

Back to fundamentals: No creed but Jesus

by [Jimmy Carter](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

Many of you may be asking why a former politician is giving a Bible lecture to an assembly of highly qualified Christian leaders. My only credential is experience. I began teaching Bible lessons as a young midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, and have continued this practice for the past 62 years—now as a deacon at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia.

I've been in a quandary about what subject to discuss. I have decided to use one of the letters of St. Paul that addresses the most serious blight that presently exists among believers in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior: divisions within the powerful river of faith that are dividing us into swirling eddies and meandering tributaries. The divisions and even animosities are a cancer that is metastasizing within the body of Christ, obsessing us with diversions from his ministry and presenting to the world a negative image of Christians.

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul shows us that he not only deplores such disharmony but also understands its root causes. The three churches in Galatia were established at Lystra, Iconium and Derbe on Paul's first missionary journey. He was proud of these congregations, but soon learned that they had departed radically from the foundation of their faith. They had become divided because some of their leaders took the clear and adequate message of the gospel of Christ and began to add other requirements for acceptance or retention in their fellowship. This caused disagreements, arguments and acrimony.

This is an almost exact description of a plague that is threatening the unity and effectiveness of the Christian community today. Elements of fundamentalism are used to denigrate or exclude others. The healing factor that saved the early Christians was the realization that drawing nearer to Christ reduced the importance of human differences and brought the worshipers closer to one another.

After identifying himself and establishing his credentials in the first few verses, Paul lashes out in the strongest possible fashion: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we [apostles] or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (Gal. 1:6-8).

Of what crime were the Galatians guilty? Their church leaders were departing from the basic gospel of Christ by adding their own requirements for fellowship and salvation. In this case, they proposed adopting facets of Jewish law, including circumcision. Other congregations were imposing a creed concerning the eating of meat sacrificed to heathen idols, or which Sabbath day to choose. Some were arguing about who was the most authoritative apostle as spokesman for Christ.

Redefining the gospel has been a temptation for many centuries. Sometimes the message is so diluted that it is meaningless. At other times, powerful men adopt strict rules and regulations based on their own opinions and impose these creeds on others. The latter characteristics are part of a trend toward fundamentalism.

I would describe fundamentalism as, first of all, a movement led almost invariably by authoritarian males who consider themselves to be superior to others and who have an overwhelming commitment to subjugate women and to dominate their fellow believers. Second, fundamentalists draw clear distinctions between themselves, the true believers, and others. They are convinced that they are right and that anyone who contradicts them is inferior and beyond the purview of God’s full blessing.

Third, fundamentalists are militant in fighting against any challenge to their beliefs, are often angry and sometimes resort to verbal or even physical abuse against those who oppose the implementation of their agenda. Finally, they tend to make their self-definition increasingly narrow, to isolate themselves, to demagogue social and emotional issues and to view change, cooperation, negotiation or other efforts to resolve differences as signs of weakness.

An example of enforced belief that was promulgated and commonly accepted by Christian denominations when I was a child was the requirement that a congregation not include both black and white people. Although some elements of this racism still persist, the legal nature of the exclusion has been removed in most places.

We know that man-made issues are causing serious and debilitating schisms among Baptists, and also among Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Quakers, Catholics and others who are professed believers in the gospel message that Paul was defending. For incomprehensible reasons, the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention unfortunately decided to withdraw from the Baptist World Alliance. I don't think the general membership of the SBC agreed with that decision. No differences are important enough to prevent reconciliation. We should all hope and pray that in the not too distant future, we Baptists can be completely reunited.

I am not minimizing the importance of the controversial questions concerning abortion, homosexuality, the role of pastors, separation of church and state, the priesthood of believers, or whether the holy scriptures are to be interpreted by the words and actions of Jesus Christ or by a group of elected leaders. Paul may or may not have anticipated some of these debates, but he made it vividly clear that to add any of these issues to the good news about salvation was an abomination that could divide us one from another and dam up or fragment the great stream of evangelism for Jesus Christ.

Paul went on to remind the Galatians that the gospel is not of human origin, and that its message should not be distorted or debased by the imposition of controversial human opinions. What is the gospel message? Paul put it this way in writing to another troubled church: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2).

There is certainly nothing wrong with believing in fundamentals, the most important of which is the gospel message: we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This should be adequate as a fundamental belief within which Christians can harmonize our evangelical effort. Does this require an additional creed or definition of who can join us in the unrestricted worship of God and the service of Jesus Christ? Certainly not.

It is inevitable that there are important issues on which many of you would disagree, both with each other and with me. And I can't end this lesson without one example. Despite the fact that Jesus Christ was the greatest liberator of women, some male leaders of the Christian faith have continued the unwarranted practice of sexual discrimination, depriving women—more than half the devout Christians on Earth—of their equal rights to serve God.

There is one incontrovertible fact concerning the relationship between Jesus Christ and women: he treated them as equal to men, dramatically different from the prevailing custom of the times. Although the four Gospels were written by men, they never report an instance of Jesus condoning sexual discrimination or the implied subservience of women. Instead, he deliberately exalted women on many occasions.

The current special effort of some devout and sincere Baptist men to “keep women in their place” is based on their official assertion that “man was first in creation, and woman was first in the Edenic fall,” which twists the meaning of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib and puts the blame for original sin on females. These men are also relying on a few carefully chosen selections from Paul’s letters to the early churches. If taken by themselves, some of these verses indicate that the apostle deviated from Jesus’ example and had a bias against women, and even suggested that women should be treated as second-class Christians—submissive to their husbands, attired and coifed demurely and silent in church.

I would never claim that the scriptures are in error, but it is necessary in some cases to assess the local circumstances and to study the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words. Most Christians ignore details of Paul’s comments that are pertinent to his own era, such as these words (1 Cor. 11:5-6): “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair.” (This passage makes it clear, by the way, that it is acceptable for women to pray and prophesy if their heads are covered.) Paul also forbade certain women to braid their hair or to wear rings, jewelry or expensive clothing. It is obvious in those cases that Paul is not mandating generic theological policies.

Paul’s close friend Priscilla is revered for having instructed Apollos, one of the great preachers of that day. To the church in Rome, Paul listed and thanked 28 outstanding leaders of the early churches, at least ten of whom were women. Listen to the apostle’s words (in chapter 16 of Romans): “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae . . . greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus . . . greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Adronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was . . . greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.”

It is inconceivable to me that Paul can be quoted by modern male chauvinists as the biblical authority for excluding women from accepting God's call to serve others in the name of Christ, when Paul himself encouraged and congratulated inspired women who were prominent—to use his own descriptions—as deacons, apostles, ministers and saints.

Paul's clear theological message to the Galatians and to us is that women are to be treated exactly as equals in their right to serve God: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-28).

Our Maranatha congregation has just called a new pastor, whose wife also will be an ordained minister. I presume that our church and I will not be excluded from this fellowship. Neither should the Baptist World Alliance limit its members to groups who guarantee equal rights to women. There will be two groups in our membership: those who choose to discriminate against women and those who treat them equally with men. This accommodation is necessary, because those of us who are gathered within the sacred confines of the Baptist World Alliance must resist the fundamentalist temptations of rigidity, domination and exclusion.

Paul supplemented his advice with a few requests: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor. 1:10). And my favorite Bible verse of all, to the Ephesians, "Be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (4:32).

To summarize our lesson for today: Paul reminds us that the vast Christian world needs to rise above divisive controversies and heal our differences; to adhere to the basic and undistorted gospel message ("We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ"); to draw close to Christ and therefore to one another; and to follow our savior Christ, the Prince of Peace, in reaching out to the lost and alleviating the suffering of others. This is a good Bible lesson for us all.

This article is adapted from a Bible study former president Jimmy Carter led in July at the assembly of the Baptist World Alliance, which met in Birmingham, England, under the theme "Jesus Christ, Living Water."