

## *Re-formed by the Gospel*

When they last gathered together in a room, not unlike the one they were in now, Jesus had led them in the Passover meal. He said many things that night they didn't understand including this disturbing prophecy. *This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'* Matthew 26:31

At the time it made no sense to them; it was not so hard to understand now. At the cross they had scattered. Who could blame them? Their Messiah was dead and with him all their hopes for the new Kingdom. They thought he was the one; obviously they were wrong. They were becoming a movement, a band of brothers convinced that Jesus would lead them to victory. But it looked like the band would be breaking up. They wouldn't even be together now except for those crazy rumors. First it was the women who went to care for Jesus' body only to find it missing. They ran back with some bizarre story about angels and even hinted at the outrageous idea Jesus might be alive. Others ran to check out the story. It was true, the body was gone, but the idea that Jesus was alive was, well, who really wanted to get their hopes up again only to be devastated once more. One heart break like Calvary is enough for a lifetime.

But the rumor was enough for many of Jesus' disciples to come together again, especially those closest to him. And now, Cleopas and his friend have just arrived with an amazing story. They say they have seen Jesus himself. They are certain of it. So certain they've run several miles in the middle of the night to tell their good news. And so these disciples mingle together nervously, expectantly, hardly knowing what to think. And then it happened. No one saw him enter, but there he was, Jesus. *Peace be with you* he says. Its all the disciples can do not to faint. It must be a ghost. It can't be Jesus. They saw him die. They buried him for goodness sake!

*Why are you troubled? Why do you doubt?*, Jesus asks. Are you kidding!? Its not everyday you find yourself talking with someone who only days before was a corpse. Jeus understands. "*Touch me*" he says, "*A ghost doesn't have flesh and bones.*" And gradually the disciples dare to entertain the amazing, the improbable, the good news that Jesus is alive. They are overwhelmed with joy, ready to burst with excitement and then Jesus walks into the kitchen and asks "*Do you have anything to eat?*"

The disciples realized that Jesus was not a ghost, but they were less certain about who or what he truly was. He was their Messiah, but not any Messiah they had ever dreamed of. They'd been all wrong about the Christ. A cross and a resurrection were not in anyone's plan for the Christ. They

were about to learn that just as they were wrong about Christ, they were also wrong about themselves, who they were, what the purpose of the Christ community was to be.

It wasn't that Jesus hadn't tried to tell them. He had taught them often enough about the Kingdom, what it would be like, how it would be spiritual not physical. "My kingdom is not of this world" he said. "The kingdom of God is within you." But they had been blinded by the kingdom they wanted Christ to bring and the glory it would bring them. They had argued among themselves who would have the seats of power in Jesus' kingdom. Only a few days previous they participated in what was practically a coronation of Jesus as they marched into Jerusalem, riding a wave of intoxicating hope. The miracles, the crowds, the ease with which Jesus handled his opposition, it had been an exhilarating ride. But that ride crashed at Calvary, throwing them in every direction, stumbling, tumbling into despair.

But now Jesus was back, from the dead! As this realization sank in, some may have thought their original kingdom dream was still possible. After all, a king who could perform miracles, feed thousands and raise the dead was nothing compared to a king who could not be put to death. But the more thoughtful disciples were focused on something else, the cross. Why the cross? If Jesus had the power to conquer death, surely he had the power

to not be put to death. He said it himself. *No one takes my life, I lay it down.* But why lay it down? Why the cross? What did it all mean?

That's why Jesus shows up, to explain what it all meant. *"This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."* Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. *"This is what is written. The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem."* It was all in the Scriptures, Jesus said. The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. Where in the scriptures does it say that? Actually no where quite so clearly as that. But, like so much of what Jesus said, it is there for those who are willing to hear it. *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear"* Jesus said. Surely Luke does not tell us everything Jesus told them that night. Which scriptures did he open to them. I'm guessing he opened Isaiah, chapter 53. *"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried away our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

If they had understood that Isaiah spoke of the Messiah, perhaps they would not have resisted when Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and prepared for his suffering. If they had understood Isaiah perhaps they would have stood by him during the trial, the flogging, the torturous march to the cross. But they did not understand Isaiah; perhaps they did not want to.

If Jesus preached Isaiah to them, he surely pointed out to them not only who the Christ was, and what the Christ had to do, but also who they were and what God's purpose for them was to be. Jesus said that they were going to preach repentance and forgiveness in his name to all the nations.

That was another part of Jesus' teaching they had trouble with, his love affair with Gentiles. Most of the trouble he had with the Jews was because he was always comparing them unfavorably with the Gentiles. Only twice they recalled Jesus praising someone's faith, and both were Gentiles, a Roman centurion and a Canaanite mother. Jesus was the Messiah spoken of by the Jewish prophets but he was far more than a Jewish Messiah. Jesus came to be savior for the whole world. So if Jesus opened Isaiah to these disciples that night, surely he turned to Isaiah 49, *it is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*"

In other words, it is too small a thing for the only Son of God to be only Israel's Savior: it is too small a kingdom to rebuild only David's Judea. It is too small a thing to only be king of Israel; he came to be King of kings.

The problem these disciples and all the Jews really was their idea of Christ was too small. Their idea of the Kingdom was too small. On the other hand, their idea of themselves was too big. Their spiritual identity as a people was centered on who they were, who they had been. They gloried in the fact that they were the nation of King David, the covenant people of Moses at Mt. Sinai, the sons and daughters of Abraham, the "chosen people of God." All that was true. But somewhere in all that glorious history, they forgot why they had been chosen by God in the first place. The story of Abraham is an old and glorious story, but it is not the oldest story nor the most glorious. God had people before Abraham: Shem, Noah, Lamech, Methuselah, Enoch, Seth and Adam. Before there was the tribe of Israel, there was the family of man, a family in desperate need of salvation. God chose Abraham not just to bless a tribe, but the whole world. *"I will make you a great nation and I will bless you. And all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you."* Genesis 12: 1, 3

The story of the chosen people of Israel is a grand story, but it is only a chapter in a greater story, the salvation of mankind. Israel plays a critical

role in that salvation drama, but theirs is not the starring role. When Jesus arrived on stage it was time for Israel to decrease and Christ to increase. Israel had been God's chosen to bring Christ to the world so he could offer his life up for the world on the cross. Now it was time to take the message of Christ and the cross into all the world; it was time for this Jewish community to be re-formed by the gospel, to be reformed into the community of Christ and the cross.

The disciples didn't understand that, more to the point, they didn't want that. But Jesus didn't come to be the Christ they wanted, he came to be the Christ God sent. And just as the cross and the resurrection had helped them to recognize what was at the center of who Christ truly was, it was now to be at the center of who they really were. They were still Israelites, but now they were more than that. They were Christ's Church, to be made up of every tribe and nation to carry to the world the gospel message of the Cross and the Resurrection. These disciples would be slow to understand this re-formation of their identity. The biggest controversy of the early church was the insistence that to be a Christian you must first become a Jew. It would take the relentless teaching of Paul and a mega-conference in Jerusalem of apostles, prophets and elders before they would realize that the identity of the Church must be formed around the universal gospel, not Jewish Law.

So what does this story have to say to us as Christians today. We are not Jews. We're not bothered by those Jewish issues. No, but the problem those Jewish disciples faced in becoming Christ's Church is the very problem Christians have wrestled with down through history. What should be the identity of the Church. From these early disciples' we learn that to form that identity around something other than the gospel deforms the Church, a problem amply demonstrated throughout history.

Later it would be the Gentile Christians who would try to reform the Church around their endless philosophies and mystery religions. A gospel that included a crucifixion was too scandalous and resurrection was too unbelievable. People prefer their salvation come as a result of their own power and wisdom. A story of a cross and a resurrection would require sermons on repentance, weakness, forgiveness. One reasons the early church fathers wrote ancient creeds like the Apostles and Nicene creeds was to reform the Church by restating the orthodox gospel message of the divine Son of God becoming the incarnate Son of Man to save the world by dying on the cross for sin and conquering death and Hades by rising from the dead.

Christian history is a lamentable litany of the Church becoming deformed around something other than the gospel message of the cross and the resurrection. When the church conquered the Roman empire, Rome

turned around and conquered the church by centering the church not on the simple gospel but the pomp and privilege of power. In reaction to the excesses and corruption that had deformed the Church, men like Martin Luther, John Calvin and others attempted to reform the Church by centering it on the principle of “sola scriptura,” exalting the Scripture as the authority for the only true authority for the believer’s faith, what was called the Protestant Reformation. There’s certainly nothing wrong with emphasizing the importance of the Scripture. It is the inspired Word of God, given for our instruction and correction. However in time the Reformation became deformed as various interpretations of scriptures usurped the unifying gospel as the identity of the Church. Believers in the gospel who disagreed on various interpretations of Scripture divided and tore apart the Body of Christ and hundreds of exclusive, sectarian churches were established.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the proliferation of divisive creeds and warring denominations led many to seek to reform the church again, this time by trying to restore the simple practice and example of the New Testament church. The only problem was they all focused on different new testament patterns and practices to restore. It was during this time our own movement, the Churches of Christ, emerged also seeking to reform Christianity. Originally we were a unity movement, pleading with

Christians in all the denominations to be simply Christians only. One does not become a Christian by a perfect understanding of all the teaching in the Scriptures but by faith in the gospel of Christ and expressing that faith through baptism into Christ. Once one becomes a Christian then one sets out to restore in both the individual and the church the New Testament examples and practices. But not everyone agreed on what constituted New Testament examples and practices and it wasn't long before our unity movement became horribly divided itself. Each division formed its identity and its fellowship around opposing practices they felt were not authorized by the New Testament: missionary societies, instrumental music, Sunday schools, supported preachers, multiple cups in communion just to name a few. When preachers taught "first principles" they were not referring to the gospel of the cross and the resurrection, but to those particular issues distinguishing them from other Christian fellowships. There were legitimate reasons for all these issues. What was illegitimate was to exalt any of these issues to the same level as the gospel. As my dad used to say, "Nothing that divides us is as important as the blood that was shed to make us one." In other words, our differences on how best to be a Christian should not destroy the basis for becoming a Christian. One becomes a Christian by believing and obeying the gospel. One becomes a better Christian by conforming

one's life to the teachings of Christ. Those early Jewish disciples were reformed by the gospel into early Christian saints when they expressed their faith and were baptized into Christ, confessing that the Son of God became the Son of Man and died on the cross to save them from their sins and then conquered death by rising from the grave. Believing this reforms us.

We may believe our interpretations of Christ's teaching is more biblical; our teaching methods, worship practices, church organization. Perhaps they are. But we are not saved by our interpretations, our methods our practices or our organizations. We are saved by placing our faith in the gospel, in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross and his resurrection from the tomb. We are baptized into that story; we are submerged into that crucifixion; and we have re-emerged into that resurrected life.

Just like those first Jewish Christians, the Church has been, is and will always be in constant need of being reformed, but only by and around the gospel. Anything other than the gospel at the center of our faith and we are deformed. Scripture could not be more clear about this. There is much teaching throughout the New Testament; there is one teaching that stands out in the New Testament, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Listen to scripture's reverberating testimony: Romans: *I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of God for salvation*; Corinthians: *I resolved to*

*know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified;*  
Galatians: *May I never boast except in the cross of Jesus Christ;* Ephesians:  
*For he himself is our peace, who has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall*  
*of hostility... reconciling us to God through the cross:* Philippians: *He*  
*humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross,*  
*therefore God has highly exalted him and given him a name which is above*  
*every name:* Colossians: *He has forgiven us, cancelled the written code that*  
*condemned us by nailing it to the cross:* 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy: *Remember Jesus*  
*Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David, this is my Gospel;*  
Hebrews: *For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every*  
*way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in*  
*service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people;*  
1<sup>st</sup> Peter: *You were bought not with silver or gold but with the precious*  
*blood of the lamb, Jesus Christ:* Revelation: *You are worthy because you*  
*were slain and with your blood you purchased persons from every tribe and*  
*language and peoples and nation.*

The community of Christ finds its spiritual identity first and foremost in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. This is the core of who we are. This is what makes us Christian; this is the message we are to take to the nations. This is

what God set in motion when he first chose Abraham. This is why even we Gentile Christians are children of Abraham, also among the chosen to bring light to all the spiritual Gentiles of this world by proclaiming to them the gospel, the story of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became the Son of Man. With that story Jesus reformed the original community of Jewish disciples and with that story he continues to reform his disciples in every generation. If we allow anything other than this gospel to shape us, we are in danger of being more deformed than reformed. And so the command Jesus gave to those first disciples is no less authoritative to those of us who claim to be Christ's disciples today. *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. Whoever does not believe will be condemned.* May our lives always be formed, informed and reformed by that gospel.