



## **Ben Blobaum's Sermon**

### **October 2, 2022**

### **17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

What do the following historical figures have in common: Arius, Pelagius, Marcion, Nestorius, Donatus, the Gnostics? The answer is: they were all condemned as heretics by the church.

By the very act of identifying particular teachings as heresy, the church implicitly attests to the fact that truth and falsehood "co-exist" in the world, and that, for the sake of peoples' souls, it is imperative that the church discern and distinguish between the two.

The question, then, is how – how, or on what basis, can the church distinguish between truth and lies? Or, put differently, what is the measuring stick against which the church can evaluate whether teachings, beliefs, or practices correspond to truth or falsehood?

If you answered, "the Bible," you're not wrong, but you're also only half right. Because here's the problem: all the heretics I just named knew their Bibles very, very well. In fact, they all pointed to Scripture as the *basis* for what they believed. If you asked them to defend their teachings, they would cite you chapter and verse in the Bible.

So, even in turning to the Bible, we face a similar question to the one we were just trying to answer. Namely, what constitutes a correct, or properly *Christian*, reading of Scripture, and on what basis can the church evaluate whether a particular interpretation is true or false?

We find the answer in our New Testament lesson for today. Two of the most important verses in the Bible, for the ongoing life of the church, are found in the first chapter of Paul's second letter to Timothy. Listen again to what Paul says in verses 13-14: *Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.*

The first point is that truth is given by the Holy Spirit, and, as such, it is a basic teaching of the church that it is impossible to rightly understand the Bible unless one is reborn of the Spirit of God, by Baptism and true faith in Christ.

However, because even baptized Christians are susceptible to falsely interpreting the Bible (as we saw with the heretics), Paul gives Timothy the key by which to properly understand the Scriptures and remain in the true faith. This is the key: he says, *follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me.* Or, some translations render it, "follow the pattern of sound *teaching* that you heard from me," which I think is a better translation.

Notice that Paul did not simply say to Timothy, "follow the sacred texts," or, "you just have to know the Scriptures." No, Paul gave Timothy something additional, something *outside* the Scriptures. Namely, a particular teaching.

Above all, what Paul and the other apostles taught – first, by mouth, and, later, in writing – was the gospel, the announcement that Jesus Christ is risen, and that he is Lord. Moreover, the apostles taught that this announcement was *in accordance with* the Scriptures of Israel, and that Jesus Christ is the *fulfillment* of the whole of Israel's Scripture (there was not yet a written New Testament).

But where did Paul and the other apostles learn this message and teaching? The answer is: directly from the risen Lord. We see this most explicitly when Jesus is on the road to Emmaus with two of his disciples, and, later, when he is back in Jerusalem with the Eleven, where Luke tells us, "[Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (24:27), reminding them that, just as he had said, "everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (24:44-45).

In other words, Jesus both A) taught his apostles the gospel directly, *and* B) he showed them how this gospel about him is the key to understanding the meaning of Scripture.

And so, Paul is at pains to convey to his readers, as he says in Galatians, "I did not receive [the gospel] from man...rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (1:12). And, most directly, in his first letter to the

Thessalonians, Paul rejoices, saying, “when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (2:13).

It is *this* word of God – the gospel – this teaching about Jesus that the apostles received from the risen Lord, *that* is the pattern of sound words to which Paul instructs Timothy to hold fast. “Follow in *this* teaching,” Paul is saying, “read and interpret the Scriptures according to *this* teaching – the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The apostles are the only persons to have received and been taught the gospel directly from the risen Christ. That’s one of the qualifications of what it means to be an apostle. An apostle is one to whom the risen Lord appeared, to whom he taught the Good News concerning himself, and whom Jesus then commissioned to be his authorized witness.

And *every other person in history* has received the gospel through their testimony. We have no other access to the words and deeds of Jesus except through the witness of the apostles, recorded in the New Testament.

This is what we mean when, in the third article of the Nicene Creed, we confess faith in “one, holy, catholic, and *apostolic* church.” What we’re confessing is that the church is founded on the witness and teaching of Christ’s apostles, and that the church stands firm, amid the chances and changes of history, by holding fast to their message and following the pattern of their teaching.

In fact, the Creed is the textualized summary of the apostolic teaching, or, as it’s more commonly called, the apostolic tradition. The Creed we will confess in today’s service is called the Apostles’ Creed. It was not written by the apostles, but it bears their title precisely because it is the summary of the teaching that they handed on, to which the church is to hold fast.

And it is this apostolic tradition, summarized in the ancient creeds, that is the key, or “rule,” by which the church can properly evaluate interpretations of Scripture and discern between true teaching and falsehood.

Recall that Jesus taught his apostles not only the gospel, but also how to read and interpret Scripture according to the gospel. And so, a circular relationship emerges: the gospel proclaimed in the apostolic tradition is *in accordance with the Scriptures*, and the Scriptures, in turn, are to be read *in accordance with the tradition*.

Thus, the Creed, precisely as the summary of the apostolic tradition, is at the same time the summary of Who and what the Bible is about. Any interpretation of Scripture, therefore, or any teaching about the Christian faith, that is contrary to the Creed and the broader apostolic tradition, is false.

“But what about updates to the faith?” we might ask, “after all, don’t we know more today than the apostles did? If the apostles could have known what we know today, surely their teaching would have been different.”

Pick nearly any discipline or field of study, and our knowledge of it today does, indeed, outstrip that of the apostles. But what about when it comes to the knowledge of God in Christ and understanding the faith? To answer that question, we need to ask, what is the content of the faith?

The gospel is not, in the first instance, a message about salvation. For example, the gospel is not, “your sins are forgiven,” or “God accepts you,” or any other variation of this sort. No, the content of the gospel is a Person; specifically, the gospel is the message about a first-century Jewish man.

And it is *because* this man is who he is, and because this man did, said, and suffered what he did, and died the death that he did, that the gospel is, at the same time, a message of salvation. But a message about salvation that is emptied of its content about Jesus Christ is not the gospel, and therefore has no power to save.

So, if the content of the Christian faith is God in the Person of Christ Jesus, then the question is, *who knows Jesus and his teaching better: us, or the apostles?* And the answer is, absolutely: the apostles.

If it were otherwise, why would we bother to continue reading the New Testament? If we moderns know the faith better than the apostles, it would make sense to read only today’s top biblical scholars. But it’s just the other way around: today’s scholars are entirely dependent – as is the whole church – on the witness of the apostles, handed down in Scripture and the Tradition

Returning, then, to the question about whether Christian teachings need updated revision to reflect modern sensibilities, here is the answer. If the content of the church’s faith and teaching is a Person, then the faith only needs updating if that Person has changed. And it is the decisive testimony of Scripture that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8).



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The notion that the apostolic faith needs updated revision is the exact source of the crisis of division in the churches today. Indeed, there are many who insist that the faith is outdated and, therefore, backwards and bigoted, in light of the wisdom of modernity. This is particularly the case with respect to the church's teaching on sexual ethics.

But to think that we know better than Christ's apostles, and, so, to refuse to submit to the authority of their teaching, that is the way of apostasy. Apostasy means to turn, or to fall, away from Christ, precisely the Christ *who has revealed himself through the prophets and apostles*. And we are living in an Age of Apostasy, in which many who still profess faith in Christ have, in reality, rejected him and rejoined the world.

If we take offense at the church's teachings, it is not on account of there being anything regressive or bigoted in the teaching; it's on account of the hardness of our hearts against God. Because what the church received from the apostles is, as Paul says, the word of God.

The pertinent question, then, is not, "should the church's teachings be updated?" Just think for a moment about the things being taught in many of the churches today. The real question is: *Would the apostles recognize such teachings as being in continuity with the gospel that they were commissioned to preach?* In other words, *would the apostles recognize the church today as being the same community that they founded?* And, if they wouldn't, then it is not the church of Jesus Christ.

For, again, this is what it means to confess that the church of Jesus Christ is the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

"Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you," Paul instructs Timothy – the "good deposit" being the apostolic faith, centered in the Person and work of Jesus. And so too must we guard the true faith which we have received from the apostles, by the Holy Spirit. The church lives and continues *as* the church of Jesus Christ, by receiving the faith of the apostles, holding fast to it, and handing it on.

There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all" (Eph. 4:5-6), who sent his only-begotten Son to suffer and die "for us and for our salvation." This very same Son is risen and Lord. His name is Jesus, and all who call on his Name shall be saved.

This is the apostolic faith, "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Amen.