

## Rules of Faith

We live in a troubling era in which civilization seems to be unraveling. And trends within the evangelical church are no less appalling. I'll mention here just these two movements: (i) Our understanding of the Gospel has been reduced to little more than mental assent to a few facts about Jesus. (ii) The liberal position that the New Testament is just a historical record of early Christian thought seems to have penetrated deep into our churches, because the study (let alone even just the reading) of God's Word is becoming increasingly rare. So, let's discuss what evidently was happening in the early church in the hope that my readers at least might recover the true, apostolic faith.

Let's think first about (i) above. Our sin nature and spiritual immaturity cause us to be content with the very least necessary (as we suppose) to be saved. Look up the Apostles' Creed! It's on the Internet and perhaps in a hymnal you have at home. It's not known exactly when this creed was drawn up, but likely very early in the life of the Church. It may have been formulated by the apostles themselves, and/or perhaps by Paul. These 12 articles of faith were the minimal theological truths deemed necessary to know about Jesus. Almost all of these articles of faith appear in the background in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthian church, which was one of his early letters. It seems that Paul was using that creed as the theological basis for instructing the Corinthians to resolve their social problems. The Apostles' Creed certainly was known and in use in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century as a rule of faith for those being baptized. In other words, it expressed in great economy of words the essential theological truths necessary to identify as a believer. It's at minimum what Christians in the very early church believed, indeed, had to believe about Jesus to be saved. But it isn't all there is to the Gospel.

So, when we read in Acts 16, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved," that is surely just an abbreviated or condensed version of all that was shared with the jailer. It is not the totality of what's necessary for salvation, as many today believe (hope). The next verse states that Paul and Silas explained all the Gospel to the jailer and his family. It may have taken hours to explain the Gospel, its demands and implications, its privileges and responsibilities. We cannot reduce the Gospel to a simple sentence or two, as if we're mouthing slogans, and expect people to understand what we're saying. And we ourselves need to understand fully what the Gospel is if we hope that it will save us from hell.

As the early church fathers in subsequent centuries reflected on the N.T. Scriptures, they realized that further theological truths needed to be stated as a rule of faith. Thus we have the Nicene Creed and then the Chalcedonian Creed. And even later, the Athanasian Creed (44 articles). These don't substitute for the New Testament, but they state the core, essential theological truths a believer in Jesus needs to know, upon which to base his or her life. The four Gospels reveal the Person of Jesus and His teachings and commands. We need to know Jesus to love Him and to be like Him. The letters of the New Testament apply core theological truths to construct a worldview that includes how we as believers are to live. I'm sure that Jesus really expected His disciples to follow Him, that is, to live as He taught. And the Apostles surely expected followers of Jesus in the churches to live out all that they wrote. For all the Church Age.

Regarding (ii) above: Liberals have an anti-supernatural bias. So we eschew their naturalistic ideas. The New Testament is the work of the Apostles to teach us what we must know and become and do to follow Jesus. When Jesus said, "When the Holy Spirit comes, He will guide you [that is, the Apostles there in the room with Him] into all truth," that was so that they could write the N.T. (John 14:26 and 16:12-15). The New Testament was deliberately written to change the lives of its readers. The N.T. is the Law of Christ. It's Jesus Himself speaking to us thru His Spirit with His authority. We're really expected to be transformed by the Word so that we actually live out the words of the N.T. It's why we've been given the Holy Spirit, to enable us to do just that.

Hearing the Word preached on Sunday mornings cannot substitute for knowing and reflecting on the Word. If we ignore the Word of Christ, are we indifferent to truth? Are we indifferent to Jesus? More likely, I suspect, we realize deep inside us that knowing the Word creates an obligation to obey it, so we choose to not know it, hoping that what we believe about Jesus is sufficient for ultimate salvation. If that's the case . . . May God have mercy on us! Remember these penetrating words of Jesus: "To whom much is given, much is required."

Scripture narrates a great cosmic drama that God is carrying out. And, in the Gospel call, we've been invited to participate with God in His great work. There is no greater privilege. So let's be faithful.