

The Rev. Eric O. Springsted, Ph.D.
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Washington, DC
June 6, 2010

The Best Example

Text: Galatians 1:11-24

It is a common and somewhat fashionable quip among many intellectual phonies and wanna-be theological critics to say that Jesus brought a gospel but the apostles, especially Paul, gave us a church. The point of the quip can be made in various ways: Jesus stands for freedom, acceptance and inclusiveness, all things that flatter our independence and our desire to be accepted. The church that the apostles created when Jesus left, however, is fallible, often narrow and intolerant, full of rules and prejudices. It makes us do stuff. In short, it is manmade and it is an institution, usually hidebound, and it tends to obscure what Jesus really stood for.

Paul would have been dismayed to hear this charge. We know he would have been dismayed because he was dismayed when the same charge was leveled against him in his own day over two thousands year ago. We know that because the letter that he wrote to the churches in Galatia is a response to that charge, and it is his rather aggressive self defence against it.

The problem was this: Paul had been traveling among the churches in the region of Galatia, and preaching the gospel. Many believed. But no sooner did he leave a new congregation than a certain group would descend on the congregation, and try to undo much of what he had been teaching. Now, the specific accusation against him was that he was not preaching Jesus' gospel but his own, a manmade product. Why? Because he was advocating the inclusion of Gentiles, that is to say non-Jews, in the church without requiring them to keep the laws of purity or circumcision or food preparation and consumption.

Since Christianity didn't even have a name then and was understood simply as a

movement within Judaism, Paul's innovation had to have been shocking. At the time it would have seemed to his fellows back then a little bit like Mormonism seems to Christians now, that is, as something that a man cooked up on the basis of a private revelation. It might even be a bit like somebody who claimed that one could and should have all the benefits of church membership without baptism, or pledging or even showing up. Not that that is a rare view, of course, since many people obviously do entertain it, but nonetheless it is hardly a view of any religiously compelling depth. It is clearly a manmade view.

So it is this charge that Paul defends himself against. He does it straightforwardly. The gospel he preaches is not manmade, he says. In fact, he claims, he got it straight from Jesus himself. What is more, he goes on, he didn't feel the need to check it out with anybody else, including those who had been with Jesus before his death and resurrection, such as Peter and James. He didn't need their confirmation or their teaching. This is Jesus all the way down, as far as Paul is concerned.

I am not at all sure that this helps Paul's case, at least on the surface. Every fanatic who wants to dismiss criticism says he or she got it from God, that God is on his side, and that therefore his position is unassailable. In fact, the loonier the idea the more one seems to insist on the message being from God. Few have insisted more than Paul.

Yet, Paul actually was right. In all honesty he could not have said anything any differently than he did. Why? Simply because of his own example. In defense of his position, Paul points to his own history. Before his conversion, he explains, he was a violent persecutor of the church, and a strict upholder of Jewish exclusivism and Jewish laws of purity. Yet, despite persecuting Jesus, whom he thought to be a fraud, it turns out that Jesus accepted him, Paul. Despite the fact that nobody deserved exclusion from the group of first Christians more than Paul

did, still, Jesus accepted Paul, violent blowhard that he was. That was something, Paul tells us, he couldn't have made up, because before it happened it was not anything he even wanted. Yet, undeserving as he was, despite how anti-Jesus he was, he was accepted and made Jesus' own apostle. "No", Paul says, "whatever gospel I have preached is not manmade, because given my history this is not the gospel that I would have made up." "So," he says, "if I could be accepted by Christ, then clearly what Christ's gospel has to be is a gospel of acceptance without imposing prior conditions – conditions of purity or circumcision or kosher law, or even right belief." "That is why," he says, "that I told them that the old law didn't count anymore as to who is in and who is out."

It is for these simple reasons that we need to understand that Paul didn't change Jesus' gospel at all. Not only did he not change it, he perhaps understood it better than anybody else, as he was its best example. The message that Paul preached was based on his own experience of love and acceptance that has at its root the fact that Christ does call sinners, and that he does raise people from the dead, even those who are morally and spiritually dead. Paul is therefore really quite consistent and convincing: if he can be accepted without conditions then so can anybody. That, as far as he is concerned, is the gospel, pure and simple, and his example is an example of the new thing being done. His example is the difference between just being an idealist, and one who has faith that the regime has really changed.

Now, there are two things to be taken away from this, one easy and one hard. One, the easy one, certainly is that Paul is right and his story not only carries conviction but is *prima facie* evidence of what he is saying. He stands as a great example of what the gospel is about. And what is it about? That the barriers are down, and that God is bringing all of his creation into his kingdom, even if there had been sin and enmity before.

That is the easy point. The second point to make about Paul being the best example of the truth of the gospel he was preaching is a lot harder, at least a lot harder for people like us. That point is this one: that what carries conviction of the gospel is most of the time the story of the person telling the story. And, as we shall see presently, that means that often the burden of proof to others is upon us as faithful people in the way we live.

Let me put it this way. Christianity, as well as many other religions, is often described as “a system of belief.” By this, I assume that people mean that there are a number of items that are believed, and that they are not just a list, but somehow interconnected in a system. Buy into one, buy into all. However, there is something bloodlessly intellectual and distanced about looking at things this way. It is as if the system were simply there, that it can be laid out in its entirety, and that we somehow choose to adopt it or not. It is this system that is attacked by atheists as being intellectually incredible, and what is defended on the same sorts of grounds by believers.

Now, there is certainly a lot to think about in Christian faith, and having Christian faith can do a major good turn for one’s thinking. So it is not unintellectual. But traditionally faith has been described not as a matter of adopting a “system of belief,” but as “belief on authority.” That description, I suspect, is one that we balk at. We don’t like taking much of anything on authority. The modern, self-directed autonomous self hates being told what to do. As Protestants surely the description calls to our minds visions of autocratic medieval popes pushing people around and telling them what to do and believe.

Yet, the description, if one thinks for a minute about what it really means, makes a lot of sense. For the authority it is talking about is not the authoritarianism of the bully, but the moral authority of the saint. Think about what moral authority is and to whom we ascribe it: the person who has moral authority does not really tell you what to do, rather, he or she has a certain moral

quality. Moral authority is a quality of a person. It is found in integrity, vision, kindness, generosity, and self-sacrifice. It is faith, hope, and love. It when we see those things in somebody that we are convinced that the person who has them is on to something. We respect people like that, and consider them real authorities on what they are talking about, and not just blowhards. We want to be like that. Moral authority is what the people in Jesus' day were talking about when they wondered at his teaching, saying that he taught with authority, and not like the scribes and the pharisees, who, one may presume, were authoritarian.

So faith as a matter of believing on authority is a matter of seeing faith not as a system out there, but a way of life in front of you. It is seeing faith in action, and then, upon seeing its beauty, being convinced that the gospel is true. "If that is what the gospel is about, if that is what it does to people, then, perhaps, it is for me," we think. Being convinced of its goodness, we then become convinced of the fact as we see it lived out. Then, when we ourselves live that way, filled by God's own Spirit, we are convinced and stand on God's promises, knowing that God is true.

Examples abound. We know that a child's best chance to come to a mature faith is to be around adults who practice their faith deeply. Conversely, we know that our faith is shaken by bad examples far more than by bad arguments. We are convinced more by sermons that give concrete examples and less by arguments of impeccable logic, but we are most of all convinced by lives that show grace, and not by the way that somebody talks about grace. Anybody can talk about it; the clear evidence that someone has been touched by grace is in the graciousness of their living. Then as we are convinced in this way, we convince others in this way.

Consider simply this example of how we are convinced and how the faith is passed along. One of the world's favorite hymns is "Amazing Grace." Many people know something of

its story, although it is frequently mistold. The words of the hymn were penned by one John Newton, a long time participant in Britain's slave trade in the eighteenth century. Now, as the story is told, Newton had an important conversion experience, and repented of his old ways. The words of "Amazing Grace" are the written testimony of this conversion experience. As told, the story makes sense, and is a powerful one. Indeed, moving from a slave trader to one that renounced that trade, is a matter of being lost and then being found, of being blind but now seeing.

However, that is not the way that the story really went. Grace began in it, but continued for a long time. Newton really did have a conversion experience when a ship he was on nearly sunk. As a result he gave up profanity, drinking and gambling. It was at that point that he got serious about life, had a second deeper experience, and wrote the hymn. But that still was *not* the point at which he gave up slaving. In fact, he continued in it until his retirement from the sea, and even after his ordination in the Anglican church he continued to invest in it. So the amazing grace he exhibited was a personal turn around, but, up to this point, he still had a ways to go. But still there was grace, and it didn't stop being grace.

Where the story becomes a matter of truly amazing grace is somewhat later on. Newton did come to see the evils of slavery, and a good part of it was due to his own reflection upon a time that he was captured and made a slave of Africans in Africa. As a result, he penned a powerful pamphlet titled *Thoughts upon the Slave Trade*. There he made, as he said, "a confession, which... comes too late....It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders." Hoping to change things, he sent copies to every member of Parliament. The pamphlet caused an immediate sensation. But Newton's greatest effect on the slave trade was not so direct since it would still be

more than twenty years before the slave trade would be abolished. Instead, Newton's effect came when a young man, who himself had recently undergone a conversion experience, applied to him for advice. He applied to Newton because of the moral example Newton was at this time, and because of the way he had lived and developed after his first conversion. The young man, William Wilberforce, had been deeply involved in politics but was considering giving it up as conflicting with his faith. Newton counseled him otherwise, recognizing how important it was to act on what God had put in one's heart. Wilberforce as a result of that advice stuck to a political life. Now, what is most interesting about this, is that it was Wilberforce who first introduced a bill in Parliament to abolish the slave ships, and who then stuck to presenting that bill for twenty years when every attempt to pass such a bill was defeated.

In one sense, Newton's own attempts to change the slave trade came late, and only helped spark a flame to change it. But it was his story of death and rebirth, and his subsequent continual reformation that gave him moral authority as far as Wilberforce was concerned. It was his courage to admit that he was once wrong, and his courage to admit that God had found him that then gave a young man who admired him to come to him for advice and to go away with the courage to act on his own faith. The truly amazing grace of the hymn wasn't therefore just a one time experience of one guy. It wasn't just a "Jesus and me" experience. It was the grace that was passed on in one example of moral authority to another, and that then grew in the hearts of others. It was that grace that finally caused a whole nation to turn its back on an evil practice. The real amazing grace was the moral authority exercised by one repentant sinner on another; it was the example that gave courage and vision to Wilberforce. That, as it was in Paul's time, is how faith is passed on. That is how the Spirit blows through our lives, that is, through the lives of others who touch us.

That sort of faith is what is often so difficult for us. We would rather that faith were an intellectual system. If it were, then all that would depend on us would be that we pass on arguments to our children or to others. It would be easier if, as some parents teach the facts of life to their children, we could just give them a book. But that is not how faith is passed on or learned. It is learned in the moral authority of a life lived, and its effect on the world is in the active lives of faith lived. That is pretty much how all of us learned it, how, by the Spirit, we are sustained in faith, and how, by the Spirit, we pass it on to others. That is difficult because that means that faith demands not cool belief in a system, but an active life of courage, faith, hope and love. It is difficult because it means that our faith puts us on the line so that the world can see what the gospel is all about. If we don't show it, how can they ever see? It is difficult because we don't get a lot of time off on this.

But if it is the hard road, it is also a possible road and the certain one. It is possible by the grace of God's Spirit. And we know that it is, because we have seen it in the lives of those who have been the moral authorities who convinced us. We know it can be done, because we are convinced by the lives of those who have done it. And even if it is difficult, it is also desirable, for where we are convinced that the Spirit dwells in another is where we want to be like that. Let us be convinced, and let us convince.