

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part eighteen - Teaching #2165

Sunday, February 20th, 2022 - 10 a.m.

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“AS LONG AS WE ALL LOVE EACH OTHER AND HELP MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, DOES IT MATTER WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES DOCTRINALLY ABOUT JESUS CHRIST?”

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:7-12 - “You were running well. Who prevented you from being persuaded regarding the truth? [8] This persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. [9] A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough. [10] I myself am persuaded in the Lord you will not accept any other view. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. [11] Now brothers and sisters, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. [12] I wish those who are disturbing you might also let themselves be mutilated!”

How shall we come to terms with the full weight of Paul’s words in our text? I would start by saying that the way we respond to these verses reveals the spiritual health of our congregation. As much as our worship, the gifts of the Spirit, the hours spent at prayer, the number of miracles manifested in our midst, or even the number of people saved and reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ, ***our response to these words reveals the spiritual health of our church family.***

This is a text where Paul reveals the fullness of his heart as he addresses the issue of the false teaching of the Judaisers in these Galatian churches. He's pressed all sorts of theological arguments in the last three chapters, but one gets the impression that he's worried these new Christians won't feel the sheer **importance** of turning from the error they are being lured into.

That's why there is more than **cool logic** in this text. There is **anger**. In a verse that no one will ever stand up and claim as their "**life verse**" at some small group meeting, Paul says, "These false teachers pushing circumcision instead of the cross of Christ - Never mind circumcision! - I wish they'd **emasculate** themselves!" Imagine the Holy Spirit wanting those words in sacred text!

Come back again to that long, convoluted title I gave to this teaching - "**As long as we love each other and help make the world a better place, does it matter what the church believes doctrinally about Jesus Christ?**"

I chose that rather awkward title because, with increasing frequency, there are evangelicals who would proudly say, "**No, those doctrines are just divisive. We shouldn't be fussing and fighting over them. It presents a fractured, bickering image of the church to the world. It's love that counts!**"

I want to take some time tonight to look at our text with an open mind and heart. Then I want to show why, at certain times, and over certain truths, division in the church is not ugly, but beautiful and pleasing in the eyes of our Lord and Redeemer.

1) **THE CHRISTIAN LIFE MUST NOT ONLY BE *INITIATED WELL*,
BUT *SUSTAINED WELL***

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:7 - “You were running well. Who prevented you from being persuaded regarding the truth?”

“You were running well...” The running of a race - a ***long, marathon race*** - is one of Paul’s favorite images of the Christian life. This is because, while there are all sorts of competitive events Paul could have chosen, the ***race*** image carries in it something very specific and important. You win a pageant, usually, simply by being the most beautiful. You win a weight lifting competition simply by lifting the most weight. You win a baking contest by baking the best pie. But a race is the kind of event that isn’t won all at once. Actually, a race isn’t won ***during*** the race at all. The actual victory takes place at the ***end*** of the race - at the ***finish line***.

In fact, a person can be **leading** a race for fifty or a hundred laps around a track, and then blow it entirely in the last hundred yards. And he gets no points whatsoever for the vast majority of the race where he was beating the field. All that counts in a race is who wins **at the finish line**.

Paul sees precious people being **“prevented”** in the race. They were doing well, but something was going terribly wrong. And what was going wrong isn’t something that we think of as a serious problem in the church today. That’s why I said, in introducing this teaching, that our response to this text is one of the most important factors in measuring the spiritual life and health of our church family.

Paul’s words are very clear. What was **“preventing”** these people in their faith was their **unwillingness to separate themselves from doctrinal error**. Although Paul was certain they would eventually come to their senses (5:10), they hadn’t as of yet been willing to **judge error as error**.

Paul feels urgency to correct them. They didn’t see their unwillingness to judge error as something devastating to their relationship with Jesus Christ, but Paul said it was - **Galatians 5:2 - “Take note! I, Paul, am telling you that if you get yourselves circumcised, Christ will not benefit you at all.” - IPAD TEXT**

2) UNDERSTANDING THE OBSTETRICS OF FALSE DOCTRINE

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:8-9 - “This persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. [9] A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough.”

These words need to be thought through. False doctrine isn't an *intellectual* issue. And it isn't an issue reserved for *theologians*. False doctrine is a *life issue*. It's a *commitment to Jesus issue*. It has to do with *loving Jesus, walking in the Spirit*, and *getting to heaven*, and until we see it this way we will never give it the passion and attention it so desperately needs.

How do people come close to rejecting Jesus Christ and not even know it? That's what these verses are all about. There are *two strategies* of false doctrine picked out in these two verses. The first has to do with the *persuasiveness* of false teaching. The second has to do with the *imperceptibility* of false teaching.

- a) ***False teaching is always persuasive - Galatians 5:8 - “This persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.”***

By that Paul means this doctrinal drift usually never reveals any obvious **denial** of what we would consider important to our spiritual well-being. These false teachers in Galatia are a classic case in point. They weren't coming on the scene calling these Galatians to renounce or reject Christ Jesus.

In fact, as is the case with most false teaching, they were calling people to **add to** - to **supplement** - their faith in Christ with something Jewish people - people of faith - had already been doing for generations.

You see, there is always **something** about false teaching that makes sense. There is always an element of **appeal**, though not **quite** the whole **truth**. But the point is, false teaching is rarely **obviously** or **entirely** false.

Also, as a rule, false teaching comes in as an **addition** to Biblical revelation, rather than a blatant **denial** of it. Or, more commonly, Biblical revelation alone is made to seem narrow, confining and restrictive - in today's lingo, **usually intolerant**. We're encouraged to believe we will be more **loving** if only we aren't so doctrinally **picky**.

I still remember this classic example from our own Era Banner newspaper in years ago. Regarding the legislation regarding same-sex marriages in Ontario, Rev. Heather McCance, then the Anglican minister in Holland Landing and Sharon made these comments:

“The Anglican Church believes the Bible isn’t the only way God speaks to us. He gave us brains and expects us to use them. We don’t believe He stopped speaking to us 2000 years ago. There are churches who believe the Bible is the only factor. The Anglican Church isn’t one of them. God’s Word is definitely evolving and I don’t know which way it’s going to go.”

Now, I think several things should have been said in response to this by thinking Christians all over York Region. I could have agreed with some of the things Rev. McCance said. First, I too don’t believe God stopped speaking to us 2000 years ago. I believe God speaks to people today. I believe the Holy Spirit speaks to Christians currently, in their own skins, as they walk in living fellowship with the Risen Christ. And I believe God speaks to ***all*** people - Christians and non-Christians - through conscience and circumstances every day all over the world.

Also, I would have agreed that the Bible isn't the only way God speaks to us today. I've already mentioned several ways in which God speaks to His people and His creation. And I don't know of any thinking congregation anywhere that would deny these things. So, fortunately, Anglicans aren't the only ones to whom God has given brains.

But none of this even gets close to the real issue. Given that God didn't stop speaking to us 2000 years ago, and given that the Bible isn't the **only** way God can speak into our lives, ***how shall we know when God is speaking?*** And ***who will be the arbiter when different people, expressing totally opposing views and values, all claim to be speaking for God?***

If we're going to talk about having brains, surely ***this*** is the issue to use them on! Because, if the Bible truly is an ***“evolving”*** revelation, then so are the other, more current revelations also evolving as they come from minister to minister, from church to church, from denomination to denomination, and so on, and so on.

In other words, if Rev. McCance is right, ***no one*** has any right to claim an absolutely fixed standard of divine truth in religion and morality if the revelation is constantly evolving.

“Well, we should just measure everything by what’s loving and tolerant to people, pastor Don”

Really? And exactly where did that absolute standard of divine revelation come from? And why should we listen to it if, it too, is evolving, soon to be replaced by some other principle of conduct?

There is a better way. The church has, for centuries, understood that when we say the Bible is God’s **final** revelation we don’t mean God no longer speaks today, but that God never **contradicts** what He has revealed in His Word, the Scriptures. Cultures change, human laws and edicts may change, but what God has revealed in His Word isn’t **evolving**.

Something **evolving** has no fixed, permanent state. The term “**evolving**” is surely a poor word to describe God’s final revelation. Then why use it? Because it allows for changes and additions that go against what we have written in the Scriptures. This is the breeding ground for false teaching and bad theology. Remember, false teaching almost always **adds** to what God has settled in His Word.

The Apostle Paul certainly believed in, and experienced, God speaking to him in current life situations. He knew what it was to be constrained and restrained by the living voice of the Holy Spirit in his heart. But he still knew the importance of a fixed measuring stick for all revelation. That's why he cautioned against going "***beyond what is written***" (1 Corinthians 4:6) when searching for divine truth.

So remember, most false teaching isn't designed to appear ridiculous. It is aimed at some perceived need. It will dress itself up as more ***loving***, more ***tolerant***, more ***helpful to hurting people***. It is, to use Paul's word, "***persuasive***." It is carefully marketed to find an audience.

- b) ***False teaching always begins almost imperceptibly.*** Paul puts this idea in very carefully chosen imagery - **Galatians 5:9 - "A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough." - IPAD TEXT**

Again, notice how this image favors the idea of false doctrine usually being an ***addition*** to existing truth. It comes in as something extra, something over and above, something added to what we have known before.

But in this image of leaven there is another important thought. The addition doesn't come in a huge, drastic surge of new thought. It comes only a little at a time, almost imperceptibly. And it doesn't take much leaven (or yeast) to make a huge difference in the baking of the bread, as any baker knows.

It is right at this point that we find the reason most churches don't do much about false doctrine until it is too late. Most Christians, and most churches, wait until they see the **damage** of false teaching before they deal with the **presence** of false teaching in their midst.

Usually, especially in our culture, it is uncomfortable to rebuke false teaching because we are all conditioned to live our lives in an atmosphere of **moral relativism** and **doctrinal pluralism**. We have actually been brainwashed to believe it is arrogant to claim certainty on revealed truth from God.

The tone of the day is designed, by the spirit of the age, to **pave the way** for false doctrine by stacking public opinion against those who would correct it. You **look silly**, and you **look narrow-minded** if you deal with false teaching because, to deal with it effectively, you must confront it **before** it looks like a huge divisive issue in the church. It's too late to deal with it **after** it has done it's rising work in the bread of the Body of Christ.

This is why it always takes incredible courage to deal with false teaching. The one dealing with it is always the one to look small-minded and picky and, yes, even divisive to the false peace of a tolerant church.

Paul says as much right in this passage. His insistent declaration of the cross earned him nothing but enemies among many in the New Testament community - **Galatians 5:11 - "Now brothers and sisters, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished." - IPAD TEXT**

Paul was experiencing persecution because he refused to join things that couldn't be joined. In this case it was the doctrine of the necessity of circumcision. But there were other issues as well on other occasions. The point is that Paul refused to synthesize conflicting concepts of salvation. The cross of Christ must forever remain undiluted.

- c) ***False teaching spreads until it is stopped.*** Again, this is the way yeast works. There is not a verse in the New Testament that encourages us to ***pray*** against false teaching. False teaching must be ***stopped*** or it ***spreads***. That's the nature of leaven. There is nothing in it that stops automatically before its work is done.

The clear example from the Scriptures will lead us to two conclusions. ***First***, genuine Spirit-filled Christians can become involved in the spreading of false teaching. And ***second***, even in these cases, false teaching must be lovingly but firmly confronted. Consider the case we have already studied in this series on Galatians. No less than the apostle Peter himself was actually spreading false teaching by his words and example with the believers in Antioch.

However sincere Peter was, damage was being done to the church body. What did Paul do? Paul confronted Peter publicly. He took the hard road and corrected the problem immediately. Why? Was Paul unloving? No. Paul knew that false teaching always spreads until it is stopped.

So remember, Scriptural truth always does more than free and save the soul. It also ***tests our loyalties***. Jesus isn't just the Life and the Way. He is always and forever the Truth.