

Who Can You Believe?

Many years ago, when the Soviet Union was still an intimidating presence and threat to peace in the world, when what was called the “Cold War” was being waged between the U.S. and the Soviets, I sat in a coffee shop in Richmond. Across from me was a man who had spent years of his life smuggling bibles into various communist-bloc countries. He pointed at the coffee sitting in front of me and said, “If they tell you it’s black, even if it’s white, they expect you to believe that it’s black.” He was describing the world of human power, where people have the authority to make your life difficult if they so choose.

The West is not so different. We, too, are held in the sway of powerful people who want us to believe things that are not true, but which those in positions of power and influence want us to believe. It’s become inappropriate or at least unappreciated to talk about an unwanted unborn child as a human being, while at baby showers all over the country people celebrate the anticipated arrival of the wanted ones. That’s how we define life now. If you’re wanted, you’re human; if not, they will redefine your existence.

I could do a whole series of sermons on how you’ve been lied to about climate change, but that would be off-point. I’ll just mention a few of the many climate scientists who have abandoned the International Panel on Climate Change, which was set up in 1988 by the United Nations, and some of their reasons for leaving the fold.

1. Richard Tol, lead author of the 2007 and 2014 UN reports and professor of Economics of Climate Change in England, now a dissenter
2. Mike Hulme, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Cambridge, formerly professor of Climate Change at University of East Anglia. He says the UN IPCC has “run its course” and suggested it had “perhaps helped foster a more authoritarian, exclusive form of knowledge production.”
3. Pat Michaels, climate scientist and IPCC reviewer says, “This is what everyone feared. Over the years it has become increasingly difficult for anyone who does not view global warming as an end-of-the-world issue to publish papers. This isn’t questionable practice, this is unethical.”
4. Vincent Gray, another IPCC reviewer, “I long ago realized that they were faking the whole exercise”
5. Will Alexander, professor at University of Pretoria in South Africa called the UN IPCC a “worthless carcass” and the then-chair, “a disgrace”. He complained of the IPCC’s “deliberate manipulation to suit political objectives” and “fraudulent science”. He said, “There is no believable evidence to support the IPCC claims.”
6. Geologist Don Easterbrook, professor at Western Washington University in Bellingham says, “The corruption within the IPCC revealed by the Climategate scandal, the doctoring of data and the refusal to admit mistakes have so severely tainted the IPCC that it is no longer a credible agency.
7. Kiminori Ito, award winning environmental chemist from Japan declared that global warming fears are the “worst scientific scandal in the history When people come to know what the truth is, they will feel deceived by ... scientists.”

8. Richard Muller, professor at Berkely, condemned the “hide the decline” alterations in temperatures.

There are many other credible, reputable scientists walking away from the claims of the Climate Change activists who write the reports for the UN.

But there is really big money involved and scientists are just as prone to falling for the lure of big money as any other person in society. I won't get into the details of the money behind the Climate Change propaganda, because as Christians we have an obligation to care for the natural world, as stewards of God's creation, and I think we should keep doing that, and do more, even though I can't believe the panicked warnings of the activists.

But my goal today is to help us understand Paul's defense of himself in the second part of Galatians 1 and into chapter 2. We saw last week that he was being attacked by the agitators who had come to the churches of Galatia. He was being called a “people-pleaser” and as someone who didn't have the authority to teach the Gospel he was presenting. Here is Paul's response:

Dear friends, I solemnly assure you that the Good News of salvation which I preach is not based on mere human reasoning or logic. For my message came by a direct revelation from Jesus Messiah Himself. No one else taught me. You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion - how I violently persecuted the Christians. I did my best to get rid of them. I was one of the most religious Jews of my own age, and I tried as hard as possible to follow all the old traditions of my religion.

But then something happened! For it pleased God in His kindness to choose me and call me, even before I was born! What undeserved mercy! Then He revealed His Son to me so that I could proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles.

When all this happened to me, I did not rush out to consult with anyone else; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before I was. No, I went away into Arabia and later returned to the city of Damascus. It was not until three years later that I finally went to Jerusalem for a visit with Peter and stayed there with him for fifteen days. And the only other apostle I met at that time was James, our Lord's brother. You must believe what I am saying, for I declare before God that I am not lying. Then after this visit, I went north into the provinces of Syria and Cilicia. And still the Christians in the churches in Judea didn't know me personally. All they knew was that people were saying, “The one who used to persecute us now preaches the very faith he tried to destroy!” And they gave glory to God because of me.

Then fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas, and Titus came along, too. I went there because God revealed to me that I should go. While I was there, I talked privately with the leaders of the church. I wanted to make sure they did not disagree, or my ministry would have been useless. And they did agree. They did not even demand that my companion Titus be circumcised, though he was a Gentile. Even that question

wouldn't have come up except for some so-called Christians there - false ones, really - who came to spy on us and see our freedom in Messiah Jesus. They wanted to force us, like slaves, to follow their Jewish regulations. But we refused to listen to them for a single moment. We wanted to preserve the truth of the Good News for you. (1:11 - 2:5)

I'm going to stop there. In verses 6 - 10 that follow, Paul makes it clear that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem fully accepted the message he preached and affirmed his calling to announce Good News to the Gentiles while they continued to focus on ministry to the Jews.

Who do we believe is telling the truth when it comes to what makes a human being human? Who do we believe when it comes to an issue like human-caused climate change? These are big questions and they need truthful answers. The Galatians were facing an even bigger question: "Who do we believe is telling us the truth about the Gospel of Jesus Messiah?"

In Paul's answer that we've just read, we see that the agitators who came to Galatia to undermine his teaching have questioned his authority, his relationship with the Jerusalem church and his credentials for teaching the Gospel the way he does. Paul has to answer these complaints before he can argue for the message itself - and that's what he's doing here.

1. He starts by telling the Galatians that the message he has preached to them came, not from something he made up, not some clever idea he had, but it came by revelation, by *apocalypse*, if you want to know the Greek word. That word indicates the revealing of something that hasn't been known before. Something becomes visible, enters people's experience, that is brand new. And Paul says that he has received his knowledge of the Gospel by direct revelation from Jesus Himself - no one else can claim to have taught him what he is now teaching others. This is a high claim and it's intended to put to rest any thought that Paul somehow managed to distort the gospel message he received from some of the apostles in Jerusalem. "My message came by a direct revelation from Jesus Messiah Himself."
2. The second thing Paul goes after is the notion that he is not a zealous, committed Jew. He describes how he persecuted the early church: "I did my best to get rid of them!" And then he says this: "I was one of the most religious Jews of my own age and I tried as hard as possible to follow all the old traditions of my religion." In our world today, we might understand that as "I tried to be an obedient Jew, following the rules of my faith." But it actually meant something different in those days. Paul is saying that he was one of the zealous ones, the ones who were passionately concerned for the advancement of the Jewish faith, to the point that he would attack those who were seen as enemies of the faith. He was a Pharisee and devoted to promoting righteousness in living. The rabbis of Paul's day would look to one of two characters from Hebrew Scriptures as an example of being zealous for God. One was Phinehas shortly after the exodus from Egypt, and the other was Elijah, particularly in his mountain-top duel with the prophets of Baal. After that victory, his life was threatened by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and he ran to

Mount Sinai in Arabia, the place where God had given Moses the ten commandments. There he encountered God and told him how zealous he had been for Yahweh of hosts. This is the language Paul uses of himself in Galatians 2:14. And what does God say to Elijah in response? He says, "You must go to Damascus and anoint Hazael king of Aram." And here is Paul saying that he has followed the path of Elijah. He went to Arabia, then later returned to the city of Damascus. It's like he's drawing a picture for them of what a truly zealous Jew would be like, and then saying, "That's me!"

3. The third thing Paul does in this passage is show that his mission is a continuation or fulfilment of the Old Testament prophets. He says that God called him, even before he was born! That was the call of Jeremiah, which you read in Jer. 1:5, and the servant of Isaiah 49:5 who is, again, called from before birth and this is spoken over him in v. 6: "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to Me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." So, this is really profound of Paul, to demonstrate that he is in line with the calling and the mission of the Old Testament prophets. Like them, his calling is to bring Good News to the nations.
4. The fourth thing that Paul does is to show that he is not dependent on Jerusalem for the message that he preaches. He didn't even go to Jerusalem for the first three years that he was a follower of Jesus. And when he did go, he only saw Peter and briefly saw James. He went again 14 years later, again because of a revelation, an apocalypse. God showed him that He wanted him in Jerusalem, so he went. This is the third time in this week's passage that Paul has used the word *apocalypse* or 'revelation' as God's means of communicating with him - Jesus had revealed the Gospel, God had revealed His Son and now God reveals the call to Jerusalem. Notice things that are repeated several times in a passage and you'll gain a clue into what the author is trying to say. Here, Paul is saying that his authority is divine, not human, that it has come because God has revealed it to him, not because he had received the message from some higher-ups in the Jerusalem church. So, he is creating some distance, separation from the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.
5. Number 5. Having said that, Paul then makes a point of assuring the Galatians that the leaders, the pillars of the Jerusalem church had added nothing to the gospel they preached, nor had they compelled Titus to be circumcised. The leaders of the Jerusalem church may not be Paul's source of doctrine, but he knows that the agitators have suggested that he is dependent on them and probably that he has misrepresented them to some degree. This has created confusion for the new believers in Galatia and they are abandoning the freedom that Paul's message had brought them and are getting tied up in whether or not they can continue the Christian life the way they started it, by faith in Jesus, by the Spirit, in the grace of God. That's why Paul would emphasize Jerusalem's positive response to the Gospel message he preached.
6. And the sixth area in which Paul is able to defend his right to proclaim the gospel is the testimony of other Christians, who are amazed at the total transformation of his life: "The one who used to persecute us now preaches the very faith he tried to destroy!" They are testifying both to the transformation in his life - which is vital

testimony - and also to the fact that the faith that Paul is teaching is the faith that he once persecuted people for believing. That's big.

So now it's up to the Galatian Christians to choose between Paul and the agitators. Whose story is going to convince them? Will they accept Paul's claim to be an apostle and to have received his gospel as an "unveiling", a revelation from the risen Jesus? Or will they bow to the demands of the agitators that they commit themselves to all the Jewish boundary markers, the things that set them apart from the world around them, in order to be true children of Abraham? Paul believes that that route leads to disaster and so he is trying hard to persuade his beloved brothers and sisters in Galatia to reject the teaching of the agitators.

You may or may not believe the warnings of the climate change community. Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe you will take better care of the world God has created if you do believe their warnings and that would be a good thing, even if it is motivated by an unfounded fear. What does matter is what we believe about Jesus and the big question is, at the heart of what Paul writes to the Galatian churches, "Is Jesus enough?"

And so the question I would ask you today is that same question, "Is Jesus enough for you?" Or, do you need to legalistically fulfill some obligations that the law demands? Or, do you feel drawn to add in to the Good News some of the things the world offers as self-help or worldly wisdom? Or, do you need to prove yourself to other Christians, to show that you're as good as they are - maybe even better? Or, are you one of those rare and happy individuals who recognizes that God has loved you far more than you deserved and you are humbly content to receive His blessings and live gratefully in His presence? It really does effect the way we live. And it really does effect the way we respond to God's love. And it really is important. Whether the oceans continue to rise by the thickness of a penny every year doesn't actually matter, because in a hundred years it doesn't make much difference and we have no idea whether or not it will continue for 100 years.

But what we understand about our faith in Jesus and how we continue in our daily lives to live out that faith is vitally important. There is always a temptation to add something to the Gospel. There is always a sense that it's too good to be true, that there must be something more that we're supposed to do. Well, what we're supposed to do is live in response to what God in His love has done for us and we do that when we really believe that it is true. When we trust in Jesus alone for His self-giving sacrifice on the cross and as we recognize that the Christian life is dependent on His grace and His Spirit living within us rather than some other external thing that depends on us - then we relax, then we are free to love and serve people without fear of condemnation, then we can have the confidence to give away the gifts God has given to us, healing the sick, freeing the captives, bringing good news to the hopeless.

Our calling to Jesus began with the call to believe. The Galatians were told that, in order to continue in their new faith, they needed to add to that some Jewish conditions. Paul's response, and the heart of my message today is, "No you don't.

What started you on your journey with God is the thing that will sustain you. Continue to trust in the love of God that is demonstrated in the sacrifice of Jesus, and you'll have everything you need.