

The Gospel for All Cultures

Acts 21:17-26

“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. And the city had not need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives its light and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light, the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations.” Revelation 21:22-26

Is your life shaped by the glorious eternal vision that God has for us as His people redeemed from every tribe and people?

Christ is redeeming humanity in all its cultural beauty and distinctiveness through the exclusivity of the gospel.

"Our hope-filled, joy-producing take-a-way from this aspect of John's vision of life in the new heaven and new earth is this: We will forever enjoy aspects of the cultures of every people group represented in the family of God, AND, we will make new culture forever as the pan-national family of God inhabiting the new heaven and new earth! Quite honestly, this blows all the circuits on my imagination board! It just seems too good, too good to be true!"

Scotty Smith

I. When the Gospel Crosses Cultures, Tension is Inevitable - Acts 21:17-22

"And they said to him, 'You see brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.'" Acts 21:20-21

“It is difficult for us to grasp the impassable gulf which yawned in those days between the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles on the other. Not that the Old Testament countenanced such a divide....it affirmed that God had a purpose for [the Gentiles]. By choosing and blessing [the Jews] he intended to bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:1-4) The tragedy was that

Israel twisted this doctrine of election into one of favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised the Gentiles as ‘dogs’, and developed traditions that kept them apart. No orthodox Jew would ever enter the home of a Gentile...all familiar intercourse with Gentiles was forbidden...” John R.W. Stott

The common temptation is to say that we believe the gospel of grace but then we try to get our sense of security not by the finished work of Jesus on the cross but by our religious practices, preferences, and traditions.

“For most people, then, race and culture are a kind of self-righteousness. We think of ourselves as the good ones, not like those people over there. That means we tend to make our cultural preferences—which are no more than that, preferences—into moral absolutes and badges of honor. For example, so many of the ways we do things in church—how we express emotion, how we sing, how long the service is, how we talk to one another—are merely cultural preferences, not prescriptions of Scripture... And yet without a deep grasp of grace we become wedded to our cultural style and patterns as ‘the right way’ to be a Christian, and we despise other cultural patterns. We secretly (or not so secretly) despise people of races and cultures (or politics!) different from our own as a way to patch up a righteousness of our own.” Tim Keller

What Paul opposed was not cultural differences. What he opposed was making cultural differences a ground for acceptance with God and inclusion in the community rather than the grace of God in the gospel.

II. What is the Relationship Between the Law and the Gospel?

The Law Was Never the Savior — It Was Always the Signpost Pointing to the Lord Jesus.

- **Justification: The Law justifies no one in the sight of God.**

“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” Galatians 2:16

“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Galatians 3:21-22

- **Sanctification: The Law is holy but it does not produce holiness.**

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.” Romans 7:7-9

"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate." Romans 7:15

- **Preparation: The Law is a tutor pointing us to Christ.**

“So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” Galatians 3:24-25

- **Substitution: The Law lays out for us the requirements needed for a substitutionary salvation.**

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” Galatians 3:13-14

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” Galatian 4:4-5

- **Evangelization: Adhering to the law is a choice you can make for the sake of advancing the gospel. It is not a requirement for belonging to the people of God.**

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews...To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.” 1 Corinthians 9:9-13

"To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." 1 Corinthians 9:9-13

- **Summarization: The law is summarized by the two chief commandments give to God's people. We are to love the Lord our God and to love one another.**

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” Romans 13:8-10

Paul's view was simple: The Law lead you to Christ as your Redeemer who alone can save you and keep you.

III. Paul's Message: Adjust Yourself for the Gospel — Never Adjust the Gospel for Anyone.

“Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.” Acts 21:23-24

"Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them." Acts 21:26

"Let us in everything not sinful become like the Chinese, that by all means we may save some."
Hudson Taylor

Gospel Principles

- Hold Firmly to the Distinctiveness of the Gospel.
- Uphold the Dignity of the Gospel.
- Honor the Beauty and Diversity of the Gospel.

Study Questions:

The Vision of the Nations

1. In Revelation 21:22–26, what does it mean that the nations bring their glory into the city? How does that shape your view of cultural diversity?
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When the Gospel Crosses Cultures (Acts 21:17–22)

2. In Acts of the Apostles 21:20–21, what were the Jewish believers concerned about regarding Paul?
 3. Why is it so easy to turn cultural preferences into spiritual requirements?
 4. Where do you see this temptation showing up in churches today—or in your own heart?
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The Law and the Gospel

5. According to Galatians 2:16, why can the Law never justify anyone?
 6. From Romans 7, what does the Law reveal about our need for Christ?
 7. What does it mean that the Law was a “guardian” pointing us to Christ (Galatians 3)?
 8. Why is Christ becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13–14) essential to the gospel?
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Adjust Yourself — Never Adjust the Gospel

9. Why did Paul participate in the purification rites in Acts 21:23–26? Was he compromising or clarifying the gospel?
 10. What is the difference between adapting yourself for the sake of mission and adjusting the message of the gospel?
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Gospel Application

11. What truths of the gospel must never be adjusted, no matter the culture?
12. Where might God be calling you to lay down a preference for the sake of unity and love?