

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH A UNITED YET DIVERSE CHURCH

Acts 18:18-19:7

INTRODUCTION

There are two forces at work upon every Christian and every Christian church that must be recognized and resisted if we are to remain faithful to Jesus and his gospel. The first of these forces which must be resisted is the pressure to expand the boundaries of what is permissible to believe and to do and still be considered Christian. There is always pressure from within and without the church to push out the boundaries of what may be believed and what may be done and still call yourself a Christian or still call your church a Christian church. Here are some recent examples of this force: During the presidential race of 2008 there were a number of Christian leaders who, out of deference to Mitch Romney's candidacy said that Mormons are Christians. Friends, Mormon's are not Christians. Their doctrines of God and of Christ and of salvation are not even close to historic Christian orthodoxy. This past summer, a professing Christian denomination voted to ordain into pastoral ministry monogamous, practicing homosexuals, thus endorsing homosexual desire and behavior as legitimate Christian desire and behavior. Again, the Bible is quite clear that homosexual desire and behavior is as sinful as lying and gossiping and drunkenness and heterosexual desire and practice that is not confined within the context of monogamous heterosexual marriage. There is continual pressure upon us as Christians to permit doctrines and practices to be called Christian which are not called Christian in the Bible.

However, there is also, always at work upon Christians and Christian churches an opposite force to constrict or reduce the boundaries of acceptable Christian belief and behavior. Churches and Christians are continually pressured to require belief in doctrines and practices that are not required by the Bible in order to be a Christian. Here again are some recent and not so recent examples of things some Christians say must be true if you are going to be a true Christian: Some say you cannot be a true Christian unless you are baptized in water following your conversion to Christ. Others contend that you cannot be a true Christian unless you believe creation took place in 6, 24 hour periods and thus believe the universe is no more than 10,000 years old. Still others argue that if you do not speak in tongues you have not been baptized by the Holy Spirit. While others just as sincerely teach that if you speak in tongues you are either deluded or controlled by the devil. By requiring belief in these things these Christians have drawn the lines too tightly as to what it means to be a Christian.

In our passage this morning God, through Luke's record of the history of the early church shows us that there is indeed one true church that is held together by the one gospel of Jesus through the work of the one Holy Spirit. There are boundaries of doctrine and practice that if you go beyond you have left behind Jesus and his saving work and you are no longer a true Christian or a true Christian church. Yet, at the same time Luke shows us that there is a considerable amount of diversity in this one true church in the ways in which we come to and live out this one faith. As we work our way through this passage I am going to emphasize the things that this text shows us that are true of all Christians and all Christian churches. However, we will also see the ways in which Luke shows us some of the diversity that also exists within Christian experience.

MAIN POINT

True Christians and true Christian churches...

I. Do all things for the sake of the gospel (vv. 18-23)

In verses 18-23 we have in summary form a journey of about 1500 miles from Corinth, to Ephesus to Caesarea to Jerusalem to Antioch and then back to Ephesus by land, which took more than a year. It begins by telling us that Paul, following the frustrated plot by the Jews in Corinth to get him and Christianity declared illegal by the Roman government, remains in Corinth for a considerable amount of time. Verse 17 tells us that he remained in Corinth for a total of 18 months and so the accusation of the Jews before the Roman governor must have

taken place somewhere in the middle of his stay. The question we have to ask is this: In Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea, Paul left town, usually in a hurry as soon as the Jewish people began to persecute him and the church but here he remains another 6 months or more. Why does he do this? He left the other towns and he remains in this town for the same reason. In Thessalonica his presence would have merely provoked the already angered Jews and brought more harm to the church and to the preaching of the gospel. However, here in Corinth, God has promised to protect him and therefore the gospel from harm and he has seen this happen and so he stays to promote the gospel among the Corinthians. His decisions to stay or to go are regulated by his ambition to preach the gospel of Christ and by his desire to provide for and protect the church.

Then, for a reason we are not told he decides to leave Corinth and head back to Syria, which is where the local church that originally sent him out to do this work is located. However, in v. 18 we are informed that in Cenchrea, which is a small town about 7 miles southeast of Corinth, he shaved off his hair because he had taken a vow. We are not given a lot of information here but the most likely explanation of what is going on is that sometime during his stay in Corinth, Paul took the Nazarite vow that is explained in Numbers 6. He took the vow either as an act of faith in God's promise to protect him or as an act of gratitude to God that he did protect him. The problem we have is this: in this book of Acts the Christian preachers, including Paul, by both their words and their practice have said that obedience to the Law of Moses is no longer required because Jesus is the fulfillment of that law. So why would Paul submit to a law about vows which he has said is no longer binding?

The answer to that question is stated by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. He writes in 1 Corinthians 9:19-20, 22-23, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law... I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel..." So Paul took this vow, not because God required it but in order that Jewish people would not be offended so that he could preach the gospel to them. He was not merely pretending to worship God, he was worshipping God by these means but not because God commanded him to worship in this way. He chose the form by which he would worship God in order to gain a hearing with the Jewish people.

Next Paul comes to Ephesus together with Priscilla and Aquila. He wastes no time but immediately goes to preach the gospel in their synagogue. However, even though they urge him to stay and keep teaching he declines in order to continue his journey. He does tell them, that if it is God's will he will return to them in order to teach. While we are not told why Paul is in such a hurry to get to Jerusalem and then on to Antioch, I think we can assume that it has to do with the gospel. At the minimum we can see that he views his connection to the first church of Jesus which is in Jerusalem and is made up of Jewish Christians and the first Gentile church in Antioch as very important. He recognizes that the progress of the gospel among the nations requires that he remain united to these churches. There is only one church and one gospel and Paul's return to these original churches shows this. Then after Paul visits and reports his progress to the churches in Jerusalem and then in Antioch he goes back to visit all the churches he started in Galatia and Phrygia in order to strengthen these Christians and finally he makes his way back to Ephesus, completing his year long, 1500 mile journey.

But Paul isn't the only one doing all things for the sake of the gospel. Paul's Jewish Christian business partners, this homeless couple that was driven out of Rome, Priscilla and Aquila are also living for the sake of the gospel. They remain in Ephesus to establish the church and promote the gospel. We can see that they are not in Ephesus for merely business reasons as they bring this young, gifted preacher of the gospel, Apollos into their home in order to make sure he has a full understanding of the gospel. Clearly, this Apollos is living for the gospel. It would appear that he is traveling around doing what Paul is doing, preaching the way of the Lord Jesus among the Jews. He goes to Achaia, where Athens and Corinth are located for the purpose of preaching the gospel.

All true Christians and true Christian churches want this message about Jesus to be clearly taught and warmly received by all. We don't want our lives to hinder others from receiving this word. We want to live our lives in a manner that commends this message to others. We want our churches to be places where this word is honored

and where it is clearly taught and lived. We aren't people who think only about our little private lives and how things are going for us in relation to this world but we think about how we might use our time and resources to promote this word to our children, our extended families, our neighbors, our co-workers and to the nations of the world. We recognize gifted men and women and encourage them to use their gifts to teach this gospel both among us and in other places. A desire to see this word about Jesus as revealed in the Bible to spread rapidly among all the nations and to be glorified by all peoples is characteristic of all true Christians and all true Christian churches.

True Christians and true Christian churches...

- *Do all things for the sake of the gospel*
- *And...*

II. Believe in Jesus as he is described in the entire Bible (vv. 24-28)

Verses 24-28 are a very common feature in good story-telling. We see it all the time in TV shows and movies. A second story line is shown to be taking place while the main story line is happening. While Paul is engaged in his long travels God sends a man to Ephesus named Apollos. This man comes with strong credentials. He is Jewish. He is from the town of Alexandria, which is in Egypt, across the Mediterranean Sea from Ephesus; a city famous for its university and sophistication. We are told that he is a very eloquent, learned man. He is intelligent and an excellent communicator. Most importantly he is mighty in the Scriptures. He is an expert in the OT. He knows the OT Scriptures like the back of his hand. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. Lord here refers to Jesus. Somehow, by someone he has been told about Jesus, this man who was born of the virgin Mary and who healed the sick and raised the dead and cast out demons and went about Israel preaching the good news about the kingdom of God. He knew that this Jesus is the one who fulfilled all the Law and the Prophets. He knew, from those who taught him and from his own knowledge of the OT that this human man Jesus was the Messiah promised on every page of the OT Scriptures.

But Apollos was not only eloquent and full of knowledge about the Scriptures and how Jesus is the fulfillment of them but he was "fervent in spirit." The Greek phrase can mean either he was simply enthusiastic about the Scriptures and about Jesus or it could mean that he was full of enthusiasm or fervency for the gospel by the work of the Holy Spirit. I think that the latter is what Luke means to tell us. This is a Christian man who has been gifted by God not only with an excellent knowledge of the OT and not only with a superior ability to communicate but also with a zeal for Christ given by the HS that compels him to talk about Jesus, this way of the Lord to all who will listen within the Jewish synagogues. It would appear that he has been sent by God to Ephesus to help the church there while Paul is out of town.

However, we also discover a most interesting fact about Apollos. His knowledge of Christ, while accurate, is not complete. This is because he only knows the baptism of John. What does that mean? It means that the person or persons who taught him the gospel of Christ only knew who Jesus was and what his ministry was about from what John had taught. Most likely someone from Alexandria had been in Israel during that time when John's ministry and the ministry of Jesus overlapped. They believed what John said that the Lord was coming to his people and that everyone should prepare for his appearing by repenting of their sins and being baptized as the sign that they had turned from their sins and were ready to meet the Lord. Those who had taught Apollos must also have seen or heard Jesus. Perhaps they had seen him baptized and witnessed his first miracles and heard him preaching about the kingdom of God. However, they had left Israel prior to the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. So Apollos having heard of John's message to prepare for the Lord's coming by repenting and being baptized had done so. He had come to believe that the human Jesus was the Lord who was coming to his people to baptize with the Holy Spirit. He recognized that Jesus was the greater Son of David who was also David's Lord. He knew that Jesus was the one through whom God would fulfill his covenant promises to his people. He was the one through whom sins would be forgiven. As Luke tells us he taught the things of Jesus accurately, using the OT Scriptures, even though he only knew John's baptism.

However, when Priscilla and Aquila heard him teach so eloquently in the synagogue they recognized that he did not have the complete story. There were parts of the work of Christ that he was missing. They knew what he was missing because they had been taught by Paul who was teaching the gospel as it was being taught by all the apostles. What is interesting is that Priscilla and Aquila, like Apollos, had come to know Jesus apart from the work of Paul or any of the apostles as well. So they would be highly sympathetic to his situation. So Priscilla and Aquila take this gifted man aside privately, most likely in their own home, and they fill him in on the details he is missing. Most likely they explained the cross and the resurrection and the ascension and the sending forth of the Holy Spirit. So from then on Apollos preached the whole counsel of God.

All three of these people are fiercely committed to the truthfulness of the word of God as it has been revealed and fulfilled in Jesus. Priscilla and Aquila recognize that this gifted and powerful preacher is incredibly effective, in ways they never will be and yet they also see that if he is not filled in on all the details he is not going to be as effective as he could be and he may even become dangerous. So they courageously approach him and dare to tell him the further things that he needs to know. But also, we see the humility of Apollos, this university trained, charismatic preacher of the gospel who takes instructions from a leather worker and his wife. He wants to preach the gospel in all its fullness, as accurately as he can because he is zealous for Jesus and his glory and not for his own glory. The effectiveness of this now completely informed preacher is then seen in his going to Achaia and his helping all those who had believed by a work of God's grace (please notice how casually Luke includes that last phrase!). He helps them to trust Jesus more and to live more the way Jesus wants them to live. In addition he is now able to completely overthrow the arguments of the Jews against the Christian faith. It is no wonder that Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians speaks so highly of Apollos and views him as a fellow worker in the gospel.

This little story makes no sense if what you believe doesn't matter. Here you have a guy that is accurately and zealously teaching the things about Jesus but yet he needs further instruction. And he knows he needs further instruction and submits to it. How much more should we, who are not well-versed in the Scriptures make use of all the opportunities that are given to us so that we might know the ways in which the Christ who is revealed in the OT Scriptures is this historical Jesus. It is this message about Jesus as he is revealed in the whole Bible that is the lifeblood of the church and is the lifeblood of every Christian. You cannot know this story too well. However, we are not just interested in knowing the story but being "fervent by means of the Spirit" in relation to it. We want not only to understand but to love this Jesus who is the Christ of the OT. He is the center of our attention and our affections. He is what all true Christians and true Christian churches are taken up with. We want to know the full truth about Jesus but not so that we can impress our friends and neighbors but so that we can trust and love him more.

True Christians and true Christian churches...

- *Do all things for the sake of the gospel*
- *Believe in Jesus as he is described in the entire Bible*
- *And...*

III. Have received the same Holy Spirit (19:1-7)

After Apollos goes to Corinth, Paul arrives back in Ephesus. When he gets there he runs into a group of about 12 dudes whom Luke identifies as disciples. Most of the time when Luke uses that word he means they were Christians. However, these are some strange Christians. There is something about them that isn't quite right. So Paul asks them if they received the HS when they believed. How can Paul ask a question like this when he writes in his letter to the Romans that if anyone does not have the Spirit of Jesus in them then they have not believed in Jesus? The presence of the HS and true faith always go together. How can he ask such a thing? Well, if you will remember back in Acts 8 we saw how the Samaritans believed the gospel when Philip preached it to them and they were baptized. However, they did not receive the HS until Peter and John came

down from Jerusalem and laid their hands on them. So, Paul knows that in these beginning years of the gospel, for reasons God knows, he sometimes does things to confirm the gospel in non-ordinary ways. So he wonders if perhaps these men are in the same condition as those Samaritans were about a decade before this. Well, their response shows Paul that is not the problem. They say that they had no idea that the Holy Spirit was now available for people. So Paul immediately recognizes that though these people have some kind of a faith in Jesus it is not a true faith for if it was they would have knowledge of the HS because the power and presence of the HS is part of the gospel message.

So he continues his investigation and asks them “Into what then were you baptized?” Now he gets to the bottom of the problem. These men have only been baptized into John’s baptism. Therefore, Paul fills them in on the whole story. He tells them that the purpose of John’s baptism as a sign of repentance was so that the people would be prepared for the one who was coming. That one who was coming had now come and his name is Jesus and he lived and died and rose again and has ascended to the right hand of the Father in order to obtain and guarantee a free and full pardon from God for all those who trust in him. These men are clearly intended by Luke to be set in contrast to Apollos, who also only knew the baptism of John. But these men are in a different place from where Apollos was at. Apollos knew who Jesus was and could explain from the OT how Jesus was the Christ prior to being instructed by Priscilla and Aquila. He already had the HS. These men however only knew that John had told people to repent of their sins and to be baptized as a sign of repentance because the Lord was coming. They did not know that the Lord had come and that his name was Jesus and that he had died and risen again. Therefore, when Paul explains the gospel they believe that gospel and are baptized in the name of Jesus. This is the only place in the NT where we see people rebaptized. Apollos is not rebaptized. His baptism of repentance is adequate because it was obvious he already was a Christian, he already had the HS. However, these men were not truly Christians. They were on the road to being Christians but they had not heard the full story of Jesus being the Christ and thus the Savior. So they had to believe in him and then be baptized in water. Following their baptism in water Paul lays his hands on them and they receive the HS and they begin to speak in tongues and to prophesy, just as the original 120 Christians did on the day of Pentecost and the Samaritans did when John and Peter came down and laid hands on them and Cornelius and his household did when Peter preached the gospel to them.

This passage is regularly used by all kinds of different Christians to prove that the way they do things is the only way things should be done. The Baptists say here is proof that everyone who has not been baptized following a credible profession of faith ought to be rebaptized. The Catholics use this passage and the one in Acts 8 to say that only when the bishop or priest lays his hands on you do you receive the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostals use this passage to say that the baptism of the HS always follows conversion and is always marked by speaking in tongues. The problem with all of these positions and others is that this is not how these things are recorded every time in the book of Acts. Apollos is not rebaptized and neither are any of the original 120 Christians who, while they believed John and believed in Jesus clearly did not have a complete knowledge of Christ until Pentecost. People regularly receive the HS without any apostle laying their hands on them in the book of Acts. Finally, people regularly receive the HS without speaking in tongues or prophesying in the book of Acts.

Not every true Christian’s experience of coming to Christ and growing in Christ is identical. What all share in common is: repentance from sin, faith in Jesus as he is revealed in the pages of the Bible for the forgiveness of sins, baptism in the name of the Triune God and the presence and power of the HS in our lives. Whether or not you were baptized as a baby or as an adult, whether you speak in tongues or not, whether you’ve had some spiritual leader lay hands on you and pray for you is not what is necessary. I’m not saying that these things are not important. I am saying that you must not require what God most clearly does not require. In the book of Acts there are certain things that are always true of all Christians and then there are things that occur by the will of God that are not universal Christian experience but fulfill God’s purposes during this unique time when the church is first established in the world. Therefore, let me ask you: Have you been born again by a work of the Holy Spirit so that you have turned from your sins and trusted in Jesus as revealed in the Bible alone to forgive

you for your sins and have you experienced Christian baptism as the sign of this work of Christ at some point in your life? These are the things that all Christians share in common.

True Christians and true Christian churches...

- *Do all things for the sake of the gospel*
- *Believe in Jesus as he is described in the entire Bible*
- *Have received the same Holy Spirit*

© Copyright 2009 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. mail@riverhillsonline.org