, children to be stoned but it will make us wise for salvation, it will make us see the demonstration of the love of God in sending Jesus to die on the cross for us. Develop good habits, use materials that will encourage good habits and if you need help get help.

Make progress in our maturity how we handle the word, do not end the year 2017 just as ill-equipped as you began the year 2017, make progress as a Christian.

There is only one gospel, there is no other because Jesus has revealed only one gospel to us and we need to preserve it. We need to walk in line of the gospel. We need to encourage one another, build each other up on that gospel, others need to hear that gospel from us.