

Introduction

Today is a special occasion. We are celebrating 35 years as a local church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The first meeting of Grace Community Church was Sunday, April 24, 1988. And here we are today by God's grace and for his glory. The local church is the miniature expression of the universal and eternal body of those redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. According to Ephesians 3:10, God is making known his eternal purpose and manifold wisdom through the church. The church is a body made up of members or parts just as the human body is made up of varying components, all of which work together under the direction of the head.

The head of the church is Jesus Christ. Under his headship and in submission to him, the Lord has designed that the church be led by elders and deacons. We are gifted by the apostles and prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body that we might be unified, know Jesus, and mature in faith so that we are stable and grounded in the truth, not blown off course by every wind of false teaching. We are intended to be a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15).

A church is no better than its commitment to the truth. We need to be more than doctrinal. The church at Ephesus teaches us that. They were doctrinally straight but had left their first love. We need to be more than doctrinally straight, but if we are not doctrinally straight, we will be failing no matter how much we may talk about love. Doctrinal fidelity has been a hallmark of Grace Community Church through the years. And it must be our intent for the future as well. We must keep as a priority the dual pursuit of a genuine and thriving love for the Lord Jesus Christ along with a steadfast grip on the truth. To lose either would be catastrophic.

This morning as we turn to God's word for instruction and inspiration for our celebration, I am going to focus on the doctrinal side of things and lead us to consider the critical matter of "Holding Fast to the Heart of the Gospel."

[Read Text]

According to the text, we cannot overestimate . . .

I. The Urgency of Holding Fast to the Heart of the Gospel

The letter of Paul to the churches in Galatia demonstrates just how quickly a person and a church can be derailed. Paul had been through Galatia preaching the gospel and numbers of folks had believed. But as soon as he moved on to continue his missionary work, false teachers arrived who unsettled the Galatians. They were asserting that the gospel actually required the people to be circumcised. To resort to this ceremonial rite as a component of gospel salvation in effect destroyed the substance of the true gospel. Paul is writing this letter to call the people back to the gospel he preached. He speaks some of his strongest words in scripture right here in the first chapter.

I want you to notice several items in the text. First, Paul draws attention to his apostleship. He testifies that his apostleship came directly through Jesus Christ and God the Father. The implicit claim then is that since Christ had called him and sent him; the good news he preached was in fact God's good news. His gospel message belonged to God. Second, Paul expresses astonishment. He is stunned that the Galatians turned so quickly from the message he brought them. Third, Paul makes a bold and straightforward declaration. There is only one gospel. There are not several

gospels, any of which will do. The true gospel is exclusive. Therefore, any so-called gospel which deviates from the true gospel of Christ actually is no gospel at all.

Finally, Paul issues a sharp and solemn denunciation of anyone who would proclaim a gospel contrary to the one he brought. He says, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach . . . a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." This word, accursed, points to eternal condemnation. Preaching a gospel that goes against the one Paul preached when he came to Galatia is such a serious matter with such serious consequences that those who do it are worthy to be eternally condemned. False gospels do not deliver what they promise. They do not result in true forgiveness and justification. They damn people to hell by deceiving them. Therefore, it is such an extraordinary offense to God and to the people to whom they preach that the worst possible punishment should come upon them eternally. Now, just in case any one might think Paul is exaggerating, he sets forth this denunciation not once but twice. There can be no mistaking how serious and important this matter is.

The urgency of holding fast to the heart of the gospel is a recurring theme here in the New Testament. It is urgent for one thing because even the most faithful of Christ's followers can fall prey to the pressure to compromise. If you look over to the second chapter of this letter to the Galatians, you find reference to a face-to-face confrontation Paul had even with Peter. Peter had been eating with the Gentiles, but when certain persons came, he stopped because he was afraid of them. The other Jews including Barnabas, joined along in the hypocrisy. Paul saw that this behavior was out of step with the gospel, and he addressed the situation directly.

In Acts 20, Paul has the occasion of meeting with the elders from the church at Ephesus to bid them farewell. In his final words to them, he warns them to pay careful attention to themselves and to the flock. He tells them he knows that when he is gone, fierce wolves will intrude to ravage the flock. He warned that from the elders themselves men would arise who would teach twisted things and draw away the disciples after them.

Paul wrote a couple letters to his protégée Timothy. In the second letter he exhorts him to be urgent in preaching and teaching God's word with patience and care. He says, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off onto myths." Timothy will need to be prepared to suffer in order to fulfill his ministry.

And then there is Jude. In the epistle he wrote, he wanted to go deeper into the truths of salvation. However, false teachers had come in perverting the gospel of God's grace and denying Jesus. With the state they were in, instead of going deeper, Jude found it needful to exhort his readers to contend earnestly for the faith.

Grace Community Church was founded with a conviction of the seriousness of getting the gospel right. And, by God's grace, this church has continued to hold fast to that conviction despite relentless pressure. As we sit here today, the pressure has never been greater for us to compromise the gospel. There is pressure from a decaying culture that is spiraling downward out of control and with increasing hostility toward the truth. There is pressure from churches and denominations and well-known preachers all of which have seemingly drifted from their moorings. Relentless pressure is exerted by cults and outright false teachers. The drive for success and results tempts folks to mollify their convictions and resort to manmade schemes. The squeeze also comes from skeptics who never go away. In our day all of these forces combine as if to say, "just let go. It's no use. You are out of

step with fashion and reason, and out of step with love and out of step with tolerance. Come on, lighten up.”

The heat is on. If we are to withstand the pressure to conform, we must constantly be renewed in our determination. We must be persuaded afresh that preaching the one true gospel and contending for it is worth it. It is precisely what we must do. We must be persuaded afresh to die if necessary before we would compromise or alter the gospel in any way.

What Paul says here to the Galatians helps. There is one gospel. It is God’s gospel. It is a precious gift entrusted to his people to proclaim, distinguish, and defend. All other purported gospels are really no gospel at all. Those who preach false gospels and those who believe false gospels will be accursed.

The urgency of holding fast to the heart of the gospel raises an important question. That question is, “what is the heart of the gospel to which we are to hold fast?” What are the fundamental truths to which we must be committed and for which we need to be ready to suffer if necessary? That is where I want to turn next this morning.

II. The Content of the Heart of the Gospel to Which We Must Hold Fast

There are five bullet-point statements which succinctly set forth the core truths to which we must be devoted if we are to hold fast to the heart of the gospel. These confessional statements are commonly associated with the Protestant Reformation. Actually, they were not articulated as such by any of the Reformers. Rather, these statements appeared together only in the eighteenth century. However, they do provide a summary of what was at the heart of the Reformation. Even then, though, these statements do not represent something new that the Reformers came up with. Rather, what was going on in the Reformation was a recovery of the gospel as it is revealed in the writings of the scripture.

We call these statements the Five Solas. The word sola comes from Latin and means only or alone. English speakers use a form of the word when we speak of solitude, which refers to the state of being alone or in seclusion. When something is alone, it is excluded from others. These statements, then, set forth exclusive truths—distinguishing aspects of the gospel which are unique to the one true and exclusive gospel.

Today’s culture and world view largely reject the idea of exclusivity when it comes to truth. In the postmodern mindset of today, there is no single truth that excludes all others. There are no absolutes, no objective truths. You have your truth and I have mine. They may be different, but that is okay, so long as you do not believe I am wrong. Tolerance of all ideas is practiced except toward the idea that certain truths are exclusive. Of course, this is why the Christian gospel is so repugnant to the world. Its claim is exclusivity. Whatever is found to contradict it is deemed false. To hold fast to the gospel means we hold to it exclusively. There are no other gospels and all ideas which contradict it are deceptions. And not only does this body of truths possess exclusivity, each of these statements declares an exclusivity as well.

Hopefully you are familiar with the five solas. Without designating them as such, we list them on the home page of our website. Every Christian and every member of Grace Community Church should know the five solas and what they mean. They are at the heart of the gospel.

A. The first sola is Sola Scriptura or Scripture Alone. That is to say that all our doctrine in general and specifically what we believe about the gospel in particular derives from the Bible alone. In contrast to Roman Catholicism, we do not affirm the Bible and an ecclesiastical body as the determiner of what we must believe. No. The Bible alone is our authority, instructing us what to believe in all spiritual matters. We are obligated to believe what the Bible says. Whatever contradicts the Bible is in error.

The Bible is sufficient. It tells us everything we need to know. 2 Peter 1:3 says that "God has given us everything we need pertaining to life and godliness." Later Peter says that no prophecies of the Scripture were produced by the will of man. Rather, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Paul reminded Timothy that it is the sacred writings of the scriptures which are able to make one wise unto salvation. These, he said, are breathed out by God and profitable for teaching. We should preach the word. Jesus declared that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

If we are to hold fast to the heart of the gospel, we must begin by holding fast to God's word. It is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. It is the instruction book from God to tell us not just what to do but also what to think. People all over seek for immediate revelation. They want to hear God speak to them. If you desire to hear the word of God, all you have to do is read the Bible. If you want to hear God's word audibly, read it out loud. If you want to believe what will truly make you wise unto salvation, if you want to know the exclusive gospel, the one true gospel, read the Bible. It will declare it to you.

One of the contributing factors to the drift of so many in our day away from gospel truth is that they ignore what the Bible says. Many of these claim to believe the Bible, but you can tell that their commitment to scripture is waning whenever they ignore what it obviously says. Whenever a person bases their doctrine on an unclear text and refuses to deal with the clearer more direct statements, it is a sign that they are drifting away from the standard of sola scriptura.

B. The second of the solas is Sola Gratia or grace alone. We derive what we believe about the gospel from the Bible alone. And the first thing the Bible tells us about the gospel of our salvation is that it is by grace. It is by grace alone. Paul drew attention to God's grace right there at the outset of his epistle to the Galatians. The very first word of salutation is grace. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Then he went on to say, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you IN THE GRACE OF CHRIST and are turning to a different gospel."

Any so-called gospel that diverts away from grace alone is no gospel. Grace. You cannot do anything or be anything to make yourself acceptable to God. This is part of the problem with what the infiltrators were teaching in Galatia. The false teachers were telling the Gentiles that to be saved, they needed to adopt Jewish ceremonial laws beginning with their males being circumcised. "You make yourself acceptable to God and then you can be saved." No. This flies in the face of what grace implies. Ephesians 2:8 says, "For by grace have you been saved." Grace by definition is God's unmerited, actually de-merited, favor. It is favor shown to you by God despite anything and everything about you. God is the actor in salvation. It is God who elects. It is God who sent his Son, who died for us while we were still sinners. It is God who raises those who are spiritually dead to life. It is God who effectually calls us in grace.

Furthermore, it is grace alone. Nothing that we bring to God, nothing that we can do can even help to save us. It is a work of God to do the saving. Grace is not help God gives alongside our efforts. It is amazing grace alone.

C. The next sola is sola fide, or faith alone. Faith is a reference to the open hands, so to speak, by which we receive God's gift of salvation through Christ as promised in the gospel. "For by grace are you saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." God gave his only Son so that "whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Without faith it is impossible to please God. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. The reception of the gift of being counted righteous is received through faith, and faith alone.

Here is the gospel. It was stated clearly by Paul and Silas to the Philippian jailer. He asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." We are not justified by faith and anything else. To be fully forgiven of your sin you must simply believe. There are no works of penance to do. There is no purgatory to endure after you die.

But what about the question of works? If a person is saved by faith alone, then there seems to be no incentive to do good works, to live a godly life. Oh, but that question fails to grasp that if one possesses real faith in God, he or she will also desire to please God with good works. According to James faith without works is dead. How true. Faith that springs forth from a heart that has been made alive through the grace of God is a faith that will desire to obey God as surely as it desires to be forgiven by God.

Paul says in Romans 4:18, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed." If God's promises rested on us, they would be imperiled. Justified by faith we have peace with God.

D. The fourth sola is actually a solus-Solus Christus, or Christ Alone. This saving grace that is received by faith is based exclusively on Jesus Christ and on Christ alone. Paul noted the work of Christ in Galatians 1:3. The Lord Jesus Christ "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age." In all the world there is no other savior. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me." Before the council after being arrested, Peter declared that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Jesus Christ alone is God who took on flesh. He alone as a man lived without a moral blemish. Jesus alone has endured the wrath of God upon himself for the sins of others. Having accomplished that, Jesus alone went to the grave for others and rose from the dead. He is the one mediator between God and man.

People of the world are uncomfortable with the thought that there is no savior but Christ and no way to heaven but through Christ. But there is no savior but Christ, and to be in union with him and his saving work you must believe in him. And to believe in him you must hear about him. Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. Therefore, Christ's disciples must tell others the word of Christ.

E. The fifth sola is actually soli- soli deo gloria, for the glory of God alone. God's work of salvation and that message proclaimed in the gospel is for the glory of God alone. Let me return you to Galatians 1, this time to verses 4-5. The Lord's Jesus' gift of himself for our sins is "according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen." Again in Ephesians, Paul

stresses that the plan of God to bring salvation and all its blessings is to the praise of his glorious grace and to the praise of his glory. In Philippians Paul states that the work of God through Christ such that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord results in the glory of God. Romans 11 ascribes to God the work of all things. To him be glory forever.

False gospels are never geared to result in the glory going to God. Indeed they diminish God's glory. The true gospel is set apart in that it is a work spoken and explained by God in his word. It is according to God's glorious grace. It is received through faith alone in Christ alone. It is fully a work of God. To God be the glory. In Christ God did not merely make something possible. He accomplished the greatest work in all creation. The gospel explained in the scripture alone exposes the sinfulness of man and it displays the glorious grace and mercy of our God through his only Son, Jesus, whom he has highly exalted. Glory be to God alone.

You can't work your way into favor with God. You can only accept as a gift what he has done for you. Then you must know that it was God at work in you both to will and work for his good pleasure. This is the heart of the gospel. It is according to the scripture alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone.

Conclusion

Every one of these pillars of truth experiences attack. People demean the trustworthiness and sufficiency of the scripture. People think they have something to congratulate themselves for in salvation. They think that being right with God is something they can accomplish. They trust in keeping commands and carrying out religious rites. They think surely Jesus is not the only way or if he is people can somehow be saved without ever knowing about him. People are so wrapped up with themselves that they rob God of his glory. They look at these factors in terms of their own arrogance and conceit rather than humbly falling before God in praise, amazement, and adoration.

But we must be watchful. We must hold fast to these five solas. They set the one true gospel apart from all the false contestants of distorted gospels, false religions, world views, and philosophies. They provide unspeakable hope and comfort in a world that clamors against them. They remind us that our salvation is secure. They demand to be proclaimed from the housetops, on the streets, and in conversations everywhere that sinners may be saved, saints may be strengthened, and God may get the glory.