

Aug. 7, 2011

Romans 10:11-15
Galatians 1:1-10

“So, who do YOU think is a heretic?”

When my husband and I began attending a United Methodist Church, it wasn't long before we decided to join. I wasn't sure Gilles would find it easy to make that decision, since he had been raised a Roman Catholic in France, where the vast majority of the population has been Roman Catholic for centuries. He thought about it over some weeks, but in the end decided he wanted to go ahead and become a United Methodist.

In the first few years of being United Methodist, Gilles used a term that I kept coaching him NOT to use. We'd be in a group where he wanted to contrast and compare realities present in each faith tradition. He'd say things like, “Well, in the **Roman Catholic church** it was done this way... whereas in the **Heretic Church** we do it the other way.”

It took a few years, but I finally convinced him to say “Protestant Church”, not “Heretic Church”. Glory Hallelujah!

In the New Testament letters we've read recently during our Grand Sweep through the Bible in one year, we've come to Romans and Galatians. In both of these letters Paul exhorts the early church to embrace this truth: We are made right with God through our trust in Jesus Christ ALONE. Nothing else is necessary, and this trust is absolutely necessary. Any teaching that varies from this is heresy.

J. Ellsworth Kalas, author of the Grand Sweep materials, makes some important points. He writes, “A preacher has to be either daring or foolhardy to use a word like “heresy” in our day. It isn't a politically correct term. It suggests we are narrow-minded, perhaps even mean-spirited. But perhaps we should ponder a word from Andre Soares: ‘In a dead religion there are no more heresies.’ Could it be we are so anxious to be agreeable we are afraid to have a strong opinion?” He goes on to state that the apostle Paul would have had no question about the possibility of heresy.

Paul founded the churches in Galatia during his first missionary journey, which is described in Acts 13-14. In the opening verses of most of Paul's letters we find a greeting expressing love and friendship, in addition to a

celebration of God's grace. In the letter to Galatians Paul's first words are stern: ***Paul, an apostle- SENT NEITHER BY HUMAN COMMISSION NOR FROM HUMAN AUTHORITIES, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God's family who are with me.***

Paul was being challenged in the early church. Some of the believers- maybe a majority- believed that to become a Christian a person first had to become a Jew and subsequently follow all the laws of Judaism, including circumcision. Peter himself initially embraced that point of view, but Paul did not. In Galatians 2:11-14 Paul points out that Peter had begun to eat with Gentiles back in Antioch. But some Jewish Christians showed up who insisted Christians must obey Mosaic Law. Then Peter distanced himself from the Gentile Christians. Paul was absolutely IRATE!! For Paul, requiring observance of Jewish law was HERESY. Nothing is required for our salvation but trust in Christ who died for us. THAT'S IT!!

And in these few verses at the opening of his letter Paul begins his counter-challenge.

Paul identifies himself as an apostle, a unique follower of Christ. He points out that his ministry is carried out at GOD'S command, through GOD's power, not any human authority. He also reminds everyone that Jesus Christ was raised from death, and concludes the greeting by affirming that many other Christians support him. Talk about positioning yourself in a place of strength!

Next he writes: ***To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.***

Ok, now he lets the Christians in Galatia know that he wants them to have God's grace and peace—which is often expressed in his salutations in the epistles. He wants them all to know God's grace and feel God's peace. But then he immediately affirms the core beliefs that they MUST embrace. God came in Christ who died for our sins and set us free from sin and death.

Paul calls Christ's followers back to Christ—to the cross, and the acceptance of God's gift offered there. THIS is the bottom line, and any other beliefs or

teachings are heresy. The best way to stay focused on this as the center core belief of our lives is to CHOOSE GOD as the only one we aim to please. Paul writes, *Am I now seeking human approval or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I WOULD NOT BE A SERVANT OF CHRIST.* (1:10, emphasis mine)

Whoa, people pleasing--- this is something we know about and talk about. It sounds like Peter in Antioch got caught up in something like that, when he pulled back from eating with the Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians would NOT be pleased with what he was doing. So he stopped. It looks like a form of peer pressure.

How do we remain faithful servants of Christ? How do we choose to please God above all else? How do we discern what is pleasing to God?

When we are small children we learn from our parents, guardians, families. So—THAT'S a HUGE THING for us to remember in our own families, isn't it?

When we are older kids the list expands to include neighbors, teachers, Sunday School teachers. Whoa—another HUGE THING for us to remember with the neighbor kids, children in church, right?

By 8th grade we begin to perceive deep inside that we need to be true to ourselves, to who we are, to who God made us to be. So we begin to discern how to please God ON OUR OWN. That's the point when kids are confirmed here at Baker Memorial, and that is a HUGE TRANSITION for our young people.

This is when young people need to begin growing the courage to see that pleasing PEOPLE is not the way to go. The transition can produce stress and strain in families, schools, societies. In the early years of high school a teen's parents may see college in his future, prodding him to register for classes preparing for that. But the teen may know that working with wood, building trades, home construction is all very appealing to him. The high school guidance counselor may see a student's high math achievement scores and urge her to register for the advanced math classes, saying, "You can't waste that gift!" But she knows she is an artist; she finds joy and fulfillment in those gifts above all others.

What is the right thing? What is God's will? There is **STRONG SCRIPTURAL AFFIRMATION THAT PLEASING OTHERS IS NOT TOPS ON GOD'S LIST**. This never means antagonizing or annoying others is ok! Please hear that word of caution, teens and others! But it **DOES** mean our inner voices have validity and God's Spirit speaks to us directly.

Another word of caution: always assess inner voices. Read Scripture and see what Jesus does and says. Talk to trusted friends and mentors. Get involved in church, studying, serving others. **CHOOSE** models and mentors. **BECOME CONSCIOUS** of how you live, about decisions, and why you have made them.

The only one we need to please is **GOD**. The only one we **MUST** please is God. That's all the apostle Paul cared about. It was all he focused on.

Hear his message: We are made right with God through our trust in Jesus Christ **ALONE**. Nothing else is necessary, and this trust is absolutely necessary. Any teaching that varies from this is heresy.

So is there such a thing as heresy? What do you think? If everything is relative, is it acceptable to purge the world of all Jews, or of all people with limitations? If everything is relative, is there any reason why I shouldn't lie to you when I sell you my car? Is it always wrong to be unfaithful to your spouse? Which rules matter? Which ones don't? What is beyond debate? Who do **YOU** think is a heretic? Isn't it true that all of us have some matters we think are beyond debate?

Paul was sure of it. We are saved by our trust in Jesus Christ, and in that alone. That's actually good news for us—the Gentile world. Without Paul, Christianity might have remained a Jewish sect. Paul won the argument. Christians did not and still do not have to obey Jewish law to follow Jesus.

We just need to trust in Jesus. We just need to invite others to trust him. We just need to please God. May God guide us as we seek to please him, and as we seek to discern his will in the multitude of situations that make up our lives. Amen.