

## The State of Evangelicalism

### Selected Scriptures

September 24, 2021

Thank you, Travis. I think he oversold me. Travis assigned me the subject, the state of Evangelicalism, and I thought, Well there are two ways I can deal with this. I, I could, one would be to do a lecture where I list and analyze some of the popular fads and trends in the evangelical movement. Thankfully, Travis covered some of that in his message. And if you follow me on Twitter or listen to my Shepherds' Conference messages, or whatever, you'll get more than enough of that kind of critical perspective from me.

I have been, I think, outspokenly critical of practically every evangelical fad that has come along since the Prayer of Jabez, 20 that was 20 years ago. Actually, I've been critical longer than that. So let me just say this about the state of evangelicalism. The evangelical movement is not in good shape.

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So the other approach that occurred to me was I, I could simply point out the central issue with all of these bad trends and address that from a passage of Scripture and that's what I want to do.

So it'll be, well, more positive than Travis' message anyway. He mentioned that the word, evangelical, has built into it a reference to the Gospel. *Euangelion*, that's the Greek word for gospel, *Euangelion*. And by the original meaning of the word, evangelicals are Christians whose identity is defined by their commitment to the Gospel message and the essential doctrines that are related to the Gospel, that is the classic definition of what it means to be an evangelical.

Evangelicalism was not founded as a political party or even a quasi-denomination. It's just what you were if a true understanding of the Gospel was the centerpiece of all of your doctrinal convictions. But the American Evangelical movement in my lifetime at least, led by, you know, big organizations. Evan, Evangelical institutions, groups like the National Association

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of Evangelicals and Christianity Today Magazine, the Gospel Coalition, and so on.

That movement, which is very broad and diverse, has for a long time, had a malignant tendency to tinker with how they define the Gospel. Christianity Today Magazine, for example, always seemed to think that if they could just expand the boundaries of the evangelical movement, they would increase the size of their constituency. And so over the years, they've just become broader and broader and moved further, further away, further, and further away from a precise definition of the Gospel. I'm not sure they're even capable of that today.

So within the evan, the visible evangelical movement, there have been a lot of efforts over the past 30 years or so to tweak or modify or contextualize the Gospel in order to make it more palatable to the cultural moment. I've often said that this is both the defining feature and the Achilles' heel of contemporary evangelicals. Namely, they crave popular acceptance. They desperately want to be perceived as cool, rather than unstylish.

And that, of course, is unbiblical and it is a fatal flaw in the visible movement.

Because what it means in practice is that self-styled evangelicals, most people who would call themselves evangelicals today, have so twisted and mangled the Gospel that what they end with is a made-up religious agenda that they might call the gospel, but it's not the Gospel at all. And that is true not only of say the Charismatic Prosperity gospel. It's also true of the Social Justice movement and their quest to redeem the Gospel, or redeem the culture, rather, in the name of the Gospel. And in fact, that movement, the idea that we can redeem this culture and bring about justice on the earth used to be called the social gospel, but again, it's not the Gospel at all.

Christianity is not about shaping the culture. The Gospel message, according to Scripture, is about repentance and remission of sins. Those are the exact words Jesus himself uses in Luke 24:47. If we preach the truth about repentance and remission of sins and, and people respond to that, that will

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have an effect on the culture. But cultural reconstruction is not the goal we are aiming for with the Gospel message.

God is calling out a people for his name, that's what he's doing. Calling out a people. Not trying to reform culture. If you try to blend the social justice agenda with the Gospel message you actually end up with a different gospel with different aims and different goals. And so the Gospel as Scripture describes it is all about what Christ has done to redeem sinners. It's as simple as that. Anything you do to amend or edit the Gospel will end up making the message, at least in part, into a message about what sinners must do in order to be redeemed.

So it flips the message on its head. Either that or you will end up with a message about what Christians must do to redeem the culture. Or save the world from injustice or whatever. And of course that is the trend lately. The Social Justice movement has changed the whole focus of the Gospel message and church leaders are now, you listen to them, you'll notice they are obsessed with things like systemic racism and white privilege and other

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emotionally charged points of ethnic politics, rather than proclaiming repentance and remission of sins, which is what Jesus said the Gospel is.

Now other speakers this weekend, I'm sure, are going to be showing in detail how that has happened, but what I want to do in this hour is help you understand how dangerous it is to try to rework or reinvent the Gospel. I want to look at why people are so prone to do that because it's been a running theme throughout church history all the way back to the apostolic era. People trying to remake or reinvent the Gospel, reformulate it so that it's more palatable, or more, more to the tastes of the people we're trying to reach.

And I want to look at why people are so prone to do that. And I want to think through those issues with you in the context of Galatians chapter 1. Galatians 1. You can turn there. And, by the way, this is the part that's still kind of negative. This is where Paul uses the strongest language he ever employed to curse anyone who thinks it's a good idea to propose an alternative Gospel.

Galatians 1. And in this chapter, verses 6-10, are often glossed over and ignored. But this is an extremely important passage and it's worthy of our special attention. So Galatians 1. Let's look at those, at those two verses, verses 6 and 7 where he gives this curse. And I want to see them in their context. Now you're aware, I'm sure, that this epistle was written to a group of churches. Galatia was not a city like Corinth or Philippi. Galatia was a region that dominated the central plateau of Asia minor. That's the large Turkish Peninsula.

And Paul's first missionary journey took him through the Galatian region. That's where he himself was from. So this is his sort of home region and in Acts 13 and 14, you have the description of his first missionary journey through there. And so these Galatian churches were churches that, for the most part, Paul himself founded early in his ministry. And they were filled with people who had first heard the Gospel from Paul himself. He was their spiritual father.

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So our text is understandably full of passion, fatherly passion. But the mood here is not exactly warm and friendly. He's, it's like an angry father. And from the opening verses, he writes with the kind of tone my dad used to use at me. It's a sort of abrupt tone. And it sets this letter apart, a, a little bit like an indigent father scolding his children. This is different from all of Paul's other epistles. And I'll show you that as we go through it.

Look at it. Galatians 1, verse 6. He writes, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but that there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." He's writing this epistle to confront the threat of some false teachers who had come in behind him and they were telling the Galatian churches and that Gentile converts in particular in Galatia, that if they wanted to be real Christians, they first needed to become proselytes to Judaism.



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This was the gist of their error. They insisted that believers are required to follow the Old Testament ceremonial law, starting with circumcision. Like most who tinker with the Gospel today, they didn't overtly deny any of the essential doctrines of the Gospel. They just wanted to add something that they thought was good, then sort of tack that onto the Gospel message. A good work.

And in their case, it was the ceremonial sign of God's covenant with Israel. So it's even a biblical good work. Circumcision. They turned the Gospel into a message that starts, then, with some ceremonial work that the sinner had to do in order to be redeemed. And that flatly contradicted what Paul had preached to the Galatians because, as you know from Paul's epistles, he always stressed that faith is the only instrument of justification. No works at all.

Romans 4, verse 5, "To the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." No good work and least of all, circumcision, is a prerequisite to our justification. That was the centerpiece of

Pauline doctrine. That's what he always defended. It's what he always preached. And it's actually a theme in every single one of his epistles.

And Paul is very specific about how important this is in Romans 4, verses 9-11. He actually goes back to the book of Genesis and traces the chronology from Genesis 15 to Genesis 17 in order to show that Abraham was declared righteous. "He believed God and it was counted for him righteousness" years, several years before Abraham was circumcised. "He received the sign of circumcision," this is verse 11 from Romans 4, "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he already had by faith."

But these false teachers are saying, "No, no, Paul is only giving you part of the gospel message. It's an incomplete gospel." They said, "Faith is important. It's essential. You have to believe, but the works demanded by the law are also necessary before you can be justified." And in fact, this was a persistent error in the early church. Acts 15 deals with the same heretics, or the same kind of heretics, anyway.

So this same false doctrine, Acts 15, is what the first church council was called to evaluate. And they ended up condemning this heresy. And in Acts 15 we learn that the men behind this heresy were some Pharisees who professed faith in Christ. They had apparently converted, but obviously not completely. Acts 15 verse 5 refers to them as "some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees."

So these guys had dragged their pharisaical legalism into the church, Acts 15:1 says they were teaching the Gentile brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." So there it is. That's the same error, just like some of the Hebrew roots cults of today, by the way. They were insistent that authentic Christianity must be thoroughly Jewish. And so we call these guys Judaizers. That's the usual name for this cult that they represented. Judaizers.

And Paul usually called them the Circumcision Party. And sometimes he called them worse names than that. In Philippians 3, one of Paul's later epistles, he calls them, dogs, evil

doers, and those who mutilate the flesh. Pretty harsh. It's the kind of thing you can't do in today's evangelicalism and get by with it. But Paul said it. And furthermore, he says their version of the gospel was really no gospel at all.

The Greek text in our passage, look at verses 6 and 7, uses two different words that can be translated in English as, another. In the King James Version, the phrase is, another gospel, which is not another. And the first, another, is the word *heteros*, which means another of a different kind. The second, another, is *allos*, which is the word you would use if you meant another one of the same kind.

So he's saying they're flirting with a whole different kind of gospel. And it's not a legitimate alternative to the true Gospel. There is no other Gospel and that's the theme of this passage. There's only one Gospel. And Paul makes this point with supreme vigor using the most severe language that he can righteously summon. He punctuates it with a double curse. Verses 8 and 9. "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach

to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”

And then he repeats himself immediately, does this for emphasis. “As we have said before,” when before? Just, just right there, the sentence before, “so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” *Anathema*. And that double curse is actually the strongest language Paul ever used anywhere. And it comes at the start of an epistle that is filled with strong words.

In Galatians 5:12, for example, he suggests that if circumcision can make a person righteous than these guys should just go ahead and cut off their manhood completely. That’s harsh. But if you think about it, these two verses in chapter 1 are even harsher than that because what he’s saying is that these guys deserved eternal damnation.

And by the way, the immediate repetition of a curse like that was the Koine Greek version of retweeting something in all caps. So don’t pass over these maledictions without considering what

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you and I need to learn from them. There's no legitimate way to soften what Paul is saying here. This is inspired Scripture and so you can't brush it aside as an accidental overstatement. You can't criticize it as something that maybe would better have not been said. These curses are as God-breathed as any other verse of Scripture. And they are meant to show what a profound evil it is to go beyond what is written and redesign the Gospel just to suit it to your own tastes and prejudices.

These false teachers were probably former Pharisees. If that's true, they would have been once colleagues of Paul's, possibly men who he even knew personally. They have supposedly professed faith in Christ, if we go by Acts 15, calls them believers of the party of the Pharisees. So they professed faith in Christ. But Paul doesn't try to make nice with them. He doesn't show them any kind of artificial academic deference. He doesn't feign congeniality. He doesn't invite them to an amiable dialogue. He doesn't even challenge them to a debate.

He also doesn't write to them personally before criticizing them publicly. He simply brushes them off as utter heretics and he

instructs the Galatians to have nothing to do with them. He says, "We're not to accept anyone who comes along promoting a different gospel, no matter who it is," and he says, "even if it's an angel or an apostle." Now, that of course, is pure hypothetical. There, there wouldn't be a true angel or an apostle peddling a different gospel. But he says if they do, let them be damned.

He's using a level of polemical vilification that today's guardians of evangelical etiquette would try to tell us is totally out of place in any discussion of religious belief or biblical doctrine. You know, you're not supposed to say such things. But here we see it's not always right to be warm and welcoming. There are times when a curse is more appropriate than a blessing. Now of course, it's not a good thing to be so fluent in imprecatory language that, you know, damning your adversaries becomes second nature or your first default.

You should avoid those self-appointed wardens of righteous precision the, who hang around on Twitter, who never do anything but curse and condemn other people. That's not a badge of honor

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to be a fulltime contrarian. An, and in fact if you are immediately inclined to call down fire from heaven on everyone with whom you have any kind of disagreement, that's not a godly trait. I think we all understand that.

But understand the gravity of the error these guys were peddling. It, this wasn't some personal affront or indignity to Paul's ego. The Gospel was under attack. That was a, this was a blatant assault against the kingdom of heaven. And Paul understood that even though the other Apostles didn't always see it as clearly as Paul did. When Paul says, verse 6, "You are deserting him who called into the grace of Christ," even though he's their spiritual father, he's not speaking of himself there.

That phrase, him who called you, is a reference to God. God is the one who calls and draws believers through the Gospel into fellowship with Christ. 2 Timothy 1 verses 8 and 9, "God saved us and called us to a holy calling." Romans 8:30, "Those whom God predestined he also called." And later in the same epistle, this same epistle, Galatians 5 verse 7, Paul says, "You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This



persuasion is not from him who calls you." Again, that's God he's talking about there.

God is the one who calls us into the grace of Christ and by flirting with this alternative gospel, the Galatians had gone to the very brink of turning away from God by turning to a different gospel. And so these preachers of a false gospel weren't merely thorns of annoyance in Paul's flesh, they were turning people against the truth of Christ. And that's why they were such a serious threat that they deserved the curse. That's why Paul calls them basically damnable heretics. And it's not just because they irritated him personally.

In other words, Paul is defending the message here. He's not defending himself. He's defending the Gospel. Now, these false teachers weren't openly hostile to Christ. It's not like they came in there as anti-Christ, we, you know, wearing a badge that said that on their lapel. They pretended to be preachers of the Gospel while they were systematically attacking the principle of divine grace that is the essential nucleus of Gospel truth.

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Remember, they're teaching that the gospel is about what you must do for God, rather than simply declaring what Christ has done for sinners. That's the whole gist of their error. It's pretty simple. And it would have been positively sinful for Paul to bless the purveyors of an upside down message like that. It would have been a sin even to ignore the danger that they posed. That is in fact what Peter tried to do in Galatians 2. And Paul rebuked him publicly for it.

In Titus 1 he mentions these same false teachers. And there he calls them "those of the circumcision party," so same guys. And there he says of them, "their mouths must be stopped." That's not a politically correct sentiment in these post-modern times, is it? Incidentally, the Apostle John whose nickname was the Apostle of Love, also said something similar. He said we're not supposed to be amicable to anyone who has an agenda to undermine or attack the core teachings of Christ.

In 2 John verses 9 through 11 he says, "Whoever does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God. If anyone comes to

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you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting. For," he says, "whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works." So both of these Apostles are saying that the Gospel is simple and it's specific and anyone who tries to tweak it or twist it or tamper with it is committing a damnable sin.

It seems to be the prevailing attitude today that if you engage in a verbal bare knuckle fight against error the way Paul does here, you automatically sacrifice your scholarly creditability. You can't do that as an academic person or a scholar. I say that's an emasculated view of scholarship. The best scholars throughout church history have always been vigorous polemicists. This goes back maybe 150 years. It's become totally unpopular to engage in any kind of vigorous debate over doctrine.

And the evangelical movement right now is overrun with false gospels. And the problem extends from the pages of Christianity Today Magazine to the fancy theatrical platforms of the, these evangelicals giga churches that Travis was describing. There has never been a time in all of church history when the church was

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more urgently in need of clear intelligent uncompromising voices that are willing to speak candidly and defend the one true Gospel just the way Paul does here.

Now, consider the context of our passage. Verse 6 is the, really the first verse of the epistle's main body. Verses 1 through 5 are a greeting and a benediction. That was the standard form for a letter like this in the First Century. And it's typical for the Apostle Paul to follow this pattern. The first word in every one of the Pauline epistles is the Apostle's name, Paul. And sometimes that's followed by the names of fellow laborers who are traveling or working with him.

And then you have the address, which names the person or the group of people to whom he is writing. And then he normally says something encouraging or complimentary to the church or to the person that he's writing to. Sometimes even if it's a bad church like even when he writes to Corinth, which is a totally messed up congregation with a long laundry list of serious problems and Paul deal with them in two epistles. But, nevertheless, he has

some words of praise for them, and he starts the epistle with them.

Just think about how disorganized and confused the church at Corinth was. They had divided into warring factions, people were filing lawsuits against one another. They were neglecting proper church discipline. They were abusing their spiritual gifts. They were even getting drunk at the Lord's Table. So they were doctrinally confused on several levels, morally confused, struggling. According to chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, struggling even with the doctrine of bodily resurrection.

And ultimately the Corinthians would be susceptible to a group of heretics who tried to entice them to rebel against Paul's teaching and his authority. So it was a messed up church. But despite all of those problems, Paul needed to deal with barely four verses into his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul says, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge."

That's a really nice thing to say to such a messed up church, isn't it?

But that was Paul's normal practice. He liked to start with a word of praise or encouragement and generally, that's a good, good practice. In the, in the very first verse of Ephesians, he commends the people there for their faithfulness. And even when he needed to deliver a rebuke or some correction, he would always try to start with some gracious words about the people that he was writing to. And every one of his epistles follows that pattern, except Galatians.

And there is not a single word of approval or commendation from start to finish in this epistle to the Galatians. Nowhere. Not even a hint of gratitude or joy. It's very unlike Paul. But his greeting is followed immediately by a scolding. And instead of a blessing, he pronounces a curse, a double curse. And that's what makes our text electric. Rather than the normal polite formalities, Paul jumps straight to the point. And it's a passionate rebuke.

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He says, "I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." And then the rest of the epistle, the whole thing is just that candid. It's an urgent and heavily didactic reprimand without mincing words. In chapter 3 verse 1, he calls the Galatians, foolish. And he suggests that some evil agent has bewitched them, put them under a spell.

In chapter 4 verse 11, he says, "I fear for you that perhaps I've labored over you in vain." Nine verses later, "I am perplexed about you." And throughout this epistle, he is never merely insulting, but he maintains that stern tone of fatherly voice. He's scolding them. He never says anything that would blunt the force of what he has to say. He is clearly deeply and seriously trouble by their flirtation with a different gospel and from start to finish, you can hear all of that passion in his words.

Now, one other notable characteristic of Paul's epistles is that his opening words nearly always contain a statement of some core Gospel doctrine, some essential Gospel truth, or, or in some

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cases, even a summary of the Gospel itself. And of course he does that here because it's so desperately needed. Verse 4. This is a simple concise statement of what the true Gospel is about. "The Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age."

And anyone who's familiar with Paul's teaching can immediately see how pregnant with meaning those few words are. It comprises the principle of substitutionary atonement that Christ gave himself for our sins. That's substitutionary atonement. In other words, the point of his death is not to provide us with earthly and material prosperity, not merely to break down the, the walls of national boundaries and ethnic prejudices, not to redeem earthly art and culture, not to send a message about social justice, not to point us on a journey toward spiritual self-realization, and certainly not just to give us a pattern of self-sacrifice so that we can atone for our own sins.

He gave himself to make a full and final atonement for sin and thereby to deliver us from this present evil age. It's a simple message, right? Why do we want to add to it? In 2 Corinthians 4



verse 5, Paul says this, "What we proclaim is not ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord." That's a great thing to remember that the Gospel is not about you and me and it's not about what we must do. By making the message about circumcision, these false teachers were preaching themselves, not Christ.

Paul's ministry was markedly different. He told the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. We preach Christ crucified," he said, specifically, "We proclaim the good news," of our text, "that he gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present age." That's the one true Gospel message in a single statement and anyone who comes with a more sophisticated sounding narrative is to be rejected.

We're not supposed to engage in friendly dialogue with the peddlers of these enhanced gospels, so that everybody can consider their point of view and we can evaluate it fairly. That wasn't Paul's style at all. And it's intriguing and significant that a heresy this serious already crept into the early church so early in the apostolic era. Even Paul was astonished that they're so quickly deserting the truth. You know, some people

have the misguided notion that the primitive church, the early church in the apostolic era the church was totally pure so that whatever was taught in the early centuries of the church should automatically be given total credence.

But Scripture itself says everything anyone teaches must be examined alongside the Scriptures to see if these things are so. That's what the Bereans did. And that's true even if the teacher is an apostle or an angel, Paul says. That is what discernment demands. And sadly, the church in practically every generation, starting with this first generation, has failed to take the stance that Paul takes here.

And that failure explains why the visible church always needs reforming. Always. There have always been professing Christians who join the church and identify with the people of God and their faith is just superficial, they don't really like the Gospel message. And they think that with a little tinkering, a little redesigning, we can reimagine the Gospel and remove the offense of the cross. Or tone it down, at least. As if we could

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fix the message so that Christ wouldn't be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense in the eyes of a hostile world.

We, we all have a tendency to want to do that. There's something innate, I think, in the heart of fallen humanity that makes all sinners wish for a different kind of gospel. And Scripture recognizes that. 1 Corinthians 1:18, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." And verse 23, "The message of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."

So the carnal mind wants something less offensive, more refined, more dignified, more, you know, ritualistic, more attractive looking. A couple of years ago on Twitter a, a well-known musician. I'll name him, Michael Gungor. You remember him who at the time professed to be a Christian. He sent a series of messages, I think, on Twitter, that, that saying he found the idea of blood atonement primitive and embarrassing.

And he said this. I'll quote him exactly. These are his words, quote, "The idea that God needed to be appeased with blood is

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not beautiful. It's horrific." And he said that we should tell people instead that blood sacrifice, the, the whole idea of that is unnecessary and should stop trying to get to God with violence. And that was several years ago. More recently, just in the past month, he's, he's mentioned that he's moved further from biblical Christianity.

In June of this year, he more or less declared himself a universalist. Not unusual. Happens with lots of people. He wanted to tone the Gospel down. He, he wanted to clean it up. He wanted to get rid of what's disagreeable and try to inject it with more noble sounding religious principles. Which is exactly what the circumcision party were trying to do.

R.C. Sproul used to tell the story of how he was lecturing on the atonement one time and someone in the audience yelled out, "That is primitive and obscene." And Sproul said, "You are exactly right." He said, "I particularly like your choice of words. Primitive and obscene. Take primitive. What kind of God would reveal his love and redemption in terms that were so technical and concepts so profound that only an elite core of

professional scholars could understand him.” He said, “God does speak in primitive terms because he’s addressing himself to primitives.”

And then Sproul said, “If primitive isn’t an appropriate word to describe the content of Scripture, obscene is even more so. What is more obscene than the cross? Here we have an obscenity on a cosmic scale.” He said, “On the cross Christ takes upon himself human obscenities in order to redeem them.” Paul said the same thing without flinching in 2 Corinthians 5:21. That “God made him,” Christ, “who knew no sin to be sin for us.”

In other words, the accumulated guilt of every evil obscene or wicked deed that was ever committed by all the multitudes whom God will ever ultimately save, all that evil was imputed to Christ. And in fact, Spurgeon says this about that text. He says, “What a grim picture that is, to conceive of sin gathered up into one mass: murder, lust, rape, adultery and all manner of crime, all piled together in one hideous heap.”

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Spurgeon said, "We ourselves, brethren, impure though we are, could not bear this. How much less could God with his pure and holy eyes bear with that mass of sin and yet, there it is. And God looked upon Christ as if he were that mass of sin." There's no way to understand the cross properly without seeing it as offensive. And that means that we cannot faithfully preach the Gospel and at the same time avoid offending people.

Paul's curse applies to anyone who tries to do that. And there are a lot of them today. Now, I don't think the average Gospel-corrupting heretic actually sets out deliberately to commit a damnable sin. I think it's probably pretty rare and maybe even almost unheard of, that someone joins the church with a premeditated plan to become a heretic. I, I think most false teachers are deceived before they become deceivers.

They think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. They assume that they can determine what's true or false by reason alone, or worse yet, by their own feelings. Even though Proverbs 28:26 says, "Whoever trusts in his own heart is a fool." And they actually believe that they're doing a good thing

by trying to fix whatever they find distasteful about the message of the cross.

And the church today is full of influential voices just like that, who are, they're claiming that they've discovered a new perspective, or they've refreshed the Gospel for the millennial generation. Or they've invented some post-modern alternative to the Gospel message because they think blood atonement is too primitive or too offensive or whatever.

And if you think like that, you may think that your motives are pure. You might have the same motives that probably drove the circumcision party to do what they did, namely, trying to make the message more appealing to their audience. But don't miss the point of this text. Paul curses every effort to do that. And let me be really candid here. 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.

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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's, that's really the gist the of the book that Travis was, was showing you earlier about pragmatism, seeker-sensitive style worship. The idea that we can, we can make unbelievers more comfortable with the message if we tweak in this way or that.



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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're 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

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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.

We're always at least five to ten years behind the rest of the world. So it's laughable anyway. You know, because at one point, everyone was reading fictional stories about territorial warfare with demons. You know, *This Present Darkness* and all of its sequels. We had *the Left Behind series*. That started to die out as soon as everyone was praying *The Prayer of Jabez*. That gave way to *40 Days of Purpose*, followed by Mel Gibson's movie,

followed by the emerging church movement, followed by hipster religion and now social justice.

It's one thing after another. And evangelicals move through it with breathtaking speed. Today, we look back with contempt on almost everything that became wildly popular and then fell out of fashion. No one who has any kind of influence is excited about *The Prayer of Jabez* anymore. We make jokes about *Wild at Heart*. Running after every new evangelical craze does not make you more relevant. It guarantees that eventually you will be totally irrelevant.

In a, 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

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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 21<sup>st</sup> 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



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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 reimagined 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

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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

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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, 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.

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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 probab, 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

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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.

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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.