

Adding to the Gospel

Exodus 24, Acts 15:1–5

Throughout history the church has had to defend the truth against error. Sadly, not everyone who calls himself a Christian is speaking the truth. The standard of truth is God’s written word, the Holy Scriptures—that is, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments.

The Scriptures were given by God to his church, his covenant people. The officers of the church—the Old Testament priests; and ministers and elders under the New Testament—were and are responsible to accurately define and defend and disseminate the truth of Scripture. God did not simply place his word in a library somewhere and invite everybody to come read it and decide for himself or herself what it meant. He entrusted his word to his covenant people, the worshiping community who would gather week by week to hear the Scriptures read and preached in public worship. God speaks to his church through the Holy Scriptures, and it is the church that defines truth in accordance with the word of God. The church has absolutely no authority to make up doctrines out of whole cloth. The church has no warrant to teach anything not expressly taught in Scripture or properly deduced from inspired Scripture.

In our New Testament text this morning we read that certain men came down from Judea and began to teach, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Now you will remember that the historian Luke includes a sample sermon preached by Paul back in chapter 13. He preached that sermon at the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. Paul boldly stated to his largely-Jewish audience that salvation is through Christ alone. He declared, “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (13:38–39). “This Man” is Christ. Forgiveness of sins and justification—being declared righteous in the sight of a holy God—are in Christ alone. It is Christ alone who saves. Paul’s message agrees perfectly with the apostle Peter’s. Peter had earlier declared that “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). He also stated: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Make no mistake: the apostles Peter and Paul both preached that salvation is in Christ alone. It is Christ who saves. No one else—even the sinner himself—has any ability to save. Christ alone is the Savior. This is the fundamental message of the faithful Church. This is the gospel.

But this message was not palatable to many of the Jews. They were offended by the idea that anybody outside of ethnic Israel could be saved. Didn’t all people have to be circumcised and become practicing Jews? Certain Judaizers came from

Jerusalem and began to teach that unless a person was circumcised according to the custom of Moses, he could not be saved. Perhaps these Judaizers gave lip service to the gospel. Perhaps their message was something like, “Yes, you must believe in Christ. But you must also become a Jew. You must be circumcised and practice the Old Testament law if you want to be truly saved.” In essence, these Judaizers were adding something to the gospel. They grudgingly acknowledged that salvation is through faith in Christ, but something else is required: circumcision and obedience to the law. That “something else” changes the gospel. Paul and Barnabas, having returned from the first missionary journey, were aghast. These usurpers who had come down from Judea were undermining the gospel. The gospel cannot be at the same time “Believe and be saved” and “Believe, be circumcised and keep the law and be saved.” The first is true, the second is false. The first is the gospel, the second is a perversion of the gospel. To believe a perversion of the gospel is to perish eternally. Salvation is by Christ alone. Christ saves sinners. The gospel is about what Christ has done. It is not about what the sinner does. The gospel is that Christ saves sinners. The gospel is not that Christ helps sinners save themselves. Christ saves sinners. “By one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).

When Paul and Barnabas heard the Judaizers’ message, they knew they had to speak up. We read that they had “no small dissension and dispute with them.” All God’s people have a responsibility to promote the peace, purity and unity of the church. None of these elements can be sacrificed in order to achieve the others. Believers must endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). But we must also endeavor to live exemplary lives “in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). Peace and unity are important, but so is purity. The church must be sanctified and cleansed with the washing of water by the word. Christ’s desire is “that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26–27). When Christ finishes sanctifying his church at the end of this age, it is going to have perfect peace, purity and unity. Its beauty will be glorious.

When Paul and Barnabas heard the message of the Judaizers, they became agitated. They had “no small dissension and dispute” with the false teachers. The word translated “dissension” means *strife* or *discord*. When strife and discord are entered into for their own sake, it is sin. But to paper over gross errors and pretend they are of no consequence is to deny the gospel. The gospel must not only be declared; it must also be defended. When Paul and Barnabas began to dispute the false teachers, we can imagine some in the crowd saying to them, “Calm down, men. These teachers have traveled all the way from Jerusalem. We should listen to them, hear them out. Hey, aren’t they saying we have to believe in Jesus? What’s

all the fuss about?” But to *add* to the gospel is to destroy the gospel. Either Christ saves sinners or he does not. If Christ saves sinners, then we who flee to him are saved. But if salvation is by our own work, then we never can be assured that we have done enough to merit salvation. We can never have assurance that we have eternal life.

So how to determine who was right and who was wrong? Was it Paul and Barnabas, or was it the Judaizers, with their message of circumcision and keeping the law of Moses? The church at Antioch “determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.”

There are two factors at work in our text this morning: the *content* of the truth, and the *manner* in which the truth is determined. Heretofore the church had taught that salvation was through Christ alone. This was the truth that was to be defended. Yet how could the church authoritatively declare that this was the truth? Through a council of the elders at Jerusalem. We’ll get into this more later, but for now, consider, how did this idea of the elders of the church debating the issue and rendering a judgment in accord with Holy Scripture arise? The pattern of going up to the elders was a long-established pattern. It is implied by the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and mother.” Our fathers in the faith are to be honored. “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (Heb. 13:7).

In our Old Testament text God instructs Moses to meet with him at the top of Mount Sinai. Moses had been serving as judge over Israel. He had spent a good deal of time doing this work. When, in Exodus 18, Moses’ father-in-law Jethro had observed him sitting to judge the people from morning till evening, he had advised him, “The thing that you do is not good. Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself.” Heeding his father-in-law’s advice, Moses chose able men, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, hundreds, fifties, tens. These men judged the small cases. The hard cases they brought to Moses. This is the biblical basis for rule by elders. So when Moses was departing to go up Sinai to meet with God, he knew that he would be away for a time (we know in retrospect that he was up on Sinai forty days and forty nights). Who would adjudicate the difficult cases in his absence? As he departed, he reminded the elders of Israel that Aaron and Hur would be remaining behind. If anyone had a difficulty (KJV: *matter*; ESV: *dispute*, NASB: *legal matter*), and it could not be resolved by the elders, then it could be appealed to Aaron and Hur in Moses’ absence.

The Bible teaches that we are all responsible to honor those in authority over us, whether in the family, the church or the civil government. Scripture teaches, “You

shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man [זָקֵן, *elder*], and fear your God: I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:32). In the church, the elders who rule well are to be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17). Elders are not infallible, so the church’s obedience is not to any one elder as having absolute authority, but to the plurality of the elders faithfully ministering the word of God.

The Psalmist says, “I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients [זְקֵנִים, *elders*], because I keep Your precepts” (Ps. 119:99–100). The theme Psalm 119 is the superiority of God’s written Word. The point is that the student who knows his Bible has an edge over a teacher who does not know his Bible! All true knowledge is derived from and in conformity with God’s written Word. Whatever is contrary to Scripture is false, no matter how many academic degrees the person holding the contrary opinion might have. A young person who is well grounded in the Scriptures has a superior understanding than a college professor who denies the truth of Scripture. Paul warned young Timothy of “the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20). But if teacher and student both love and submit to God’s word, then ordinarily it is the teacher who possesses better understanding. In the ancient Middle East maturity and understanding were greatly valued. How different from our own age; our world is attracted to the young and hip.

In a fallen, broken world, disputes are sure to come, but as God’s people learn how to resolve those disputes in a God-honoring manner, the faith will be defined more perfectly and Christ will be glorified. Nobody likes disputes, nobody likes problems and difficulties, but as the church deals with these matters in a biblically-faithful manner, the church’s understanding of biblical truth is sharpened, and the church benefits.

Two weeks ago we made the point that Paul and Barnabas went about Asia Minor planting presbyterian churches (small *p*). The missionary duo returned to the communities where they had evangelized, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and warning them that “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” But this was not all. We read also that they “appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). The word for “appointed” is literally *to elect by the raising of the hand*. Paul and Barnabas patiently instructed candidates for elder and recommended them to the people. But the people had a role to play. Their elders were to be godly men with an ability to teach the Scriptures. The people would submit to their spiritual leadership. Elders were never imposed upon the people. They were to evaluate the elder candidates and indicate their willingness to submit to them by the raising of their hands. Clearly, Paul and Barnabas’s work established the pattern of churches being

governed by a plurality of elders. Yet many churches today are not governed by a plurality of elders. The Bible says, “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17). A church ruled by a single man is a monstrosity; it is a usurping of the authority belonging solely to Jesus Christ. Church government must be brought into conformity with Scripture.

See how this plays out in our New Testament text. Certain men come down from Judea and begin to teach that unless a person is circumcised according to the law of Moses, he cannot be saved. Essentially, what they were saying was that faith in Christ and his finished work on the cross are insufficient to save, that man must be saved by his own efforts—submitting to the ordinance of circumcision and keeping the law of Moses.

The gospel itself was at stake. Years later, when the Philippian jailer would ask, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul and Barnabas would reply, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” Were they omitting a critical element of the gospel? Must the sinner contribute to his salvation? No! All of us are by nature are spiritually dead sinners. We can do nothing to merit salvation. We have broken God’s holy law. We have failed to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We have failed to love our neighbor. We stand condemned before the holy God with whom we have to do. The gospel comes to us and we hear its sweet message, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Is this really the inspired gospel? Is this truly enough to save an undeserving sinner? Yes, it is. The gospel is about what Christ has done to save us: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4). The gospel is about what Christ has done, it is not about what we do to earn our own salvation. We must never add anything to the gospel. Adding anything to the gospel destroys the gospel, it renders it no gospel at all. The gospel is not, “you can earn your own salvation.” It is not even “you can earn your own salvation with Christ’s help.” It is simply “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” Now it is true that a genuine faith will show itself by a life of good works. Good works are the fruit and evidence of a true and living faith. But our good works do not save us—*Christ* saves us. By faith, our sins are laid on him, and his perfect righteousness is credited to us. This is the gospel that Paul and Barnabas fought for. This is the faith that was once delivered to the saints.

Have you put your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus? Have you acknowledged that you are a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? If so, you are invited to confess your faith before the church. You are invited to become part of the covenant people. If you have never been baptized, you are invited to be baptized, symbolizing that your sins have been washed away by the blood of

Christ, and that you have become part of the worshiping community, the covenant people. This is the gospel. It is offered to all who humbly repent of their sins and turn to Christ.

In our Acts text, Paul and Barnabas are disturbed by the Judaizers' distortion of the gospel. The church at Antioch agrees; they determine to send Paul, Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to decide the question. But Paul and Barnabas are indomitable evangelists. As they travel to Jerusalem, they stop at churches along the way, reporting on the conversion of the Gentiles and encouraging the saints. When they arrive in Jerusalem "they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders" (Acts 15:4). The word "received" is important; it indicates that Paul and Barnabas's ministry had the stamp of approval of the Jerusalem church—the mother church, so to speak—and of the apostles and elders of the church there. (Yes, even the Jerusalem church had elders.) Paul and Barnabas reported all things that God had done with them. But there were some of the sect of the Pharisees who were not happy. They had not yet learned that salvation is by grace, through faith alone; they wanted to add something to the gospel, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." Later, Paul will describe them with the words "brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage)" (Gal. 2:4). To depart from the pure gospel of the grace of God in Christ is to bring God's people into bondage. By that standard, the "gospel" that is preached in many churches today holds multitudes in bondage. To tell people that they cannot know that they are saved by the finished work of Christ, that they must attend the Roman mass and receive the wafer that has been magically turned into the very body and blood of Christ, that they must do works of penitence, that there is merit in repeating the rosary, that they must receive the last rites or be in danger of hell-fire. Or in some Protestant churches to be told that they must walk the aisle and pray the sinner's prayer, that they must dress a certain way, have daily devotions, avoid certain worldly amusements and maybe even vote a certain way. Brothers and sisters, legalism doesn't save; only Christ can save!

Conflicts over doctrine are not pretty, but they are sometimes necessary to defend the gospel, and the church can come out stronger. In like manner, conflicts, disagreements and struggles that we all go through can purify and strengthen us. The apostle Paul goes so far as to say, "We also *glory* in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Rom. 5:3–4).

The other day I saw something written by my nephew's wife, reflecting on their sixteen years of marriage. She writes, "What a ride! We have had some mountaintop moments and some hellishly desperate moments. I wondered for a moment if that was too dramatic a statement, but it isn't. People would often tell

me early in our marriage that I should write a book about our first tumultuous years. But, you see, our story wouldn't fit into the expected narrative, especially not the narrative that is promoted on those cute little Christian bookstore displays. I never had some bits of wisdom or a one-two-three process to share as a result of my experiences. No, when I say desperate I mean moments too emotionally and physically and mentally broken to even reach for one of those Christian bookstore books, as helpful as they might be. No, desperation in our brokenness both within and without has caused us to wonder many times if we were going to make it. And guess what? *I see now what a gift those desperate moments have been to us.* In fact, I think coming repeatedly face to face with our own desperation has been the best gift our marriage could have ever received. Why? Because that's when we have had to rely on God, the one who holds the whole universe together (Col. 1:17), that's when he had to do it all for us and we couldn't deny for a moment that it had nothing to do with us. *That's when we understood the gospel all over again."*

The church must steadfastly resist those who would pervert the gospel. The gospel is our only hope. If we add anything to the gospel, we destroy it, to the dishonor of Christ. Brothers and sisters, let us hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints. Amen.