

BaptistWay Bible Series for September 20: United by the gospel

September 8, 2009

It's one of those often quoted lines. The origin of the words is still a mystery. Someone penned them and others have used them: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love."

Though this sentence is not a Bible verse, these words reflect the teachings of Scripture. In the fundamentals of our faith, we must have unity. In matters open to interpretation, we should grant freedom to one another. Above all, everything should be done in a spirit of love.

What the Bible says ...

In Galatians 2:1-10, we see all three of these ideas at work. Foremost in Paul's mind is the sharing of the gospel with non-Jews. This was his mission in life—to take the "good news" to those outside his own people group.

In essentials, unity. Paul would never compromise the truth of the gospel. He always asserted salvation was available only to those who responded with faith and received the gift of eternal life. One of the main reasons he penned this letter to the churches of Galatia was to bring them back to the fundamental issue of salvation. Remember his words when he said, "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned" (1:9).

In nonessentials, liberty. There was no wavering from the truth of the cross. Yet, Paul took vigorous issue with requiring Gentile converts to accept and practice Jewish customs and rituals as part of their salvation

experience. Paul included a precise timeline of events in his life in his discussion. He mentioned a visit to Jerusalem three years after his Damascus road conversion experience (1:18) and then another visit to Jerusalem 14 years later (2:1). He is careful to maintain a distance from any outside influence on his beliefs. These relatively unknown years provided Paul the opportunity to sharpen his convictions and prepare him for his future work.

There is ample evidence to support the idea that the visit of Paul to Jerusalem found in Galatians 2:1-10 is also described in detail in Acts 15:1-35. The content of the Acts passage describes the council that convened to deal with the issue of requiring Gentile converts to undergo the custom of circumcision as part of their salvation experience. Paul brought Barnabas, his Jewish coworker, and Titus, his Greek coworker, on this visit to Jerusalem to discuss this and other issues of faith.

In Galatians 2:4, Paul related, “Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.” Paul saw a distinction between the essential truth of salvation by grace through faith and the nonessential burden of legalism placed upon Gentile converts. Paul pled for freedom in this matter.

Paul maintained the entire problem was the result of false teachers who “had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you” (2:4-5).

In all things, love. Though you will not find the word “love” in this section of Paul’s letter, give him a break. He is single-minded in his purpose to set the record straight. As a result, he employed “tough love” to accomplish his purpose. Later on, he will remind the Galatians of the fruit of the Spirit, which has at the top of its list, love (5:22).

What the Bible means for me today ...

How many relationships could be restored, or how many arguments would never develop if we all lived by the ideas mentioned above?

We hold dear the essential matters of faith. The chief essential truth of our day is the same as Paul's: Salvation is found only by grace through faith. Other essentials include the following: Jesus Christ is Lord; God created the heavens and the earth; and the Bible is God's word.

While we should foster and promote unity concerning the essential matters, there also are nonessential aspects of our faith where we should grant freedom. The style of worship in a church should never be used as a test of one's love for God, but how many churches have divided over this very issue? Differences of interpretation concerning the return of Christ and the sequence of events surrounding the end of time should not cause strife among God's people.

We should acknowledge different viewpoints as being God-honoring and Bible-believing. Yet there is ample arrogance among God's people concerning this very topic.

Ever realize some people who are far from God will never set foot in our churches because they know they will be criticized for the way they dress? Is this an essential matter? The Book of James says no. When we treat such worshippers with disrespect "have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts" (2:4)?

The result of the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) was a monumental coming together, a classic compromise. They maintained unity concerning the essential truth of the gospel. They granted freedom concerning the nonessential practice of circumcision. And they communicated their message in love and with respect toward all involved.

We do well in our day to realize our lives should be defined by the gospel and not by the ebb and flow of our culture. When we make this part of our mindset, then we can easily find common ground for living and serving in unity.