

Blessèd Blunders and Eschatological Errors

In the name of him who is coming in the clouds with power and great glory to judge the living and the dead, dear friends in Christ: For the vast majority of the last 2000 years, the Christian Church throughout the world has owed a huge debt of gratitude to the first congregations founded by the Apostle Paul and his missionary colleagues across Asia Minor and Greece – and not because of what they got right; but rather because of what they got wrong. I'm referring to the things they *misunderstood* about the teachings of Paul and the doctrines of the Christian faith. "How is that beneficial for us" you ask? It's because Paul had to write to them to correct their errors. That's what most of books of the New Testament are: Paul's letters to churches that had things messed up with his instructions about how to fix it. The result is that we know a lot about how things are supposed to be in the church and what doctrines should be taught mostly because of the mistakes they made.

And it's easy to understand why so many of these young churches had problems with their doctrine and practice. Several factors were working against them. One was Paul's relative haste. In his rush to get churches up and running and then quickly dash off to the next place to start a new church, not all of them were as thoroughly grounded in every aspect of the faith as they could have been. It's sort of like the present administration's approach to the new health care laws: first rush to put them into place and *then* discover and correct the errors – except Paul wasn't thinking about getting people health insurance; he was trying to save souls. He knew that people were perishing in ignorance of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. His goal was to first make converts and then train them in all the details.

Other problems that led to misunderstandings in the new congregations were worldly ideas and presuppositions that people brought with them when they came into the church; and – even more damaging – a veritable swarm of false teachers who followed hot on Paul's heels, attempting to inject their toxic doctrines into the hearts and minds of the faithful. Satan never rests. And he knows that it's easiest to topple and destroy the faith of new believers before they have a chance to sink their roots deeply into God's Word. These factors together – along with some others – explain why there were so many misunderstandings among Christians in the early days.

For example, in the Galatian congregations, which were practically invaded by false teachers called Judaizers, there was a terrible tendency to mix Law and Gospel, thus making salvation result part from faith in Jesus and what he did to atone for the sins on the cross, and part from certain good works that had to be performed by the believer. Paul's blistering response to this error in his epistle to them makes it absolutely clear: to add what you are required to do to what Christ has done to save you is to deny Christ altogether. You can't do it without destroying the Christian faith – and we know this so emphatically because they made the error.

Another example is the church at Corinth. They had all kinds of problems regarding proper worship, the administration of the Lord's Supper, church discipline, the use of spiritual gifts, and many others. If you could mess something up, they did. Thus Paul's two letters to them are like the troubleshooter's guide to fixing broken churches. If something isn't right in a congregation, chances are you can find the solution in 1st or 2nd Corinthians.

And then there's the church at Thessalonica, which, thankfully, wasn't as messed up as the church at Corinth; but still, they had several problems. In general, they seemed to be too open to hearing strange new teachings and too willing to accept them without critical consideration. Say it another way: they didn't exercise proper spiritual discernment. Thus Paul exhorts them over and over again to hold fast to the faith exactly as he taught it, and to reject anything or anyone that goes against the Gospel as they received it. Some of what Paul says to them further indicates that they had a problem pursuing holiness of life. They were too willing to permit immorality in their ranks.

The issues that seemed to trouble them the most, however, had to do with what we call Eschatology – that is, matters pertaining to the last things. Apparently Paul very much impressed upon the believers at Thessalonica the teaching of the imminent return of Jesus to judge all mankind and to usher in the new heaven and new earth. At least, teachings on these matters really captured the attention of many of the members there – which in turn led to all kinds of speculation and misunderstandings.

Case in point: in the time after Paul left them, some of the members of the congregation died. And their loved ones thought, "Oh no! Grandma or Grandpa died before Jesus came back. Now they lose out. They aren't going to be part of his coming kingdom." Paul had to tell them, "No, no, no. You don't understand. The dead will be raised at Christ's return. And we who are living, our bodies will be changed, becoming incorruptible like theirs. And all together we will meet and be with Jesus forever."

In last week's reading from Thessalonians, we heard about another wrong-headed idea that was floating around among the believers there. It seems that someone claiming to represent Paul, either by letter or in person, was telling them that the Day of the Lord had already come. How that idea played out isn't quite clear; whether it was a case of "Jesus came back and we missed it" or "Jesus came back and now we're living in the eternal kingdom" ... who knows? Either way, Paul had to straighten them out. "Trust me, when Jesus comes back, you'll know it. It'll be unmistakable. Don't listen to anyone who says it's already happened."

In today's Epistle reading, Paul addresses yet another problem related to the Last Things that was causing trouble in the Thessalonian church. Some of the people there were convinced that because the return of Jesus is imminent, that is, it could happen at any time, it was going to happen, like, within the hour. Or tomorrow. Next week at the latest. Something like that. So, they said to themselves, there's no point in making plans for the future, or going to work, or getting an education, or planting the fields. Even household chores – no need to do the laundry or mend clothes. Why waste the effort doing any of that if it's all going to be for naught? Jesus will be back any minute now. The logical thing to do is just sit tight and wait. It won't be long.

And so there were members of the congregation doing just that: chilling out and waiting. In their spare time, which they now had lots of, they'd go around making themselves a nuisance to others who were continuing to work, poking their noses into other people's affairs; as Paul says, "not busy at work but busybodies". Exacerbating the problem, and to a certain degree allowing it to happen, was that the Thessalonian church, like so many of the early Christian congregations, pooled resources. In Christian love wealthier members contributed food and money to help support those with more limited means. And here I need to stress just how economically stratified society was back then. The gap between rich and poor was vast, far more so than in our culture. The rich would always enjoy three square meals a day; the poor maybe only one meal, and that consisting of stale bread or a barley gruel called "puls". Some

days there'd be no food at all. So for the poor, there were advantages to converting to Christianity (I mean beyond the forgiveness of sins and salvation and eternal life and all that). The pagans didn't care if you starved; but Christians tended to take care of their own.

But now here's the problem: the "we're not working because we're waiting for Jesus" folks felt free to help themselves to the congregation's benevolent fund. They thought they were entitled to it. And no doubt they thought of themselves as being more spiritual or faithful than the others who were continuing to work. After all, "We actually trust what Paul taught us about Jesus coming back soon. Our not working or bothering to think about the future proves it."

As we heard in today's text, Paul didn't share their exalted view of themselves. Instead he writes to the others commanding them to mark and avoid anyone with such an attitude. There's nothing Christian about it. "That's not what I taught you", he says. "Look at the example we gave you while we were there. We worked for our daily bread just like everyone else. In fact, we worked harder because we supported ourselves while evangelizing you. We could have asked to be paid for teaching you; but we didn't. We didn't want to be a burden to anyone." Elsewhere Paul explains that he never wanted the matter of money to be an obstacle to someone hearing and receiving the Gospel. He didn't want to be accused of preaching Jesus only for a paycheck.

The point, though, is that a person who is spiritually mature and who believes the Gospel and who is expecting Christ's return is never motivated toward idleness but toward greater industry and effort. There's work to be done; lots of it. And since we don't know how much time we have left, we should be all the more diligent about getting it done. What kind of work? Well, first and most obviously, the work of evangelism. As I mentioned before, this is what motivated Paul and his companions to risk life and limb traveling about facing all kinds of hardships. He knew that people were dying without faith in Jesus and being lost forever because they never heard about him. So he pushed himself to the limit and beyond to proclaim Christ and salvation through faith in him.

But not everyone is an evangelist – nor should they be. We all have different callings according to the gifts, talents, and interests we've been given. And we are to serve God and our neighbors through our various vocations. Doctors cure patients, farmers grow food, truckers transport goods, mechanics repair things, parents raise children, teachers teach, lawyers ... well, okay, maybe we'll leave them off the list because they don't seem to do anything useful other than to serve as the subject of some pretty funny jokes. What I'm driving at is that the way we show our Christian love for others is through the things we do to serve them in our varied vocations. So we should do our work, whatever it is, honestly and well, putting forth our best efforts because this is how we serve the Lord. And we do so recognizing that some, due to mental or physical incapacity, are unable to work. These need our charity. They depend on it. And we show Christian love by caring for them and providing for their needs.

But not for those who could work but won't. As Paul says, "If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat. I've mentioned before that there is a sub-class of criminal who go from town to town hitting up all the churches for handouts. I run into them rather regularly. They have honed their hard luck stories to cut even the hardest hearts. And they all claim to terrific Christians. Technically what they do is not illegal; but in my estimation they are worst kind of thieves because in living off the charity of the church they are stealing from the genuinely needy. For a long time I wasn't sure how to handle them. More recently I've taken to telling them that I believe that churches should take care of their own, so if they'll tell me the how to get hold of the church they belong to, we'll see what can be done. Funny thing, even though they'll

say they've lived some place for years, it always happens that they never got around to joining a church. Or they'll tell me they don't believe in organized religion. Hello? Jesus founded a Church. It's an organized religion. If you don't believe in it, what are you doing here asking it for a handout?

All right; three quick thoughts in closing: first, when it comes to refusing help, we're talking about those who won't work; not those who are temporarily unemployed and seeking a job or those who are employed but not making enough to support themselves and their families. In the latter two cases we should assist as needed. Christian love demands that we do. The family of God takes care of its own. And we reach out to others who are outside the church with acts of kindness and love as our circumstances allow.

Second, a thought about our motivation: for the past decade, next to the Bible, the biggest seller in Christian bookstores has been *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. The overall gist of the book is this: having come to saving faith in Christ, you should now do good things for others. Why? Because by doing so you'll earn for yourself a better place in the kingdom to come. That's it. That's your purpose. Your heavenly reward is directly proportional to how much good you do here and now, so dedicate yourself to getting one of the top positions and put every effort into it. Friends, let me say this: next to the fact that the book has in it almost no Gospel at all (which alone makes it awful), that is the worst theology ever. It makes the motivation for doing good for others purely a question of selfish gain. It's "What's in it for me?" which is the exact opposite of godly love. We are to serve our neighbors and attend their needs because it's good for *them*, not because we hope to be rewarded for it.

Finally third, when Paul condemns certain members of the church at Thessalonica of the sin of being idle, we all need to do some self-examination. True, none of us is going to the extremes that they did (at least, I'm not aware of it); but I think it's fair to say when it comes to giving ourselves in sacrificial love and service for our neighbors, there's a streak of laziness in all of us. We tend to hold back, carefully guarding ourselves and our precious resources, with the result that we do and give less than we are perfectly able. Sometimes we'll even justify it by comparing ourselves to others and what we feel they ought to be doing and giving – which is, in our judgment, always something less than it should be. We need to turn that amazing power of perception back upon ourselves and see the same thing. And too, we need to recognize that what others do is between them and the Lord. God calls each one of us to not become weary of doing good. His standard is not what others are doing; but what he's called upon you to do. Therefore each one of us ought daily to repent of the sin of idleness. And receiving again Christ's word of forgiveness and through it the power of the Spirit to live in Christian love, commit ourselves to serving our neighbors by the work of our hands as long as God gives us both the ability and opportunity. May he give us the grace to do so from now until Jesus comes in glory. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!