

The State of Evangelicalism, Part 2

Selected Scriptures

There's a tendency, I think, in all of us to think that we might be clever enough to be really winsome and influential so that we can figure out some ingenious way to minimize the offense of the cross without corrupting the Gospel.

Most of us, I believe, have probably entertained thoughts like that. And it's a desire we need to recognize as sinful and mortify it. And Paul was emphatic about that. 1 Thessalonians 2:4, "We've been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel, so we speak not to please men but to please God." The way to do that, he told Timothy is not to revise and embellish, but to "guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge." He's talking about academic experts who think they have a better way to understand and explain it.

He says, "By professing that some have swerved from the faith." That's 1 Timothy 6 verses 20 and 21. And I've been watching the, the drift of the pragmatic seeker-sensitive movement for at least four decades now. That the idea that we can, we can make unbelievers more comfortable with the message if we tweak in this way or that.

And here's the conclusion I've come to after four decades of watching this. We need to beware whenever someone blithely insists that radical contextualization poses little or no danger, that it's possible to be cool and culturally engaged and wildly popular and still be doctrinally sound all at the same time. People who have the philosophy have always ended up twisting or de-fanging the Gospel even if they insist they never would that intentionally. It always happens if your main aim is to be stylish in the eyes of worldly people and win them through your own popularity. You've already compromised the Gospel.

And if you think the impression you make on people is the key to winning them for Christ, what they think of you is really the key of whether they're going to respond or not. If that's what you think, then you are guilty of preaching yourself rather

than Christ Jesus as Lord by definition. You more concerned of what they think of you than what they think of Christ.

The Gospel is deliberately unsophisticated. That's God's design. The Gospel lands a death blow to human pride. You try to spice it up or tone it down and you will inevitably corrupt it. And in fact, according to 2 Corinthians 11:3, one of the main strategies of Satan is to try to draw us away from the simplicity that is in Christ. And there are three common desires that tend to draw people subtly away from the faithful proclamation of the unvarnished Gospel. Three pitfalls. Three potholes you need to steer around that are in this text.

Paul alludes to all three of them here. And I want to point them out to you from our text. If you've been waiting to write something down, I'll give you a simple outline. Three points. The first is, the first thing to avoid, an itch for something new. An itch for something new. This is a malignant tendency that has afflicted the America evangelical movement for at least 250 years. It's the reason why evangelicals today move from one fad to another with such breathtaking speed and ease.

Now I, you know I think I've made that point in our Shepherds' Conferences at Grace Church every year for the past 20 years. The people we minister to, and even some pastors who we might respect for much of their ministry, we're too easily corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. Because there's an incredible amount of pressure coming from within the church today, coming from people who insist that we can't effectively reach our generation or the next generation unless we follow the styles of popular culture, adapt our ministry to that.

It's why so many pastors are exegeting movies rather than preaching the Word. But whatever is currently in fashion is soon going to go out of fashion. And not only has it become virtually impossible to stay up to speed with all the changing styles, we also know from experience that today's fads will be the brunt of tomorrow's jokes. You know, for decades American evangelicals have blindly run after a seemingly endless parade of shallow fads.

In 1887, Spurgeon's fellow pastor and close friend, Robert Schindler wrote the first article of *The Down Grade controversy*. And in that article, he said this, "In theology that which is true is not new. And that which is new is not true." I love that saying. And it's exactly right if you accept the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. If you believe that Scripture alone contains everything necessary for God's glory, man's redemption, faith, and life and that nothing is to be added to what Scripture says, then you have to acknowledge the truth of that little aphorism. "Any new is not true and whatever's true is not new."

That's Paul's whole point about the Gospel. Notice his words. I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you into the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." And then in verse 9 just before he gives the curse a second time, he says, "As we have said before, so I now say again." I said earlier. When did he say it again? Just the verse before.

I don't think he means only that either. He, he wouldn't need to say anything that was that obvious. I think he's reminding them that while he was with them in person from the

time he founded their churches, he was already warning them not to listen if anybody came teaching a different message. But the speed with which the Galatians turned away from Paul's clear and simple Gospel in search of something new was appalling and breathtaking.

And again, this is a common tendency. It requires firm determination to remain steadfast and immoveable. Someone not deeply anchored in the truth of God's Word will always risk being tossed to and fro by, by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning and by craftiness and deceitful schemes. And that's what was happening to the Galatians. Something new had caught their fancy. And lacking deep enough roots, they were easily swayed by the sheer novelty of it. It sounded fresh and exciting.

And that same tendency is what you see on a global scale that's driving all of culture today in the church, and in the world as well, like the people in Athens, according to Acts 17:21, people spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. The internet feeds us with nonstop lists

of what is currently trending. And that feeds this lust for novelty.

And the antidote to that is the unchanging Gospel. There is only one true Gospel. And it can't be improved on. If someone tells you that we need to craft a new and more relevant message to reach the next generation, let him be accursed. You know the Christian blogosphere right now is full of people who self-identify as evangelicals, but they have no firm commitment to the truth that Christ gave himself to deliver from this present evil age, according to the will of God our Father.

They are so enthralled with proclaiming everything from social justice to cultural engagement, as if the goal of the Gospel was to immerse us in the values and the jargon and the entertainment of this present evil age, rather than to deliver us from it. Some people would rather talk about almost anything rather than the great themes of the Gospel. Remember, Jesus said, "When the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."

And yet in countless pulpits today, those are the three topics that are most assiduously avoided. They are omitted in the name of relevance. You can't talk about sin and judgment and righteousness. That just sounds old fashioned and it's not what people want to hear. And that motion away from the simplicity of the Gospel is the inevitable result when church leaders allow an itch for something new to influence their message or their ministry philosophy. In fact, I would say that is the chief besetting sin of 21st Century evangelicalism.

Here's a second fleshly lust that causes Christian leaders and Christian institutions to veer off message. Number two if you're taking notes, an urge to modify. An urge to modify, verse 7, "There are some who trouble you and want to distort the Gospel of Christ." And Paul makes it clear that these false teachers had a bad motive born out of an evil desire, even if they didn't consciously realize that.

They had a premediated plan to warp and wrench the Gospel out of shape. And again, I don't think he necessarily means to suggest that these guys were self-consciously knowingly in league with Satan, seeking to be sinister or knowingly

conspiring to do evil out of sheer hatred for Christ. Like I said earlier, they most likely did not think of themselves as enemies of Christ.

But in their self-deceived and spiritually darkened minds, they probably believed that they were improving the Gospel, making it more harmonious with Moses' Law. Removing a serious stigma from the Gentile converts. Fixing what they saw as a glaring deficiency in Paul's teaching. And their problem was not that they had a itch for something new. That love of novelty may have been what the Galatians susceptible to their teaching.

But the circumcision party actually had a different agenda. They wanted to preserve elements of the old covenant that were being brought to an end, according to the book of Hebrews. And so they had this urge to modify the Gospel, perhaps to devise a message that would be more acceptable to their own priests and scholars, more comfortable to them because they were Pharisees, and this is what they were used to. They wanted something more sophisticated than the simple sounding message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. They wanted a

religion that was more polished, more ornate, more congenial to human pride.

And this urge to modify is, I would say, even today, the bane of many people who live in the academic realm. You know, nowadays if a seminary student writes a dissertation on any of the central doctrines of the Gospel, he's very likely going to be encouraged, or even formally required to concoct a novel point of view or make an argument that nobody has ever proposed before against some magisterial principle. In much of the academic world it seems the prevailing philosophy is if it's not new, it's of no value.

And so ostensibly, evangelical scholars constantly spin out new perspectives and other modified doctrines so that even the most basic long established principles of trinitarianism are now being recklessly revamped and reimaged with a fair amount of frequency. That's the fruit of the post-modern idea. Nothing is certain. Nothing is settled. Nothing is really authoritative. Anything and everything nowadays can be reimaged and refashioned, tweaked and twisted.

And even supposedly conservative and evangelical scholars sometimes seem to be infected with a relentless urge to modify their own confessions of faith. Even the circumcision party were not that foolhardy. The truth is the modification they made to Paul's Gospel seems rather insignificant by today's standard. They didn't question the authority of Scripture. They didn't deny the imputation of Christ's righteousness. They don't directly attack the concept of substitutionary atonement.

What they proposed basically boils down to a slight change in the *Ordo Salutis*, the order of salvation steps. They thought that it was necessary for some kind of good work to precede justification. You can't be declared righteous until you actually do this righteous thing. And Paul taught, no, that good works flow from saving faith. Not vice versa. Good works don't establish saving faith, they flow from it.

And then obedience follows as the inevitable fruit of authentic faith. It's the fruit, not the root. And so Paul stressed that faith alone is the instrument by which sinners lay

hold of justification. Romans 4:5 again. I read it earlier. "To the one who does not work but believes his faith is counted for righteousness." So justification comes first, then works. That's the Pauline doctrine.

The circumcision party said, no, no, no, a minimal expression of obedience, that, that first act of compliance with the ceremonial law is a necessary prerequisite for justification. You can't be justified until you're circumcised. Obedience first, then justification. Now, think about this, both sides agrees that faith without works is dead. Both sides believed that faith and obedience will always accompany genuine salvation. But they disagreed about the order; which comes first, the faith or the obedience? That was their disagreement.

By the standards that are in vogue today, that might sound like a difference that's too small to worry about. Why would we fight over that? Here's what J. Gresham Machen said about that very thing. He wrote this, quote "About many things that Judaizes were in perfect agreement with Paul. The Judaizes believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. They believed that faith in

Christ was necessary to salvation. From the modern point of view, the difference between them and Paul would have seemed to be very slight.

“Surely Paul could have made common cause with the teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him, surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity. Let’s not fight about this. Let’s get along. However,” Machen says, and these are his exact words, “Paul did nothing of the kind. And only because he did nothing of the kind, does the Christian church exist today. What seemed like such a small point of disagreement was in fact a wholesale attack on the central point of Gospel truth. The circumcision party made justification hinge on a work that would be done by the sinner.”

And that simple refinement destroys the whole Gospel message. And that happens every time someone decides that the Gospel isn’t sophisticated enough or it’s not scholarly enough or it’s not rigorous enough. People need, need to tweak the Gospel because they just think it’s too simple. And when they do that, they always, always inject some kind of works into the formula. Perhaps it’s something as insignificant as walking the

aisle or saying a formulaic prayer or being baptized or following some other simple ceremonial requirement.

But to make any kind of human work instrumental in justification is to destroy the doctrine completely. Genuine saving the faith is the natural expression of God's regenerating work. God's work. He's the one who opens spiritually blind eyes and grants repentance, Scripture says. And he awakens faith. Regeneration and faith and repentance, these are all wrought by God's grace. They're not human works.

As Paul says in Ephesians 2 verses 8 and 9, "By grace you've been saved through faith," that is every facet of this salvation is not your doing, "it is the gift of God, not as a result of works so that no one can boast." That's the essential tentative Gospel truth that the Judaizers' tiny little modification totally nullified because they eliminated the fundamental truth that no element of our salvation is the fruit of a human work. And when it comes to the Gospel, the urge to modify is damnably sinful because it destroys the whole Gospel.

So let's review. Here are the sinful attitudes that give rise to a corrupted Gospel. Number one, a, an itch for something new, number two, an urge to modify, and now third and finally, I'll close with this, a craving for the applause of men. Huge pitfall. A craving for the applause of men.

Verse 10 Paul says, "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." Now Paul could have pleased a whole of people if he had simply acquiesced to the circumcision party. There would have been a great celebration of unity. Or even if he had just ignored their error the way Peter seemed inclined to do.

A quest for human approval was quite clearly the dominant motive of the circumcision party in the first place. They no doubt thought of their work as a shrewd public relations campaign. They were trying to remove something the elite rulers of Judaism found absolutely offensive about the Gospel message. The Jewish leaders were saying, the, the unsaved Jewish leaders, looking at the church and saying, "Look at all these uncircumcised Gentiles that they fellowship with. This is an

unclean religion. It's offensive." They were trying to remove that offense and make people happy.

Paul himself, more or less, acknowledges all of that. He says in Galatians 5:11 that by preaching circumcision, he himself could avoid persecution. He could remove the offense of the cross if he went along with this. The circumcision party, it probably convinced themselves that they were doing Christ a favor by making the message more appealing to large groups of people. What they were really doing was seeking the approval of men rather than God.

And Paul says in verse 10, you can't do that and think that you're serving Christ. He knew very well what it was like to crave the applause of men because that was the dominant goal of Paul's life before he was converted on the road to Damascus. He persecuted the church at the behest of the Sanhedrin because it gave him status with Judaism's most powerful ruling body. And according to Jesus, that was the central error of Pharisaism. Matthew 23:5, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others."

Multitudes in Israel rejected Christ and remained in unbelief for that very same reason. John 12:43, "They loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." There is no greater impediment to genuine faith than that. Jesus said 5:44, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"

Or Luke 16:15, "For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." A sinful craving for the applause of men can produce a showy brand of legalism like that of the Pharisees. But not always. In the modern academic world, it makes people tend to stifle their conviction and overly nuance every important point of truth so in the end, all truth lies hidden under a mountain of stammering qualifications and vague uncertainties. That is the problem is academic evangelicalism today. They don't want anything to be clear and clearcut.

But you cannot faithfully proclaim the Gospel if you mince words. You won't be clear and definitive if you're terrified about getting a negative reaction. And you're not preaching the

true Gospel at all if you've modified the message in a way that seeks the appreciation and approval of your listeners.

Listen to Paul, 1 Corinthians 1:22, "Jews demand signs and Greeks demand wisdom." Now if Paul had a ministry philosophy that resembled the strategy of practically every church growth guru who is in business today, the way ahead for him would be clear. He certainly had the ability to produce the signs of a true apostle, signs and wonders and mighty works. And furthermore, he was the most highly educated of all the apostles, able to hold his own with the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus.

Paul could have contextualized the Gospel in the language of Greek wisdom with all of the trappings of philosophical soph, sophistication. He had the skill to do that. But instead, here's what he said, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." So the Jews demand a sign, but we give them a stumbling block. The Greeks demand wisdom and instead we give them foolishness.

Rather than catering to the Jewish demand for a sign, he gave them a stumbling block. Rather than answering the Greeks' demand for erudition and wisdom, he preached a message that he knew would sound like foolishness to them. Understand, Paul didn't have some perverse agenda to frustrate his listeners. He went on to explain that that strategy and that message is God's choice so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

The Gospel simply does not cater to human pride and when we're tempted to tone it down or dress it up, we need to remember that. There is only one Gospel. And it's too easy to nullify it, or modify it, or embellish it in order to fulfill some fleshly and self-aggrandizing desire. We need to guard carefully against all of those tendencies as Paul did. And the earthly cost of faithful ministry might seem high, but I promise you, the glory of heaven makes it all worthwhile. Let's pray.

Father, we confess that our hearts are filled with less than noble motives. We love earthly novelties when our minds and hearts should be fixed on that which is eternal and immutable, timeless. We find it too easy to edit and amend and over

contextualize the message that you've commissioned us to proclaim in all of its simplicity. And just like the Pharisees, we have a sinful tendency to love the applause of man and forget that your verdict on our lives is really the only one that counts.

We're grateful that we are hid with Christ and enveloped in the richness of your life and your blessings. And may we be faithful messengers of the Gospel no matter what the cost, regardless of the response. May Christ be honored in our witness and in our lives. We pray in his name, amen.