

Sermon – 10/01/2010 am

Beware of Dogs

Study Text: Philippians 3:1-3

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord (3:1). This word ‘finally’ which is found in most translations, might lead you to think we have reached the end of this letter. But we are only half way through. Is the apostle adopting the technique of some preachers, saying ‘finally’ shortly after he starts, and a number of times after this! One child asked his father what the preacher meant by saying ‘finally’. ‘Nothing son’, his father replied.

Because of this word ‘finally’ some critics have questioned the integrity of this letter. ‘Was it written at different times and put together by an editor’ they ask. How come we get this word here in the middle of this letter? The word literally means ‘for the rest’ or even ‘so then’; it does not mean ‘finally’ as we might understand. Paul is picking up where he left off in 2:18. He went off to talk about sending Timothy, and then Epaphroditus, off to Philippi.

You also be glad and rejoice with me he wrote in 2:18. Here in 3:1 he writes *rejoice in the Lord*. Rejoice in the Lord always – this is the theme of this beautiful letter. Twice in this passage before us today he writes ‘rejoice in the Lord’.

Concern

In addition to being a letter of thanks for their gift, Paul took the opportunity to encourage the church at Philippi. He urged them to stand fast in one spirit as they strove for the faith of the gospel (1:27). He warned them about opposition. They would experience opposition for the Gentiles such as Paul experienced when he cast demons out of the slave girl. Paul was thrown into prison at Philippi without being given an opportunity to defend himself.

It was opposition from the Jews, however, that Paul was most concerned about as he wrote this letter. In this chapter he slams these Judaizers, as we call them, in no uncertain terms. We find some clever and colourful use of language in this chapter. We also find the way of salvation, which is through faith in Christ, most powerfully proclaimed in this chapter. It is often in the midst of defending the gospel against false teaching that the truths of the gospel are most clearly enunciated.

The truths of the gospel need to be asserted again and again. The sinful nature of man keeps on asserting works of righteousness, the idea that we can be saved by good works or pious worship, or that such works at least count towards our salvation. Faith plus works salvation is widely taught.

Paul said it was no trouble for him to tell the Philippians once again the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. *This is a safeguard for you* he wrote (3:1). This word ‘safe’ means ‘certain’. They need to be absolutely clear and fully persuaded of this doctrine of justification. The more they heard it the better, according to Paul.

It is such a joy to hear children learning Bible verses and also the Catechism. It is a greater joy to hear them as adults repeating these truths in the midst of teaching or defending the gospel.

To write the same things. Paul had obviously told them these truths some time before. When? Did he mean previously in this letter; there is a brief mention *of the faith of the gospel* in 1:27. Did he

mean in another letter of which we have no record? The conclusion of most readers, including Calvin, is that the 'before' refers to when Paul was visiting this church.

Concision

Beware, beware, beware! Paul was sounding the alert in this community of believers. They were in danger. In danger of what, or of whom? We do not know just how closely this danger was lurking. Paul knew from the experience of other churches that this church at Philippi would come under attack sooner or later. Maybe danger was already present in their church.

Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision/mutilation (3:2). In the Greek each of these dangers begins with the letter 'k', making for powerful alliteration. In the next verse he writes *for we are the circumcision*. Paul was clearly referring to Jews to whom God gave the covenant sign of circumcision. All Jewish boys were circumcised eight days after birth. For the Jew this was the most powerful sign that they were the chosen people of God. All Jews were circumcised but non-Jews were not.

It was probably not orthodox Jews that Paul was referring to because they hated Christians. There were other Jews who had joined the church but had not left behind their old ways, in particular the law about circumcision. They maintained that all Christians had to be circumcised and be made to obey the Law of Moses. Repentance and belief in Jesus Christ as Lord was not sufficient in their view. These Judaizers said all Gentile believers had to be circumcised.

In the churches of Galatia Paul had to rebuke these false teachers. *Every man who is circumcised is a debtor to keep the whole law* he warned (Galatians 5:3). To claim that circumcision or any other ritual was essential to justification was to negate the doctrine of grace. Jesus Christ fulfilled the law. He supersedes the law. Circumcision was no longer a covenant sign in the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

In other letters Paul argues that true circumcision is circumcision of the heart not the flesh. Circumcision means cutting off or separating. It symbolises the putting off of sin, and the separation of the person unto God. This cannot be done simply by cutting off some flesh. It is the heart that must be circumcised. *He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart in the Spirit not by the written code* (Romans 2:29 cf. Colossians 2:11). *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love* (Gal 5:6).

Orthodox Jews often denigrated Gentiles calling them unclean dogs. They proudly claimed that circumcision made them spiritually clean. In this passage Paul takes their own word and turns it back on these Judaizers. Their false teaching was luring people away from the pure doctrine of grace. They were roaming around like hungry dogs, making loud noises and tearing apart the church of Christ.

The dogs pictured here were not pampered pets. They were mangy, stray dogs, like those we often saw roaming the streets in India. The dogs there carried deadly diseases like rabies. These Judaizers were no less deadly to the spirit of true believers.

Beware evil workers. Paul was not mincing his words about these people. In contrast to Epaphroditus his fellow worker these men were evil workers. They were deceitful workers. They came into the church for the purpose of propagating false doctrine. Their teaching lead people away from Christ and his accomplished redemption, to human works and outward rituals. 'Here is Satan's demolition crew' writes Hendriksen 'working hard to demolish God's beautiful palace of grace and peace'.

The third 'beware' is again directed at these Judaizers. The word 'circumcision' means just that – to cut around. Paul calls these wicked workers 'mutilators of the flesh'. The prefix to the words 'cut' in this case means to cut 'against or down' rather than 'around'. This is graphic language, and intentionally so. Paul condemned these people in no uncertain terms. Elsewhere he says *I could wish they would even cut themselves off* (Galatians 5:12). They were destroying, emasculating if you like, the essential doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.

If the apostle condemned any and every doctrine that undermined this great doctrine, should we not do the same? This is what the Reformation was all about. Luther began by condemning the excesses of the church but God soon revealed to him that the doctrines taught by the church destroyed the essential doctrine of grace. Such false teaching continues today. We must beware of any teaching that destroys the doctrine of grace; in particular any that promote works in addition to grace.

Circumcision

For we are the circumcision writes Paul. The church of Jesus Christ is the church in which Jewish and Gentile believers stand as equals before God. Circumcision of the flesh plays no part in the church. *There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28). There is no place for special churches exclusive for Messianic Jews, or any other particular group. *We are the circumcision* writes Paul referring to all believers at Philippi, most of whom were from Gentile background. True circumcision is of the heart, as we have said.

All who believe in Jesus receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. *We worship God in the Spirit* writes Paul in his first point explaining why we are the circumcision (3:3). Without the Holy Spirit it is impossible to worship in Spirit and truth (John 4:25). Worship by rituals, sacrifices or other outward means is not valid if the heart is not right before God. God is Spirit. God looks on the heart. God takes no notice of circumcision in the flesh or other 'fleshly' adornments.

Paul's second point describing the true circumcision is that we *rejoice or glory in Christ Jesus* (3:3). When he preached he preached nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified (I Corinthians 2:2). Christian worship is about giving glory to Jesus Christ. The 'truth' component of 'worship in Spirit and truth' refers to Jesus. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. 'No one comes to the Father but by me' said Jesus. The glory of Jesus is the focus of worship in the church.

The final point is simply the negative of the other two. We put *no confidence in the flesh* (3; 3). Nothing that we do as human beings will give us access into the presence of God. Circumcision was of no help. Keeping the law was of no help either, as Paul found out. As Augustus Toplady wrote in the famous hymn:

*Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to thy cross I cling
Naked came to thee for dress
Helpless look to thee for grace
Foul I to the fountain fly
Wash me Saviour or I die.*

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon