

What is the Gospel?

Lesson 8: The Gospel and the Church/Body of Christ

Lesson Objectives:

1. Appreciate the universality of God's salvific plan.
2. Appreciate the diversity of the body of Christ and maintain its unity.

The Gospel in the Bible

1. God's Plan of Salvation for Humankind
 - a. God's election of Abraham of Ur (current Iraq out of all places!) shows God's desire to transform all humankind.
 - i. "For I have chosen him [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Genesis 18:19).
 - ii. God "wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).
 - b. Isaiah looked forward to the last days when the nations would join God's people: "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (2:4).
 - c. Even though the OT does not use the term "Gospel," God's election of Abraham/Israel was/is good news to the entire humankind. This universality of salvation runs through both Old and New Testaments.
2. Gospel according to Mark
 - a. "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).
 - b. Mark uses the secular, political term "gospel," which was good news only to a certain portion of the Roman population, to highlight the true Gospel that is good news to all humankind (See lesson 3 for more detail).

The Body of Christ

1. We live in a very individualistic society where individual's rights are highly valued. Individual's rights are important, but sometimes this emphasis can get in the way of understanding what biblical Church is all about. God calls us to be a part of the body/Church of Christ. The Roman world was a highly hierarchical society with numerous classes and guilds. The NT provides a vision of a community that is drastically different from the world. This community of faith (body/Church of Christ) is to tear down the walls that separate races, classes, and genders. The best examples would be 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Galatians 3:28.
2. Justification by faith: Since the Reformation, Protestant churches have understood "justification by faith" as a judicial metaphor, an individual being justified in God's court of justice. This has led to a very individualistic understanding of the metaphor. A case in point is *TDNT (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament)*, which is a massive ten-volume work, approximately 9,000 pages long! Supposedly, this dictionary should have

covered **all** theologically important NT terms. Unfortunately, none of the 10 volumes covers Paul's favorite word *allélón*, meaning "one another," which was used 38 times in his letters (This number includes the cognate of *allélón*). What this implies is that Protestant scholarship has emphasized individual's faith at the expense of the communal and relational aspect of faith.

3. In recent decades scholars emphasize the relational aspect of "justification by faith." This relational aspect of the metaphor is apparent in Paul's use of the term as can be seen below.
4. After explaining that everyone is justified by faith in the first 8 chapters of Romans, Paul talks about how that should be reflected in our relationships: "Be devoted to **one another** in love. Honor **one another** above yourselves" (Rom 12:10); Live in harmony with **one another** (Rom 12:16); "Love **one another**" (Rom 13:18).
5. In Ephesians Paul again talks to the Ephesian Christians about what God has done in Christ in the first three chapters. As in Romans, Paul then talks about what Christians ought to do in light of their saved status in Christ: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with **one another** in love" (4:2); "Be kind and compassionate to **one another**, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (4:32); "Submit to **one another** out of reverence for Christ" (5:21).
6. Former Yale professor Wayne Meeks talks about the creation of new Christian communities in chapter 3 of his influential book, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. Needless to say that Paul's church planting and nurturing were wildly successful. No other individual was so successful. Why Paul? Meeks points out that Paul used the language of belonging and formation, such as, "saints, elect, call, beloved by God, known to God, brothers, sisters, children of God, new creation," etc. We may take these words for granted these days, but keep in mind that the Roman world was hierarchical, where not everyone was called brothers or sisters. For example, Paul regarded the Thessalonians as family and used "brothers" 15 times in 1 Thessalonians.
7. We also need to keep in mind that when salvation is mentioned in the OT, it is often Israel's salvation, such as God's deliverance/salvation of Israel from the Egyptian bondage. To neglect this view of salvation in a collective sense would be unbiblical and a grave mistake.
8. "The Lord is my strength and my defense; he has become **my salvation**. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him" (Exodus 15:1). The first 18 chapters of Exodus narrate Israel's salvation/deliverance from the Egyptian bondage. Even though the song in Exodus 15 uses the first-person singular possessive pronoun "my," the song does not talk about an individual's salvation, but Israel's salvation. The 1st person singular is used in songs/psalms because the songs/psalms are performative, commissive, and declarative inviting the worshiper to identify with the sentiments of the song/psalm.¹ For the same reason, many of 150 psalms use the first person singular even though they were worship songs sung by Israel.
9. There is only one body/Church of Christ that is racially and theologically diverse. We are to maintain that unity in diversity.
 - a. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is **one body** and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 60-64.

you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:3-6).

- b. When Paul talks about Church in Ephesians it is the one and only universal Church, whereas in other Paul’s letters he talks about individual, local churches like Corinthian Church, Galatian Church, Roman Church, etc.
 - c. We value individual churches’ autonomy, which is important. A drawback of this good practice is our lack of collaboration even among churches of Christ, not to mention other denominations.
 - d. The earliest churches, however, were theologically, racially, and geographically diverse even to the point that their NT list was not the same. It was only in the late 4th century the list of the current 27 NT books was adopted.² That is, the earliest churches did not even have the same Bible for more than 300 years! They were that diverse theologically!
 - e. The canon of the OT and NT sets the perimeter of faith, but within that perimeter theological diversity exists as both Testaments are ecumenical.
 - f. Paul as a great exemplar of ideal ecumenical Christian who practiced what he preached. He valued the unity of the Church so much so that eventually he even gave his life in his attempt to maintain the unity in diversity (Eph 4:3-6).
 - g. Some Jewish Christians argued that the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses (Acts 15:1-5). What that implied was that they had to become a Jew first by circumcision, then Christian.
 - h. Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith implies that the Gentiles did not have to become a Jew first by being circumcised.
 - i. The Jewish Christians continued to practice their religious customs, but the Gentile Christians did not. While the two groups’ practices were quite different, Paul in Ephesians highlights maintaining the unity in Christ because there is only one body, one Church.
 - j. Paul uses this body metaphor often to illustrate the diversity of the Church in its racial make-up and various roles and talents (e.g., 1 Cor 12:4-31).
10. What was Paul’s way of maintaining that unity between the two racially and theologically diverse groups in one body/Church of Christ?
- a. Paul often mentions the Jerusalem Relief Fund in his letters (Rom 15:25; 1 Cor 16:1ff; 2 Cor 8-9; Gal 2:9-10).
 - b. This would bring solidarity between Jewish and Gentile Christians because any devout Jew would send his/her relief fund to Jerusalem.

What Does It All Mean for Us Today?

1. Paul gave his life in his attempt to maintain the unity of the diverse body Of Christ in spite of its racial and theological diversity. How can we heed to his challenge to imitate him (1 Cor 4:16)?
2. How can we restore the communal aspect of the earliest churches in spite of their racial and theological diversities? What responsibilities do we have with the churches in the world/Abilene?

² Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).