

24. Wage the Good Warfare

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[0 : 00] Page 923 in our visitor's Bibles. A passage all about waging the good warfare.

One of the wonderful things about the Bible is its sheer realism. There's no pretending, it just gives us the honest truth. And that's very refreshing in a world that is so full of pretending and make-believe.

There's plenty of that in the church as well. Plenty of make-believe and fantasy that if only we do this thing or that or the other, then suddenly if we find that way, then all our problems will be resolved.

Everything will be wonderful. Well, Luke certainly will have absolutely none of that. And his account of the growing mission of the church and the acts of the apostles is very real.

It's very down to earth. And he wants us to be certain about what we are to expect in that mission of the church. And we've seen all the way through our studies in Acts, two things that go together.

[1 : 03] Open doors for the gospel on the one hand, and in fact, that's how chapter 14 ends in verse 27, doesn't it? A door of faith, open to the Gentiles.

On the one hand, an open door. And yet that is always in the midst of the second thing, many adversaries. Progress and opposition in the church of Jesus Christ always go together, at least in genuine apostolic mission.

And that ought to be very encouraging to us, as well as very salutary. And there's more of that, in fact, here in chapter 15, as we'll see. Chapter 13 and 14 was the story of a journey from Antioch through Asia Minor and back to Antioch, a missionary journey.

And there was fierce opposition all the way to the messengers of the true gospel, threatening to destroy them. Remember chapter 14, verse 2.

Unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. Well, chapter 15 is another journey from Antioch and back to Antioch again, this time with Jerusalem in the middle.

[2 : 19] And this time also there is an attack on the true gospel, except that it's a much more insidious one. And it comes from, we're told, believing Jewish people within the church.

An attack not on the messengers of grace, but this time on the message of grace. And exactly the same language is used, incidentally, in verse 24 of chapter 15.

What were they doing? They were troubling the believers. They were unsettling their minds. Two attacks from different quarters, but ultimately the very same problem.

And once again, the gospel is opposed from both within the church as well as without the church, as we've seen so many times before.

And of course, it is a fact, simply, of history and the church's history that actually far more damage has been done to the church from theological sin arising within the church than from any persecution that's ever come from outside it.

[3 : 21] And that explains why this chapter is here, Acts chapter 15. Not just why the events of Acts 15 happened, but why Luke recorded it so that the church would have it as a record forever after.

Because Luke wants us to see that sometimes the Spirit of the risen Lord demands that there should be battles in the church, not peace.

And that we are to be prepared to fight those battles because the whole health and the future of the church of Jesus Christ may be at stake. So let's see what Luke wants us to learn then about waging the good warfare for the sake of Christ and his church in this chapter.

First of all, verses 1 to 5, he tells us that this was an unavoidable dispute. A controversial but unavoidable dispute to protect true gospel mission.

When Paul writes years later on to young Timothy, he warns Timothy to keep away from those, quote, who have an unhealthy craving for controversy and quarrels about words.

[4 : 27] That's 1 Timothy 6, verse 4. That kind of spirit, he tells Timothy, just leads to friction in the church and to great harm. And of course we are right, aren't we, to heed that advice.

The history of the Christian church is littered with examples of just that kind of unhealthy controversy. All kinds of fallout and damage caused by that kind of thing. And yet in the same letter, Paul also writes to Timothy just as plainly and says, wage the good warfare.

Fight the good fight of faith. So what is the difference between good fighting and bad fighting in the church? Well, the one is unnecessary and avoidable and always harms the gospel, whereas the other is essential and unavoidable.

And it is necessary to protect and preserve the true gospel and the true way of salvation. And that is essential. Because God's desire, says Paul to Timothy in that same letter, is for all people to come to a knowledge of the truth and to be saved.

And therefore if you destroy the truth of the gospel, you destroy the way of salvation. And that is the most heinous sin of all. And that's exactly what this controversy in Acts chapter 15 is actually all about.

[5 : 52] The issue at stake is the very heart of the Christian gospel. It's about how people can know that they are truly saved. That they are God's chosen people. That they can be fully assured of eternal life in the kingdom of Christ.

Can former pagans with no biblical Jewish background at all, can they simply by accepting Jesus as the Messiah and trusting in him for salvation, can they have full assurance that they have a complete salvation?

Or is it, as some were saying, that having found Christ, they now need to also go on and become fully Jewish. They need to live like Jews.

They need to change their whole cultural identity. If they want to be really and truly at one with God, if they want to be really and truly at one with God's true people, the Jewish believers and equal sharers in the blessings.

Now, of course, it might seem very obvious to us that the answer to that question is a resounding no. Of course they don't have to become Jews. But the reason that it's a very obvious answer for us is precisely because Paul and Barnabas were willing to do battle as they did here in this chapter and have a major confrontation.

[7 : 20] If they hadn't done that, then none of us would actually be here today. Neither would most of the Christian churches throughout the world, which are predominantly Gentile churches. Because it was not obvious to the Jewish Christians, or to some of them at least, in Jerusalem, that it was so.

It's quite difficult for us to state the issue briefly. Actually, we need the whole of the letter to the Galatians at our fingertips to really understand the heart of all of this. That letter was written in the midst of this very controversy, probably just before Paul was arriving in Jerusalem, perhaps even while he was on his journey.

It would have been written after this council. It wouldn't really have been necessary at all. But Paul's whole argument in Galatians, and if you can remember, we studied it a few years ago, he presses home the real implications for the church of the doctrine that they all actually thought that they believed in, and that is the doctrine of justification, of salvation, by faith in Christ alone.

So that whoever you are, whether you're Jew or Gentile, it's nothing to do with your cultural background or anything else, but it's to do with whether you've trusted in Christ, and that alone. He says that they all believed that they were saved by faith in Christ. In fact, Peter says that here in chapter 15, verse 11 of Acts. He says we Jews believe we will be saved by grace.

[8 : 45] And Paul wrote exactly that to the Galatians. We Jews know that a person is justified not by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So they all knew that, at least they thought they did.

But some of the Jewish Christians still thought that salvation couldn't come apart from also being properly Jewish. So they assumed that any Gentile, any Greek or barbarian who believed in Jesus must now go on to become fully Jewish, to find a full salvation.

Trusting Jesus was great. They rejoiced in that, to see the Gentiles trusting Jesus, but it was only the beginning. It was only half a gospel. And they needed to be led on by those in the know, like them, the Jewish Christians, to find full gospel fellowship, to find full assurance of being truly God's people and saved.

So verse 1 of our chapter says, some of them were saying, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you can't be saved. You can't be fully assured of that great salvation. It belongs to the Jews. Verse 5, they said, it's necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses. And you see, theirs was a gospel of Christ plus.

[10:07] You begin by trusting Jesus, yes, but you go on, in this case, you go on to find full salvation through a Jewish way of life.

But you see, by adding to the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone, you have thereby actually totally destroyed that gospel. You've so distorted it that it becomes absolutely no gospel at all. That's what Paul says to the Galatians. And that's because, and Paul's whole argument in Galatians is this, it's because you simply haven't worked through the full implications of what Christ's salvation by grace alone actually means.

And if you don't do that, you will find yourself living out of step with the truth of the gospel. Even Peter was doing that, Paul says in the Galatian letter. They're out of step with the true gospel and therefore, out of step with the Spirit of God and destroying the church of God.

And that's why it's so serious, you see, the whole gospel was actually being completely turned on its head. The Bible, the whole of the Old Testament, Moses himself and the prophets, they lead you to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[11:27] And you're saved as you find your true identity in the Savior who at last has come. That's the gospel of the Bible, says Paul, to the Galatians. But what these people were saying was the very opposite.

They were saying, yes, you Gentiles, you find Jesus, that's wonderful. Now let Jesus lead you to find your true identity in Moses and in the Jewish religion.

It's the opposite. You see, Moses isn't a savior and there's no salvation there. And you see how by adding to the gospel, in fact, you have subtracted from it totally.

You've taken away the real message of salvation which is through the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. And that is a deadly, serious thing to do. And that's why verse 2 says that Paul and Barnabas didn't just say to these people, look, we're all really saying the same things.

Let's just tolerate one another. Let's not quarrel about this. No. They had no small dissension. They had a sharp dispute. A massive bust up.

[12:34] The gloves were really off. There was all kinds of strong language. Read Galatians chapter 1. You'll see. And sometimes, Luke is telling us in the church, that just has to be so.

when the eternal salvation of men and women really is at stake. And it was. And that means church leaders have to get involved in disputes privately and also, as here sometimes, publicly.

They have to give a lot of their time and effort into resolving these kind of controversies. And in this case, it was a long journey to Jerusalem and a protracted gathering of the church leaders to have very serious talks about all of this.

And friends, when we understand what it's all about, we see how contemporary it is. Because assaults to the gospel in this way within the church have always been with us and are with us still. There are all kinds of people who want to modify the gospel either by adding to it or by subtracting from it. And when that happens, we will always find ourselves in unavoidable disputes if we're to remain faithful to the true gospel, if we're to remain faithful to the message of the kingdom.

[13:51] Now, there's plenty of other kinds of gospel plus. Nobody's asking people today in the Christian church to become Jewish, but there are plenty of people within the Christian church and people who purport to be the Christian church who will say, yes, yes, Jesus is great, but now we need to lead you on really to understand the thing that really gets you to the center of a full experience of salvation.

Sometimes it's very obvious, like among some of the cults, who will say, yes, you must trust Jesus, but then to be really fully assured of your place in heaven, what you need is the Book of Mormon or you need the teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

We recognize Jesus, but this extra thing has come in and this is what will really take you on.

Sometimes it's much more subtle and spiritual and orthodox sounding than that.

We're delighted that you've trusted Jesus, but you see, to have a really full and authentic Christian experience, don't you see that you need to join with the great tradition, the great history, the great line of the true mother church, the church of Rome, with all its bishops going all the way back to Peter, with a direct connection to the apostolic time, a direct connection to the Holy Spirit himself.

Or you have the first cousins to the church of Rome in some parts of the Pentecostal movement, who will say the same thing. Yes, we're delighted you believed in Jesus, but now, for a full and fulsome gospel experience, you need something more.

[15 : 32] You need to be a Spirit-filled Christian. You need to have hands laid upon you to receive the Spirit, to become a different type of fully, fully understanding believer. As though there were any other kind of Christian than one upon whom the Holy Spirit has come and cleansed their heart.

Peter says that plainly in verse 10. Sometimes it's things that are just very good and right in themselves that can become so elevated in your understanding of the faith that they themselves become an idol that you worship.

Something that actually displaces the centrality of the gospel of grace in the Lord Jesus. So, Reformed theology, for example, that we believe in. Well, that can, for some people, become a be-all and end-all.

You hear them saying things, I'm not sure about so-and-so. Is he really Reformed? I'm not sure about that chap, if he's really Presbyterian or not, you know. So, that was essential for a full experience of the grace of God.

And we've got to be very careful. Where is your assurance of salvation? Is it really in the free gift of God by grace through Jesus Christ alone?

[16 : 46] Or is it actually in some plus? What is it? Let me ask you, that really excites you? What is it that you talk about all the time when you're talking to other Christians or to others? That's a giveaway.

Is it the grace of God in Christ? Is it the joy that is in Jesus and Him alone? Or is it your view of the millennium? Or the rapture?

Or baptism? Or creationism? Or what kind of music we should be having in church? Or any number of other quite secondary things which may or may not be good in themselves?

What you always go on about is actually what is most central to your assurance of salvation. And it's surprisingly easy for any of us to become fixated with some of these things so that we actually lose the heart of the gospel ourselves.

But if something, whatever it is, becomes so essential that it becomes an essential plus to the gospel of grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, if anything becomes so important that it stops us having fellowship with other believers who don't have it, then we must absolutely resist that.

[18 : 01] And if need be, we must resist it publicly. As we must, just as much, with subtractions from the gospel. Of course, that's the issue that's threatening the truth of the gospel so much now in the mainline denominations in the churches of our western world, including our own one.

We want a gospel minus repentance. Sin, and in particular sexual immorality, is no longer to be called sin, it's to be celebrated as good by the church.

Well, a gospel of no repentance is no gospel at all. Because there can be no forgiveness unless forgiveness is asked for. And that means regarding sin as sin and asking for forgiveness from it. And so we have to resist the gospel that wants to be destroyed by removing repentance. That's why I'm going to spend my whole day tomorrow, just as I did last Monday, with a long journey to meet others in ministry who are seeking to wage that good warfare in the unavoidable disputes we're having at the moment in our own denomination.

It wasn't as long a journey as Paul and Barnabas, but it is something that's taking up a huge amount of time for many church leaders in our land at the moment. Perhaps you'll pray for us and we will have wisdom and grace and understanding as we seek to do that.

[19 : 22] Some disputes are unavoidable. So there was a journey off to Jerusalem and I'm sure you noticed in verse 3 there was great joy among many of the brethren as they went and also a great warm welcome in verse 4 from the apostles in the church in Jerusalem and that no doubt was a great encouragement to Paul and Barnabas.

When you're fighting battles it always seems as though absolutely everybody is against you but that is not so of course. The true people of God are always far, far more than we think and it's good to remember that.

And thankfully verses 6 to 19 then relate to us how this unavoidable dispute issued in an unambiguous declaration that preserved the real gospel truth.

And I want us to see two things here. Both the pronouncement that was made and also the process by which they made it because it seems to me Luke is very careful to record that for us. First of all

the pronouncement was clear and unambiguous.

The question was whether true and complete possession of salvation could be had whether true heirs of Abraham could be Gentiles. Is it that all those who believe in Christ regardless of their origin are true heirs of all the promises of God to Abraham or is it only for those who move on and become also Jewish?

[20 : 45] Well the unified answer with the whole weight of the church and the apostles and elders was a clear and unambiguous no. Salvation is through Christ alone by faith alone.

In the words of verse 9 there is no distinction between us and them. Or verse 15 God has taken from the Gentiles directly through faith in Jesus says James a people for his name.

A chosen people. Paul's detailed argument in Galatians 3 and 4 is that yes the Jews have had a favored past. They've had Moses and his law but Moses and his law were to lead them until Christ came and fulfilled all the promises to Abraham that through his seed all the nations would be blessed.

So now says Paul whether you're a Jew or a Gentile if you're in Christ you are Abraham's seed. You are heirs according to the promise. And that's just exactly what is pronounced here.

It's absolutely unambiguous and clear. There's no fudge. Fudge is beloved isn't it? Of our modern ecclesiastical institutions our modern commissions and committees always a fudge but no fudge here.

[22 : 05] No they say these revisionists are tampering with the gospel and they are wrong. And in their letter to the churches they say clearly we reject them we dissociate ourselves from them publicly we did not send them but we affirm the gospel of Paul the apostle which you believed and which you rejoiced in.

Wouldn't it be good if the special commission to our general assembly of the church of Scotland in 2011 came back with such clarity in an unambiguous declaration of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

It may be miraculous but it's what we should pray for isn't it? Well if they will listen to Luke about how this council came to that clarity then perhaps they might just do so.

So let's look at the process that led to such a clear pronouncement of the truth of the gospel that resolved this controversy once and for all. Any such committee or council like this is of course seeking the certain leading of the Holy Spirit.

You notice that in verse 28 when they wrote their letter they claimed that that is precisely what they had. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. They clearly claimed the mind of the Spirit of God.

[23 : 23] Well how do you find that? How do you have confidence that you have the clear voice of the Spirit of God to resolve a controversy? We're always hearing the church today saying that.

We're seeking what the Spirit is saying to the church today. Well look at how the Jerusalem council did precisely that. Notice first how they did not do it.

They did not sit in silence waiting for somebody to feel what the Spirit might be saying to them.

They didn't even pray endlessly about it until somebody seemed to come to any conclusion about it. Although of course, no doubt, they were prayerful. Nor did they do the opposite. Nor did they look around and see what was the prevailing view nowadays in the theology of the synagogues and just say, well we better accept that so that we don't alienate people from our new church.

No. Luke tells us very plainly that the mind of the Spirit was made clear to them, in two very plain and verifiable ways.

[24 : 28] In the clear evidence that came both from the work of the Spirit in history and from the words of the Spirit in Scripture. Verses 7 to 13.

The council give their minds, don't they, to the apostles' unique witness to the work of the Spirit from the very beginning. Peter stands up and tells how the Gentiles had heard the gospel and believed in Christ.

Christ. Yes, yes, we know that, they would have said. And verse 8, God gave them the Holy Spirit just as he gave him to us.

Yes, yes, we remember that. And God made no distinction between them and us. He cleansed their hearts completely by faith. That is, he justified them. He welcomed them as his own sons and daughters, as his own family.

So, why, verse 10, are you taking sides against God? Why are you putting him to the test? That's very strong language, the language used of the unbelieving Israelites in the desert who rebelled

against Moses.

[25 : 33] If God has welcomed them into his family, why won't you? That's arrogant, blaspheming God. And it's cruel and heartless into the bargain.

It's trying to weigh down the Gentiles with all your Pharisaic traditions. Remember what Jesus said about that in Matthew 23, about the Pharisees. They loved to tie up heavy burdens and put them on people's shoulders, weigh them down with endless religious traditions, but it's all hypocrisy, Jesus said.

That wasn't Jesus' way, that wasn't Moses' way either. Moses and the prophets led to Jesus. And what did Jesus say? My yoke is easy.

My burden is light. It's the very opposite to the gospel we say we believe, says Peter in verse 11. We say that we're saved by grace just as they are.

In verse 12, they all fell silent. The penny was just beginning to drop. The logic think that there's nothing really superior about the Jewish way at all.

[26 : 47] There's nothing to boast about for the Jews, as Paul says to the Romans. And then Paul and Barnabas just rub it in in verse 12, showing the very same signs and wonders that God performed among the first Jewish Christians at Pentecost.

He performed exactly as the gospel went to the Gentiles. You remember Acts 8 and Acts 10 were almost repeat experiences just to make the point of the day of Pentecost.

Clear, objective evidence of the work of the Spirit testified to by the unique historical witness of Christ's apostles. And then added to that in verses 13 to 18 is the prophetic universal witness of the word of the scripture right from the beginning.

James sums up what has happened and he says very simply, God has called, a people for his name from the Gentiles. Now that language is the language used all the way through the Old Testament for Israel, the people of God.

And he says that's what the scriptures teach us. He quotes here from Amos chapter 9. He could have quoted from any number of the prophets. There's some difficulty about the exact wording here.

[28 : 00] He probably quotes from a different version of the Old Testament than the normal Hebrew one. But it's very plain what he's saying. Verse 16, God promised that he would rebuild the tent, the household, the royal line of David, and that in the coming of the Messiah and David's offspring, verse 17, many from all the nations, from the Gentiles, would be directly called by God to take his name, to become his people.

And so the work of the Spirit and the words of scripture are absolutely undeniable and unambiguous. Verse 19, it's quite wrong, he says, therefore, to trouble these Gentiles, to make it hard for them.

They are all fully Christian. They have turned to God, he says, quite apart from needing to be Jewish. A decision of absolute clarity given by the Spirit and seen by everybody to be so.

And that is a model, Luke is telling us. For when the Church has controversy and it needs to find answers. If you want the mind of the Spirit, you find clear evidence in these two places.

The once for all unique witness of the apostles to the Spirit's work in history, and the once for all universal witness of the prophets in scripture's words. And when the Church looks to these places, it finds clarity.

[29 : 27] It's not a mark of the Spirit of God when a church council comes back and says, well, there's all varieties of opinion. There's vagueness, there's confusion, and total fudge. That is not a mark of the Holy Spirit of God.

The mark of the Spirit is clarity. He is the Spirit of truth, of biblical truth, of apostolic truth. We just pray that our General Assembly Commission will seek the mind of the Holy Spirit in the historic apostolic faith and in the timeless word of the scriptures.

scriptures. So this unavoidable dispute then led to an unambiguous declaration of real gospel truth. Full salvation is in Christ alone.

But having established that then very firmly, the council went on nevertheless to give unhesitating direction for real gospel people. We see that in verses 20 and 21 and then in the letter that follows. Now, when you first look at verse 20, it seems a bit strange. Doesn't it seem that they're selling the past? Are they saying to the Gentiles immediately, all right, you don't have to become Jewish, but just act a little bit more Jewish for the sake of these Jewish Christians?

[30 : 45] Well, do you really think the apostle Paul, who wrote the letters to the Galatians, who was standing in this council, would have countenanced anything that seemed to compromise like that? Of course he wouldn't.

So what is going on in verse 20? Well, just simply this. That just as Gentiles who have turned to Christ don't need to become Jewish, they do have to stop being pagans.

They need to become fully Christian. And that does mean having nothing to do with their former ways of pagan idolatry. They don't have to adopt a totally different culture and become Jews, Jews, but they do need to flee from the idolatry that was rampant in that culture in which they lived. And that's what verse 20 is all about. It's not, I think, about certain Jewish food laws that they're being asked to obey to please some of the Jews. All of these things mentioned here, in fact, are things to do with the going-ons in pagan temples, marked by their sacrifices and their cult prostitution.

If you listen to the words of Jesus, the risen Lord, to the churches in Revelation chapter 2, he says it twice to the church of Pergamon. I have this against you, says the Lord, that you hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

[32 : 13] It says the same thing again in verse 20 of that chapter. Immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols go together. I haven't got time to go into all the detail, but the social life in these Greek and Asia Minor cities revolved around the temples and all the rituals that went on there to do with sacrifice, drinking the blood of the sacrifices, eating animals that were often strangulated or killed in other strange ways.

And this was a really big issue in those Gentile cities. Foreign to us, but it wasn't to them. Read 1 Corinthians 8 to 10, and you'll see Paul says to them in Corinth, flee from idolatry.

Yes, of course he says that meat that's sold in the market is perfectly alright for you to eat, even though it was maybe dedicated to a temple, although some people had a real conscience about that. You've got to be careful.

Nevertheless, Paul was very clear, I do not permit you to get too close to all that paganism. Flee idolatry, he says, 1 Corinthians 10. I don't want you to be participants with demons.

How can you drink the cup of the Lord, he says, and the cup of demons? Maybe referring to these very cups of drinking actual blood, as opposed to the wine of the Lord's supper.

[33 : 33] So you see, yes, salvation is by grace alone, through Christ alone, and through faith alone. But the faith that justifies and saves us is never alone.

It issues always in a brand new life, a life of obedience to Christ, of service to him, not any longer of a life in bondage to idols. Because the new has come, the old must go.

So there's no conflict here. Of course not. Obedience to God's command doesn't mean earning salvation, it doesn't mean leaving salvation by grace, no, it's merely a consequence of it.

Paul says to the Corinthians, it doesn't matter any longer if you're circumcised or uncircumcised, but what does matter is keeping the commands of God, the living God. And what is the very first of all the commandments of the living God?

You shall worship the Lord your God alone, there shall be no idols. That's just what we saw Paul say last time in verse 15 of chapter 14, to the Gentiles in Lystra.

[34 : 42] Turn from these vain things, he says, to the living God. So there's no contradiction here in verse 20 at all. In fact, he's saying the very same thing both to the Jews and to the Gentiles.

To the Gentiles he's saying you must leave behind your idolatry of these pagan temples. And to the Jews he's saying you must leave behind your idolatry of the customs of Moses.

Both of you are to obey the truth that is in Christ Jesus alone. That's the way of real freedom, he says. But that liberation in the gospel will never lead you into license.

So it doesn't mean that Gentiles will never have to depart from their pagan immoral behavior.

Neither does it lead you into legalism. So it can never mean that the Jews must force their traditions upon you.

No. It leads to love, to serving one another, to uniting one another as God's true people of grace.

[35 : 49] And again that's precisely what Paul teaches to the Galatians in Galatians 5.13. Don't use your freedom, he says to the Gentile Christians, as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, serve one another.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. That's a word to both Jew and Gentile in the church of Jesus Christ. And that's simply what James is saying here. There is a real turning away for Gentiles from their pagan past. They do need to stand apart from pagan idolatry. Not to become Jews, but to become truly Christian.

And by that in turn means that they turn towards their new family, the family of God, which includes many Jews who in turn will find their life far easier and find it far easier to make their adjustments away from their beloved customs of Moses into the new situation of a united church of Jew and Gentile together.

They'll find their way easier also if the Gentiles go out of their way to show how they've departed from pagan idolatry. And you Gentiles should know that, says James, verse 21, because right from the earliest times Moses has been read in synagogues in your cities, you know just how big a thing idolatry is for the Jews.

[37 : 13] And you can see how sensitive they are about it. So neither group, says this declaration, is to assert their own cultural background.

But each group, rather, is to submit to the shared culture that they now share of being Christ's true people, the people of the name. And when you think about it, friends, that is very helpful today, isn't it?

Because when somebody becomes a Christian, we're not forcing upon them the adoption of a totally new culture, a different culture. We shouldn't be saying to somebody who's a rugby player who becomes a Christian, you've got to give up rugby and take up something more Christian, like bell ringing or something.

We're not saying to somebody you've got to give up ACDC and start listening to organ music all the time. Well, actually, that would be very good for your eardrums if you did. We're not saying if you're used to wearing jeans and a t-shirt, you've got to start wearing three-piece suits.

We're not saying anything like that. We're not saying and shouldn't be saying that when people become Christian, they have to adopt all the culture of the missionaries who brought them the gospel, either in some far country or here in Glasgow.

[38 : 27] Some people think if somebody's converted from a certain part of Glasgow, they have to start supporting Rangers football team. How ridiculous. Although why you would support the other one, I'm not sure.

We're not asking people to leave their culture behind, but at the same time, the gospel does demand of all of us that we leave our old life behind.

The pollution of all the idols that we formerly served and worshipped, all the things we devoted our lives to, all the things that were most important to us. And that might mean a very great deal of change, and it will mean a great deal of ongoing change as we come to understand more and more of the clear direction of Christ for our lives.

And so that's why we're to pay heed to the commands of the apostles, which are the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ. And friends, when all believers do that, and when all of us leave behind our loose living or our legalistic religion, all the former vain things that we chased after, when all of us leave these things behind and follow the Lord Jesus Christ, when we live according to the unhesitating direction of the apostolic scriptures, then not only is the truth of the gospel preserved, but the unity of the church is also preserved and strengthened.

And there will be joy and encouragement and strength and peace among all the Lord's people. That was the result of this letter, wasn't it?

[40 : 08] Look at verse 30. When they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those they had sent them from.

If you read the letter to the Galatians, you will see what the hallmarks are of a church that is losing the gospel, either by subtraction or by addition. What has happened to all your joy, said Paul to them?

It was full of immaturity. It was full of immorality and license. It was full of misery. Conceit, says Paul. Pride. People biting and devouring one another. Dissensions.

Jealousy. Anger. Strife. Read Galatians chapter 5 and see. That's what happens when you lose the gospel. That's what happens when the church descends into mere religion and the total power of the transforming gospel of Christ is lost.

[41 : 18] And when that happens soon, everything is lost. There's plenty of evidence of that in the decaying institutions that still call themselves churches around our world today.

And that's why some battles are worth fighting. Only the true gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ for Jew and Gentile, for religious and pagan, for great and small, for Pharisee and prostitute alike, only that gospel will bring joy and encouragement and strength and peace both in our own hearts and in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because only that gospel, friends, can cleanse even your heart and mine of of real sin and can fill us with joy in the beautiful and the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So let's fight to keep that gospel, our gospel, always. Let's wage the good warfare together.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, how we thank you that your gospel is a mighty transforming power that slays the haughty into the dust but raises the humble to the highest place.

[42 : 49] May the grace that is in Jesus be ever our joy and to the end of our days in our lives and in our church we may sing with joy in Christ alone our hope is found.

Amen.