

World Evangelisation in Jeopardy

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Preacher: William Philip

- [0 : 0 0] Well, do turn again with me to Galatians chapter 2. And we really focus this evening on the incident described in verses 11 to 14.
- Peter and Paul at Antioch. And I guess really the title is the same as last week. World Evangelism in Jeopardy, part 2. Because the issues are just the same as we looked at last week.
- Let me begin by saying this. The life of the Christian believer and the corporate life of the Christian church is a battle.
- Indeed it's a war. And it's a war of cosmic proportions. I guess it's out of fashion to talk like that these days. Just as it's out of fashion to sing hymns like onward Christian soldiers.
- But as you know already I'm not bothered about being out of fashion. And unless we rediscover this fundamental truth that we really are at war.
- [1 : 0 4] We're going to be defeated in our Christian life before we even begin. Right from the start the Bible is very clear about all of this. Very clear indeed.
- Do you know what the very first description in the Bible is of a Christian believer? It's in Genesis 3.15. It's one in whom God has placed enmity.
- Violent struggle. Opposition. Against the serpent. Against the devil and all his. Against the enemies of God and his people. That's the first description of a believer.
- One that God has placed in a struggle. In a battle. In a war. To the death. And the history of the unfolding of God's promise through the Christian scripture. Through the Bible.
- Is one of the outworking of that enmity. That struggle. That bitter opposition. Between the seed of the woman. The people of promise. And the seed of the serpent. The massed forces of the enemies of God and his people.
- [2 : 0 6] You see it in the story of Israel. The corporate life of the nation. The people of God. Wars on every side. All through their history.
- Not just natural wars. Do you remember the story in the book of Daniel. The prophecy that Daniel receives. He gets a glimpse behind the scenes of everything that's going on on the earth.
- What does he see? A great war in the heavenly realms. In other words. The real and physical battles of God's people on the earth.
- Simply reflect the real and violent battles going on. In the spiritual realm. In the heavenly realms. Why is that? Well it's because.
- The kingdom that God has been building from the very beginning. Is not just an earthly kingdom. It's a heavenly one. And it's built. And it advances. Only. Only by the destruction.
- [3 : 0 7] And the overthrow. Of God's enemies. And his ultimate enemy. The devil himself. And so the battles raged from the very beginning.
- For the people of God. For his church. And for all believers. And for all of their mission. For the building of the kingdom of God. Right from the beginning of history. And with the coming of Jesus Christ.

And the definitive inauguration of his kingdom. In these last days. Through his death and resurrection. He's dealt a final blow. A fatal blow. To the evil one.

To all his hosts. That's been done decisively. That battle has been settled. That battle has been settled once and for all. Forever. But. And this really is absolutely vital.

If we've got any hope at all. Of understanding the Christian life. And the life of mission for the church today. But though that battle has been decisively decided.

[4 : 08] On the cross. At Calvary. It's certain beyond doubt. Nevertheless. The whole message of the New Testament is very clear.

That that battle is not yet fully over. For God's people. Christ has inaugurated. He's begun. He's. He's ushered in his kingdom. The last days.

But. For the sake of his grace and mercy. The New Testament tells us. Those last days have been prolonged. So that the gospel can be proclaimed.

To every tribe and tongue. And people and nation. So that there can be people from. Every corner of the earth. Who find salvation in him. That's what Peter makes so clear.

In 2nd Peter 3 verse 9. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise. As some count slowness. But he's patient towards you. Not. Wanting. Any.

[5 : 03] To perish. But is eyeing that all. Should. Seek repentance. And so. Just like God's people of old. We today in the Christian church.

Are in the midst of conflict. In the midst of war. In the midst of battles. Our enemies are not flesh and blood. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6. They're the rulers. The authorities. The cosmic powers.

Of this present darkness. The spiritual forces. Of evil. In the heavenly realms. And the battle that we're in friends. Is raging more fiercely than ever. Read Revelation chapter 12.

When you get home. It's a graphic picture. Of the days that we live in now. The war in heaven. Clearly won. But. The devil.

Fighting with all his might on earth. He has come down to you. With great wrath. Says the angel. Because he knows. His time is short. So friends.

[6 : 01] We better get this straight. The Christian life. And our life together. As a Christian church. Is going to be one of battles. And whether we like it or not. We're Christian soldiers.

And soldiers. And soldiers need to expect battles. They need to train for battles. And when the battles do come. We need to know how to fight.

And we do actually need. To fight. And because they're spiritual battles. They can come to us. In so many guises and disguises. All kinds of grief.

All kinds of sorrows. All kinds of hardships. All kinds of persecution. Physical and otherwise. But facing up to these kind of realities.

Is one of the themes. That's prominent. In Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul has to help. This young church. This zealous church. He has to help them see. That the gospel is always under attack.

[6 : 58] That the gospel is always. Needing to be defended. Even from the most unlikely of sources. Even from within. The professing Christian church.

That's what we're seeing in Galatians. Isn't it? There are ambushes. That come to us. In gospel ministry. In the life of the church. Ambushes that come from all sorts of directions.

We could never have anticipated. Surprise and deception. Well they're. They're key weapons. Aren't they? In armed struggle. And Paul wants the Galatians.

And he wants us. To be vigilant. To spot the enemies. And know how to react. And Paul. All the way through this letter. Is reminding them. And encouraging them too. That it's been like this.

Ever since the beginning. The seed of the woman. The seed of Abraham. God's people. They've always been persecuted. Remember in chapter 4. Verse 28. He reminds them of the story of.

[7 : 53] Of Abraham. And his two sons. Ishmael. And Isaac. Just as at that time. He was born according to the flesh. Persecuted him. Born according to the spirit. So also it is now.

Being like that. From the beginning. Says Paul. The gospel of the kingdom of God. Has been under attack. From his enemies. Right from the beginning. And it will be.

Right up until the very end. The church. True. Gospel church that is. Is always going to be. In a struggle. The Christian.

The truly committed. Christian believer. Will always be in a struggle. That's one of the surest marks. Of true and living Christianity. It's not a mark of failure. It's a mark of faithfulness.

Maybe some of us here tonight. Need to know that. Very clearly. And particularly. It's one of the surest marks. Of living Christianity. Because. We are. By definition.

[8 : 50] People of the cross. And people of the cross. Bear the marks of the cross. Paul says that. In chapter 6. Verse 17. I bear on my body. The marks of Jesus. Jesus. And so it is for all.

Who follow Jesus Christ. Last week. In chapter 2. Verses 1 to 10. We saw how Paul. Had to face up to. Real and damaging. Potential challenges. To the gospel.

And to its progress. And mission. From within the professing church. Even. From the heart. Of the Bible belt. From Jerusalem itself. And we saw.

How in dealing with. That situation. And in teaching. The Galatians. About that situation. He made it absolutely clear. That. That any church. No matter how. Good its pedigree.

No matter how great. Its history. Any church. And every church. Must be. As the reformers said. Semper. Reformanda. Always reforming. And the criteria.

[9 : 48] For reformation. Is always. The gospel. And the gospel alone. Living by. The gospel of Christ alone. And for. The gospel of Christ alone.

Is essential. Says Paul. For the survival of the gospel. And for the survival. And the unity. Of the church of Jesus Christ. No matter how. Tough it may be. We must.

Stand firm. On that. On the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it can be very tough. Can't it? We saw last time. How the. Potential opposition.

Came both from true brothers. And from false brothers. The true brothers. In Jerusalem. Real evangelical believers. We saw how they can. By their. Paralyzing orthodoxy.

Actually become a real threat. To the mission of Christ. And his gospel. And we know this happens. It does happen. There are churches.

[10 : 44] Aren't there? With an impeccable history. With faultless doctrine. And yet. And yet. They can lose themselves. They're so concerned. About preservation.

Of their own concerns. Of their own traditions. Their own ways. That the gospel mission. Somehow becomes buried. There are many. A dying church.

In the world today. And in our country today. There are pure churches. But dead churches. And a corpse. Is a corpse.

Is a corpse. Whether it's. Orthodox. Or heterodox. But. We did see also. That when the gospel. Is. Allowed to challenge. And awaken.

Such a situation. When the gospel. Truly is put in first place. When. Personalities. And prejudices. And everything else. Are put aside. For the sake of the gospel. Well then.

[11 : 38] True unity. Is revealed. Where the gospel. And the mission. Of the gospel. Really are placed. In the driving seat. In the life of the church. When the gospel.

Dictates policy. And polity. And strategy. And everything else. There really can be. Gospel unity. Despite differences. Despite. Differences of emphasis.

Different spheres of working. Paul and the Jerusalem church. Separated. With the hand of fellowship. And the blessing. On each other's mission. And that's a vital lesson today.

Isn't it? We've got to see the big picture. Of gospel. Mission. We've got to forget. The petty rivalries. That can get in the way. Of that big picture.

We've got to forget. Trying to have. Useless get togethers. Doing everything together. As though we. All were sharing the same task. And unless somehow or other. We weren't all. Holding hands. Doing it together. It wasn't unity.

[12 : 33] We've got to forget that. And get on. Pressing on. With the mission of the gospel. Blessing one another's efforts. Recognizing. One another's sphere of work. But the challenge also came.

Didn't it? From false brothers. Even. Even in churches. When the leadership. Can get it straight. And get it right. And come and respond. Even there. There can be those in the fellowship.

That can make things go really wrong. And again. The gospel. And the gospel's demands. And its implications. Must be the test. They can be nothing. Nothing different. From the gospel.

Nothing added to it. Christ alone. Must be the basis of fellowship. And the gospel itself. Must be allowed to critique. And expose.

All that deviates from that. And when it does. As Paul says in verse 5. We can't give in to that for a moment. Not one moment. The truth of the gospel.

[13 : 32] And its message. And its implications. For the mission to the world. Must be the plumb line. That decides our reaction. Directs our responses.

To all of these. Potential conflicts. Paul you see. Wasn't naive. He saw the implications. For the whole of his mission. To the world. Of these potential threats. And that's why he faced up to them.

That's why he had to do that. In Jerusalem. And praise God. He won the day. But that wasn't the end. Was it? Of the challenges he faced. Worse was to come. And that's in our verses tonight.

He met and he saw. Of these potential challenges. But shortly afterwards. He was to face. A real. In your face. Actual challenge. A public dispute.

With a fellow apostle. With Peter himself. One of the pillars. And it all happened in Antioch. In his. His own home patch. His mission church. His great. Mission station.

[14 : 28] For the whole world. Missionary hub. Of all his. Operations. To the Gentile world. That's where it came. John Stott says. Without doubt.

It's one of the most tense. And dramatic episodes. In the New Testament. So what was the nub then. Of this. Very real threat. Well it was. As we said last week. The threat. Of true brothers.

Acting. Falsely. Not only can you be threatened. By true brothers. And by false brothers. But by true brothers. Acting falsely. The message of these verses.

Is that. Even. Christian leaders. Are sinful. That's no surprise. And they can become. Totally inconsistent.

With the gospel. That they know to be true. And as a result. Even healthy. And well taught. Churches like this one. Even churches. With a strong. Missionary zeal.

[15 : 26] Can very quickly. Begin to live. In such a way. That totally. Contradicts. The gospel. That they say. They believe in. Their creed. They can totally.

Deny the gospel. Leading to a destruction. Of its mission. Among them. And God's mission. Through them. That's what happened. In Antioch. And that can happen.

And Paul tells us. When the cosmic scope. And the purpose. Of the gospel. Becomes displaced. By cultural protectionism. And that's something.

That even the pillars. Of the church. Like Peter. And everyone else. Can easily fall into. But it can't be allowed. To prevail. It mustn't.

Whatever. The threats might be. To the safety of the church. And the well-being of the church. And the prosperity of the church. Whatever. Whatever. The threats might be perceived to be. For the world outside.

[16 : 22] The gospel alone. And its demands. For mission. Must. Set. The way. Whatever the cost. It's the gospel.

And the gospel. Of the new creation alone. It's the gospel. That rescues us. From this evil age. And frees us. For the glory of the new age. Now begun in Christ. And whatever this evil age.

Might still throw at us. We must never lose sight. Of what the gospel is really about. Where it's all going. That. And that alone.

Must be in the driving seat. And that alone. Must drive the church's strategy. And the church's policy. In everything. Whatever that means. In terms of facing up to hardship.

Or persecution. Or whatever it might be. The point that Paul. Is making to us. Is that the church. Is built upon the gospel. And if the gospel's lost.

[17 : 19] Then the church is going to be lost. If you take away your foundations. Your house falls down. You might retain the shell. It might look something like a church. But no.

Once the gospel is lost. And once the implications of the gospel are lost. Well. Everything's lost. And that just can't be allowed to happen.

We must insist. As Paul does here in verse 14. Insist. On conduct that is in step. With the truth of the gospel. However.

Painful that situation might be. We must live by the gospel. And for the gospel. Or else it will be destroyed. Well let's look then at these verses.

And just see what the situation was in Antioch. That led to this. Great. Confrontation. Rocked the church. Didn't it? But right in the answer. Let's just be clear.

[18 : 14] What the nub of the issue really is here. It's not. It's not a theological disagreement. About justification by faith. We read verses 15 and 16.

It's absolutely clear. Both Peter and Paul. Were absolutely at one on this issue. Verse 15. We are both Jews by birth. We know. That a person is not justified.

By works of the law. But by faith in Jesus Christ. It wasn't a theological disagreement. About the nature of the gospel itself. Let's be very clear on that. Both of these men were sincere Christians.

They were forgiven. They've been filled with the Holy Spirit. Both of them were apostles of Jesus Christ. Charged with this gospel. And both of them are absolutely clear. On what the heart of the gospel was.

We saw that last time in verse 8. The same God worked through Peter. As worked through Paul in his mission. So the issue here is not one of theological orthodoxy.

[19 : 15] Rather it's all about practical consistency. It wasn't Peter's belief that was wrong. It was his behaviour. Verse 14. It was not in step with the truth of the gospel.

His false behaviour. Was what was destroying the unity of the true believers. A unity that was something that his belief held clearly.

His belief in justification by faith alone. For both Jew and Gentile. Demanded that they were all one in Christ Jesus. But if you're all in one family.

You can't possibly act as though. Well really it's upstairs downstairs. If you can't eat around the same table. Then you're not one family are you? Dick Lucas puts it this way.

The issue at stake is not so much how we receive Christ. But how we receive one another. Paul battles this issue in many places in the New Testament.

[20 : 15] Remember Romans 15 verse 7. He says welcome one another. As Christ has welcomed you. If you can't welcome those that Christ has welcomed. By grace alone.

Through faith alone. Then your behaviour is actually destroying the message of the gospel. That you say you believe in. That's exactly the Apostle James' point isn't it?

In his letter chapter 2. He's not at variance with Paul at all. He says I'll show you my faith by my works. Yes. That's what Paul's saying. Your works are negating your faith.

Real faith you see is visible. That's what Paul says. That's what James says. That's what Jesus says. You've seen that in Matthew 5. It's not the one who says Lord, Lord.

But he who does the will of my Father in heaven. But you see when faith begins to become invisible. Soon it's going to disappear altogether.

[21 : 14] And the gospel of grace alone. Through Christ alone. For justification. Well it's going to disappear. And that's what happened in Antioch. How did it come about? Well let's just trace it through.

Verse 12. At one time clearly Peter was happily eating along with Gentiles. Living alongside them. Just as one of them. In fact verse 14b.

Paul says he was so liberated he actually lived in all respects like a Gentile. You know what? You lived like a Gentile. In other words he'd laid off all the customs of his Jewish past.

That wasn't a natural thing for Peter to do. He was a faithful Jew. But remember in Acts chapter 10. God had met him in a dream. And told him off and rebuked him. Don't you call unclean what God has made clean.

You can't make any distinction anymore between Jews and Gentiles. Because God stopped making that distinction. And Peter got the message. We read later on in Acts chapter 10. That he says truly I understand that God shows no partiality.

[22 : 19] In Acts chapter 11 we see him robustly defending that view. In the face of some of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. And he told them what God had clearly said. And what God had clearly done. And that shut them up.

Indeed they glorified God. They said themselves. Gentiles also have received the same life as we have. So it was very clear. Peter was absolutely clear on the implications of the gospel.

But then something happened. Verse 12. Some men came from James. And everything changed. Now. It seems that these men were not officially representing James.

If you read Acts chapter 15 later on. He denies that. But at the very least. They were purporting to be representing James as you. The chief of the church in Jerusalem. And therefore they were very influential.

And Peter. For whatever reason. We'll think about that in a minute. Peter played the coward. He drew back. He separated himself. And then that act itself.

[23 : 22] Had huge implications. Verse 13. The rest of the Jewish believers. Also started acting hypocritically. In other words. They too. Acted falsely. To what they knew to be true. Believing one thing.

And doing quite another. And look at this. Verse 13. Even Barnabas. Was led astray by their hypocrisy. Think of the blow.

That that must have been to Paul's ministry. Barnabas in many ways. Was Paul's senior mentor. He was the one who'd gone and found him. And brought him to Antioch. He'd been on that early missionary journey. It was even Barnabas.

And what was the result? Not very simple. Two tier Christianity. In the church at Antioch. Upstairs. Downstairs. One table for Christians light.

Another. For Christians plus. The true sons of Abraham. Couldn't possibly be interpreted any other way. By the Gentile believers. Could it? Well yes.

[24 : 23] Of course. We believe we're all one in Christ Jesus. Just that. Well you know. Culturally we're so different. And it makes a lot of sense. To meet separately like this. As Jews and Gentiles. Because the outsiders.

Can't really understand it. If we meet together. Because of course. We're all one in Christ Jesus. But it just makes sense. Culturally for us. To meet separately. Doesn't it? The blacks.

Over here. And the whites. Over here. Or the rich. Over here. And the rather irritating. Poor and smelly people.

Across there. Oh yes. Well we do have a meeting together. And we sing. And we pray. We. But afterwards this evening. We'll be having a communion service. For the Jewish believers.

And brother Ishmael. Not brother Ishmael. Brother Barnabas. Will give us. A sermon on Abraham. The father of our faith. You see.

[25 : 17] It's not what you say you believe. Or even do believe. It's what you actually do. That matters. Isn't that right? And if what you do.

Is out of step. With the truth of the gospel. Then it destroys the truth of the gospel. It destroys the fellowship in the gospel. The word Paul uses there.

For being not. In step. Is the word that we get. Our English word. Orthopedics. It means walking straight. And what he's saying is that any lurch.

To one side. Subtracting from the gospel. Or to the other side. Adding to the gospel. Any lurch. Sets you off on a course of disaster. It's very important isn't it?

See it's not just our doctrine that matters. It's our practice that matters. Just as much. You see you can say.

[26 : 14] Oh yes we're all one in Christ Jesus. There's no partiality in this. In this congregation. But if. If the reality and practice is. That only people from one particular background.

Ever get any attention paid to them. Or if only certain voices and accents. Are ever really listened to. Or certain cultural norms are adhered to.

Or we've destroyed the gospel haven't we? We've got a two tier church. Upstairs. Downstairs. You can say about any particular thing that.

You might do in a particular church. Oh yes. We don't believe. Of course we don't believe speaking in tongues is essential for true fellowship. Of course not. Not everybody has that gift. We don't believe that. But if you spend all your time going on and on about that.

And emphasizing it. And playing it up. And telling people who come to your church. That really wouldn't you like to come to the meeting where you learn to speak in tongues. Well you've destroyed the gospel haven't you? You've got a two tier faith.

[27 : 20] There are 101 other examples where we do just that. It's far more common I think in Bible churches and Bible believing churches.

That people walk out of step with the gospel. Than disbelieve the gospel. Isn't that right? But Paul says here it's just as damaging. But why?

Why did this happen? Why did Peter and Barnabas and the rest cave into this pressure? Seems extraordinary. What explains it? Given how Peter and Acts had boldly defended his actions in front of all the church in Jerusalem.

What on earth explains this? Well verse 12b is the answer isn't it? He feared the circumcision party. Well who were they?

Well I don't think they were the men who came from James. Peter couldn't have had any reason to fear them. I mean Peter himself was one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem along with James. It makes no sense that he would be swayed by them.

[28 : 23] Verses 7 to 9. Three times the same expression is used. And it just simply means they are the Jews. Not Jewish Christians but Jewish non-Christians. And I think it's best to take it that way.

But why would Peter fear the Jews? After all he's the apostle to the Jews. He's preaching the gospel to them. Well we can't be absolutely sure.

But the scholars tell us that there was at this time in these decades in Palestine a rising tide of Jewish nationalism. We know that happened. There was a great deal of zealotry.

And hatred against the Romans. And passionate nationalism among the Jews. It was what eventually led to the Jewish revolt. And the Roman reprisal that led to the sacking of Jerusalem. And the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

And one of the features of that rise in Jewish zealotry was that there was great persecution by the Jews of any of their own. Who fraternised with the enemy. Who spent time or even mixed with Gentiles at all.

[29 : 25] It's rather like today in some of the Muslim countries where there's Sharia law. Anybody even mixing with Christians or other non-Muslims.

Are persecuted. We saw that didn't we in the aftermath of the tsunami in Sumatra. In Bandar Asa where Muslim zealots were going in. And very very cagey about anybody who was accepting aid from these infidels.

Well that's what was going on in Palestine in the 50s AD. And obviously you see Christian Jews were doubly at risk weren't they? Because they were Christian. That was one thing that was anathema.

And because they were Christian very often they had relations with Gentiles who were Christians too. And it seems that men had come from James and they'd reported to the church in Antioch.

Things that were going on in Jerusalem. And that the Jewish church in Jerusalem was facing great persecution. And it was being made worse. Because stories were getting back to Palestine about this church in Antioch.

[30 : 27] Where Jews and Gentiles just lived together as Gentiles. And so they were persecuting all the more the believers in Jerusalem. And so it was the most natural thing in the world wasn't it?

For Peter and the Jewish believers to want to protect their own countrymen. Their own brothers. We know from elsewhere in the scriptures that it was obviously a pressing issue for the apostles at Jerusalem too.

They wanted to do everything they could to avoid needless offence to the Jewish culture around them. And there's nothing wrong with that. In Acts chapter 15. Later on when we read of the Jerusalem Council.

They requested the Gentile churches to make some concessions. Concessions. On a few things. For that reason. But they certainly weren't willing to make the Gentiles try and become Jews.

James said we should not trouble these Gentile believers who have turned to God. They wanted to keep the peace and do whatever they could in practical terms.

[31 : 31] Of course. Nothing wrong with that. But not by jeopardizing the heart of the gospel. But that's what happened in Antioch. Richard Longenacker puts it this way.

They turned practical concerns into a theological issue. Peter, as he had heard about the persecution in Jerusalem. He feared those Jewish zealots. He was full of concern for his hometown.

His home church. His countrymen. His heritage. His heritage. Wanted to do anything. To make things easier for them. The most obvious thing to do surely was to draw back.

To separate. Take away any accusation. So he backed down. Didn't want to rock the boat of the establishment.

Wanted to keep the peace. But he didn't see the dire theological consequences of what he did. Because even when faced with real practical concern.

[32 : 32] And human suffering. And bodily needs. And personal dilemmas. The truth of the gospel must still be the decisive factor. It must be the thing that conditions our decision making.

Our responses. Whatever that has to be. But that didn't happen here in Antioch. And no matter how difficult it was.

No matter how explosive the situation. Paul simply had to stand up to that. Because he could see. He had to insist that the gospel. And the implications of the gospel.

And the mission of the gospel. Had to be put first. However hard that was going to be. However much it might cost the church. However difficult it was going to be for him personally.

To stand alone. And it does seem that he stood alone. We've got no indication in the text here. That he won the day. At that time. He certainly did later.

[33 : 28] We see in Acts chapter 15. That Paul's position was vindicated. We know later on. When Peter writes in his second epistle. So warmly of Paul's writings. Encouraging others.

We know that there was reconciliation. But perhaps not at the time. Paul was on his own. Against the world. Everybody was saying to him.

But Paul we can't do this. We must protect the mother church in Jerusalem. Paul said no. Friends we've got to be realistic.

It's very, very, very hard. At times. For the gospel really to take precedence in our thinking. There are all kinds of powerful ties.

That want us to push the gospel aside on this issue or that issue. Family ties. Natural ties. Maybe cultural ties.

[34 : 31] Ties of a relationship. It's so easy for our emotions to be led astray by hypocrisy. That word that Paul uses. Led astray. It's got a nuance of irrationality about it.

Hansen in his commentary says this. It's frightening to see. How otherwise sane and sensible people can be swept away by emotion. In the midst of a church crisis. In the heat of the conflict.

They lose all sense of perspective and proportion. Isn't that right? You know that's right. You know that's right in your own heart, don't you?

So do I. You know that's right even in this fellowship, don't you? So do I. Why is that?

Because we're in a battle. A spiritual battle. We've got an enemy. And he preys on the weakness of the flesh at every possible opportunity.

[35 : 29] Wherever that will be. That's why in Galatians Paul speaks so much about the battles of the flesh. The inward battles in chapter 5. The flesh opposed to the spirit. So what does he say?

You must walk in step with the spirit. In these battles. But the outward battles too. Just as here. The flesh is opposed to the gospel.

What does he say? You must walk in step with the gospel. It's the same thing. Walking in step with the spirit. And walking in step with the gospel. We can't be naive.

The flesh and the ties of the flesh are very, very powerful. The power of cultural protectionism in the church is very, very great. Let me just give you three examples.

Nationality. Which is more important really? Our Christian bonds. Or our national bonds. A couple of years ago when I was in London.

[36 : 30] I was watching the England-Scotland game. In a pub with the minister of the church that we went to. Jason Robinson had just scored his second try against us. And this friend of mine turned around and said, You know, he's a brother.

He's a Christian. I said, I don't care if he's a brother. He's a dirty English scumbag. I can hope he gets scribed. Some of you might have felt like that this afternoon with our Welsh friends.

Well, perhaps it's alright on the rugby pitch. But you know, it can be very serious, can't it? Here's a serious example. Think of Israel and Palestine today. Where Christian Jewish believers are persecuted.

Greatly. What a great temptation. Wouldn't it be to separate at any church. Between Jews and Arabs.

To avoid that persecution. Wouldn't you be tempted to do that? What about in Ireland today? Think about the south of Ireland.

[37 : 34] Where John and Susan have gone. Must people become Protestant? With all the baggage and the national, political things that go with that.

In order to have true fellowship in the church of Jesus Christ. The ties of blood, the ties of nationality. They're very, very strong, aren't they? You can think of many other ways in which that can affect us in the church.

But Paul says the gospel ties are the ones that really count. Think about it in parochialism, in churches or in denominations. We are part of the church of Scotland.

I was born and bred in the church of Scotland. Every spiritual benefit I've had in my life has come through the church of Scotland. I love the church. I love the church. I cherish it.

I cherish its heritage. But you know, if the survival of that institution becomes so important that the mission of the gospel in Scotland is curtailed.

[38 : 44] Well, I can't submit to that. That's to put the Jerusalem below the things of this world, the things which are temporary, above the Jerusalem above.

The thing that really matters. That's not to say, of course, that our own frustrations, our irritations are grounds for confrontation.

Paul was the arch-accommodator. He bent over backwards in every possible way. But if the truth of the gospel becomes at stake, if the mission and the advance of the gospel in our nation becomes at stake, we can't let any fleshly protectionism stand in the way of that, can we?

We can't cave into pressure not to rock the boat of the establishment, to just avoid persecution, to avoid opprobrium. No, we'd have to face it down.

That kind of fleshly cultural protectionism has many, many guises within congregations too, doesn't it? Of course, all of us have our own preferences.

[39 : 55] What we prefer in music, or in form of service, or in a way of doing things. All of us have precious traditions that we want to protect. They're good things.

Things that have meant a lot to us. Things we've enjoyed have been precious. All of us have precious theological roots, perhaps. Or backgrounds. But none of these things, none of the things of this world like that, could ever, surely, be elevated above the concerns of the new creation.

The gospel and where it's all heading. Surely, the gospel and its implications must come first. In a way we assert ourselves about these trivialities.

We can't cave in to any pressure of just cultural protectionism. We can't protect the truth of the gospel and the concerns of the flesh at the same time, because they're in opposition to each other.

We can't protect the concerns of the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly Jerusalem at the same time. We can't be taken up with the new creation and the things of this present evil age.

[41 : 05] It just can't be done. It can only be the one or the other. The spirit or the flesh. The gospel or falsity. Christ or enemies. It's one or the other. And throughout the history of the church, you know, friends, so much damage has been done to the gospel, because good Christian people have been led astray, have been carried off from the truth that they know truly in their hearts.

Rationalizing their behavior is some kind of sensible accommodation to a crisis. What's happened is that the gospel has been destroyed.

The gospel of being all one in Christ Jesus, because we're all one through Christ Jesus. It could be nationalism. It could be racism.

Or classism. Or culturism. Or theological sectarianism. Parochialism. Anything else you can think of. But all of them, all of them are ultimately about things of this evil age.

That we cling to. Knocking us offline. Causing us to walk out of line with the truth of the gospel and its demands. And its implications.

[42 : 24] So friends, as we close tonight, let me say this. There's no room for naivety for us here in St. George's Tron, is there? With Peter and Barnabas and the most zealous missionary church that the world has ever seen, and that's what Antioch was.

If they can be knocked off their stride, then surely we could be, couldn't we? So we've got to be vigilant. We've got to be realistic.

We've got to recognise that we are in a battle, a battle for the gospel of the kingdom of God. We've got to determine to let the gospel and the gospel alone dictate our pace.

To live by the gospel alone as a fellowship, and live for the gospel alone as a fellowship. Because that's essential for the advance of the gospel, and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ in any age.

In 1st century Antioch or Galatia, just as in 21st century Glasgow. We're in a battle.

[43 : 39] And we need to know how to fight, and when to fight. And most of the fighting is with our own sinful hearts inside. So are you willing to battle your sinful heart, and subject it to the battle of the cross, and the treatment of the cross, for the sake of the battle, the gospel of God's kingdom?

Well, we'd better be, or in time the gospel will be lost from this fellowship. We don't want that, do we?

Let's pray.