

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!
"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 07 ***Is There a Biblical Reason*** ***that Women Cannot be*** ***Elders and Deacons?***

1 Peter 5:1-4

Feb 19, 2017

Communion: Ed Saunders
Care Calling: The Webb's
POTLUCK

Saturday 2/19 Clean Up: Mike Rylant

- 1 🎵 How Majestic [DH 2238]
- 2 🎵 424 - The servant song ALL 424
- 3 🎵 415 - We are called to be God's people ALL 415
- 4 🎵 Doxology [DH 1981]
- 5 🎵 408 - How firm a foundation ALL 408
- 6 🎵 425 - Bind us together 425
- 7 🎵 Family of God [DH 2357]

Titus 1:5-9 (NASB)

⁵ For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, ⁶ *namely*, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. ⁷ For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, ⁸ but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-

controlled,⁹ holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

1 Peter 5:1-4 (NASB)

1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

This is one of those difficult sermons that I would prefer not having to talk about.

As you know, this is a highly charged, emotionally driven, topic, caught up in the powerfull cultural turmoil of the world in which we live.

It's my nature to be loving and kind and accepting and understanding of people whatever circumstances they are in.

When people disagree with me about the necessity of accepting the Bible as being the authoritative word of God, as we discussed several weeks ago, I choose to stand on the word.

You constantly hear people saying that we don't need to accept everything the Bible says because it is out of date.

I say it is God's word for **ALL** time.

When people say "I don't need to be immersed for my salvation," my inclination is to say, "Well, I accept you and I love you just as you are."

And yet I cannot disregard the fact that it was God who said **"turn to God and change the way you think and act, and each of you be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift."**

It is in immersion that we receive both our forgiveness of sins, and His gift of our Holy Spirit.

I am bothered that some people feel discriminated against by God's word, and feel like they are second class citizens.

To demonstrate that leadership does not deny equality one need only consider the Godhead.

All three members are eternal and share the same essence.

Yet the Father is the leader.

Jesus said that He did not speak on His own authority:

John 12:49-50 (NASB)

49 "For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment *as to* what to say and what to speak. 50 "I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me."

Furthermore the Holy Spirit who would **guide the apostles into all truth** would not speak on His own authority:

John 16:13 (NASB)

13 "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come."

If the Father, therefore, could exercise the leadership role in the Godhead **and equality be maintained**, why cannot the same thing occur in the home and in the church?

Is Jesus inferior to the Father?

Is the Holy Spirit worth less because He does not exercise the leadership role?

All should agree that each member of the Godhead is of great value.

In order for someone to draw the conclusion that women cannot be leaders in the church because they are somehow worth less than men, one must equally conclude the same about Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The concepts of *role* and *worth* must be disassociated, and the Scriptures must be accepted for what they teach.

We are in a global war with the Evil one.

If I'm to err, I would rather err on liberating women to join the fray than tying up over half of our soldiers.

I am not a feminist, nor is it my intention to "set women" free.

My goal as a preacher is to proclaim our unmitigated bondage to Jesus.

We need to ask: "What is the Holy Spirit calling me to do?" **NOT**, "What is my gender role."

I find throughout the bible notable exceptions to women's traditional roles.

I have no problem with the Spirit guiding a woman in ways that are unique and even extraordinary.

It is our current culture that seeks to discredit the Word of God on this subject.

Jesus says

John 17:17 (NASB)

17 "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.

God's word has spoken about these things, and because of that, we need to take a look at why the Bible says that elders and deacons have to be men.

Is there a biblical reason that women cannot be elders and deacons and that is the subject of our difficult sermon for today.

I have spent a lot of time researching our topic over the years. And, just for this sermon today, I have accumulated nearly 300 pages of notes.

I have examined our discussion from not only the Biblical Theology perspective, I've examined the early history of the church, I've read the early leaders of the Restoration Movement, and I have read the current views, both pro and con.

I need to be honest with myself, before I can be honest with you.

James 3:1 (MSG)

1 Preaching is highly responsible work. Preachers are held to the strictest standards.

There is a huge volume of written literature available that is written by Christian feminists.

Christian feminists believe that God does not discriminate on the basis of biologically-determined characteristics such as sex and race.

And, I agree that God doesn't discriminate on the basis of race.

Christian feminists major issues include the ordination of women, male dominance in the church, male dominance in Christian marriage, recognition of equal spiritual and moral abilities, reproductive rights, and the search for a feminine or gender-transcendent god.

Christian feminists draw on the teachings of other religions and ideologies in addition to biblical evidence.

Feminists were especially active during the French and American Revolutions, during the abolitionist movements and political rights mobilizations of the mid-nineteenth century, and especially during the Progressive Era in the United States.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Wicca, started in England,

and it pushed the feminist point of view.

Wicca is a predominantly Western movement whose followers practice witchcraft and nature worship and who see it as a religion based on pre-Christian traditions of northern and western Europe. It spread through England in the 1950s and subsequently attracted followers in Europe and the United States.

It is now classified by the U.S. Government as a organized religion, and as such, now have chaplains in women's prisons.

The modern debate regarding the ordination of women to the Eldership and Deaconship began in the 1880s, about twenty years after the rise of what has been called "**Christian feminism.**"

The debate over women in church leadership re-emerged in the 1980s, about twenty years after the rise of secular and pagan feminism.

The fact that the push to ordain women as Elders and Deacons occurred in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after certain types of feminism became popular in our culture is worth noting.

The arguments set forth during the 1980s bore a striking resemblance to the arguments offered during the 1880s.

The chaos and social disorder that resulted from the political revolutions ushered in by the French Revolution in 1789 gave Christian feminists hope of changes.

But the changes Christian feminists wanted required them to change centuries old understanding of God's inspired Word.

So, we have to decide whether we will be swayed by cultural interpretations, or live by what God said.

I. What Are The Biblical Leadership Offices?

I think it will help if we understand Biblical leadership as implimented by the Holy Spirit.

While the Apostles were alive, there were some temporary positions.

Paul says

1 Corinthians 12:28 (NASB)

28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers

Luke tells us about

Acts 21:8 (NASB)

8 Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven

And, Luke tells that he and Paul

Acts 14:23 (NASB)

23 appointed elders for them in every church

Then, Paul and Timothy begin their letter to the Philippians by saying:

Philippians 1:1 (NASB)

1 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:

As the head of the church Jesus has final authority over it.

But he has mediated his authority through the Apostles and the Prophets, whose inspired teaching constitutes the very foundation of the church

Ephesians 2:19-20 (NASB)

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*,

In the first century these apostles and prophets were a direct source of inspired teaching, and thus were the primary leaders of the church in that day.

In post-apostolic times their teaching comes to us through the written New Testament.

For this reason, the offices of apostle and prophet were temporary and are not filled by anyone in the church today. Christ exercises his authority over the postapostolic church through the written words of the NT.

Does the NT give us any specific teaching about permanent leadership roles for the ongoing church?
The answer is yes.

This is very important for our understanding of God's will for the structure of the visible church. Of these offices, two were intended to continue through all the ages until Christ returned, and those are the Elders and the Deacons.

A. The Office of Elder

There are four terms used in the Greek New Testament to describe the roles of church leadership. We can't understand one without also understanding the other others, since they all work together to provide leadership over Christ's sheep.

What's the difference between a Elder, a Bishop, a Pastor, and a deacon?

In the congregation, the main leadership role, the role in which authority resides, is that of the **Elder**. The NT uses three main terms to describe this role: **Elder** (*presbyteros*), **Overseer or Bishop** (*episkopos*), and **Shepherd or Pastor** (*poimen*).

That these terms are used interchangeably for this **one office** is seen in Acts 20, which refers to the same group - **Acts 20:17 (NASB)**

17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church. ... **28** "Be on guard for yourselves and

for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

The same thing is seen in

1 Peter 5:1-2 (NASB)

1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

That elders and bishops are the same is also shown by the fact that **Titus 1:5,7** uses the words interchangeably.

So, according to these texts, no distinction should be made between elders and bishops/overseers, or between elders and pastors/shepherds.

Elders, Bishops, and Pastors refer to the authoritative leadership in the local congregation.

And, while it has become among the denominations the acceptable thing to call the minister by the title Pastor, you need to know that is a misuse of the biblical word.

These terms in themselves show that the elders are the ones who exercise authoritative leadership in the local congregation.

Following the pattern of the Old Testament, in the NT era the church is a spiritual family, and the elders are the father figures, the ones in the family who have the experience and maturity to exercise spiritual leadership.

That the elders are called “**shepherds**” also reflects their role as leaders.

The Scriptures pictures the people of God as a flock of sheep who need someone to lead and protect them.

That the elders are the ones who have this responsibility for God’s

New Covenant people is seen in Paul's words to the elders at Ephesus.

As shepherds they are responsible for *feeding* the sheep, i.e., for making sure that the Christians under their care are being taught the sound doctrine that leads to spiritual maturity.

As shepherds the elders are also responsible for *protecting* the sheep from their enemies.

These enemies are depicted as false teachers who want to lead the sheep astray from the truth.

Shepherds are also responsible for *healing* their sheep.

The NT refers to the whole Christian life as a healing process called sanctification.

The elders are called to oversee this process.

When a lost sheep comes into the flock, it is diseased by sin.

The shepherds help it to get well and to reach spiritual maturity

Ephesians 4:11-13 (NASB)

¹¹ And He gave some *as ...* pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

The word "overseer" (or "bishop") represents one whose work is very much like that of a shepherd, except without the imagery of sheep.

An overseer is literally one who *watches over* or *looks after* someone, or one who takes care of or takes oversight of someone. In this sense an overseer is a watcher, a protector, one who gives "protective care."

The parallel between overseer and shepherd is seen in Jesus who is called

1 Peter 2:25 (ESV)

²⁵ the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

That the elders' leadership involves the exercise of authority is

seen in

1 Timothy 5:17 (NASB)

17 The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

The Greek term for “**rule**” has the primary meaning of “manage, rule, direct, be the head of.”

It seems clear, then, that the elders are meant to have spiritual authority in the church, leading by their teaching, and by their example.

The NT always depicts local congregations as having a plurality of elders, and not just one elder or bishop or pastor.

Such authoritative leadership is not a dictatorship, since the congregation has a voice in the selection of those who lead.

B. The Office of Deacon

The other major leadership role in the local church is that of deacon.

The Greek word is *diakonos*, the basic connotation of which is “servant, helper, one who carries out the will or purpose of another, one who ministers to the needs of others.”

The NT usually uses it in this generic sense for Christian workers of all kinds, both men and women and in such cases the English word “**servant**” is most appropriate.

That there is a OFFICE of Deacon is seen in

Philippians 1:1 (NASB)

1 To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons

And in

1 Timothy 3:8-13 (NASB)

8 Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ... ¹² Deacons must be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good managers of *their* children and their own households. ¹³ For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

These texts give us a picture of a “official” role of service in the church—“official” in the sense that the individual is selected and appointed by the local congregation to be responsible for a specific task within or on behalf of that congregation. In this case the English word “**deacon**” is used.

What is the role of deacons in a local church?

The most important clue comes from the word itself, i.e., “minister, servant.”

Deacons are first of all servants of Jesus Christ, then servants of the local congregation.

The Greek word itself, *diakonos*, has a fairly broad range of meaning, such as “**a generic servant,**” “**a waiter of food,**” “**an agent with a special mission,**” or “**an official minister in a church.**”

In the New Testament *diakonos* can mean

a servant with a certain mission or task (Rom. 15:8; 1 Cor. 3:5; Eph. 3:7);

an assistant of a particular person (Matt. 22:13; 2 Cor. 6:4; Col. 1:7);

or **an official appointment, office, or position as a “minister” in a local church (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8–12).**

Working under the oversight of the elders, the deacons tend to the many important details of church life so that the elders can devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

To say it another way, the elders determine policy by studying and

applying God's Word, and the deacons help to implement that policy.

I started giggling over what Dr. James D. Cox, in his book "With the Bishops and Deacons," wrote:

“Too much of the time the preacher is spending his hours doing mostly what the elders are supposed to be doing - visiting, counseling, overseeing and shepherding the flock. The elders are spending their time doing the deacons' work - unlocking the building, cleaning the baptistry, fertilizing the lawn, etc. and the deacons are on the outside looking in, wondering what is going on”

In the NT there is nothing comparable to the kind of “**church board**” that exists in many modern churches.

Dr. Jack Cottrell, says,

"A better arrangement is to have a board of elders (always more than one) appointed by the congregation to be the church's spiritual overseers and policy makers, and a board of deacons appointed to assist the elders in carrying out their work."

Though **all** people were called to be *diakonoi* (servants), when Paul couples this title with the words for “elders” (*presbyteroi*) and “overseers” (*episkopoi*), he appears to use *diakonos* as an official title, a title that soon took on the sense of a distinct rank in church order (the *diaconate*) and still remains with us today in most ecclesiastical traditions as “**deacons.**”

To say that the NT mandates that elders and deacons are the main leadership roles in the church does not rule out other roles of service.

II. Other Roles of Service in the Congregation

Some other categories of ministry are specifically mentioned in the

NT.

A. The ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4),

B. The ministry of the evangelist (2 Tim 4:5)

C. The ministry of benevolence (Acts 6:1; 11:29; 12:25; Rom 12:7; 15:31; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1,13).

But just because a specific ministry is not mentioned by name does not mean it is forbidden.

The NT certainly allows us to design other roles or positions of service according to need, such as
the church treasurer,
the church trustee,
the youth minister, and even
the preaching minister.

The preaching minister is not “*the pastor*” of the congregation, nor is he automatically even *one of* the elders.

Unless he is qualified and selected to be an elder, he should guard against assuming the role of authority reserved for the eldership.

Any Christian who is carrying out a specific task or is filling a specific role in the church is a *diakonos*, in the general sense of servant.

D. The Ministry of the Deaconesses

One ministry we have here at OCC is that of the Deaconess.

Our Constitution and By-Laws state:

ARTICLE XI: ORDINATION

It shall be within the power of this Congregation to exercise the New Testament right of ordination of Evangelists (Preachers), Elders, Deacons and Deaconesses.

ARTICLE V: DUTIES

Section B: DEACONS AND DEACONESSES

1. Deacons according to Scripture are males. Scriptures that

reference the Deacons and Deaconesses are: Acts 6:1-6; I Tim. 3:8-13; Phil. 1:1

2. The Deacons and Deaconesses, in cooperation with the Elders and the congregation, shall promote the growth and welfare of the Church.

3. They shall be responsible for greeting and ushering of the worshipers; distributing the Lord's Supper and receiving the offerings; assisting in financial canvasses and visitation projects; assisting in preparation of candidates for baptism; giving counsel and service in the business affairs and program activities of the Church; cooperating in ministering to the needy; and performing such other duties as may be designated or assigned.

4. They shall elect from their number a chairperson.

I agree with our Constitution that Deacons are referenced in Holy Scripture as a office subservant to the office of Elders.

However, our Consitution is wrong when it says that Deaconesses are also mentioned in Scripture.

There is absolutely no mention in the Bible of a office of Deaconesses.

While not specifically mentioned in Scripture, Our Restoration Movement forefathers supported the role of the deaconesses.

Alexander Campbell

“it appears that females were constituted deaconesses in the primitive church. Duties to females demand this.”

Robert Milligan

Deaconesses were also appointed to attend to the wants of the sick and the needy, especially of their own sex.

William K. Pendleton

“Besides deacons, every church should have deaconesses, whose duty it is to perform such offices as cannot be so well performed by deacons, and especially such to females, as could not with delicacy

and propriety be laid upon the deacons.”

Tolbert Fanning

Held the same position as Milligan

Moses E. Lard

“whenever the necessities of the churches are such to demand it, the order of deaconess should be re-established.”

Does the evidence from church history support the pro-women deacon view, as many assert?

I have endeavored to examine the historical evidence and the biblical passages for information on the deaconesses.

Those in favor of ordaining women to the diaconate argue that the early church had deaconesses.

Those who argue in favor of women deacons who are of the *same* office and function as male deacons should note that the evidence from church history starting with the earliest church fathers and ending with the 19th century is ***overwhelmingly against*** women deacons who are in the same office and have the same function as male deacons.

There is not a ***single instance*** in the entire history of the Christian church of women deacons who are of the same office and function as male deacons, until the 19th century.

Did the early church have women who served?

Yes, absolutely.

The first clear reference to deaconesses in the early church is found in the Syrian church in A.D. 381.

Were these women in the same office with male deacons?

No, clearly not.

Male deacons were ordained from the very beginning.

Women deacons were not ordained throughout the east until the

later half of the fourth century.

Women deacons were not in a separate but parallel or equal office to men deacons.

As late as A.D. 325 a church council declared that women deacons "are only to be numbered among the laity."

The Syrian Church Constitution of 381 A.D., said:

Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but *a woman to the ministry of women*. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but mayst send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a deaconess is required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing....But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water.

The deaconess's ministry is solely to women.

Deaconesses are needed to visit poor women because it would look inappropriate before the heathen to send a man.

Deaconesses would baptize women, because it would be improper for men to see women naked, apparently with little or no clothing, to represent the new birth.

Deaconesses also instructed new female believers in the faith.

The intimacy involved in nursing a sick Christian woman back to health can only be done properly by a deaconess.

When we examine the qualifications for women deacons in the fourth and fifth centuries it will become clear that deaconesses evolved from the order of widows.

The qualifications for deaconesses are virtually identical to Paul's qualification given in 1 Timothy 5:9-12, and the deaconess had to

be over 40 years old.

The female diaconate was restricted to godly widows who made a vow of perpetual chastity for the sake of church service.

Remarriage could result in excommunication.

To argue that these deaconesses belonged to the same office as male deacons makes no sense whatsoever.

With this said, we need now to examine the question this sermon is supposed to answer.

III. Is There a Biblical Reason that Women Cannot be Elders and Deacons?

The Christian feminist begins with the assumption that God's original creation purpose was for gender to be irrelevant with respect to leadership roles in both the home and the church.

The Christian feminist maintain the work of Christ was to abolish sinful hierarchicalism.

They maintain that qualified women are just as eligible as qualified men to serve as elders, deacons, and preachers.

So, I say **yes**, there are Biblical reasons why women cannot be Elders and Deacons.

The opposing view to Christian Feminism is called complementarianism, or hierarchicalism.

Jesus did not abolish male headship, either in practice or in His redemptive work.

The complementarianism's view is that God's original intention for the human race, established at creation, is summed up in

1 Corinthians 11:3 (NASB)

³ But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

This is not cultural.

This is based on God's ordained hierarchy -

1 Corinthians 11:8-9 (NASB)

8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

The roles of headship and submission are still assigned to husbands and wives respectively.

(Eph 5:22–24),

And women are excluded from roles that involve teaching men and roles that involve having authority over men (1 Tim 2:12).

Notice the qualifications established under inspiration by the Apostle Paul:

Titus 1:5-6 (NASB)

5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, ⁶ namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife

1 Timothy 3:2 (NASB)

2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife

1 Timothy 3:12 (NASB)

12 Deacons must be husbands of *only* one wife

And, no, that doesn't rule out a man whose wife has died and he has remarried, not does it rule out a man who has been divorced and remarried.

Why not?

Because the words which Paul uses in the Greek is better translated as "**a one woman sort of man.**"

But, it does establish the fact that both elders and deacons must be males, because of the marital requirement.

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, which are called the pastoral epistles, were probably the last letters written by the apostle Paul before his death.

The *Chronicon* of Eusebius dates them to A.D. 67 or 68.

The institution of the office of deacon in Acts 6, and Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding deacons are separated by a period of 35 to 38 years.

This period of time encompasses almost the entire writing of the New Testament.

If God had introduced women into the ordained diaconate sometime after the events in Acts 6 were recorded, then we could expect such a change to be reflected in Paul's detailed instructions regarding deacons recorded in 1 Timothy chapter 3.

But instead we find the opposite.

The inspired word **only** gives us a male leadership.

Harlin E. Phillips wrote:

“To think of having to give an account of all the souls in the congregation over which he rules is the most serious thought one could have. No greater charge has ever been given to any man. What a tremendous responsibility! Little wonder that God wanted the strongest men in the church to be the overseers of His flock”

Well, I have said a lot and left a lot unsaid.

Prayer and Invitation

February 19 Lesson 12 Freedom in Christ

Devotional Reading: Galatians 5:22-26

Background Scripture: Galatians 5:1-17

GALATIANS 5:1-17

1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.**2** Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. **3** Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. **4** You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. **5** For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. **6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. **7** You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? **8** That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. **9** “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” **10** I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. **11** Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. **12** As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! **13** You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. **14** For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” **15** If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. **16** So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

KEY VERSE

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be

***free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.—
Galatians 5:13***

Introduction

A. What Does a Free Person Look Like?

Occasionally we see newscasts of people experiencing political freedom for the first time. As totalitarian regimes fall, nations have to learn new habits. How can people live together in freedom without chaos? What does a free person look like?

Freedom in Christ raises the same questions, but with distinct answers. What keeps us from using our freedom as an excuse for the chaos of selfishness? What does a free person in Christ look like?

Today's text addresses these questions.

B. Lesson Background

Paul's letter to the Galatians addressed a struggle to come to terms with God's plan in history. The struggle involved deciding whether Gentile believers in Jesus had to adhere to the law that God gave to Israel. Some taught that Gentiles who accepted Christ had to be circumcised in order to become part of God's people; Gentiles had to receive the mark that distinguished Israel as having received God's covenant.

Paul's response is a lesson on the shape of God's work in history, which focuses on Christ's death and resurrection. Everything that came before was preparatory. God did not give Israel its law as the final expression of his purpose, but as a means of pointing to Christ (Galatians 3:24).

Part of that preparation had to do with what Israel's law did not accomplish. Even while God was giving the law to Israel, Israel was rejecting the God who gave it (Exodus 32:1-6). That pattern of rejection continued, as failure to keep God's law was the story of successive generations. This pattern demonstrated that if God's will was to be done on earth, it would take something more powerful than law.

Israel's Scriptures included promises that God would indeed do something greater: He would make a new covenant with his

people, writing the law “on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). He would replace stony hearts with new ones as his Spirit enabled them to obey (Ezekiel 36:22-32).

The cross of Christ signals the fulfillment of these promises. Now the people of God are defined not by the covenant of circumcision, but by faith in Christ who died for their sin. Because of Christ’s death, God’s Spirit is given to all Christians (Acts 2:38). The Galatian Christians needed to understand these truths.

I. Charter of Freedom

(Galatians 5:1)

1. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

This verse both summarizes the message of Galatians to this point and begins application of that message to the Galatians’ lives.

Christ’s mission was to give humanity true *freedom*, so there can be no going back to what formerly had caused people to be in *slavery*.

This means there is to be no return to the pagan practices that some followed before becoming Christians. But it also means no going back to rely on the Mosaic law to attempt to make oneself a member of God’s people. Either path is a road back to slavery. To turn back would be to thwart God’s plan and lose everything for which one submits to Christ.

II. Threat to Freedom

(Galatians 5:2-6)

A. Fall into Debt (vv. 2-4)

2. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

Christ came as the fulfillment of what Israel’s law pointed toward but could not accomplish. So for a Gentile Christian to receive circumcision would mean to turn back to the thing Christ came to fulfill! It would be to live as if Christ had accomplished nothing.

Submission to circumcision threatens the very basis of the Galatians’ relationship to God.

How to Say It

Corinthians Ko-*rin*-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Ezekiel Ee-*zeek*-ee-ul or Ee-*zeek*-yul.

Jeremiah Jair-uh-*my*-uh.

Mosaic Mo-*zay*-ik.

3. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

Circumcision signifies initiation into the people of God and intent to keep *the whole law* as God had given to his people. A *man who lets himself be circumcised* cannot claim to be part of Israel as the covenant people if he ignores the rest of the law!

Any attempt to keep the entirety of the law is, of course, a recipe for failure. Israel's history demonstrates inability to do so. To enter into that same covenant of obligation would be to repeat that same pattern of failure. God has fulfilled the promise of his law by supplying in Christ what humanity really needs: true forgiveness from sin and true power to overcome sin.

4. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Circumcision has been offered to the Galatian Christians as the supreme sign of belonging to God. But where does that leave Christ? *To be justified* is to be acceptable to God. This requires that the conditions for a sinner to be acceptable to him have been satisfied. To attempt to be *justified by the law* through a rite of that law is to say that Christ does not accomplish our justification. It is to say *no* to the *grace* Christ offers in the gospel.

How high are the stakes? Eternally high! To accept circumcision as the sign of belonging to God is to reject the eternal freedom from sin's punishment that Christ purchased by his death.

B. Hope in Christ (vv. 5, 6)

5. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

A vital feature of the new covenant is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:14). Paul has already criticized his readers with the pointed rhetorical question, "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?" (Galatians 3:2).

It's either/or, not both/and. As noted in the Conclusion to lesson 11, attempts to add something to salvation in Christ actually result in

subtracting. On the topic at hand, that which is subtracted is *the Spirit*. This is no small matter, since having the Spirit is a mark of a new covenant believer—a Christian (compare 2 Corinthians 1:22). The appeal of adding or substituting circumcision as that mark may be that the future righteousness in view here is thought to be under human control. By works of the Law of Moses, a person may fantasize that he or she can achieve such righteousness on a personal timetable.

Paul squelches any such notion. It is *through the Spirit* that *the righteousness for which we hope* comes. Since such a hope comes about this way, we *wait* for it as we yield to the Spirit's timetable. Such expectant waiting can only happen in *faith*. It is when faith starts to wane that we are tempted to control the timing of things. Bad things happen when we yield to such temptation (example: Genesis 16).

What Do You Think?

How can we help one another be better at waiting “through the Spirit” for the stated hope?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding help for preteens

Regarding help for teenagers

Regarding help for young adults

Regarding help for middle-age adults

Regarding help for older adults

6. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Christ Jesus is at the center of everything God has done. So nothing else can matter as he does. Circumcision was a key part of God's unfolding plan, but circumcision is nothing compared with Christ. With the completion of his work, both Jew and Gentile come to God the same way: through faith in Christ.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, embodied the fullest expression of the love God has for humanity (John 3:16). To put faith in him, therefore, means to have faith in God's *love*. Genuine faith in Christ must therefore reflect the same love that God showed in Christ. To pay lip service to the need for faith's outworking in love

is to treat God's love for us in Christ with contempt.

III. Commitment to Freedom

(Galatians 5:7-12)

A. Run a Good Race (v. 7)

7. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

Paul likes to compare Christian experiences with athletic competitions (see 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 3:14; 2 Timothy 4:7). Runners who are focused on the finish line will have nothing to do with those who try to hinder them. In this case, those interfering oppose "*the truth* of the gospel" (Galatians 2:5, 14).

B. Avoid Ungodly Teaching (vv. 8-10)

8. That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

The opponents claim a godly purpose, but the opposite is the case. Their *persuasion* does not originate with God, the author of the gospel. To follow circumcision is to reverse his plan and to impede believers' progress to his promised future.

The word *persuasion* translates a Greek word so rare that it appears only here in the New Testament. Paul shows his brilliance in this choice because it forms a play on the Greek words translated "obeying" in verse 7, above, and "I am confident" in verse 10, below, in that the three words originate from the same root. Anyone who thinks Paul is a lightweight needs to think again!

9. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."

Yeast makes bread rise. When used figuratively, the imagery of yeast (leaven) is almost always in a negative or evil context (compare Matthew 16:6; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; contrast Matthew 13:33). Only *a little* of this substance is required to make a loaf rise properly. And as yeast affects bread, so false teaching can affect a church. The circumcision advocates appear righteous. But to adopt their teaching will be to turn one's back on God's grace in Christ. This, the deadliest of things, will be the result if false teaching about circumcision is allowed to have a foothold.

10. I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may

be, will have to pay the penalty.

Paul's harsh language to this point may leave the impression that he has little confidence in the Galatian Christians. Here he corrects potential misunderstanding in that regard as he expresses trust that his readers will decide for the gospel.

But a solemn warning remains to be offered. Those who advocate circumcision are potentially turning people away from God's grace. The fact that a righteous God judges rightly puts the false teachers on notice to repent.

What Do You Think?

What steps can our church take to express confidence in God's people while warning of God's judgment, as Paul did?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When gathered as a church

When gathered in mid-size groups

When gathered in small groups

C. Endure Persecution (v. 11)

11. Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

Advocates of *circumcision* apparently insist that Paul himself continues to observe Jewish practices, even that of circumcision. The events recorded in Acts 16:3; 18:18; and 1 Corinthians 9:20 could serve as the false teachers' evidence, depending on when Galatians is written.

The contexts of those actions make clear, however, that Paul approaches the Law of Moses from the perspective of *the cross*. His continued observance of Jewish practices is always with the aim of sharing Jesus. So Paul's evangelistic technique among his fellow Israelites is to become "like a Jew" (1 Corinthians 9:20).

These are actions to extend grace, not to subvert it. The fact that Paul continues to be *persecuted* establishes that he does not insist on circumcision. Such persecution is part of the message of the cross. The idea that God should save humanity through the death of his Son is deeply offensive to so much in the human spirit. We want to believe that our lives are not so lost as to require something so extreme. The advocates of circumcision would like a

different divine plan that makes salvation a matter of following the right laws. But the cross with all its *offense* offers the only way to the freedom that God has for his people.

What Do You Think?

How can we help each other appreciate freedom in Christ even while we are rejected because of the offense of the cross?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When one-on-one

When in small or mid-size groups

When gathered as a church

Other

D. Speak Boldly (v. 12)

12. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

With exasperated sarcasm, Paul expresses his disdain for the advocates of circumcision. They insist that commitment to God is defined by cutting off the foreskin. Well, Paul says, if they are so intent on showing commitment by cutting, let them cut off even more than the foreskin! Like Jesus' words about plucking out eyes or cutting off hands (Matthew 5:29, 30), Paul's expression is not literal. But it does indicate his strong feelings about the situation.

SPIRITUAL GANG CULTURE

A college professor entered the world of gangs in East Los Angeles a few years ago to study that subculture. He found that children who grew up in gang-controlled areas faced powerful incentives to join gangs. The threat of harm for not joining was a common enlistment tactic. Initiation rites could include being beaten by other gang members, committing a theft, etc. A common requirement for female initiates was to give sexual service to one or more gang members.

Religious groups have been known to be like gangs in their expectations regarding initiation and loyalty. This is especially true of groups that tend toward cultish rules and practices. "True believers" are those who prove their loyalty by adhering to expectations that don't stand up to the light of Scripture or common sense. The simplicity of following Christ is lost in the

excitement of establishing by personal effort one's worthiness for membership in the group.

This seems to be what was happening, or on the verge of happening, among the Galatian churches. I trust it is not happening in yours.—C. R. B.

IV. Responsibility of Freedom

(Galatians 5:13-17)

A. How to Use Liberty (vv. 13, 14)

13. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

The good news of Jesus is a comprehensive call to *freedom*. To Jews it means (or should mean) being freed from the shackles of an unbearable system (Acts 15:10). To Gentiles it means freedom from the repeated pattern of devotion to things that are not of God. Even so, Paul warns his readers against understanding freedom in Christ to mean they have a license to live as they please. This problem is what Paul refers to as *the flesh*, by which he means “selfish indulgence,” life lived as if God were not in the picture at all. To misuse Christian freedom is to *indulge the flesh*. Freedom bought with Christ's blood is squandered if it merely serves as twisted reasoning for a new opportunity for sin.

But there is an alternative: *serve one another humbly in love*. This is the very essence of the cross that bought our freedom: Christ in his love serving us, even though we are undeserving. To use our Christian liberty in this way is to live according to the gift God has given us. It is to let God replace our pattern of failure with the pattern of his own grace-filled, Christ-expressed love.

“HAPPY”

Roko Belic is an Academy Award-nominated movie director known best for his 2011 documentary titled *Happy*. The film depicts interviews with people in various countries to see whether they are happy. Belic found that life circumstances have little to do with happiness. Instead, one's attitude about life and a spirit of serving others characterize the happiest people.

“Serve one another humbly in love” is Christ's call to each of us. We do not do so in order to be saved, but because we have been

saved. Lest some consider such loving service to be a form of slavery, consider the alternative: slavery to self and to this world as someone or something other than Christ is enthroned as king of one's life. When happiness does not result, the pseudo king always has another rule to follow, a different path to self-improvement, etc. It's a system of "trying hard, never sure."

Faith in Christ sets us free from such a system. Any hard effort on our part comes because we are sure that Christ has already purchased our salvation. That's what releases us from the tyranny of a "trying hard, never sure" system.—C. R. B.

14. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

As Jesus had emphasized the command to love one's neighbor (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19), so do Paul (Romans 13:9) and other New Testament writers (James 2:8). All emphasize that the entire Law of Moses comes to its focus in *this one command*.

God's purpose for those who bear his image is that they should live in his world as he lives with them: in self-sacrificial, grace-filled love. All the commandments he gives are specific expressions of the honest, faithful, forgiving love that God himself demonstrates. This is how the gospel calls all people to the freedom that leads to the fulfillment of God's will.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to expand the ways in which we use our freedom in Christ to serve others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In church programming

In personal sacrifice

Other

B. How Not to Use Liberty (vv. 15-17)

15. If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

The circumcision controversy seems to be a point of bitter division in the Galatian churches. The time has come for all to remember the true message of Jesus, with the cross as its focus. God's love means God's people must love one another, even when they have been unlovely. To fail to live such love can mean the destruction of

a church, to the ruin of God's purpose.

16. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

If the story of humanity is a story of failing to fulfill God's purpose, how can we possibly change that path? God does not leave us alone in our freedom. Through Christ we receive God's Holy Spirit, who empowers us to overcome the old mind-set and habits that work against the life for which God has freed us. Our objective is now to live moment by moment by the Spirit's power. To do so is the opposite of the old life, which is rooted in self-centeredness. *The desires of the flesh* refer not just to physical desires but to all desires that put self on the throne. God's Holy Spirit empowers us to enthrone Christ instead. As we *walk by the Spirit*, we do not desire to return to the old, self-centered life.

17. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

The two ways of life are always *in conflict with each other* as they battle for control over us. Our frustrations with ourselves as Christ's followers stem from this conflict. When the old life seems to be winning, we become distrustful of ourselves as free people. The answer to our problem is always in the gospel; the Holy Spirit is stronger than sinful selfishness. Trusting the sufficiency of Christ and the power of the Spirit, we can overcome the old patterns and learn the true life of freedom.

What Do You Think?

How can our church help members recognize when they are hindering the Holy Spirit's battle against "the flesh"?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding challenges various age groups are likely to face

Regarding gender-targeted challenges

Regarding Satan's tactics in general

Other

Conclusion

A. Set Free for What?

If you were free to become anything that you chose to be, what would you choose? To what use would you put such radical

freedom?

We should all consider how our honest answer to such a question compares with what we confess as Christians. If we truly believe that Christ's cross saves us from the ruin of our lives, do we let the cross define what should become the purpose of our lives? For what has Christ set us free?

B. Prayer

God, we thank you for the freedom granted us in Christ! By the power of your Spirit, we ask that you enable us to use it in gratitude and praise to the one who gave it. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Ours is not just freedom *from*. It is also freedom *to*.
Standard Lesson Commentary 2016-2017 (NIV)