

## **Introduction**

Obtaining certification is one way a person can demonstrate that they are competent to complete a task or serve effectively in a particular role. Generally a test is administered which measures a person's knowledge and skill. A person must score at a certain level in order to be certified. If you bear certification from an organization, they are affirming that you are qualified and you can be trusted in a particular area of competency.

Ordination in a church functions to certify a pastor, elder, or deacon. An ordaining body will review a candidate and render a decision. If they find him to be qualified, they will move to ordain him. They are certifying his qualification and affirming him for service.

In our text this morning, Paul tells how he subjected the gospel he preached to a test of affirmation. Would they certify him? It was important to be able to know that he and the apostles in Jerusalem were on the same page. So let's look at what unfolded . . .

[Read text and Pray]

Paul had preached the gospel in Galatia and had established churches consisting of the new believers. After his departure other teachers came behind him with a distortion, a perversion, of the gospel. They were proclaiming that in addition to faith in Christ, Gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to actually be saved. We have seen thus far in our study that Paul was straightforward and blunt in his claim that such a gospel is actually no gospel at all. The beginning of the letter sets forth the case for the gospel he preached and the rejection of all that are contrary to it. Thus far we have observed four planks of evidence in his case. 1. Paul's apostolic authority is from God. 2. Paul's determination is to please God, not man. 3. Paul's conversion substantiates that his gospel came from God. 4. The transformation of Paul's life demonstrates power that could only come from the true gospel.

This morning we come to the fifth plank of evidence in Paul's case that the gospel he preached is the one that must be believed and preserved. Paul paid a visit to the church in Jerusalem for the purpose of apostolic validation, and that is exactly what he received. I want you to see four aspects of this incredibly important visit.

First, observe with me that ...

### **I. Paul's Visit Was Directed by the Lord. (1-2)**

Paul told us in verse 18 of chapter 1 that he had been to Jerusalem once three years after his conversion. The visit lasted only 15 days and the only apostles he saw were Peter and James. It was apparently an uneventful visit. His point was that he did not receive the gospel even from the apostles. He had received the gospel directly from Christ. He went from place to place preaching the gospel of Christ anywhere he could.

Only now after a total of fourteen years does he visit Jerusalem again, and this time he formally sought confirmation that he and the Jerusalem apostles were in agreement about the gospel. Paul says in verse two that he set before the influential leaders in Jerusalem the gospel he proclaimed among the Gentiles. He was making sure that he was not running or had not run in vain.

At first blush it may sound like Paul was seeking assurance that he was not preaching a false gospel. However, that cannot be. Paul had received what he preached directly from Jesus himself. He was convinced of that. He did not need input from Jerusalem to be sure. He was already sure. "Running in vain" rather seems to be a reference to the waste that would come to those to whom he had preached if it turned out that he and Jerusalem were of opposing views. It would undermine the work he had done. But he did go to verify that there was agreement.

But Paul did not go because he was unsure. He went to Jerusalem because the Lord directed him to do so. He tells that he went up because of a revelation. He had received the gospel through a revelation, and now in the same way he has received word that he must go to Jerusalem to set the gospel before the leaders there. God orchestrated this visit. The reason it happened is that's what God wanted. The God who gave the gospel wanted the world to know that there were not two gospels but only one. He wanted a united church not a divided church. And for this to be abundantly clear, Paul and the other apostles would need to meet. So this visit took place not for the assurance of Paul or even for the assurance of the Jerusalem leaders. Rather, it was for the assurance of others. It was for clarity about the gospel itself. It was for our clarity, even for our assurance.

Here we have another compelling piece of evidence for those who might be tempted to doubt. Think of it. On one hand we have the initial group of Jesus' disciples. They spent three years with him in person, learning, watching, and experiencing him day by day. They witnessed the empty tomb. They experienced his post-resurrection appearances. They were there on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came in power. They witnessed the massive turning of thousands to Christ that day. And here they are years later still engaged in gospel ministry, holding fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

On the other hand, we have a man who had not witnessed all these things. He had become a fearsome enemy to the church seeking to kill and imprison those who followed Christ. And yet his claim is that the risen and glorified Christ came and revealed the gospel to him. He began preaching the very Lord whose church he had sought to destroy. For years he preached without consulting the original apostles. He met briefly with Peter and saw James in passing after three years. And then he continued his gospel preaching ministry for at least another decade—a decade!—before consulting with Jerusalem in regard to the details of the gospel he proclaimed.

If this gospel was truly of God, you would expect agreement. Disagreement in any major way would be grounds for doubt. Do you see the Lord's mercy in directing this visit? As much as for anyone, it was for our own assurance. Their agreement is a major reason to believe. Here is a group of guys who got the gospel one way and a sole man who received the gospel another way. Is either one just making it up? No. Theirs is the same gospel. That, brothers and sisters, is a God thing. Don't miss it. Be strengthened in your conviction of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, observe with me that ...

## **II. Paul's Welcome Was Tested Because of Titus. (3)**

When Paul came to Jerusalem, he brought with him a prime example of the power of God through the gospel. Titus was a Gentile whom the Lord had saved. He was a solid follower of Christ, but as a Gentile, he was uncircumcised. Roman culture regarded the practice of circumcision as barbaric. But of course, the practice of circumcision was an indelible mark of a faithful Israelite from the time of Abraham. For an Israelite to be uncircumcised was to be cut off from the people of God. An illustration of the seriousness of circumcision is brought to our awareness as Moses and his family

departed Midian to go to Egypt. The Lord came against Moses to kill him until his wife circumcised their son. The matter was therefore perplexing to the Israelite mind. How could that which once was such a crucial requirement to belong to God's people now be unnecessary? It was something so ingrained in the Jewish mind that they simply could not easily relinquish it.

But when Paul brought Titus to Jerusalem, he was not required to be circumcised. He came to Jerusalem. He came among Israelites. But they did not force him. What happened in Jerusalem was contrary to what the gospel-distorters were advocating in Galatia. Clearly, they were saying, "Faith in Christ is not enough; you need to embrace circumcision and the law of Moses too." This is in fact what some who came from Judea to Antioch were claiming. If you look in Acts 15 you see this is exactly what was being said. Acts 15:1 says, "But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" But Paul points out here that's not what was being said in Jerusalem by the lead apostles.

Third, observe with me that ...

### **III. Paul's Gospel Was Contested by False Brothers. (4-5)**

Not all was peachy when Paul went to Jerusalem. There were those who came in deceitfully. They were like spies; their intent was to infiltrate the church and wreak havoc. What appears to have happened is that they made a big deal about Titus' uncircumcision. THEY were demanding that he be circumcised. So it is not as though the whole circumcision thing got swept under the rug in Jerusalem. No. There were advocates in Jerusalem just as there were in Galatia. But they were OVERRULED and Titus was NOT required to be circumcised.

What I want you to notice here, however, is the specificity with which Paul describes the situation. What we have here are false brothers, what's at stake, and Paul's reaction to them.

These advocates of circumcision are called "false brothers." They came into the assembly under the pretense of being BROTHERS, but they were ENEMIES. They were not really brothers at all.

We come to a point Paul has already intimated in chapter one. Those who reject the gospel that God has given are no friends of the gospel. They are not guilty of a minor misjudgement. They distort and pervert the true gospel and are its mortal enemies. They may call themselves brothers but they are kin to Satan rather than Christ. They are spies. They are outsiders. So here are two points of exhortation. Beware of false brothers and beware of being a false brother. False brothers were right there in Jerusalem just as demons were right there in the ministry of Jesus. What may seem to be a minor adjustment in the gospel can have enormous consequences. I cannot think anything more enormously catastrophic than thinking you are a brother but turning out to be false.

Now let's look at what was at stake. What was at stake was the truth of the gospel. Paul was doing what he was doing because he wanted the truth of the gospel to be preserved. And the truth of the gospel is that we are free in Christ Jesus. Paul says the false brothers "were spying out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery."

The law is enslaving. It is a burden no human being can bear. We cannot keep the law. Only Jesus could keep the law. If we resort to law keeping, we resort to trying to do the impossible. It's like this. Someone may compare the impossibility of being saved through keeping the law to swimming. And let's say you jump into the water at San Francisco and you head for Hawaii. It really doesn't

matter how good a swimmer you are, you will never make it. But for a sinner, trying to keep the law is like saying, try to swim not just to Hawaii, no, try swimming to the moon! You will never make it! And that is what happens when you add law keeping to faith. It is no longer a work accomplished by God received by faith. Now it is a work of man; and that is an enslaving burden that will crush us under its enormous weight.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the law—every jot and tittle. All who trust in him have his righteousness applied to their account. But if we put our faith in what we do, we repudiate what has been accomplished by Christ. Our account will only reflect our own personal righteousness which is filthy rags. So you do not get baptized in order to be saved. You do not take the Lord's Supper in order to be saved. You will never be saved by trying real hard. You are not saved by going to church or praying a certain kind of prayer a certain kind of way. You will not be saved by observing a sacrament or having a priest give you last rites. You do not add some legalistic hoop to the gospel without exchanging freedom for enslavement. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Paul makes special note of how he responded to the enemy spies. He says, "To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment." This response is another evidence of Paul's confidence in the gospel he received from the Lord. Knowing what was at stake, there was no hesitation and no question how he should respond. Not even for a moment. When you hesitate, you may just open yourself up to give way. Obviously there are some aspects of doctrine that are not essential to saving faith. And there is reason in those areas that are less plain to allow for careful thought. But there are OTHER areas that are just as plain as can be and in those cases, hesitation is prompted by the fear of man. And when we pause to consider what humans think as opposed to what God clearly says, we may find ourselves in search of a doctrinal stance that might find better favor in the eyes of the world. Trying to keep one foot in God's favor, we place the other foot in man's favor and straddle the fence. But remember what Jesus said, "You cannot serve two masters."

Hesitation leading to caving is a growing problem in our day among churches. Most of what I am talking about has to do with matters related to LGBTQ. Societal pressure on the church is increasing by the minute ... and churches are hesitating and then caving. Just this past week the Catholic pope signaled the possibility for blessing same-sex unions. The week end before, Andy Stanley's church hosted a conference that carried with it a tacit endorsement of same sex unions. Listen, as more and more churches buckle, the pressure increases on those who have yet to cave. Here is an issue where we must imitate the apostle—to them we must not yield in submission ... **EVEN FOR A MOMENT.** If we cave on this issue, we abandon the truth of the gospel and join up with the Judaizers.

Now let me explain. There is a difference. The Judaizers were adding works to the gospel. The LGBTQ proponents are not legalists in that way, but they excuse persisting in sins which God says will keep you out of heaven. One compromise adds to the gospel. The other compromises the gospel by taking from it. And we must be vigilant and unhesitating on both fronts. There is only one Savior. There is only one gospel. That gospel is of salvation from God's wrath by God's grace through the work of Christ received by faith. It is a work of God which assuredly results in life transformation. Without vacillation, without procrastination, without confusion, without reluctance, and without question, we must not yield to anything that would spoil the truth of the gospel. And that means we need to be ready.

The rise of mass shootings and threats against assembled groups has prompted us to assess our situation as a church so as to provide as safe an environment as we can. One of the aspects that

helps ensure church safety and security is readiness. When people are alert and ready to respond, it limits the danger. Recently a man entered a church in Virginia intending to kill. However, because of people who were alert, who responded unhesitatingly, the man was stopped and arrested before he got a single shot off. We hope we never have to experience an active shooter in our midst. But we cannot avoid being confronted by active enemies to the truth of the gospel. We need to be ready. Be convinced. Be clear. Be unhesitating in response to any who would assault the one true gospel.

And now finally, observe with me that ...

#### **IV. Paul's Gospel Was Upheld by the Pillars. (6-10)**

Those who were influential in Jerusalem added nothing to the gospel Paul proclaimed. Indeed, they recognized that God entrusted the gospel to Paul for the sake of Gentiles. They saw that God was at work in apostolic ministry among the Gentiles through Paul just as he was at work through Peter among the Jews. Peter, James, and John perceived that God gave to Paul the grace of apostleship. They could not impart apostleship to Paul, but they could see that Jesus Christ had done so. And so their response was to give to Paul the right hand of fellowship.

The right hand of fellowship is an affirmation of unity and mutuality. It says, "We are in this together. We are on the same team. We delight to be co-laborers for the same cause." In that they did not add anything to Paul and in that they gave to him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, these pillars of the church in Jerusalem were expressing their consent and approval and endorsement. They were commending the gospel that Paul preached. They were not the final authority to verify a ministry that Paul had received directly from Christ, but they could add their seal of agreement and endorsement. And this is what they did.

When you pick up a book and you turn it over to the back side, you will often find a little summary of the contents and a picture of the author and a blurb about him or her. Generally you will also discover a few testimonials from influential persons who recommend the work the author has done. The right hand of fellowship was like an authorial recommendation, but it wasn't just a recommendation, it was an endorsement. They were siding with Paul in his gospel proclamation. To disagree with Paul's gospel was to disagree with the pillars of the church in Jerusalem as well. It is not surprising but it is remarkable. It should be noticed. The disciples who had been with Jesus during his earthly life, who had eaten, slept, prayed, traveled, and ministered with him, were preaching the very same gospel as the man who had been their mortal enemy to whom Jesus had come in a post-resurrection revelation. It is apologetic evidence for the gospel. Believe this gospel; it is authentic. It is THE gospel. It is GOD'S gospel. There is no other. Do not settle for any substitute. This is a case where it is the name brand and no other. Any hope built on anything cheaper than the life and blood of Jesus received only by grace through faith is no hope at all.

Do you believe THIS gospel? Are you believing in THIS Savior? Have you cast away ALL hope in your own works? Do you see yourself as a spiritual pauper whose righteousness, whose best work, is filthy rags? Do you see that obedience to Christ can never be the ROOT of reconciliation with God but only its FRUIT, growing out of a heart that he has changed? If yes, praise God. If no, then won't you come and be reconciled to Christ today?

Now, before I close this morning I should say something about Paul's references to the leaders in Jerusalem. First, Paul says that he had conference with those who "seemed influential." Of these he says, "what they were makes no difference to me." Paul seems to imply that though these leaders

held roles of importance, what really matters is the truth. Second, Paul refers to Peter, James, and John as those "who seemed to be pillars." It would undermine his whole argument if Paul was showing disrespect. The best way to take what Paul says here is as a cautious respect which grants that they are pillars but that they should not be regarded too highly. After all, they are still mere men like him. We can apply the precept by giving regard to those who lead us but without venerating or exalting them.

It is noteworthy that Paul uses the word pillars. The word derives from the realm of architecture. Here is the same word which appears in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament in 1 Kings 7 to refer to the two columns Solomon used in the construction of the Temple. The Jerusalem leaders were not pillars of a material structure. They were foundational in a spiritual temple Jesus himself is constructing called the church. It is made of living stones. They are Jew and Gentile saved through one and the same gospel. Jesus builds this temple as the gospel is proclaimed and sinners believe. This temple is a dwelling of God the Holy Spirit. Through him, we who are part of that temple are a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We are set free from the bondage of the law to serve for the glory of God cleansed by the precious blood of Christ Jesus. Our worship as the temple of God is to yield up ourselves as living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God through Christ. Our obedience is not a work that gets us saved but is a work for which we have been saved. To God be the glory!

The church is not a building. Buildings are nice to have. We should be grateful for this one in which we meet. However, our emphasis should not be on buildings when we think of the church. The church consists of the people God is saving. The work of construction is the work of preaching the gospel and making disciples.

Finally, there was one thing that the Jerusalem apostles did encourage. It was not an addition to the gospel, but it was the ONLY thing that they had to say. It was this, "remember the poor." The gospel of God impacts the hearts and lives of those who believe in Christ. One of the points of impact is to produce a heart that wants to show to others the same kind of mercy it has received from God. Mercy sees the misery of those who are truly poor and acts to alleviate it. Paul says that remembering the poor was the very thing he was eager to do. The New Testament demonstrates Paul's effort already at work to provide relief especially for those Christians suffering horribly in Jerusalem due to poverty, persecution, and famine. Let us join him in such a willingness. We who have received mercy from the Lord in rich abundance should be quick and intentional to give mercy for the relief of others for the glory of God.