

Title: You're only a true Christian if _____
Text: Acts 11:1-18
Theme: The temptation of adding to the gospel
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: We have to guard against adding to and/or taking away from the very essence of the gospel.

Read Text:

Gospel challenge – 60 seconds

Many of you remember Chris Dilley, our first pastoral intern. Some of you may remember that Chris was a big New England Patriots fan. Around here, that really isn't a big deal. While most of us cheer for the Lions, many of us have to pick another team that has a chance of winning, so that every season doesn't wipe out all the local supplies of Prozac. But, when Chris was being interviewed for a staff position at a church in Texas, his Patriots loyalty was more of a problem. Chris told me that one person, completely serious, said, "I don't know how you can be a Christian and cheer for the Patriots." Of course, I'm thinking, I'm not sure you can stay a Christian and cheer for the Lions. If anything could make you lose your salvation, it might be them. Chris told me later that he really thinks that this person was serious. And while we are tempted to laugh at that, the story of Christianity has been muddled and marred by those who either unwittingly, or deviously attempt to add things to the gospel.

I cannot overstate how this one issue has been such a perennial problem for Christians. And it remains a problem and will always be a problem that we have to guard against. I could preach this sermon every six months for the rest of my life at it would never get old because this is always a problem that we have to humbly be on guard against.

I. What is the problem?

The problem simply put, was some people in the early church wanted to add something else to the gospel. It was Jesus + eating kosher and only with kosher people. These were people who were labeled the circumcision party. (Doesn't sound like a particularly fun party does it?) But, we need to be charitable and seek to be understanding.

So let's acknowledge that this was an easy and natural thing to do. Peter assumed that the OT dietary laws still applied. It's not like they had the NT yet. When they studied the Bible and gathered to hear it preached, they were hearing the OT Scriptures. They were learning how the OT Scriptures were to be understood now as pointing to Christ and in so many ways of being fulfilled by Christ. This was a process. They were learning what it meant to be the church and they were about to learn that the church was going to be much bigger than Israel. But this was new for them and this is why this was a big issue for them. That is obvious because Luke gives this particular story so much attention. Peter's vision is told in detail, then summarized for Cornelius and then told here for a third time. This is a very big clue that the Spirit of God knew that this issue (temptation to add something to the gospel) needed to be emphasized for the church. Now, think about this. In Peter's vision, he saw a large sheet that was being let down

from heaven by its four corners and it was done right in front of him. Then it was taken up and brought back down, then taken up and brought back down, then taken up and brought back down, each time Peter was told by the Lord, “Rise Peter, kill and eat.” And “What God has made clean, do not call common.” Why did it happen three times? Because this was a difficult lesson for Peter to learn. The vision contained repetition and now, Peter’s vision is being repeated in the text. Why is it being repeated? Because, if this was a difficult lesson for Peter to learn, then obviously this was going to be a difficult lesson for others to learn. And, if this was a major problem for the early church, we have to assume that this is potentially a major problem for us.

So, what was the problem? The surface problem was that Peter, a full-blooded, circumcised Jew went into the home of a Gentile and ate with him and other uncircumcised Gentiles. And we should assume that part of the perceived problem with what Peter did is the assumption that he probably ate non-kosher food. In fact, the vision itself ties the food and the people together. Today we would say both the non-kosher food and the goyim (the Gentiles). The deeper problem is that there were a group of Christians who were trying to place rules and expectations on others that God did not require. By means of this vision to Peter, Jesus made it very clear that full fellowship in the gospel is open to Gentiles who were thought of as being contaminated because they ate non-kosher food. In fact, there was no longer any such thing in the mind of God as kosher and non-kosher. Those categories no longer exist. It seems to me, that at least some of the Jews were open to Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus as long as they started to live like Jews and became kosher in diet. (more expectations are added later) Otherwise, if they weren’t kosher, you couldn’t eat with them because then you wouldn’t be. But that creates another issue because if, as a Jew, you treat a Gentile as if he doesn’t belong, you are being inconsistent with the gospel, or perhaps you don’t even understand the implications of the gospel. If, as a Gentile, you treat a Jew as if he doesn’t belong, you are being inconsistent with the gospel, or perhaps you don’t understand the implications of the gospel. These Jews were adding an old covenant, (now no longer in force) dietary law to the gospel and were not only refusing to associate with Gentile believers, and therefore, not acknowledging that these Gentiles could be or were in full fellowship of the gospel, but they were taking issue with anyone else who, like Peter did. The surface problem laid open the main problem of our tendency to add to the gospel. That tendency has many tentacles that spread in the early days of the church. So, when you add something to the gospel, relationships in the church are going to be strained, unity is going to be broken, and over time the gospel is going to be minimized and perhaps lost. Again, in their defense, they were embracing OT laws. What they needed to know and what God was telling them was that these laws no longer applied. But, this was going to be hard to grasp. When you are told, “this is wrong, this is wrong, this is shameful, this is terrible” and you or others are shamed, warned and guilt-tripped regarding a matter, you develop a conscience about that. But, is your conscience biblical? Just because you feel guilt doesn’t mean that you are truly guilty. And when you place upon yourself or someone else a judgement that God doesn’t recognize, you’re not only crushing others, but you are taking upon yourself a role that you cannot fill and it will mess with you.

Do you see what happened here? Instead of being shocked and thrilled “that the Gentiles also had received the word of God” they were shocked and upset that Peter had eaten with the Gentiles. So, let’s say that you have been praying for your grandson to come to faith in Jesus and through the years, you’ve invited him to come with you to church. But, he has never shown any interest in it. But, today he came. And you are thrilled. You love him. You want him to

understand the gospel. You plan to meet up with him out in the Gathering Space about 10.35, and you see him, but he's talking with me and I leave and when you approach him, he looks baffled and you ask him what's wrong. He tells you that I went up to him and told him that I didn't think that he should wear a hoodie in church because I think it shows disrespect. Now, you are apoplectic, aren't you? I didn't care a whit about your grandson or about him hearing the gospel, or embarrassing him because that may have been the only thing he had to wear, I only cared about what he looked like and how his appearance affected the image that I wanted conveyed for the church. That is what happens when we care more about irrelevant issues than we do gospel issues.

Do you see how this is such a huge problem? Peter comes back from a thrilling step in the advancement of the gospel and the home church is angry. There's a sense in which when we read this text we should feel like yelling. What are you criticizing Peter for? Really!? Look, if you are going to get upset about something, get upset about something that matters, cause when you get upset about something that doesn't matter, over time you won't get upset about the things that do. And yet, Peter understands their concerns. They were singing Peter's song (10.28), at least the song that he used to sing. Peter knew that song and not only sang it but he led the choir in singing that song:

I don't eat with the goyim men,
and I don't aim to be mean,
but I don't eat with the goyim men
'cause all they touch is unclean.

But Jesus changed the music and Peter was singing a new song, at least for now. So, what was the problem? The problem was Jesus + kosher had to be challenged and corrected because it was not the gospel. Two questions for you to consider: 1) Have you opposed or perhaps do you oppose the work of the gospel because someone doesn't hold the same cultural preference as you? 2) What things you are tempted to believe and practice that you've added to the gospel that you think are necessary for others to believe and practice if they're going to be true Christians?

II. How did this problem affect the early church?

Remember that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who came (in their minds) to restore Israel to her rightful place as the greatest nation in the world. Do you remember how the book of Acts begins? Jesus is about to ascend back into heaven. In his last conversation with his disciples and they ask (1.6), "*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*" In their minds, the mission of spreading the good news about Jesus was directly related to Israel being the focal point of the world. Therefore, following Jesus meant to follow the Israelite laws which included remaining distinct from the Gentiles. The Temple practices would have only enforced this. This idea was deeply engrained in them and would not go away quickly or easily. And it doesn't.

Now, these issues can get a bit muddy. For example, here in Acts 11, the circumcised party, appear to be a group whose main objection with Peter is that he ate with Gentiles. Later in Acts 15, there were a group of men who went out from the church in Jerusalem and went up to Antioch and were teaching the members of the church there, that if you were a man and you wanted to follow Jesus then you had to be circumcised in order to be really saved. That is a bit

different. In Acts 11, it was Jesus + separation from Gentiles (and a non kosher diet). In Acts 15, it was Jesus, plus circumcision. Both of those issues continued to haunt the early church.

If you were a Jew who became a follower of Jesus, you were still a Jew. Jerusalem still meant a lot to you. You were part of a people who had a 2,000-year history and many meaningful events. You probably liked the Passover, Hanukkah, Pentecost and other holidays. You probably loved your mom and dad, siblings and cousins. But, you are now a follower of Jesus and many of them were not. Now, they may not agree with your view that Jesus was the Messiah, but you still went to the Temple, kept the traditions, and you did not eat with Gentiles. You were still clean. But, if you ever dared to step over the threshold of a Gentile home and eat with them, Oh My! That would be it! But, if you did not eat with the Gentiles, if you treated them as if you could not fellowship with them, then what were you telling them? Well, up until this point, that was really not an issue that you had to face. But, as the gospel spreads, this becomes a huge issue.

The pressure from this group was very strong. It was so strong that Peter himself, later on, would not eat with Gentiles when some of his Jewish friends were around because he did not want to upset his Jewish friends. Peter did this! Paul calls him out on this in Galatians 2 and says, *“I opposed him (Peter) to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.”* This issue is such a huge problem that the entire book of Galatians is written to address it.

It comes up again in Colossians 4 in a subtler way. Paul is commending a group of brothers who were with him to the church at Colossae. He is telling the church what a great help these brothers have been (Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter.) He tells them that only a couple of them were circumcised. For him, it was and should be a non-issue. In Titus 1, we read that Paul sent Titus to the island of Crete to help get the churches there in order in part because those of the circumcision party were upsetting whole families. They were teaching heresy in the church. They were adding to the gospel and trying to put people under rules that God did not put them under. Paul attacks this issue in the book of Romans. It’s a big deal. We are tempted to add our own preferences to the gospel.

III. **How does this problem express itself in our church?**

There are many ways and I am not going to list them all, but here are some popular ones. There is a lot of talk about whether or not to vaccinate your children. Is the debate about vaccinations a gospel issue? In other words, if you vaccinate your children are you automatically going to heaven or going to hell over it? No. Do you have to trust in Jesus in order to be a follower of Jesus? Yes. Do you have to trust in Jesus and vaccinate your children to be a follower of Jesus? No. Do you have to trust in Jesus and not vaccinate your children in order to be a follower of Jesus? No. Do I have an opinion about it? I sure do. Do you know what it is? Probably not. Is my opinion informed? Yes. Do I know everything there is to know about vaccinations? No! So, how should I talk with other parents whose opinion about this is different than mine? With humility, kindness, and a teachable spirit. They may know something that you don’t. Now based on all that you have read, you may be very frustrated that there are parents who are putting their children

and other children at unnecessary risk by not getting certain vaccinations. So you announce on social media, “I don’t see how you can be a true Christian if you don’t vaccinate your children.” Or based on all that you have read, you may be very frustrated that there are parents who are putting their children at unnecessary risk by getting certain vaccinations. So you announce on social media, “I don’t see how you can be a true Christian if you vaccinate your children.”

The same thing is true about schooling choices. You may sincerely think that anyone who does not put their child in a public school is cheating that child from a well-rounded education and not preparing him or her to be able to stand up for Jesus in this world. You may also sincerely think that anyone who does not homeschool their child is wrong. Do you know everything there is to know about that issue and do you know all of the factors that every parent in this congregation is dealing with in their home and with their child? I worked on some poetry this week.

Believe just like me above the rest
Confess to the world that I am the best
Educate your kids as only I do
And then, maybe then, will I approve of you

The same thing is true for a number of political issues. Are there people in this church family who think President Trump is doing a wonderful job? Probably. And they may be tempted to say, “I don’t see how you can be a Christian and not vote for Trump.” Are there people in this church family who think that President Trump is a moral reprobate? Probably. And they may be tempted to say, “I don’t see how you can be a Christian and vote for Trump.” Is your view of the president more important than your relationship with another brother or sister? Are you going to spend eternity only with people who voted just like you? Is, the person you vote for going to determine your standing before God? No, that is determined by your understanding of and embracing of the gospel. This is a big issue and that is why I’ve asked Jonathan Leeman to address it on June 5.

There are some doctrinal issues that are fundamental to the gospel itself. Therefore, it is true and right to say, “You can’t be a true Christian if you deny the existence of Christ, or if you reject his death on the cross as the payment for sin, or if you reject his bodily resurrection. But, there are doctrinal issues that are not primary to the gospel. You and I may disagree on church polity. I am convinced and we practice an Elder led/Congregational Rule form of polity. You may disagree so strongly that you cannot be a member here. Ok, but that does not mean that you are not a follower of Jesus. It would be wrong for me to say, that it’s Jesus + my view of polity. But, all of these issues and many more like your view of trichotomism vs. dichotomism, eschatology, organic gardening, essential oils, only buying produce at Whole Foods, etc. are not essential to the gospel.

IV. **What do we do about it?**

What did Peter do about it? He told them what God had revealed to him and in that revelation, he told them what God had said.

A. **Remind ourselves that God’s Word is above all.**

B. Remind ourselves of the gospel.

Peter told these people that he was preaching the gospel and as he preached these people experienced a Gentile Pentecost. And this is how you see the gift of tongues used in the early days of the church. God used that gift to authenticate the early believers, then to authenticate that the Samaritans had really come to faith in Christ and now the Gentiles. This was not a private prayer language sort of deal, this was a confirming tool by the Spirit of God to show that the gospel had not only gone to the Gentiles, but the Spirit of God had given them a seat, just like everyone else, around the same table.