

Another Gospel?

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on June 1, 1986. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-42; Psalm 100; *Galatians 1:1-10*; Luke 7:1-10.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever felt like telling someone to go to hell? You can tell a lot about a person's character by listening to the language they use. Certainly someone who has the Spirit of Christ doesn't lightly tell somebody to go to hell. That's why it's so surprising and out of character to hear St Paul tell a group of people to go to hell. He wrote, "If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." That means, "Let him go to hell! Let him suffer the divine curse in hell! May he be damned!"

Now Paul was a 'Christ-intoxicated' man. He once wrote, "I've suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I might know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." Paul's whole purpose in life was to be Christlike. So it seems a little out of character to hear Paul tell anybody to go to hell. How could any Christlike person say something like that?

But a Christlike person is someone who acts like Christ, who loves the things that Christ loves and who also gets angry with the things that angered Christ. There's one place in the Gospel according to St Matthew where we see Christ really angry. That incident helps me understand Paul's anger. Jesus was talking to the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, the authorized interpreters of the O.T. Law. Jesus said these men 'tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry'. He was talking about Jewish ceremonial laws. He says, "Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You lock the door to the Kingdom of heaven in

people's faces, but you yourselves don't go in, nor do you allow in those who are trying to enter." He was saying that when they require converts to keep all these ceremonial laws they actually lock the door to the Kingdom of God for them. He continues with a scathing attack on these men and concludes by saying, "You snakes and sons of snakes! *How do you expect to escape from being condemned to hell?*"

The people that Paul told to go to hell were the same kind of people that Jesus ~~expected to go to~~ ^{warned about} hell. These people were really preaching a gospel contrary to all that Jesus said and did. They were saying that you can't come to Christ just as you are. If you want to come to God you *first* have to clean up your act. Become a Jew! If you're a man, get circumcised! Don't eat bacon! Don't touch lepers! Don't teach women! Don't heal on the Sabbath! Don't associate with tax collectors or gentiles! Don't sit at the Lord's Table with gentiles ~~unless~~ unless they become like us Jewish Christians.

What if these people who preached another Gospel had won the day instead of Paul? What if Paul had never written this letter? Think of the consequences. *For one thing* women would be second class citizens in the church. We wouldn't have the benefit of Ann Bailey leading one of the adult Sunday School classes. There would be no women serving at the Lord's Table. The leadership in the church would be totally male. That other gospel, the gospel of Jewish legalism forbid that sort of thing.

Secondly, some of us here this morning would probably be slaves sitting in the balcony. The world would still be divided between slave and free. But the good news of Jesus Christ is that he came to liberate us all. Paul's letter to the Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian freedom. His letter unleashed a new spirit of freedom in the world that

still has not run its course.

Thirdly, if Paul had not written these harsh words probably *none* of us would be here this morning. I don't think any of us are Jews. None of us keep a Kosher house. If Paul's opponents had won the day Christianity would've remained a small sect within Judaism. The door of the Kingdom of God would be locked to the vast majority of people. Men and women would still be trying to meet the Law's demand in order to feel right with God. So you can see why Paul wished anyone would go to hell that put stumbling blocks in the way of people coming to God through Christ. This is deadly serious business with Paul. The destinies of men and women, the destiny of the whole world was at stake.

The Gospel that Paul preached is still truly good news. He got that gospel from Jesus Christ himself. He didn't think it up himself. He didn't get it from others. The Gospel he preached accurately reflected the attitude of the Jesus with see in the Gospels eating and drinking with sinners. The gospel is the good news of what God has already done for the whole world, through Christ. Christ gave himself for our sins according to the will of our God and Father.

But that *other Gospel* is still with us. It crops up in every generation. I've spoken to men and women who've dropped out of church for all sorts of reasons. Maybe they've gotten a divorce. Maybe they've become an alcoholic. Maybe they've discovered that they're gay. Maybe they just aren't sure what they believe anymore. They think the church is only for people who are absolutely certain about all they believe. It's only for the perfect. If that's what they think they've listened to another gospel, not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The church is not a hotel for saints but a hospital for sinners. The church contains the fellowship of sinner saints

who trust that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age.

Paul's opponents said, "Get rid of your sins and then come to Church". Now of course Jesus doesn't want us to wallow in the pig-pen. But he doesn't want us to wait until we clean up our act before we enter the community of his followers. Paul preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ which said,

Come ye sinners, poor and needy,
Bruised and broken by the fall;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pardoning love for all.

Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All that He requires of sinners
Is to turn and trust in Him.

Once in Edinburgh, Scotland the Revd Dr John Duncan was celebrating Holy Communion. He noticed a young woman near the front of the sanctuary with tears in her eyes. When offered the bread and the wine she she shook her head ^{"No"} and refused to take communion. When Dr Duncan saw this he came from behind the communion table, walked down the aisle, took the bread from the elder and thrust it into her face saying, "Take it lassie, it's for sinners."

The Bread and the Wine this morning are for sinners only. We aren't perfect. We are forgiven. And in this Sacrament Jesus is present to assure us of his love and acceptance. Take the bread! Take the cup! Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we give you praise and thanks for this Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of your beloved Son Jesus Christ, the pledge of our redemption; and we pray that it may bring us forgiveness of our sins, strength in our weakness, and everlasting salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.