

Jealous for the Whole Gospel

Acts 20:13-35; Ephesians 2:11-3:13

Rick Peterson

What happens when only a partial gospel is preached? Two things: The glory of God in Christ is diminished, and the Christian community remains immature and ineffective. In the previous lesson, we learned the preaching and teaching of the whole will of God is seldom heard, today. And this fact is the primary cause of much spiritual, mental, and relational suffering within Christian homes and churches. This is because the wholeness for which Christ died and rose again, simply cannot be experienced with a popular, but powerless, partial gospel. And I told you last time that is precisely what is taught these days — many pared-down, trimmed back, even distorted versions of the gospel, all of which were imported from the European state-church.

And this not likely to change, for in the last 200 years, most Christian leaders have proven to be unworthy stewards of the gospel. Instead, they have sought to define a so-called core gospel, focusing primarily on justification by faith alone, in order to develop a pseudo unity and a sham of an evangelistic effort. But that does not mean you cannot know and benefit from hearing the whole gospel, and that's what I proclaiming to you, today. I know what you need is not the core of the apple alone, but the whole apple — the gospel of the whole will of God. Now why is this important to you? First, because it was important to Jesus and his apostles. Second, because, as already stated, Christian maturity and wholeness demands a whole gospel approach. So, in this lesson we are going to define what is meant by the whole will of God, and then, how this whole gospel quite naturally creates a mature, effective Christian community within which wholeness is the rule among its members.

Defining The Whole Will of God

I told you last time of how the apostle Paul spent three years in Ephesus teaching and exhorting the Christian community. Just prior to leaving that region, he sent for the Ephesian elders, and told them the following,

¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

²² “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.

²⁵ “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you **the whole will of God**. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

³² “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:13-35 emphasis mine).

Central to our study, is verse 27: “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.” Apparently, some were hesitant to proclaim the whole of will of God. But not Paul. The reasons why others were hesitant are not clear. We may glean some insight from his letter to the Galatians; there Paul tell us that many advanced a *fleshly* alternative gospel in order to avoid being persecuted for preaching the cross of Christ (Galatians 5:12). Conflict avoidance, therefore, could be one reason for some to hesitate to proclaim the whole will of God.

And in Corinth, there was false teachers who emphasized wisdom, oratory skills, and credentials over the power of God displayed in the preaching of the cross (I Corinthians 1:18-25; 2:1-5). Selfish ambition is another common reason many do not proclaim the whole will of God. In Philippi, Paul was compelled to send Timothy to check on the welfare of the church

because, he stated, “I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 2:20-21). Self-interest in preaching create charlatans, not preachers. Later, he also urged Timothy to remain in Ephesus in order to “command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer” (I Timothy 1:3). Back again in Corinth, the apostle expressed “godly jealousy” for them due to the presence of some who preached “a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached . . . a different spirit other than the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted,” and then he added, “you put up with it easily enough” (II Corinthians 11:1-4). Clearly, Paul was jealous for the whole gospel. But what did he mean by the one whole gospel?

A Testimony to Christian Character

First, in Acts 20:18-19, Paul reminds the elders of his daily conduct, saying, “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.” Whatever Paul meant by the whole will of God, we can deduce that his preaching sprang from his own Spirit-transformed character of service, humility, and tears, in the midst of severe Jewish opposition. Does that remind you of the life of Jesus? Yes, indeed. The very life of Christ was being revealed in Paul through his character and how he lived. He lived as Jesus lived and so suffered as Jesus suffered. This is one reason many are unwilling to proclaim the whole will of God as Paul did: Our pulpits are filled with those seeking to avoid suffering.

The life of this dear brother was that of one who had been crucified with Christ, nevertheless, he lived, yet not him, but Christ was living in him, and the life he lived in the body, he lived by the faith of the Son of God who loved him and give himself for him (see Galatians 2:20-21). Paul’s character reflected the character of Christ, and so does his suffering. Therefore, this is a man, unlike so many Christian leaders today, who can confidently say, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9). Is there even one modern Christian leader that we would dare imitate like this? The imperative here is that you and I be that person who

genuinely displays the character of Christ so that you, too, can tell others to imitate you. Second, even in the midst of severe opposition, Paul, again, writes how he did not hesitate “to preach anything that would be helpful to you,” but taught them publicly and from house to house. And what did he declare to them? Verse 21: “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”

Now, let’s unpack that statement.

One Gospel to All Nations

So far, we have determined that the proclamation of the whole will of God produces Christ-like character so that others can not only learn from you, but also see Christ in you, and follow your example. The whole will of God produces genuine transformation into the image of Christ, including suffering rejection and persecution, which we know from elsewhere in Paul’s writings, is the paramount purpose of God in the life of every believer (see Romans 8:26-30; II Corinthians 3:7-18).

Now, let’s examine more closely, Paul declaration: “I have declared to **both** Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in **our** Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21). Paul could have said, “I have declared to **all people**, everywhere, that they all must turn to God in repentance, and have faith in **the** Lord Jesus.” But he did not. Words are important, and phraseology is also significant, therefore Paul was careful to use “both Jews and Greeks” and “our” Lord Jesus, for a very important reason.

Paul chose his words carefully because throughout Paul’s mission field, there was growing pressure on the Christian community to divide into two groups, Jewish and Greeks (Gentiles). And the notion of two churches, Jewish and Gentile, separated on the basis of ethnic and religious heritage, utterly outraged Paul. He had no tolerance for such a practice and for this simple reason: Nothing could be further from the meaning of the gospel than to reduce Christianity into just another Jewish sect which would require Gentiles to either go through a second conversion to Judaism in order to be included, or form a Gentile church of their own. The teaching that God has one plan for the Jews and a separate plan for Gentiles was to Paul, “another gospel” altogether, and worthy only of a double apostolic cursing (Galatians 1:6-9).

No, the apostolic preaching was that of a gospel to all the nations; a gospel in which a new creation meant a new humanity after the image and model of the risen Christ.

So, if we are to understand the meaning of “the whole will of God,” we must step back and remind ourselves of the eternal purpose of God: *To create a people for his own glory who are worthy of his presence in all holiness* (See Ephesians 1:4,11). And while this purpose was delayed in the first Adam, it was perfectly fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the last Adam — and now also in all those who are in Jesus (v. 5-14). Therefore, Paul adds,

¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— ¹²remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made **the two groups one** and has **destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility**, ¹⁵by **setting aside in his flesh the law** with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself **one new humanity** out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him **we both** have access to the Father by **one Spirit**.

¹⁹Consequently, you are **no longer foreigners and strangers**, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

3 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, ³that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. ⁶This mystery is that through the gospel **the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus**.

⁷I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the

heavenly realms, ¹¹ **according to his eternal purpose** that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (Ephesians 2:11-3:13, emphasis mine).

So, we can say that the proclamation of the whole will of God is that God has fulfilled his eternal purpose by the creation of a new humanity after the image and model in Jesus Christ. And this means that God's covenantal and eschatological plan for humanity has also been fulfilled in Christ, and is *now* at work in those who are in union with him, by the Spirit; it is not *yet* fully realized, but this will occur at the return of Christ, and the consummation of all things.

But the glorious good news is that God's eternal plan of a new creation, under a new covenant, as confirmed by the restoration of his own presence through the gift and ministry of the Spirit, is now at work in you who are in Christ Jesus. The result of this work is the transformation of every believer into the image of Christ. And while it has not yet been made known what we will be; "but we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (see I John 3:1-3).

We will pause here. In the next lesson, we will examine the awesome responsibility to proclaim the whole will of God, and the continual threat of that proclamation being distorted by charlatans, hucksters, hirelings, and savage wolves both within and without the church.

AMEN.

© Rick Peterson. 2022.