

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(May 10, 2009)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!

By the way...

(Galatians 2:1-10)

Study #3

Introduction: How to spot a “by the way...”

On Wednesday of the week that I was in Minneapolis, the Board of Directors was interviewing a candidate for the position of President of Trinity International University.¹

We were all impressed with this candidate, and, after an hour of so of the interview Dr. Craig Williford was enthusiastically and unanimously recommended to become the school’s next president. That recommendation will be voted upon at this summer’s National Free Church Conference in Minneapolis.

Near the end of the interview, Dr. Williford’s wife, Carolyn, asked the Board a question, “*Before we conclude, are there any ‘by the ways...?’*”

In case you don’t know what a “by the way” is, let me explain.

Carolyn asked this question because of an experience they had suffered years earlier when Dr. Williford had taken a position as an associate pastor of a large church in Colorado Springs.

The candidating process went great and the vote was overwhelming positive to bring him on to the church staff.

¹ That would be the combined Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Trinity College and Graduate School, and the Trinity Law School.

Then, as the church’s senior pastor was driving Dr. Williford to the airport after the congregational meeting and as they were turning into the airport parking lot, the pastor turned to Craig and said,

“By the way..., it is our practice at this church for all the staff to wear white suits to church every Sunday from Memorial Day through Labor Day.”

That’s a “by the way...”

It’s an expectation placed on someone AFTER a deal is done that had never been mentioned during negotiations.

Have you ever been “by the way-ed...”?

Schools can “by the way...” you when a teacher tells you something about an assignment they hadn’t mentioned until AFTER you turned it in.

Employers can “by the way...” you by adding to your job description AFTER you sign on the dotted line.

Be on the watch for “by the ways...”

They can sneak up on you. And when they do sneak up on you, they are very unsettling. They are irritating. They lead to feelings of resentment. A person who is “by the way-ed” feels taken advantage of.

We have every right to expect that the same rules will apply after the deal is done that were in place during the negotiations. When the rules change after the ink dries, we feel blindsided.

In no realm of life is a “by the way...” more unsettling than in the life of faith. Today we are going to watch as some folks in the first century tried to “By the way...” certain Christians into a very different arrangement with God than the one under which they were brought in.

And - by the way - if this particular “by the way...” had won the day, the face of Christianity would have been forever changed.

And it likely would have won the day, except for the courageous actions of the Apostle Paul.

The life and times of Saul of Tarsus/the Apostle Paul

Over the past two Sundays, we've spent a good bit of our time tracing the life and times of Saul of Tarsus, the man who became the Apostle Paul.

Saul was one of the most violent persecutors of the church in the first century. But, following his "Damascus Road experience" (when Jesus appeared to him in a blinding flash of light and spoke to him) Saul was converted and then was welcomed into the church he had intended to persecute in Damascus.

He immediately began proclaiming that Jesus was, in fact, the Son of God (Acts 9:20). After evangelizing for a couple of years in Arabia, an attempt was made on his life in Damascus. He was rescued by being lowered in a basket outside the city walls of Damascus by the Christians there.

From Damascus Saul traveled south to Jerusalem to get to know the Christians there. A first century hero, Barnabas, extended the right hand of fellowship to Saul, which led to him being accepted by that church.

He stayed in Jerusalem for only a couple of weeks because a plot quickly formed to kill him in Jerusalem, as it had formerly formed in Damascus! And as had happened in Damascus, this plot was foiled when the Christians in Jerusalem spirited him away to points north and west.

Saul spent the next several years (about ten) near his hometown of Tarsus, growing in Christ and serving the Lord in relative obscurity.

But when Barnabas asked him to join him in a team ministry in Antioch, Saul went with him, forming the first real (ministry) Dream Team!²

As we continue to trace Paul's Christian history, we turn to Galatians, chapter 2. Here, he reminds his readers of a second trip he had taken to Jerusalem.

From the book of Acts, we know that he had been sent there by the church in Antioch.

Paul Travels BACK to Jerusalem (vv. 1-2)

[Galatians 2:1] Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.

Back to Jerusalem, with Friends...

When he took this trip to Jerusalem Paul had been a Christian for fourteen years, and he had been away from Jerusalem for about ten years.

That's a long time! And during those ten years he had been maturing as a Christian, spreading the Gospel, serving the Lord.

Mostly he had been serving the Lord by serving the church at Antioch. And during all this time, he had made many good friends in Antioch - Jewish friends and Gentile friends.

As he made his way up to Jerusalem (south, but "up" in terms of elevation), he traveled with two of these friends - Barnabas (a Jew) and Titus (a Gentile).

Why had they traveled to Jerusalem? Paul tells us that it was because of a revelation.

Why Go to Jerusalem? (see Acts 11:19-30)

[Galatians 2:2] It was because of a revelation³ that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.

² This is probably the time in which believers were first called "Christians" in Antioch (Acts 11)

³ This is what is often referred to as the "famine relief visit" recorded in Acts 11.

If you were a Christian, things were tough in the city of Jerusalem. But then, things were tough for everybody in Jerusalem during this time frame because of a famine that had hit the area.

This famine had actually been predicted by a Christian prophet named Agabus who prophesied in Antioch.

[Acts 11:27] Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. [28] One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.⁴

Evidently, the famine was especially hard-hitting in Jerusalem. But, on top of the famine and the hardship that came with the famine, Christians in Jerusalem were also suffering persecution.

The church had been dispersed throughout the Roman Empire following the stoning of Stephen. Many strict Jews saw Christianity as a renegade faith while the Romans saw Christians as trouble-makers (after all, their Leader had been crucified - talk about guilt by association!)

So, due to the dire straits in which the believers found themselves, Christ-followers in Antioch decided to do something about it!

To demonstrate the unity that exists in the Body of Christ, they set out to help their suffering brothers and sisters in Judea.

[29] And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.

This was a tremendous affirmation of the unity of the church of Jesus! Believers cared for each other in tangible, material ways. Love was going to be fleshed out through the gift of cold, hard cash.

This - demonstrating the ties that bind Christians - is what prompted the believers in Syria to send emissaries from the Gentile world of Antioch to the Jewish world of Jerusalem.

And, not having access to Fed Ex or wire transfers, they hand-delivered the money, *[30]...sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.*

Now, it is only through Paul's letter to the Galatians that we know that Paul and Barnabas were accompanied by another brother from Antioch, a man named Titus.

Luke doesn't tell us that Titus went along, but Paul brings it up when relating the story to the Galatians because what happened to Titus - or, rather, thankfully, what did NOT happen to Titus - is completely relevant to the reason Paul is writing Galatians in the first place.

Test Case for "Faith Alone in Christ Alone" (vv. 3-5)

No "by the ways" for Titus (v. 3)

[Galatians 2:3] But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.⁵

Titus

Titus, who shows up in several of Paul's letters (he was even a recipient of one of those letters), is never even mentioned in the book of Acts.

From Paul's writings, though, we know him as a solid Christian man, well-known and highly esteemed in the early church. And he was one of Paul's most trusted fellow-laborers in the Gospel.

But, like many of the second generation Christians, Titus was a Gentile, not a Jew.

Among other things, this meant that he had not received circumcision, a physical mark made on the body of a Jewish male.

⁵ Note the treatment of Titus, as opposed to that of Timothy. Timothy, being half-Jewish was circumcised, Acts 16:1-3. Why circumcise Timothy, but not Titus? Titus was a full-blooded Gentile, but not Timothy. Paul yielded to the weak brethren, but never to the false brethren, as here in Galatians.

⁴ Claudius was the Roman Emperor from A.D. 41-54.

Circumcision

In Old Testament times, circumcision identified a male as a member of God's family. It was very important among the Jews and was a rite established by God at the time of Abraham, about two thousand years before Christ!

Titus' uncircumcision made certain people in Jerusalem very uncomfortable.

They reasoned, *"God's people have always been circumcised. Why should that be any different for people who believe in Jesus? If Titus wants to be saved or to lead a God-honoring life, let him be circumcised."*

What would you say to that logic? Well, Paul had a few things to say about it and Titus' situation functioned as a critical "test case" for the early church.

Test case

In the early church, Jews who put their faith in Jesus had no cultural barriers to overcome.

They stood in a long line of traditions and beliefs that led to Jesus - monotheism, sacrifices and offerings, God's involvement with the nation of Israel, Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, circumcision - and more.

But now Gentiles were putting their faith in Christ. Hmmm... How should they be treated? What expectations should be placed on them?

Would there be any "by the ways...?"

"Oh, by the way, Titus, we know that nobody mentioned this to you before, but you should know that you will be expected to wear white robes to worship every Sabbath from Passover to Pentecost." Or *"By the way, Titus, one little detail about being a Christian - you have to keep the Sabbath and the laws of kosher."* Or *"By the way, Titus, you need to be circumcised."*

Titus was a believer in Jesus AND uncircumcised.

Paul, Barnabas and Titus had come to Jerusalem to bring money for relief from the famine. The gift was no doubt gladly received, but some in Jerusalem were demanding that Titus be circumcised⁶

Maybe even more than that, circumcision was urged in order for Titus to **prove** that he was a true Christian, or to **make** him a true Christian.

Well, if they wanted Titus circumcised, so what? What's the problem?

What's the harm?

After all, it would ease the concerns of some in Jerusalem. And except for the pain of a little surgery it wouldn't do any harm, would it?

Well, this was no minor issue. At stake was truth that was central to the Gospel itself. A pastor and theologian, John Stott writes forcefully about what was going on here.

"Paul saw the issue plainly. It was not just a question of circumcision and uncircumcision...It was a matter of fundamental importance regarding the truth of the Gospel...The Christian has been set free from the law...[and] his acceptance before God depends entirely upon God's grace in the death of Jesus Christ received by faith.

To introduce works of the law (i.e. - circumcision) and to make acceptance depend on obedience to rules and regulations is to bring a free man into bondage...

"Titus was a test case. It is true that he was an uncircumcised Gentile, but he was a converted Christian. Having believed in Jesus, he had been accepted by God in Christ, and that, Paul said, was enough. Nothing further was necessary for his salvation, as the Council of Jerusalem was later to confirm (see Acts 15)."

If Titus had been compelled to be circumcised, what message would he and other Gentiles have clearly heard about Christianity?

⁶ What they were really trying to do was to put Christianity INTO Judaism. They wanted Christianity under a system of law. They would have said that faith in Christ, and then circumcision, were only the first steps in making a person complete in Christ. Titus also would have had to continue down the road to Judaism and keep all the Law. Once the camel's nose of a "Jesus and" Gospel gets into the tent, the rest of the camel is sure to follow!

Simple - that faith in Jesus is NOT ENOUGH to save. It still depends on something he had to do. It is “Jesus AND.”

Paul would not allow this!

He stood firm against these men and refused to let them circumcise Titus. He stood firm because it was true to the gospel to not treat Titus in a way that made him into a second class citizen of the Kingdom of God.

Paul refused to let there be a “by the way...” because he knew that to have yielded to the pressure to have Titus circumcised would have meant a compromise of the Gospel itself.

That’s acting out of conviction and it took guts!

Well, the upshot of Paul’s intervention was that Titus was welcomed into the church there in Jerusalem just as he had been in Antioch - with open arms. Like the song says, “just as he was.”

How strongly did Paul feel about this issue? Listen.

Standing up to Legalists (vv. 4-5)

[4] But it was because of the FALSE BRETHREN secretly brought in, who had SNEAKED IN to SPY OUT our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into BONDAGE. [5] But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.

The way I read this is that there were three groups with three perspectives on the issue in Jerusalem.

First, there were Paul and Barnabas who refused, on principle, to circumcise Titus, believing that to do so would be to subscribe to a “Jesus AND” message.

Second, there were the “false brethren” (these would be non-Christians) who would have compelled Titus to be circumcised for salvation. They held to a “Jesus AND” Gospel.

And third, there was a mediating group - perhaps “the pillars” Paul mentions in verse 9 - who didn’t think Titus needed to be circumcised to be saved or to honor God. They just thought it would be a good idea to circumcise him out of deference to those who had difficulty with Titus not being circumcised. (the ones Paul describes as “false brethren”)

Well Paul didn’t cave and here’s why.

It is OK to yield to weaker brethren. It’s OK to yield to folks with tender consciences. It’s OK to bend your behavior so as to not cause others to stumble.

But it is **not** OK to alter your behavior to placate legalists, or when that alteration of behavior compromises or confuses the truth of the Gospel. Period!

Titus was spared circumcision, and with that controversy quelled, Paul and the pillars of the church at Jerusalem had some fellowship.

Not that Paul counted on them for affirmation...

Separate but Equal Ministries (vv. 6-9)

Independence (v. 6)

[Galatians 2:6] But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me.

Paul’s not being unfriendly here. He just had to make it clear to the Galatians that he stood alone - independent from Jerusalem’s influence - when it came to his apostolic ministry.

He had received NOTHING from the Jerusalem leaders with respect to authority (after all, he had been commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ). And he had received NOTHING from them with respect to the content of his Gospel.

But, while on the one hand he and the Jerusalem pillars were independent, on the other hand, they were interdependent.

Interdependence (vv. 7-9)⁷

[Galatians 2:[7] But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised [8] (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), [9] and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas⁸ and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Both Paul and the pillars recognized God had given them “separate but equal” ministries.

Clearly, the group from Antioch and the group in Jerusalem were energized, equipped, and commissioned by the same God with the same Gospel. But, their ministries were focused differently.

Peter (and the rest of the pillars) primarily ministered to Jews; Paul (and Barnabas and Titus) primarily ministered to the Gentiles.

And that is OK! They were committed to the same Gospel. Jesus - period. Faith alone in Christ alone. No “by the ways...”

Their conversation ended on a high note as they agreed on a distinctive that should mark all Christian ministries. They were of one mind when it came to an overwhelming passion to serve the poor.

Identical Heart for Love (v. 10)

[10] They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.⁹

⁷ Making clear to the Galatians that he stood alone - independent from Jewish influence - he told them that the leaders of the Jerusalem congregation had contributed nothing to him. NOTHING in respect to his apostolic authority (after all, he had been commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ) and NOTHING with respect to the content of his Gospel.

⁸ Cephas is the Hebrew/Aramaic word for “rock.” The significance was the same as “Peter”, see Matthew 16.

⁹ Some have taken this to mean that Paul may have taken some initiative in seeing to it that money made its way from Antioch to Jerusalem.

Of course that’s what Paul was eager to do. That’s why he and Barnabas and Titus had come to Jerusalem in the first place - to remember the poor!

But I also say “hats off to the ‘pillars’” of the church at Jerusalem. Here, these folks were destitute and hungry AND they were urging Paul and Barnabas that when they made their way back home to Antioch they not forget to serve the poor.

I’m thrilled to say that it is something that our church is doing more and more of these days. Thanks to some great organizing and cheerleading from Rhonda Olson and her Food Pantry Team and to outstanding generosity from YOU, our church is handing out bags of groceries to folks on an almost daily basis.

And, thanks to your generosity toward the Benevolence Fund, we have been able to serve people in our church who are in great need and have also helped a number of folks in the community with utility bills (making payments straight to CPS) and other necessities.

Helping those who are struggling to make ends meet is one great way to say, “Jesus loves you” to folks who many times are desperately in need of His touch.

Serving the poor is really, really important.

But hold it!

By highlighting the importance of ministering to the poor, have we just added a “by the way...” to the Gospel? Have we done exactly what the false brethren were doing in saying that Titus had to get circumcised to be a Christian?

Conclusion:

NO! And here's the difference between what the apostles agreed on in Jerusalem - remember the poor - and the sharp dispute over Titus' circumcision.

- The false brethren who were urging circumcision were saying that taking that action was necessary for getting saved, for staying saved, or for staying right with God.
- The apostles who were urging each other to care for the poor were saying that taking that action just made sense, given who they were - redeemed people who have feasted at the banquet table of God's grace.

One sets behavior as a condition for getting saved. The other sets behavior as an important, reasonable response to having been saved.

Over the course of our time studying Paul's letter to the Galatians we will have opportunity to think a lot about behavior. Behavior is important. But good behavior is not a condition of salvation and bad behavior is not necessarily a sign that someone is not saved...

I'll close with this brief story.

Over the course of my six years serving on the Board of Directors for the EFCA, I had the privilege of being a part of the team that put together a new Statement of Faith for our movement.

What a tremendous experience! Believe me, I thoroughly enjoyed getting all theological and working hard to make our Statement of Faith say what we wanted it to say.

One of the most interesting discussions came as we considered "Christian living" a topic that is not usually even considered in doctrinal statements. We all felt that it was important to address it, though.

The original proposal for the Board to consider read this way:

"We believe that God's justifying grace cannot be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose."

That statement is meant to link together salvation and Christian behavior. And they should be linked. But HOW should they be linked?

The presence of the word "cannot" implies something. It implies that if a person is saved, then his or her behavior will - without question (and without exception?) - be godly.

A number of us on the Board argued for different wording. Rather than "cannot", we urged that the statement read,

"We believe that God's justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose."

In that wording, Christian behavior is not a condition. It is an exhortation. Right living is so important that we should by all means pursue it - and for all kinds of reasons!

We should live the way the Bible tells us to because of who we are (redeemed people), because of what we have received (God's grace), and because of what we will receive (treasure for ourselves in Heaven)!

But the Bible never tells us that we are to live rightly to prove that we are Christians or to become Christians or to stay Christians!

The Bible says that we are saved through faith alone in Christ alone - no "ifs" "ands" or "buts" about it! And no "by the ways..." about it, either.

How freeing to realize that after we place our trust in Jesus, God doesn't change the way He dealt with us prior to saving us!

He wooed us by love and grace. He keeps on dealing with us in love and grace.