

Do Our Beliefs Really Matter?

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 18/19, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Galatians 1:1-10 (NRSV)

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—²and all the members of God’s family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ⁹As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

¹⁰Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

If, as the song goes, all you need is love . . . if, as so many people seem to think, all truth is relative . . . Then, perhaps our beliefs don’t really matter so much.

But they mattered very much to the Apostle Paul.

Today, we’ll explore why.

Galatia was an area in ancient Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) visited by Paul on his first missionary journey in the late 40's AD. Paul's success in Galatia was largely among the pagans, not the Jews (4:8-9). Many Galatian pagans believed the Gospel and were baptized into the body of Christ. After Paul's departure, the Christian communities in Galatia were "running a good race" (5:7) until some people came to the communities teaching and preaching a gospel that differed from that taught by Paul. This set the stage for a confrontation. So far as Paul was concerned, there simply was no other Gospel than the one that he had brought to the Galatians. The question for us is this: what is the problem and how could it matter so much?

The "circumcizers"

Most New Testament scholars agree that the problems in Galatia were created by Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping the Jewish Law (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath, and the rest) was necessary to become a full-fledged disciple of Jesus. In other words, to become a true Christian, one first needed to become a Jew. This may seem an odd claim to make, but we need to remember that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. All the apostles were Jewish. Jesus said he had come to fulfill the Law, not abolish it (Matthew

Heresy

There's a word that will stop you in your tracks. As Ellsworth Kalas put it, "A preacher either has to be daring or foolhardy to use a word like *heresy* in our day." A great many horrors have been visited upon people in the name of *heresy*. Yet, it is the accusation that Paul levels at those who have come to Galatia teaching another gospel (as if there is one!). Kalas also recalls a quote from Andre Suares, "In a dead religion there are no more heresies."

In the Christian context, defining "heresy" is straightforward – it is an opinion, doctrine, or practice that is contrary to the essentials that have been generally accepted by the Christian community. But knowing one when you see one is another matter.

Paul believed that the teachings of the "circumcizers" in Galatia lay outside the bounds of the Gospel of Christ. When we rise to say the Apostles Creed, we are putting concrete shape to the message that we proclaim to the world. We are stating essentials. When we say, as Christians have for two millennia, that we believe in the "resurrection of the body," we are necessarily saying that the denial of bodily resurrection is a heresy. The purpose of the creed is to help put some boundaries around the "essentials." You'll notice that the creed says nothing about infant baptism, tongues-speaking, or women in the pulpit. Those are "intramural" disagreements, not disputes about the essentials.

Wise Christians know that the list of unifying essentials is brief. As John Wesley put it, "In the essentials, unity; in all else, liberty; and in all things, charity." To deny Jesus' divinity or his humanity or his Lordship over all creation is to deny the heart of the Gospel – and we sometimes label such denials as heresies. It is a helpful word, but one that we will rarely use or hear.

5:17-20). It isn't hard to imagine that these "circumcizers" could weave together a persuasive case that Jesus-followers in Galatia should keep the Law.

To say that Paul was angry is an understatement. The letter-writing protocol of the day called for every letter to open with a somewhat lengthy introduction expressing praise and thanksgiving for the letter's recipient. All of Paul's letters begin in this way – with the exception of his letter to the Galatians. All

niceties are set aside. Paul wastes no time getting to the point: "I can't believe your fickleness – how easily you've turned traitor . . . it is not a minor variation, you know, it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God" (from Peterson's *The Message*).

" . . . who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God . . . "

Paul could cram a lot into a few words. In these three phrases from 1:4, Paul sums up all that the "circumcizers" are undermining. For Paul, Jesus' faithfulness all the way to the cross, his willing gift of himself, is what has put us right with God – that and nothing else. The cross is the means by which we are liberated from the present age of sin and death so that we might enter into the age of the Spirit. And all of this is the plan of God.

For Paul, to return to the Law was to return to slavery, to forsake the redemption offered by Jesus' atoning death. The Law had fulfilled its purpose of leading everyone toward the Messiah. The time for the Law, as the thought-to-be means of salvation, had passed.¹ Paul writes that he "died to the Law so that I might live for God" (2:19, TNIV). Paul had passed from the old to the new, from death to life, and there could be no going back. Not for him, not for any of the Christians.

Why it matters

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, this Good News that Paul brought to Galatia and we are to bring to the world, is a proclamation, an announcement. The Gospel is not a dry recitation of doctrine interesting only to theologians. It is a trumpet that calls people to the God-Who-Is.

The Gospel proclaims truth. The Gospel claims that some things are true and some are not. The Gospel proclaims that there is one God who created everything only to see it damaged and twisted by human rebellion. The Gospel proclaims that through the faithfulness of God's one and only Son, even to the cross, humanity and all of creation has been put right with God. The work is not done, but the victory has been won. And how do we know this? Because the Gospel proclaims not only Christ crucified . . . but Christ risen.

Some of the Galatians had been torn away from the Gospel of Christ by false teachers, the wolves about which Paul would later warn the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:29). It cannot surprise us that the dangers of false teaching is a theme in all of the later New Testament writings. We stake our lives on the truthfulness of the Gospel. Of course it matters.

Truth

In recent decades, it has been fashionable to claim that there are no absolutes, that all truth is relative. Ironically, of course, these claims are self-contradictory.¹

Christians hold that there is such a thing as truth, that some notions about the nature of reality correspond to reality and some do not. Those who have trouble with "truth" will sometimes, for example, hold in their minds the idea that Christianity and Buddhism both tell us much about reality, just from different perspectives, and that, in some mysterious way, both can be true.

It seems to me that this is sentimental nonsense. Truth is that which corresponds to reality; i.e., truth is that which is so. The world-view held by Christians could correspond with reality, with things as they are, or it could not. The Buddhist world-view could correspond with reality, with things as they are, or it could not. But, because the essential world-views of Christianity and Buddhism are so diametrically opposed, they cannot both correspond to reality - they cannot both be true.

1. The statement "there are no absolutes" is an absolute statement!

2. Each of us carries around in our head and heart a story about how the world works, a story that explains all that is, a story that claims to make sense of all of reality. This story is a key part of what I mean by a world-view. A world-view explains things. It makes sense of it all. It is the way we organize all of reality. It tells us who we are and where we are. Though no two persons have identical world-views, world-views can be similar enough to enable us to speak of a Christian world-view, a materialist world-view, a Buddhist world-view and so on. Though no two Christians are likely to agree on every detail of what constitutes the Christian world-view, they can agree on a lot. Generally, they can agree on the "lock-nuts" that hold the world-view together, the essentials that constitute the common affirmation of the Christian world-view. Indeed, the purpose of most Christian creeds and statements of faith such as the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the UMC Articles of Religion is to identify the "lock-nuts" of the Christian world-view.

¹It isn't that the Law is bad. After all, just think of the Ten Commandments. What is wrong with loving God and loving neighbor? Obviously, nothing. It is how Jesus calls us to live. The Law is good but, because of sin, it could not be the means by which the promises made to Abraham are fulfilled. Only faith can put things right. Next week, our reading will be drawn from Deuteronomy 6 and we'll have more time to talk about the Law.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

March 19-25

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Galatians 4:6; Psalm 39 The Father's gift of the Son and the Spirit; freedom and slavery; the freedom of the Spirit	Day 2 Deuteronomy 1:4; Psalm 40 Introduction to Israel's story; The summons to obedience
Day 3 A day for reflection and catching up	Day 4 Deuteronomy 5-7; Psalm 41 The Ten Commandments; Moses calls the people to careful observance of the Law
Day 5 Deuteronomy 8-10; Psalm 42 Remember; Be prepared and be humble	Day 6 Deuteronomy 11-13; Psalm 43 Be diligent to keep the commandments; the beginning of the Law Code; worship
Day 7 Deuteronomy 14-16; Psalm 44 The calendar; judicial authority	

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy begins soon – the week of March 27 Registration is now available at www.standrewccl.org

The Spring Session classes are: *Paul: On a Mission from God* with Scott Engle (Mon. morn. & Tues. eve.), *Boundaries: When to say YES, When to say NO to take control of your life* with Rev. Linda Carmicle (Wed. morn.), *Paul's Letters to Timothy* with Frankey Commer (Thurs. morn.), *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* with Rev. Doug Meyer (Thurs. lunch), *Connection and Direction: Discover Your Spiritual Gifts* with Laura Zuber (Mon. eve.), *Introducing the New Testament* with Scott Engle (Mon. eve.), and *Jesus: His life, His time, His land, His Hebrew Faith* with Debbie Lyons and Janet Collingsworth (Tues. eve).

March Book Recommendation

The Message – Remix . . . A Bible paraphrase by Eugene Peterson

I am supplementing my reading from the NRSV in the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* with Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary language. I'm finding that Peterson helps me to make better sense of some of the more difficult (dare I say tedious) passages. The "Remix" is an inexpensive, hard-bound, compact edition of *The Message* with verse-numbered paragraphs.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by talking about your own understanding of "heresy." How do you react to the word? What do you think Andre Suares meant when he said, "In a dead religion there are no more heresies"? Is there any value left in the word "heresy" or ought we to drop its use altogether? Do you think that Christians sometimes talk about heresies without ever using the word? What are some examples from your own experience?

Do you think there are "essentials" to the Christian faith, those doctrines or practices about which John Wesley expected us to find unity? What some of the most important essentials so far as you are concerned? What are some examples of doctrines or practices that seem might important to many Christians but are not so important to you? How can you tell an "intramural" disagreement among Christians from a heresy?

You might re-read the text box on truth and world-views. How would you summarize the Christian worldview for someone else? Do you find it pretty difficult? Why do we find it so hard to articulate what we believe about our faith? We stand up each week and say the Apostles Creed. Do you think that most people in the pews understand what they are affirming? How could we get better at knowing what we believe and why? How do you think what you believe compares to what most Christians have believed for 2,000 years and why? . . . Do you think any of this really matters? Why?