

The Power of the Gospel to Unite Believers



SABBATH—JULY 8

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 2:1–14; 1 Corinthians 1:10–13; Genesis 17:1–21; John 8:31–36; Colossians 3:11.

MEMORY VERSE: “If any of these things has happened to you, then agree with one another. Have the same love. Be one in spirit and in the way you think and act. By doing this, you will make my joy complete” (Philippians 2:2, NIV).

JOHN CALVIN was a church reformer. A reformer works to improve things. Calvin believed that the devil used two “weapons” to attack the church: (1) disagreements and (2) division or splitting up the church. Calvin warned that Christians should avoid anything that divides the church.

But is keeping the church together more important than the truth? In answer to this question, think about Martin Luther. He was also a reformer. Luther was brought to trial at the Diet of Worms for believing that we are saved by faith alone.

“But suppose Luther chose at his trial to give up his beliefs so that the church would not split apart. Then Satan and his followers would have won a great victory. But Luther’s firm stand for the truth set the church free. It started a new and better time for the church.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy [War Between Christ and Satan]*, page 166.

In Galatians 2:1–14, Paul does all he can to keep the church together. But he refuses to allow the gospel to be weakened in order to have agreement. There is room for different ideas in the church. But the gospel should not be weakened to keep the church together.



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THE IMPORTANCE OF AGREEMENT (1 Corinthians 1:10–13)

How important for Paul is agreement in the church? How does 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 help answer this question?

In Galatians 2:1, 2, Paul turns his attention to another attack against his beliefs. The false teachers in Galatia said that Paul's gospel was not in agreement with what Peter and the other apostles taught. Apostles were the twelve men Jesus chose to spread the gospel. They served as leaders and teachers in the church. The false teachers said that Paul went against the apostles' teachings. They accused Paul of being someone who caused trouble and could not be controlled.

Paul answers this attack by telling a story of a trip he made to Jerusalem some 14 years after he became a believer. We really cannot be sure when the trip took place. But we do know that no trip in Bible times was ever easy. It was 300 miles from Antioch to Jerusalem. So the trip would have taken at least three weeks. Paul would have faced many dangers along the way. But Paul still made the trip. He did not go because the apostles asked him to. He went because the Holy Spirit told him to go. He arrived in Jerusalem. And then he set his gospel before the apostles.

Why did Paul do that? It was not because Paul had any doubt about what he was teaching. He did not need the apostles to approve of his message or accept him. After all, Paul had been preaching this same gospel for 14 years. But Paul did want the apostles' support and encouragement.

So the lie that Paul's message was different was not just an attack on Paul. It was an attack on the apostles and the church. Agreement between the apostles was very important. A difference in ideas between the church and Paul over his work would be very bad. It would result in a split between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish believers. Such a split would "divide the church of Christ. And all the work that Paul had done to spread the gospel to the non-Jewish world would be undone."—Adapted, F. F. Bruce, *The Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), page 111.

What are the problems in the church today that could weaken or divide it? How do we deal with these problems?



Paul arrived in Jerusalem and set his gospel before the apostles.

FALSE TEACHINGS AND FALSE BROTHERS (Galatians 2:3–5)

Paul and some of the Jewish Christians fought over circumcision. Circumcision is the custom of cutting off the skin at the end of the sex organ of a man or a boy. Read Genesis 17:1–22; Galatians 2:3–5; and Acts 15:1, 5. It is easy to see from these verses why some Jewish Christians thought that non-Jewish believers should accept circumcision. Why might they think that way?

Circumcision was a sign of the special relationship God made with Abraham. Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation. Only males from Abraham’s line had to go through circumcision. But all God’s people were invited to join in the special relationship with God. The sign of circumcision was given to Abraham in Genesis 17. It happened *after* Abraham had a child with his wife’s slave. After all, God had promised Abraham a son. And Abraham thought he would “help” God out by making the promise come true.

Circumcision was a fitting sign of the covenant. The covenant was the agreement between God and His people. Circumcision reminded the Jews that the best-laid plans of humans can never do what God has promised. Outward circumcision was a symbol of God’s saving work in the soul of the sinner (read Deuteronomy 10:16; Romans 2:29). Circumcision also reminded God’s people to let go of their trust in themselves and to depend fully on Him instead.

But in Paul’s time, circumcision became a sign of what it meant to be a Jew. About 150 years before Jesus’ birth, some Jews forced all the Jews and non-Jews in Palestine to go through circumcision. Some Jews even believed that circumcision was a “passport” to being saved. This belief can be seen in such ancient sayings as, “ ‘Men who accept circumcision do not go down into Gehenna [hell].’ ”

To think Paul was against circumcision would be a mistake. Paul was against the false teachers who said, in Acts 15:1, that non-Jewish believers, or Gentiles, must go through circumcision to be saved. So the problem was not really about circumcision. It was about how we are saved. Paul said salvation comes from faith in Christ alone. But the false teachers said it comes by obeying the law.

Maybe today we do not argue over the need to be circumcised to be saved. But what do we argue over instead?



Circumcision is a symbol. It shows how God requires us to let go of our trust in ourselves to depend fully on Him instead.

AGREEMENT IN SPITE OF DIFFERENCES (Galatians 2:7)

In Galatians 2:4, Paul says, “Some people had slipped in among us. They had pretended to be believers. They wanted to find out about the freedom we have because we belong to Christ Jesus. They wanted to make us slaves again” (NirV). What are Christians free from? For the answer, read John 8:31–36; Romans 6:6, 7; Romans 8:2, 3; Galatians 3:23–25; Galatians 4:7, 8; and Hebrews 2:14, 15. How do we experience this freedom ourselves?

Freedom is an important idea for Paul. It describes for him the Christian experience. He uses the word more often than any other writer in the New Testament. And in his letter to the Galatians, he uses the words “free” and “freedom” many times.

Freedom is an important idea for the Christian too. For the Christian, it means to be free in Christ. It is the chance to live a faithful life of love to God without being held back from doing so. This new life includes freedom from three things: (1) the slavery of sin, (2) the guilt of breaking the law, and (3) the power of death.

The apostles accepted the fact that God gave Paul a special work to do, just as He gave Peter (Galatians 2:7, NirV). Both men were sent to preach the same gospel to different groups of people. What does this fact tell us about how the gospel brings us all together as one in spite of our differences?

The apostles believed God chose Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. In the same way, God chose Peter to preach to the Jews. Both men preached the same gospel. But how they shared it depended on the people they tried to reach. “The gospel would bring all believers together as one in spite of differences in their backgrounds. This oneness, or unity, is what it means for Christians to be in agreement.”—Adapted, James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle [Letter] to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993), page 106.

How open should we be to new forms of sharing the gospel? What forms of witnessing make you nervous, and why? How do we know if a new method is good?



The gospel would bring all believers together as one in spite of different backgrounds.

CLASH IN ANTIOCH (Galatians 2:11–13)

Peter made a visit to Antioch. Antioch was the place of the first Gentile church. It was also the headquarters for Paul's work to reach the Gentiles. In Antioch, Peter ate with Gentile believers. But then some Jewish Christians arrived from James. Peter was afraid of what they would think of him for eating with Gentiles. So he stopped.

Read Galatians 2:11–13 and then Acts 10:28. Why should Peter have known it was wrong to stop what he was doing? What does his action tell us about the power that customs and beliefs handed down from the past have over our lives?

Some think Peter and the other Jews with him stopped following the Jewish food laws of the Old Testament. But this idea is not true. Suppose they had stopped. Then there would be a record of it somewhere. But there is not. And such a choice would have caused a big uproar in the church. So it seems the problem here is really about eating with Gentiles. Many Jews thought Gentiles were not pure. So they avoided being social with Gentiles as much as possible.

Peter once felt this way about Gentiles too. But God gave him a vision. Afterward, Peter went to the house of Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army. Then Peter said to him, “ ‘God has shown me that I should not say anyone is not pure and ‘clean’ ” (Acts 10:28, NIV). This verse shows us Peter knew better. But he was so afraid of upsetting his own countrymen that he went back to his old ways. How sad that culture and beliefs handed down from the past had such a strong pull on Peter's life!

But Paul sets Peter straight. In Galatians 2:13, Paul says Peter's actions are “not honest” (NIV). The NKJV Bible translates these same words as “hypocrisy.” Hypocrisy comes from the Greek word *hypokrisis*. Hypocrisy is the act of doing the opposite of what you believe or say. It means being two-faced. Paul says, “Even Barnabas was led astray” (NIV) by Peter's hypocrisy. Strong words from one man of God to another!

Why is it so easy to be a hypocrite—a person who says one thing but does another? Could it be that we are blind to our own faults more than the faults of others? In what ways are we dishonest in our own lives? And how can we learn to see this hypocrisy and then get rid of it?



Paul says Peter's actions are not honest.

PAUL'S CAUSE FOR WORRY (Galatians 2:11–14)

The situation in Antioch was surely tense. Paul and Peter were two leaders in the church. And they were in open disagreement. Paul holds nothing back when scolding Peter.

Read Galatians 2:11–14. What reasons does Paul give for scolding Peter in front of others?

In Paul's view, the problem was not that Peter chose to eat with the Jews from Jerusalem. The rules of hospitality required Peter to do so. Instead, the problem was about weakening the power of the gospel message itself.

Read Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11. How do these verses help us understand Paul's strong words to Peter?

We read how Paul met in Jerusalem with Peter and the other apostles. They agreed that Gentiles could enjoy all the blessings of Christ without circumcision. But Peter's behavior puts that agreement in danger. Before this time, both Jewish and Gentile Christians joined together in open fellowship. But now the church in Antioch is divided. And the split could break apart all churches in the future.

In Paul's view, Peter's behavior sends a negative message to the Gentile Christians. Peter's actions make it seem that the Gentile Christians are not equal to Jewish believers. Paul believes Peter's actions would cause Gentiles to feel that they needed to be circumcised to experience full fellowship in the church. So, Paul says to Peter, " 'You are a Jew. . . . But you live like one who is not. So why do you force Gentiles to follow Jewish ways?' " (Galatians 2:14, NIV). The wording "to follow Jewish ways" also can be translated as "to Judaize." This word means "to adopt a Jewish way of life." It was used to mean Gentiles who followed Jewish traditions and rules. Paul's enemies in Galatia were often called "the Judaizers."

What Peter did was bad enough. But Barnabas got caught up in doing it too. Both men knew better than to act the way they did. What a clear example of the power of "peer pressure"! Peer pressure is the feeling that you must do the same things other people do to be liked or respected by them. How can we protect ourselves from being led in the wrong direction by people around us?



The church in Antioch was divided. And the split could break apart all churches in the future.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: To learn more about the topic of being united in the church in spite of differences, read Ellen G. White, “Investigation [Careful Study] of New Light [Truth],” pages 45, 47, in *Counsels [Advice] to Writers and Editors*.

“Even the best men will make terrible mistakes if they are not led by God. A person with a lot of power has more opportunity than most to turn others away from what is good and true. He can damage many hearts and minds. So he must be careful to follow the Lord. At Antioch, Peter failed to be fair and honest. Paul had to stand up face-to-face against Peter’s poor example. This clash is recorded in the Bible so others may learn from it. It is a warning to people who hold great power. It is to help them not to fail to be fair and honest. It is a lesson to stay true to the law of God.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, page 1108.



We must stay true to the law of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Few people enjoy a face-to-face challenge with another person. But sometimes it is needed. When should a church punish wrongdoing and those who refuse to be corrected?
- ② The more the church grows, the more it will be made up of people or things different from one another. What steps can the church take to make sure that what unites us is not weakened or lost sight of in the midst of such differences? How can we learn to accept and even enjoy the different ways of life and customs among us? And how can we do these things and still stay united?
- ③ What should *not* change about the gospel when sharing it with people who live differently than we do? At the same time, what can be changed? How can we learn to tell the difference between the two?

SUMMARY: Some Jewish Christians insisted that Gentiles must be circumcised to become true followers of Christ. This belief almost divided the New Testament church in half. But the apostles worked together to stop this threat from happening. They put their differences aside. And then they were able to help the church stay united and faithful to the truth of the gospel.