

The Truth of the Gospel

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We're considering what it means to be grounded in the gospel. We've seen the *grace and peace of the gospel*, the *peerless authority of the gospel*, and today the *truth of the gospel*. Let's consider: 1) *History*: what's going on in the letter? 2) *Theology*: what does it tell us about God? 3) *Life*: how do we know the gospel is working in us?

History

Christianity isn't a religion of esoteric ideas; it's faith in the details. In this passage, we discover the gospel affecting Paul's travel schedule, his friends, even some enemies. Some six names are mentioned in the span of just ten verses! Let's get into the details, [Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.](#) What's going on? [MAP] Paul had met the risen Christ on a road to Damascus, was transformed and went on to have an itinerant ministry outside of Jerusalem. Then, he set up shop in Antioch, which was the center of ministry to non-Jews/Gentiles. While there he's visited by leaders from Jerusalem, the center of ministry to Jewish Christians. Peter (Cephas) and some men allegedly from James, the brother of Jesus, create a ruckus by doing two things. *First*, they refuse to eat at the same tables as Gentiles. *Second*, they insist the Gentiles be circumcised like the Jews. This effectively treats them as second-class citizens in the Church. Why insist on circumcision? The rite goes back to Gen 17, where it was initiated as a sign of God's covenant with Israel. Other ethnic groups were circumcised then, but eventually this came to be recognized as a distinctive of Jewish people, i.e. the circumcised. Now, non-Jewish people are becoming Christians and the Jewish Christians want them to undergo the ritual marking of the people of God. They expect the Gentiles to conform to their theological and cultural heritage. But Paul does *not* require Gentiles to be circumcised, [as we see in the case of Titus](#) (3). It's a divisive issue. Things are boiling over. And it's hard to overstate the importance of what happens next. Fourteen years after his conversion, Paul makes a trip back to Jerusalem, the epicenter of Christianity, to sort this out with the original apostles. Look at verse 2, [I went up because of a revelation and set before them the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.](#) Paul senses the need and receives a revelation to resolve the dispute, but if he's so confident his gospel is from God, why does he say he went [in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain](#)? Are there two Pauls? Hyperconfident and second-guessing? Actually, Paul isn't second-guessing his gospel at all. Here's why: the gospel is about two groups of people coming together *in Christ*: Jews and Gentiles. Jesus, the messiah, came to reconcile Jew and Gentile, making them right with one another. The Head comes with a reconciled Body. Paul talks about this at length in Ephesians, where he describes Jesus as removing a dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile in order to create *one, new, multiethnic humanity* in himself—the Church. So, if the Jerusalem apostles disagree with Paul and insist on circumcision and kosher laws, they will debunk the peoples-uniting gospel (2:14-16). The gospel will fail and we're left with two divided, hostile groups who care more about their cultural heritage than Christ. This is instructive for our racially tense times where it's tempting to elevate racial preferences over our reconciled identity in Christ. To consider ourselves white, Asian-American, African-American first and Christian second. But Paul is arguing we should consider ourselves

family first, and not just any family, a holy family as African-American pastor Eric Mason puts it. Mason says we must start here, not with pragmatics: “If we don’t start with who we are in the living God, we are no more than social activists and speakers without any power for long-term systemic change” (64). Then, from this shared, primary identity as a holy family we can listen, learn, and work for racial justice with our brothers and sisters of a different race. Now, during a private meeting with the apostles some “false brothers” break in and start pointing fingers trying to *spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery*. But we (the apostles, Titus, Barnabas) *did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you* (4-5).

Theology

This brings us to theology: what does all this tell us about God? *First, it tells us God esteems the truth of the gospel*. The *truth of the gospel* is the truth *in* the gospel, its claims, its very nature. What is that? *The truth of the gospel isn’t primarily that Jesus reconciles people to one another but that he reconciles them to God. The offence in this whole debacle isn’t primarily cultural (you have to keep Jewish custom); it’s spiritual (you have to keep our custom to be accepted by God)*. Paul gives us a case study. He says when Peter came to visit him, and withdrew from eating with Gentiles, Peter reinforced the necessity of keeping kosher laws to be accepted by God. So Paul rebukes him saying Peter stood condemned (11). Why the strong language? Paul says, “*I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel*” (2:14). He does not say, I saw their conduct was not in step with cultural relativism. He says it wasn’t in step with the *truth* of the gospel. What truth? That God accepts all peoples based on faith in Jesus, not on keeping racial or legal norms. Where do I get that? Galatians 2:16: “*we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ*.” God esteems the truth of the gospel, which is the only way for us to experience the joy of being right with God. *Second, this tells us that God values our freedom in Christ*. It is a freedom *from* something and a freedom *for* something. *Freedom from*: being required to do enough good, to obey the Law perfectly, to be accepted by God. When I’m talking to secular people, and they find out that I’m a pastor, about three-quarters of the time they say something like, “I think it’s important to do good.” They perceive Christianity as a do-good program. But that isn’t the gospel; that’s religion: *obey and you’ll be accepted*. Actually it’s worse than religion; it’s bondage. Why? Because we can never do enough good to please a perfect God. *Now, you may not think the gospel is a do-good program, but you probably act like it from time to time*. Do you ever find yourself thinking: *Have I done enough? Did I do it right? What will people think? Did I say the right thing? Is God coming for me?* Your internal monologue reveals you’re not living in the freedom of the gospel. You’re living as though the gospel is a do-good program. The apostles stood, and did not yield in submission even for a moment, so you can experience freedom from nailing it. But they also sought *freedom for: for the truth of the gospel to be preserved for you*. As Western individuals we tend to think of freedom as permission to do whatever we want. Freedom from restraints. Freedom from others. Freedom from government. That’s freedom in the negative, but true freedom is found not just from something but for something. Paul mentions two things. 1) freedom **for us that we have in Christ Jesus** (4). This is a freedom to be our new selves, to live as humanity was intended to live, under the sun of God’s undying approval, in the sweetness of union with Christ. The truth of the gospel is that it

sets us free to enjoy that God. A number of years ago I went to therapy weekend. While I was there I was asked to roll up a towel for each fear of failure and place it in a pillowcase: failing as a father, as a husband, as a pastor, as a Christian. At the end of the weekend I wrote a contract with God. Do you know what it said, "I am a free and loved son of God." In Christ, we are free *from* the fear of failure and *for* the love of God. He offers that to all of us. 2) our freedom is **for others**, which brings us to our final point, Life.

Life

How does the freedom of the gospel affect life? It puts us in the service of others. Paul writes, **Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another** (5:13). Freedom to love and serve others. This shows up in our passage in two ways: gospel proclamation and gospel demonstration. In verses 7-9, Paul points out that he was entrusted with the gospel for Gentiles and Peter for the Jews. They were sent to proclaim the gospel to others, and so are we. How selfish and stingy would we be to not share the truth and freedom of the gospel. To refrain from sharing it is to show you're not enjoying it. But its also not up to you to convince people to welcome that freedom. Paul says he who worked through Peter also worked through me (2:8). God worked through them, and he will work through you. God does the work; we simply witness. The gospel puts us in the service of others through gospel proclamation *and* gospel demonstration. If it really is a gospel for all, then we'll serve the poor and marginalized. Paul says, **they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do** (2:10). Many of you faithfully serve in our mercy ministries to the poor, give so our church can help others financially. Don't stop. If you don't, start! The gospel frees us for service to others, where we get to seek God work.