

If you listen to most newscasts you will hear something like, “What are you hearing on/in....” This is usually a question from the anchor to one of the field reporters. The question could be rephrased, “What is the word on the street.” This is the question Jesus asked of the disciples in Mark 8:27, “Who do people say I am?”

Our world is alive with rumors about what is happening or what may be happening. And, if you don't like what you are hearing on this channel just change channels. You will probably find the opposite side of the story there.

A recent television ad offered hearing tests over the telephone. We want to hear but usually we only want to hear what we want to hear. Our minds are made up and we don't want to hear anything that might change them. Charles Schultz, the creator of Peanuts, did one or two books with the Peanuts characters as teen-agers. In one frame we have the teen on the floor with his Bible open and his father standing over him. The caption reads the son saying, “Don't bother me now. I am looking for a verse to back up one of my preconceived notions.” Tragically this is the way many use the Scriptures. We want to hear things our way.

Paul is writing to the congregation in Galatia. He begins with his call and commissioning to be the bearer of the Good News of the Gospel. He was not chosen by man (Matthias was chosen by the disciples, Acts 1:26). Paul was not even on the ballot. He was a persecutor of the faith, putting men and women in jail for following Christ. But now, he is defending the faith he sought to destroy.

His message was that Christ came into the world and brought to it God's grace. It was Christ who paid the price for our sins. It was Christ who rescued us and set us on the right path. It is to Christ that we owe all praise and thanksgiving. Christ came, not on his own but through the will of God. This is/was the message of our faith.

There are those who were already trying to distort the simplicity of the Gospel. Those who were trying to turn the faith into legalism. This is what you can and cannot eat. This is what you must wear. This is how you must act. These are the hoops you have to jump through to be a Christian. There were those who demanded that one first become a Jewish follower before they could be accepted into the faith. Grace was not really grace.

One commentator noted that these distortions were not coming from outside but from inside the Church. Stott notes, “The churches greatest trouble makers (now as then) are not those outside who oppose, ridicule and persecute it, but those inside who try to change the gospel.” Eugene Peterson in The Message, “I can't believe your fickleness—how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ” (Gal. 1:6). There are those who are putting their own twist on the message of Paul. I John 4:1 warns, “My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear...”

Christ's message was being distorted and misrepresented for power and personal gains. Instead of welcoming all they were trying to find ways to keep people out. Burdens were being added to believing. They were trying to please everyone by distorting grace. Grace can't be this simple - there has to be more - you have to do more than believe. At least become a Jew like us.

What are you hearing? There are still many who are distorting the Gospel and wanting to find a faith that meets their preconceived notions. Those who visit around until they find somewhere where their gospel is being preached. If not, just start you own, there will soon be those like-minded folk who will follow you. We are a gullible people. Adam and Eve believed the serpent. The fruit looked good, and why not. The truth was distorted and they took the bait.

All we have to do is change the channel and we can find a gospel that meets our thinking. Paul would go crazy today!

Paul's simple solution, look at Christ. Any message that is contrary to what Christ did and taught is not from God and is wrong — even if an angel from heaven should come — if it is not what Christ taught then it is wrong. If it goes against grace then it is not the Gospel. If it does not say that Christ died for us, it is wrong. If it adds or takes anything away from grace, it is wrong. The message of Christ is the only one that is valid.

Thus, we need to know the message of Christ. It is easy to be led astray when we do not know what the message of Christ is. Tomorrow is Memorial Day. A day when we honor those who have given their all for the freedoms we claim. Yet, there are those who would distort their service and their memory. There are those who seek to rewrite history in order to have it conform to their “preconceived notions”. There are some school text books that reflect a wrong view of history - slavery was not bad. It was an economic good and slaves really enjoyed being slaves. Or, those who would deny that the Holocaust happened? For two examples of how we want to rewrite history so that it conforms to our idea of what it should be.

I fear that as we are losing the generation of WWII, the Korean War and Vietnam war veterans that we will lose some of the history and people will distort and dishonor those who gave their lives to protect religious freedoms, etc. As we honor these men and women we must also honor the truth of the battles they fought.

Paul was concerned about how the message of Christ was being distorted. He fought that the Gospel would not be distorted and grace would not lose its power in the world. Paul had to defend the message of grace, the message of Christ.

We should be as angry as Paul at those who distort the Gospel of grace. Paul's message is that the message of Christ was simple - it cannot and must not be distorted. It was for this message that Paul was willing to give his life — that the truth of love and grace might be shared with all people.

Might we not only remember those who have given their lives for our freedoms today — let us also remember those who have given their lives for the message of Christ's grace.

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1988