

Gospel Unity Gal 2:1-10
Tim Anderson 16/6/2019

Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the song of angry men?
It is the music of the people
Who will not be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes!

It's a stirring theme from Les Mis.
It stirs my heart.
I'm not French.
But freedom stirs my heart.
And it's an anthem of our age.
It's a very high value in our community.
And it's a very high value for Christians.
We must not let anyone take away our freedom!
Freedom is one of the blessings of the Christian gospel.

But not everything that people look to as freedom is in fact freedom.
The soup dragons sang,
"I'm free to do what I want any old time."
But is doing what you want any old time actually freedom?
Christianity would say that doing what you want any old time
is actually being a slave to your sinful nature.
True freedom is being the person God made you to be.

Well freedom is an anthem of Galatians.
It appears here in chapter 2 for the first time.
2:4 "This matter arose
because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks
to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus

and make us slaves.

But freedom returns in more detail later in the letter.

So we are going to be looking
at the true nature of Christian freedom then.

Today we will simply observe
that preserving our Christian freedom is vitally important.

Verse 4 tells us that false believers
were trying to take away the Galatians' freedom.

Paul says,

2:5 "We did not give in to them for a moment,
so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you."

Do you see what that means?

If you give up your Christian freedom
you are actually losing the truth of the gospel.
That's how seriously Paul takes Christian freedom.

Christianity without freedom
is Christianity that has given up on the gospel.

Let's put it bluntly.

It's not Christianity any longer.

We can't have Christianity without the freedom of the gospel.

We don't know exactly what that freedom is yet.

It's not freedom to do what you want any old time.

But we are called to be free,
and we must maintain that freedom.

How did we get here in Galatians?

Paul is defending his gospel of freedom.

His authority and the message he taught
have both come under attack in the Galatian church.

He has told us that he is an apostle.

He was directly commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus
for the task of preaching the gospel.

He wasn't chosen by a human being.

He wasn't sent by a human being.

Jesus sent him to preach the gospel and no one else.
He has also told us that the message he brought
came straight from Jesus.
He didn't nut it out himself.
He wasn't told it by another human being.
He didn't consult with the existing leaders of the church
to work out what to preach.
Jesus gave Paul his gospel message directly.

So what is the basic message of today's passage?

When he did you up and spend time
discussing his message with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem,
they wholeheartedly endorsed his message.

There was no disunity.

There was no wedge between Peter and Paul.

The gospel Paul and Barnabas preached is the same gospel
that Peter, James and John preached.

Why is that important?

Because the strategy of the false believers was to divide and conquer.
They were approaching the Galatian church and saying,
"Paul hasn't told you the full story.

Peter down in Jerusalem has the full story.

Listen to us.

We'll tell you the things that you've missed out on."

Well as it turns out,

this wasn't the first time that Paul had run into this question.

The point at issue was whether converts to Christianity
who were not Jews needed to obey the Jewish Law.

And this was one of the biggest issues in the early church.

Not just in Galatia.

Everywhere that Paul preached.

And so Paul recounts for the Galatians an earlier occasion
when he had encountered the same question.

2:1 "After 14 years",

that means 14 years after his conversion,
but some years before he was writing to the Galatians.
"After 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas.
I took Titus along also."

Notice that 14 years is plenty of time
for Paul's gospel preaching to be fully established.
There is no longer any question
about whether this visit
was for Paul to be instructed in the faith by the Jerusalem leaders.
This was a meeting to ensure unity in the Church.
He had the gospel he had been preaching to the Gentiles.
The Jerusalem leaders had the gospel
they had been preaching to the Jews.
But there were people
who wanted to tell the Gentile Christians to obey the Jewish Law.
And let's be clear.

They were not just saying,
"You really ought to do this, you know."

Listen to Acts 15:1

"Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch
(Antioch was the main city of Galatia)
and were teaching the believers:
unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses,
you cannot be saved."

People were being taught
that their eternal salvation depended on following the Jewish Law.
That's wrong!

Now there are levels of wrongness.
Some things are wrong and it's best to just ignore them.

Someone might say to you,
"Christians should never drink alcohol."

Now, there's nothing in the Bible that says that.
The Bible speaks against drunkenness but not alcohol consumption.
But look, maybe the person had a problem with an alcoholic father.
Who knows?

It's not worth getting into a massive argument about.
But other things are wrong and it's crucial to address the issue.
And at the pointy end of matters needing to be addressed
is this question of what you need to do to be saved.
If people are teaching that something
other than faith in Jesus is required for salvation
then they are leading people away from true Christian faith.
That must be addressed.
It's way too important to ignore it.
So how should it be addressed?
Well there are two ways to go wrong.
The first is to try to down play the issue and pretend it is not important.
This is very tempting in today's world.
Our culture would like to give everyone licence
to believe whatever they sincerely think is true
without suggesting there are consequences for that.
But there are consequences.
Adding to the gospel destroys the gospel.
As soon as you tell someone
they need to keep the Jewish Law to be saved,
then they have done something to earn their salvation.
They have kept the Jewish law.
Salvation is no longer a free gift from God.
It is something that can be earned by our good works.
And that is not the gospel.
Those who believe their good works make them right in God's sight
will not receive the gift of eternal life.
We can't pretend that's not important.
It's of central importance.
That's the first way we can go wrong.
The second way is to immediately break off contact.
This is less common today,
though in more conservative Christian circles it is alive and well.
You hear that someone is preaching a false gospel.
So you don't talk with them about it,

instead you go your separate ways
and only have Christian fellowship with those who have stayed faithful.
Well there is a time for parting company.
But it's not the first thing to do.
Paul could have said,
"These people coming up from Judea are not teaching the truth.
My gospel was given to me by revelation from Jesus.
Clearly Judea has departed from the truth.
We in Antioch are now the only true church."
But that would have been a tragedy.
It would have fractured the unity of the church.
So what is the right way to address important matters of false teaching?
You do what Paul did.
He took Barnabas and Titus
and went down to have a conversation with the Judean church leaders.
And what he found out when he got there
was tremendously encouraging.
You know, when the people came up from Judea
teaching that men needed to be circumcised to be saved,
Paul would have thought the worst.
"This is all going pear shaped.
I'm going to have to be in conflict with esteemed leaders in the church."
But it didn't turn out that way.
He went down there and what does it say in verse 6-8,
"The added nothing to my message.
On the contrary,
they recognised that I had been entrusted with task
of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised,
just as Peter had been to the circumcised.
For God who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised,
was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles."
What did the church discover?
They discovered that they were on the same page.
The leaders in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas
and the leaders in Jerusalem, Peter, James and John,

were proclaiming exactly the same message.
And that should not be a surprise, should it?
Because the same God is at work in both groups.
God is not going to say one thing to this group of people
and another thing to that group of people.
Same God - Same message.
And so the unity of the church was preserved.
Notice that you don't preserve unity by ignoring doctrine.
You preserve unity by sitting down and talking the matter through.
With patience and good will,
with a shared commitment to the truth of the Scriptures
a remarkable amount of unity is possible.
Possible even between people from different places,
different races, different genders, different ages.
"In Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free,
nor is there male and female,
you are all one in Christ Jesus."
Christ unites us.

There's something else very important about unity.
It's not just words.
It's actions.
You know in the Anglican Church in Melbourne we face this issue.
We say we are a church for people of all races.
But when white guys like me become ministers in the church,
we pay them a salary so they don't have to do secular work
and can undertake ministry full time.
But when Sudanese guys become ministers,
ministers of congregations
with the same number of people as in my church,
we tell them
that they need to go out and get a job to support themselves.
They can minister in their spare time.
Does that sound like unity to you?
Unity is actions as well as words.

Well there are three actions I would like to highlight in the passage.

Action number 1.

Titus was not circumcised.

Paul took two friends along to Jerusalem.

Barnabas was a fellow leader in ministry.

Titus was a young man, a ministry apprentice if you like.

And it's likely that Paul took Titus along precisely because he was not circumcised.

No doubt there were other reasons to take him.

Where he could,

Paul did all his ministry with a group of friends and colleagues.

But it was very important that uncircumcised Titus was there.

Because it's one thing to say,

you don't need to be circumcised to be saved.

But you can imagine that soft pressure might be brought to bear.

"We all know that you don't need to be circumcised to be a Christian, but not everyone believes that.

And we don't want to get them offside.

How about you undergo a little operation for the sake of unity, peace and harmony?"

Sorry, No.

It's not possible.

To do so would undermine with our actions everything we've just achieved in our words.

It's also worth noticing that on another occasion,

Paul did get Timothy to be circumcised.

What's the difference between Timothy and Titus?

Well the circumstances were different.

Timothy was circumcised as a way of being a Jew to the Jews.

It was in the name of not putting up barriers to reaching out with the gospel.

Titus was not circumcised

because that would be compromising with false teachers.

We bend over backwards to remove stumbling blocks to evangelism.
We will not budge an inch for false teachers.
To compromise with false teachers destroys our unity
because our unity is in the gospel.

Unity is actions not just words:

The second action.

2:9 "James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars
gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship
when they recognised the grace given to me."

Don't keep your hands in your pockets.

It's true at the Holy Trinity Jumble Sale,
unless you want to attract commentary from Werner.

It's true about Christian unity.

It's one thing to say,

"We all agree here."

It's another to extend the right hand of fellowship.

Shaking hands on it is not just some quaint ritual.

It's a sign that we are not just going to talk about our unity,
we are going to act on it.

We are going to work together for the gospel.

So for example,

Gafcon has a statement of faith called the Jerusalem Declaration.

That's important because it shows
that all members confess the same faith.

You can't be a member of Gafcon
without signing the Jerusalem Declaration.

But it's quite possible to sign the Jerusalem Declaration
and then put your hands back in your pockets.

It's possible to fail to act on unity.

Gafcon also has ten ministry networks.

They span such things as women's ministry, sustainable development,
theological education, bishops' training, prayer, and church planting.

They are ways that as a movement
we are going to work together for the gospel.

When we work together,
we are putting unity into practice.
Don't keep your hands in your pockets.

Unity is actions not just words:
The third action.

2:10 "All they asked was that we should remember the poor,
the very thing I had been eager to do all along."

You can read in Paul's letters, particularly 1&2 Corinthians,
how he made a collection for the impoverished church in Jerusalem.
It was something close to his heart.

If the Gentiles are to share in the Jews spiritual riches,
then it's only fair that the Gentiles share their material blessings
when the Jews are starving.

The apostle James puts it this way,
"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.
If one of you goes and says to them,
'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,'
but does nothing about their physical needs,
what good is it?"

Unity rings pretty hollow if we talk about being united
but ignore the real needs of the people we say we are united with.
I was so pleased when we helped the churches in Tanzania
to build some church buildings.

It was a genuine sign of the unity we share in the gospel.
And those guys are poor.

Half the children under 5 in Tanzania suffer from malnutrition.
That has got to be a good reason to give them a helping hand.

Well what have we seen today?

It's been lessons in gospel unity from the apostle Paul.

Here are some main points.

1. Our Christian freedom depends on maintaining unity.

If we don't stay united in the gospel,
someone will come along and enslave us with a false gospel.

2. When unity is under threat,
you need to have a robust conversation about it.
You may find out like Paul did in today's passage,
that God has actually worked powerfully to unite his church.
But in any case,
the alternatives of pretending the problem doesn't exist
or in breaking fellowship without having the conversation
are bad options.

3. Unity results in action.
Our actions must back up the doctrine we agree upon.
You can't be truly united unless you are working together.
Signing a doctrinal statement on its own
is akin to putting your hands in your pockets.
And unity demands that we act in love
to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters.