

What Did the Early Church Teach About Variations of the Gospel Message?

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The gospel was first proclaimed in Eden (Gen. 3:15; cf. Rev. 12:17), given to Abraham (Gen. 17:2-9; Gal. 3:6-9) and then to the children of Israel (Heb. 4:1-2; Rom. 9:30-33). Central to this gospel is trust and obedience toward God and His law (Ps. 3:1-8), therefore, the change in the law must be correctly understood (Heb. 7:12), as proper adherence to the covenant depends on it (De. 7:9; Dn. 9:4). The promise of the covenant is to remove our sin (Rom. 11:25-27), so we may have life (Isa. 55:3), which is everlasting (Heb. 13:20-21). The gospel applies to all equally (Num. 15:29; Mal. 4:1-6; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 2:12-13) and is proclaimed from generation to generation (Mt. 28:18-20; Isa. 51:4-8).

From Christ's comments, as well as statements made by his disciples, we can see from scripture that different messages (gospels) about his mission were extant at the time of the early church. Paul pointed out that there was only one gospel, and that Christ's followers needed to be careful that they were not misled (Gal. 1:6-8). The early church taught that Christ had fulfilled those aspects of the Law and Prophets associated with the temple system (Ac. 7:48-50).

These included animal sacrifices, circumcision, and the Levitical/Aaronic priesthood. Some within the early church were teaching that these activities were not fulfilled in Christ and that new converts had to be circumcised (Gal. 5:1-13) while others were teaching that true believers in Christ did not need to obey God's law anymore (Mt. 7:21-23; Lk. 13:22-27; 2Thes. 2:7; 1Jn. 2:29). Both these positions were incorrect and represented variations of Christ's message (the gospel) that were to be rejected (Gal. 1:6-8; cf. De. 4:2; 12:32).

The passages in scripture which speak of the corruption of God's truth make it clear that false teachers and false doctrines introduced error very soon after Jesus Christ established the church. It has continued since that time and affects everyone's understanding of God's plan to some extent. The early church writers admonish all who wish to obey God to guard themselves from deception and to examine and prove all things, holding fast to what is right (Eph. 5:6; 2Thes. 2:3; 1Thes. 5:2-4; 1Jn. 3:7). The early church understood from scripture the tools necessary to guard themselves from all forms of deception, including subtle variations of the gospel message (Isa. 8:20; Ps. 19:7-9).

This document is the collaborative work of individuals who believe God's truth should be given freely (Mt. 10:8; 1Cor. 2:12; 2Cor. 11:7; Rom. 10:14-21) and the message of the one true God should be made available to all nations (Mt. 24:14) as a prerequisite to the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings (Mt. 17:10; 19:17; Mk. 9:11; Lk. 1:17; Rev. 19:11-16).

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