

CHRISTIAN MARGINS

Limites do Cristianismo

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ABSTRACT

The Apostle Paul did not hide anything that God had declared to him, but boldly proclaimed the entire Gospel: Salvation, Sanctification, and also our final Glorification. Unfortunately, after decades of syncretism, rationalism, and relativism many saints struggle to identify the Gospel. The content of the Gospel is then the issue. What are those margins of the Christian faith, and how can one judge what is truly the Gospel in a world of competing beliefs? The margins of Christianity can be identified with a series of questions. Who/what is God? God has revealed Himself as Trinity, as good, holy and redemptive. We owe Him our allegiance. How do we know religious truth? We know through historic events, the revelation of God in Jesus and the authority of the Bible. What is the church's responsibility to these margins? The church must know Christ, know the Bible and compel others to know Christ as revealed in the Bible. The truths in the Bible have authority over humanity and to refuse Jesus as Savior and King is an egregious act of rebellion. To neglect telling the world about Jesus is an intolerable act of neglect.

Key Words: Gospel. Authority. Truth. History. Church. Responsibility.

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RESUMO

O Apóstolo Paulo não escondeu nada do que Deus tinha declarado a ele, mas corajosamente proclamou todo o Evangelho: salvação, santificação e, também, a nossa glorificação final. Infelizmente, depois de décadas de sincretismo, racionalismo e relativismo, muitos santos lutam para identificar o Evangelho. O conteúdo do Evangelho é então o problema. Quais são esses limites da fé cristã, e como se pode julgar o que é verdadeiramente o Evangelho em um mundo de crenças concorrentes? Os limites do cristianismo podem ser identificados com uma série de perguntas. Quem / o que é Deus? Deus revelou-se como Trindade, como bom, santo e redentor. Devemos-lhe a nossa fidelidade. Como podemos saber a verdade religiosa? Sabemos através de eventos históricos, da revelação de Deus em Jesus e da autoridade da Bíblia. Qual é a responsabilidade da igreja para com esses limites? A igreja deve conhecer a Cristo, conhecer a Bíblia e compeli-los outros a conhecer a Cristo como revelado na Bíblia. As verdades da Bíblia tem autoridade sobre a humanidade e recusar a Jesus como Salvador e Rei é um ato flagrante de rebelião. Negligenciar falar ao mundo sobre Jesus é um ato intolerável de negligência.

Palavras chave: Evangelho. Autoridade. Verdade. História. Igreja. Responsabilidade.

INTRODUCTION

I have been reading how the Apostle Paul gave a ‘going away’ speech to the Elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:17-35. One of the things that stood out in the text was how the Apostle Paul was able to say that he had boldly declared the “whole counsel of God” (v 27) to the church while he was with them. That is quite a statement! The Apostle Paul did not hide anything that God had declared to him, but boldly proclaimed the entire Gospel. The entire Gospel means that Paul talked about Sal-

vation, Sanctification, and also our final Glorification.

The “whole counsel of God” is synonymous with “the faith once and for all delivered to the saints,” in Jude 3. Unfortunately, after decades of syncretism, rationalism, and relativism many saints struggle to identify the Gospel. Sometimes someone will quote a favorite verse and say, “here is the Gospel!” -- hoping that the hearers are thinking with the same theological and cultural world-view as that of the speaker. The content of the Gospel is then the issue. What are those margins of the Christian faith, and how can one judge what is truly the Gospel in a world of competing beliefs?

The margins of Christianity can be identified with a series of questions. Who/what is God? How do we know religious truth? And, what is the church’s responsibility to these margins?

1. WHO IS THE CHRISTIAN GOD?

In Christianity, when one says, “God,” it is referring to a specific Being. Classic Christianity believes that God is Triune. This simply means that God exists in three persons. Within the one God is the person of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each is not the same person as the other, yet there are not three gods but one. He is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being. He has created everything, preserves it and rules over it. God’s knowledge covers all things, past, present, and future, including the decisions of each person whom He has created. To Him, each person owes Him their complete allegiance,

respect, and compliance.

The Trinitarian God of Christianity is self-sustaining and self-fulfilled. This means that God was not lonely and in need of anything before He created all that exists. God is outside of creation, but is always involved in what is going on in His creation. Therefore, the god of the deist or the gods of the pantheist or panentheist are not related to the God found in Christianity.

There is much more that can be said at this point. We could talk about God's attributes, His sovereignty, omnipotence, holiness, goodness, love, or how He loves even His enemies, etc. Yet, there is a question that needs to be answered. How do we know that this is true?

2. HOW DO WE KNOW RELIGIOUS TRUTH?

Three points need to be made here. First, that Christianity is a faith based on history, as well as dogma. So if the events in the Bible are myth or stories in a graphic novel or novella, then nothing in Christianity is worth committing one's life to. If Jesus really did die on the cross and rise from the dead three days later, then belief that Jesus is the God-man Savior of the world becomes significant. (1 Cor 15) Christianity is a uniquely historic worldview. Jesus' ministry was a public ministry. Christianity was not started with someone having a private dream, or private vision or a private encounter with an angelic being, and then telling others. Private experiences are impossible to verify. In classic Christianity Jesus spent three years teaching and accomplishing miracles

in the full view of the public. He was executed on a cross where he died a public death, was buried in full view of friends and enemies and showed himself alive, having risen from the dead publically. That is, there are witnesses to all of these events that can verify and corroborated the reality of these public events. It was those witnesses to these public events that told others what had happened. Those testimonies were and continue to be verifiable historical evidence. The point is that in Christianity there is no room for separating the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. They must be one and the same, or it is not Christianity.

The second point surrounds Jesus as God's revelation of Himself to humanity and for humanity. For Christians Jesus is both fully God and fully human. He was not a ghost or phantom. He is the second person of the Trinity. This 'Living word of God' came to earth for the redemption of fallen humanity. In case you object to the idea that humanity is sinful and fallen I would only encourage you to read your local paper. It will quickly reveal that humanity is desperately fallen and self-destructive. So God sent His Son to save humanity. Jesus did this by substituting Himself for humanity's sins being executed on a Roman cross, and by rising from the dead.

The doctrine of the substitutionary atonement and the literal resurrection have been seen by some as controversial. I think that Derek Rishmawy has done a good job of identifying what is meant by substitutionary atonement;

At its heart, the idea is that Jesus' death on the cross was the divine means of dealing and dispensing with the guilt incurred by sinners who have rebelled against the true God. Humanity through its sin violated the divine law, wrecking God's intended shalom, bringing down condemnation upon them, and alienating them from proper relationship with God. God being just as well as loving and merciful sends the Son, Jesus, as an innocent, representative person, the Godman, to take responsibility for human sin and suffer punishment on behalf of sinners. Or rather, he suffers the legal consequences of sinners, the judgment and just wrath of God against sin, thereby relieving them of guilt, bringing about reconciliation.²

Jesus died for the sins of humanity. Christianity is based on historic events, and the revelation of God which is seen in Jesus, the Living Word of God. For Christians, if Jesus did not pay the penalty for sin, then there is no hope of redemption or peace with God.

Along with the salvation that is offered by Jesus' redemptive work, is the necessary position that Jesus now holds in the universe. For the Christian -- Jesus is our God and King. If the word "King" is too uncomfortable we can substitute the words "Master." The implications here is that, for the Believer, their final allegiance is not to their political party, government or other powers and authorities. Their allegiance is to their King, Jesus. There

2 RISHMAWY, Derek. The beauty of the cross: 19 objections and answers on penal substitutionary atonement. **Reformish**. Accessed from <https://derekzrismawy.com/2014/10/23/the-beauty-of-the-cross-19-objections-and-answers-on-penal-substitutionary-atonement-500th-post/>

has been needless confusion about this point of ultimate allegiance. As an example, many politicians claim to be “Christians,” but from the way that they live their lives it seems that Jesus is the last person who controls their lives. It is their lust, passion, and desire for power, greed, and love of self that drives them. All of these purposes are antithetical to Christianity.

This brings us to the third point – the Bible – or more specifically the authority of the Bible. The Bible is seen as God’s revelation of Himself to humanity. It is called “The Written Word of God.” This revelation is seen as completely dependent upon God Himself, who through many human beings has given to us all that we need for life and godliness. (2 Peter 1:3) One group has said this about the Bible;

All Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.³

Without quibbling over certain theological words that may cause needless knee-jerk reactions, most Christians would agree with the above statement that the Bible holds final authority over the Christian’s beliefs and conduct.

There are two warnings that should be considered

³ The Southern Baptist Convention. **The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message.** Accessed from <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>

that could result in misinterpretations of the Bible. On the one side is Christian Rationalism that places an Enlightenment or Naturalist grid on reading the Bible. This means that if there are miracles in the Bible, they may be necessarily accepted, but those events could not happen today. The reason why has nothing to do with the authority of the Bible; rather it has everything to do with the lens with which the Bible is being read. There are a lot of challenging things in the Bible, but if our theology disagrees with the Bible then we would be very unwise not to change our theology. This means that our worldview must conform to what the Bible says, not what our favorite theologian reinterprets it to say. A good standard is that if someone has discovered something in the Bible that no one in the last 2000 years of scholarly research has discovered, then there is a good chance that this new discovery is wrong. As I suggest to my students, "Please go back and check your sources."

The second warning comes from the opposite extreme. In Deuteronomy 18 there are two standards for a true prophet of God. The first is correct doctrine. The second is that the prophet must be 100% accurate in all prophetic utterances. Deuteronomy 13:1-3 also addresses the issue of false prophets. What this means for us is that every time we see someone make some divine pronouncement, like events relating to four red moons, and nothing happens we should 1) not be afraid of anything they say, and 2) ignore them as being a false prophet.⁴ In

4 BOYCE, James P. **Abstract of Systematic Theology**. Hanford, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, (first published in 1887).

the Bible one does not find that God is a side show carnival salesman trying to get people to buy magic pencils to pass a test or magic seeds to make money grow. Nor does God respond to people reposting Facebook messages that say that you will be blessed if you forward that message to ten of your friends in the next five minutes. That is simply not the way God works. The Bible is clear that God does answer our prayers, but He is not our Divine Candy Machine.

This leads us naturally to the work of the Holy Spirit. Theologically, He is the third person of the Trinity through whom God acts, reveals, empowers and discloses His will and presence. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to God's people, convicts the world of sin, righteous and judgment (John 16:8), and is at work around the world today accomplishing the sovereign mission of the Father. There is one other issue about the Holy Spirit that needs clarification. The Baptist Preacher, Charles Spurgeon has said of the Holy Spirit,

We are so accustomed to talk about the influence of the Holy Spirit and his sacred operations and graces, that we are apt to forget that the Holy Spirit is truly and actually a person—that he is an actual life—an existence; or, as we Trinitarians usually say, one person in the essence of the Godhead. But I am afraid that, though we don't know it, we have acquired the habit of regarding the Holy Spirit as a divine emanation flowing from the Father and the Son, but not as being actually a person himself. I know it is not easy to carry around in our mind the idea of the

Holy Spirit as a person. I can think of the Father as a person, because his actions are such that I can understand. I see him hang the world in space; I observe him wrapping the newly created ocean in darkness; I know it is he who formed the drops of hail, who determined the number of the stars and calls them each by name. I can conceive of Him as a person, because I see his actions.⁵

So the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force, (i.e. Star Wars), or a feeling of religious experience, (i.e. William James), but a person who chooses to work and do as the Trinity decides.

Therefore, Christians must beware of three things when it comes to the work of the Holy Spirit. First, Christians need to beware of putting religious activity over loving others. That means that cold-blooded and merciless Christianity does not honor God. I am the chairman of a transition house where we minister to drug addicts, ex-cons and people in gangs. As one of my board member has said, "These are the people that society has forgotten." Yet, if we are consistent in our faith, then these are exactly the people to whom we should be serving. Like the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, Christians must choose to be inconvenienced by God's mission, or else we may find ourselves at odds with God's purposes.

Second, we need to beware of apathy. Many who are church members are purposeless, indifferent, entitled

5 SPURGEON, Charles. **The Personality of the Holy Spirit**. (Originally preached January 21, 1855). Accessed from <http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0004.htm>

and cynical. The problem here is that one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is to help Christians grow in their sanctification. They should become holy. God does this through disciplining His children through trials, circumstances, warnings and training in righteousness. (c.f. 2 Tim 3:16 and Heb 12:5-7) Apathy embraces impurity, grieves the Holy Spirit, and hinders spiritual maturity.

Finally, beware of confusing cultural trends with biblical truth. An example of this is seen in the “worship wars” that have engulfed some churches in recent decades. If needless disagreements are to be avoided, the church must *be* Christ centered and not culture centered. There needs to be a bit of clarification at this point. What is meant here is *Christian Culture*. Confusing Christian Culture with the work of the Holy Spirit will hinder spiritual maturity. In other words, the church must not continually be side tracked on issues concerning the style of music (hymns or contemporary), the response to preaching (loud responses and standing or sitting quietly taking notes), or architecture (strip mall or vaulted ceilings with bell towers). This is where theological margins can really help us. Where the Bible is silent, we have freedom. That means that pastors and missionaries are not to import culture (whether someone likes NASCAR has nothing to do with their faith), but the essential theology of Christ. How Christianity is indigenously expressed is a freedom given to every culture. People need to learn/be taught how to think bibliocentrically.

3. THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY

It has been said that unbelief always hides behind three “bushes.” These bushes are “It is not my fault,” “It is someone else’s fault,” and “it is not the right time.” Unbelief not only hides behind these bushes, but it also fails to take personal responsibility. On the other hand – faith does not hide. It rises up and agrees with what God says about the human race. That is, people of faith take personal responsibility for their actions, and they know that they have fallen short of what God wants from them. This is not the end of the story. Thankfully, we are told, “God sent His Son into humanity that He might redeem humanity.” (John 3:27) God was not talking about some other time or dimension, but here and now. He was not calling out to Angels or animals, rather He is talking to you and me! He was and is seeking to redeem His people who have been so prone to hide behind the bushes. This should make us stand and shout because it is very good news. God has come to save sinners. To be saved we have to admit 3 things: First that we are not God; second that Jesus is God; and third, that only Jesus can save us. This should not be a surprise to anyone who has read the Bible, but there are a number of celebrities who have embraced the error that each of us has a ‘divine spark’ and that we too can become gods. This type of post-modern Gnosticism has become very popular among religious groups, but it is outside of the boundaries of orthodoxy.

One would be correct to ask how this pernicious idea of man becoming God became popular? One reason

is that our churches are filled with biblically illiterate people. That is not to say that there needs to be a requirement for all church members to have technical theological degrees. What is being said is that in many churches, no one outside of the paid staff regularly reads the Bible, and even some preachers only look at the Bible for proof texts to support their next motivational talk. It is the church's responsibility to teach people how to learn the Word of God for themselves. This is what teachers do according to Ephesians Four; train or build up the saints to be effective servants of God in the ministry that God has called them.

The problem of biblical illiteracy raised its head in an undergraduate class that I taught on the book of Romans. The students were bright and attentive. Most of them had been in good churches for decades. One of the major assignments was to memorize Romans 8. After the class one would have thought that they were asked a truly impossible task from the way they complained. Now, on the positive side, many of the students said that their entire theology was strengthened by the assignment. On the negative side, not one of them completed the task by the end of the course. They had experienced years of familiarity with the Bible, Christian talk, and Christian culture, but they had not learned the biblical text for themselves. Churches cannot be witness to the "once and for all delivered to the saints faith" if no one actually knows what it is. This issue returns this paper to the initial points of this paper.

True truth is not an oppressive power play, but

a reality outside of our experience. It remains constant, whether one agrees with it, or not. It is not a personal hypothesis or a social construct. It corresponds with what is. Therefore, the revelation of God through the Jesus, the Living Word of God, and the Bible, the Written Word of God, are foundational. The implications here is that the truths in the Bible have authority over humanity and to refuse Jesus as Savior and King is an egregious act of rebellion. Theology then must fit what the Bible says, if not then it is not Christian.

A second responsibility of the church when it comes to the Gospel is that there is a desperate need for discipleship or mentorship. The church must teach others the faith once and for all delivered! This is an arduous process that involved personal interaction with other people. There is no true growth in the Christian life apart from intentional, time consuming and messy personal interaction with another, more mature believer (cf. 2 Tim 2:1-7).

CONCLUSION

The boundaries of the Christian faith are found in the central theological doctrines concerning God's self-revelation in Jesus and the Bible. Christians can evaluate what is truly the Gospel by whether it conforms to the work and words of Christ. This makes Christianity and Christian theology not just counter-culture, contra-culture. Contra-culture simply does not match the purposes of the world. The Gospel is diametrically opposed to the

central motivations of this world's system.

The result of Christian theology having these margins that necessitate a contra-cultural confrontation is that the church is responsible for teaching the entire counsel of God, and to tell others about the great things that God has done. The way Christians confront culture is contra-culture. It is seen through love, acts of mercy and service that earn them the opportunity to share the entire counsel of God with others.

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