

## DEFEND THE GOSPEL

*2 Then, after an interval of fourteen years, I again went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. <sup>2</sup>I went up in response to a revelation, and I laid out before them the gospel that I preach to the Gentiles. But I did so privately before those who were esteemed [as leaders], so that by no means would I be running, or had I been running, in vain. <sup>3</sup>But not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. <sup>4</sup>[This whole matter arose] because of the false brothers who entered [the church] undetected, having “sneaked into [our fellowship]” in order “to spy on” our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might make us “slaves.” <sup>5</sup>[But] not even for a moment did we submit to them; [we resisted them] so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. <sup>6</sup>But from those who were held in esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me, God does not accept a man’s status—[I received nothing]. [I say,] those who were held in esteem did not contribute anything to me. <sup>7</sup>On the contrary, seeing that I have been entrusted with [the task of preaching] the gospel to the uncircumcised [Gentiles], just as Peter [was entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel] to the circumcised [Jews]—<sup>8</sup>for [God], who was at work in Peter’s ministry as an apostle to the circumcised [Jews], was also at work in my ministry to the Gentiles—<sup>9</sup>and recognizing the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, those who were esteemed as pillars [of the church], gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised [Jews]. <sup>10</sup>Only [they requested] that we remember the poor—the very thing I, also, was eager to do.*

*<sup>11</sup>But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him [directly] to his face, because his actions deserved to be condemned. <sup>12</sup>Before certain men came from James, Cephas had been eating with the Gentile [believers]. But when they came, he withdrew and separated himself from the Gentiles, [because] he was afraid of those who belonged to the [faction who advocated] circumcision. <sup>13</sup>The rest of the [believing] Jews joined with him in his hypocrisy, so much so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup>But when I saw that they were not walking in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles, and no longer like the Jews, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? <sup>15</sup>We who are Jews by birth, and not sinners from among the Gentiles—<sup>16</sup>knowing that a man is not justified by his observance of the law,\* but through faith in Jesus Christ—even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by our observance of the law,\* because no [sinful] man shall be justified by his observance of the law.\* (Gal. 2:1-16)*

*\*Literally, “by works of the law”*

### **Introduction**

Tim was serving as a missionary in a West African country, teaching the believers how they could evangelize their tribal neighbors. One day Tim went to the capital city for his annual physical exam. He got more than a medical exam that day. He also got a scolding from the West African doctor who examined him.

The doctor objected to Tim's missionary work and accused him of seeking to "colonize" and "westernize" his native land. Tim politely pointed out to the doctor that his aim was neither to colonize nor to westernize, but only to introduce needy sinners to Jesus Christ the Savior. He sought to explain that the gospel is not a western religion he was seeking to forcibly impose upon an African culture. On the contrary, it is the gift of God by which the heavenly Father calls men out of the bondage of the devil and into the household of God through faith in His Son Jesus Christ (*Our Daily Bread*, 9/28/95.)

Like Tim, we, too, must be prepared to stand up for the gospel, because there are those who intentionally or unintentionally would oppose the gospel and misinterpret it. Like the Apostle Paul, we need to defend the truth of the gospel so that it is neither compromised nor lost.

### **I. Defend the Gospel, by Being Alert (2:1-5)**

In verses 1-10 Paul is summarizing the events that took place at the first major council in church history, namely, the Jerusalem Council.

Later in church history would come other such councils: 325 A. D.; the Council of Nicea (dealing with the relationship of Christ to God the Father and affirming the fullness of Christ's divinity;) 451 A. D.; the Council of Chalcedon (dealing with the relationship of Christ's two natures and affirming the fact that He is fully God and fully man.) But the Jerusalem Council, held in about the year 50 A. D., was the first of such councils. It dealt with the question, How are we to be saved? By good works and religious ceremonies? By a combination of good works and the work of Christ? Or by the work of Christ alone?

Acts 15 gives the background and the controversy that led up to this first great church council. While Paul and Barnabas were ministering to the Gentile Christians in the city of Antioch, certain men came from Judea and insisted that the Gentile converts must be circumcised in order to be saved: *"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'"* (Acts 15:1.) Paul and Barnabas protested against this teaching, recognizing it to be a dangerous and debilitating heresy and maintaining that salvation is by faith in Christ and His work alone. As the controversy continued, it was finally decided that Paul and Barnabas should present the matter before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2.) Note: In Galatians 2:2 Paul indicates that it was *"in response to a revelation"* that he and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem; the Holy Spirit used this controversy as the occasion to assemble the Christian leaders and lead them to biblical truth on this issue.

When Paul and Barnabas present their case before the apostles and elders, there were certain men from the sect of the Pharisees who protested against them:

*“Then certain men of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, stood up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them [i.e.; the Gentile converts] and to charge them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5.)*

How did these Pharisees happen to be present at a council of the Christian church? We must recall that the Pharisees were firm believers in the doctrine of the resurrection, as Acts 23:8 informs us, *“the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.”* Apparently, when the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead and His disciples presented their irrefutable witness to His resurrection, some of the Pharisees acknowledged Him to be the Messiah and affiliated themselves with His church. But when they entered the church they did not understand the gospel, they still held to their former religious beliefs. They did not place their faith completely in Christ alone; rather, they sought to fit Christ into their religious system.

What teaching were these Pharisees seeking to propagate within the church of Christ? An outline and summation of their teaching is provided in Acts 15:5, *“Then certain men of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, stood up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them [i.e.; the Gentile converts] and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.”* These men taught the necessity of circumcision and personal obedience as part of an effort to earn one’s own salvation. According to their teaching, one enters the church by means of the sacrament and then one must seek to merit his own salvation by means of his personal effort to conform to the law of God. Apparently, they only viewed the Lord Jesus as an example to be followed, rather than as the Savior to be trusted. Recognizing this teaching of the Pharisees to be a heresy that stood in subtle, but direct, opposition to the gospel, Paul and Barnabas refused to yield to their demands that the Gentile converts must be circumcised in order to be saved—Paul and Barnabas took their stand *“so that the truth of the gospel might remain”* with the church (Gal. 2:5.)

The final outcome of the council is reported in Galatians 2:3, the apostles and elders agreed with Paul and Barnabas and consequently, *“not even Titus ... was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.”* Upon becoming a Christian, Titus had remained uncircumcised. He was thereby demonstrating his complete trust in Christ alone for his salvation; by his action he was declaring, “Christ and His work are fully sufficient; I need not and cannot contribute anything of my own.” The apostles and elders, by agreeing that Titus need not be circumcised, were supporting the truth of gospel that salvation is by Christ alone.

Notice how Paul and Barnabas were alert to detect the error of these men of the Pharisees while the other apostles initially did not. These Pharisees were affiliated with the church in Jerusalem and were unopposed by the apostles until Paul pointed out their error.

Let us defend the gospel, by being alert. Let us be alert to any teaching that turns the focus of our faith away from Christ and places it anywhere else: upon

ourselves, upon the church, upon any other person. The gospel always directs us to focus our faith and trust wholly upon Christ alone for every aspect of our salvation.

## II. Defend the Gospel, by Being Bold (2:11-16)

In verses 11-16 Paul relates another incident at which time he was compelled to take a public stand for the gospel—this time because a fellow apostle was unwittingly denying the truth of the gospel.

This incident took place in the city of Antioch and involved the Apostle Peter. Peter had come to Antioch to visit the church in that city (a church mainly composed of Gentile converts.)

During his stay in Antioch Peter entered into complete fellowship with these fellow Christians who had come out of a pagan background and were Gentiles by race and nationality—Peter even went so far as to eat with them, a thing that had been strictly forbidden under the Old Testament Jewish law. On an earlier occasion, when Peter visited the home of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, doing so at the command of the Holy Spirit, he testified, *“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean”* (Acts 10:28.)

Peter’s act of dining with these Gentile Christians demonstrated two things: First, it demonstrated Peter’s own trust in Christ alone for salvation, as opposed to trusting in his compliance with the Old Testament regulations. Peter had rightly come to understand that the Old Testament regulations of the ceremonial law had symbolically pointed to Christ—to the work He would accomplish for us and in us—and that those regulations were now fulfilled with the coming of Christ. Secondly, Peter’s action further demonstrated his conviction that the Gentiles need not become Jews and submit themselves to the regulations of the Old Testament ceremonial law in order to be saved, they need only trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation.

But then it happened: certain men came from Jerusalem. They came from James, although they were not sent by him. Later, James and the church in Jerusalem would send out an official letter to the Gentile churches in which they acknowledge, *“We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said”* (Acts 15:24.) These men are identified with those who maintained that circumcision was necessary for salvation (Gal. 2:12.)

When these men arrived at Antioch—men whom Peter may have known personally, and who knew Peter to be a strict Jew from the time of his birth—Peter became intimidated. He began to withdraw from fellowship with the Gentile Christians of Antioch. By so doing, he was indicating that it had been

wrong for him to accept these Gentiles converts as they were, and that it was, indeed, necessary for them to be circumcised if they were to be accepted by the Jews and by God. What Peter's action amounted to was the statement that faith in Christ is not enough, one must also receive the sacrament and take upon himself the obligation of observing the whole Old Testament law with all of its regulations. Peter's conduct, motivated by intimidation that sacrificed principle, eventually led Barnabas and other Jewish Christians to also withdraw from fellowship with their Gentile Christian brothers in Antioch—thereby reinforcing the erroneous conclusion that the Gentiles must observe the Jewish laws in order to be saved.

At this point the Apostle Paul was bold to stand up in opposition to Peter because Peter was not acting in accordance with the truth of the gospel (vs. 14a.) Paul pointed out Peter's inconsistency: *"If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles, and no longer like the Jews, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"* (vs. 14b.) Paul may have even reminded Peter of Peter's own testimony given to the church at Jerusalem upon his return from ministering at the home of Cornelius the centurion:

*After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup>God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup>He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:7-10)*

Paul then proceeded to remind Peter of the one and only source of our salvation:

*We who are Jews by birth, and not sinners from among the Gentiles—<sup>16</sup>knowing that a man is not justified by his observance of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ—even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by our observance of the law, because no [sinful] man shall be justified by his observance of the law. (Gal. 2:15-16)*

Notice Paul's boldness: he stands up in opposition to one of the chief apostles; he confronts him publicly in the presence of those who insisted upon the necessity of circumcision; and Paul apparently stood alone. Paul did this because Peter and the others were not acting in accordance with the truth of the gospel (vs. 14a.)

Let us defend the gospel, by being bold. Bear in mind the situation that confronted Tim, the missionary in West Africa, and the gracious, but firm, stand he took for the truth of the gospel. Consider what situations you may encounter: A university professor suggests that all religions are basically the same—they are all founded by a religious teacher, they all instruct men how to improve

themselves and try to make themselves acceptable to God—then the professor asks if there is any discussion or disagreement on this subject: By the grace of God, will you stand up for the truth of the gospel? When the subject of religion comes up, one of your fellow workers suggests that if a man is sincere and seeks to keep the Golden Rule of love, he will be all right. The other workers agree with him. By the grace of God, will you stand up for the truth of the gospel? Let us bear in mind the testimony of the Apostle Paul, and by the grace of God, be faithful to it: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes”* (Rom. 1:16-17.)

### **III. Defend the Gospel, by Living a Gracious Christian Life (2:6-10)**

Peter, James and John recognized the grace that was given to Paul. They recognized that he had become a Christian brother and that he had received the divine calling to be an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Upon recognizing this grace bestowed upon Paul and at work in him, they did the following. First, they extended to him the right hand of fellowship (vs. 9.) To this one who had formerly been a persecutor of the Christian church, there was now extended forgiveness and a welcome into Christian fellowship and partnership in the work of Christ. Bear in mind the extent and intensity of Paul's former opposition to the Christian church: *“Saul [Paul's name prior to his conversion] began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison”* (Acts 8:3.) Consider Ananias' testimony concerning Paul when the Lord commissioned him to go and minister to Paul: *“‘Lord,’ Ananias answered, ‘I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem’”* (Acts 9:13.) But now, by the grace of God, forgiveness is extended to this former persecutor and he is received into the fellowship of Christ's church. Even as we have been forgiven by God by virtue of the atoning work of Christ Jesus, so must we extend forgiveness to others.

Secondly, Peter, James and John exhorted Paul and Barnabas to remember the poor (vs. 10.) Specifically, they were being exhorted to show generosity and concern for those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering physical deprivation as a result both of famine and persecution.

Let us defend the gospel, by living a gracious Christian life. Since we are saved by grace, our living should be filled with grace. We must be ready and willing to extend the grace of forgiveness towards others, especially towards fellow believers:

*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. <sup>4</sup>But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his*

*mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:3-5)*

*Get rid of all bitterness and rage and anger and clamor and slander, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup>Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other just as God by Christ forgave you. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, become imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup>and walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God that was a pleasing fragrance [to him]. (Eph. 4:31-5:2)*

*... if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup>But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matt. 6:14-15)*

We must be ready to extend the grace of generosity and concern towards those in need, especially those who are fellow believers:

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. <sup>17</sup>If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? <sup>18</sup>Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. (1 Jn. 3:16-18)*

## **Conclusion**

Because there are those who either intentionally or unintentionally would oppose or deny the truth of the gospel, we must be ready to defend the gospel. We must do so by being alert, ... by being bold, ... and by living a gracious Christian life.