

“Who am I? I am Thine.”

A sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Galatians 2:20

The ultimate question is: What is really, really, really real? What is truth? Of course, that says something about who you are and who I am, but it's really the ultimate question: What's really, really, really real?

There is no other Gospel. Paul is very harsh about that. He uses the strongest language: Even if an angel from heaven preaches another gospel, let him be damned.

He says in Galatians 2:5 and 2:14 that “the truth of the gospel” is what it's about. Then in Gal 2:20 he points out exactly what that means for you and me.

When we ask: What is truth?, most of us think of Pilate and his question: “What is truth?” (John 18:38). And the paragraph ends. Who knows? As the poet Swinburne wrote: “Pilate asked: ‘What is truth?’ and did not stay for an answer.”

The common idea among us is that truth is anything and everything. Who knows what's really, really, really real? Isn't it all a matter of opinion?

Two hundred and fifty years ago there was a movement called Spiritualism, the conviction that the physical world is populated by multiple worlds of spirits. Even Arthur Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes) was interested. The great magician Houdini, who himself had done amazing tricks of magic, spent the last twenty years of his life investigating the Spiritualists. He was always able to show how their claims were fake, how they tricked people into believing. Of course, that didn't bother the Spiritualists at all because they had so many followers, so many believers. It was during this time that G. K. Chesterton wrote: “When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in everything.”

Starting in the 1960's, the Pew Foundation did a fifty-year survey and found that the number of people who claim to have direct spiritual experience rose in that period from 22% to 48%. That's a big change. Why? What's going on?

Paul writes in 2 Cor 11:14: “Even Satan appears as an angel of light.” But to those who claim to have had spiritual experiences, that can't apply to them! Everyone thinks: “My experience is real. It's other people who are deceived, mixed-up. My

experience is real." For these people, what's really, really, really real is my experience.

Why should that be true? The flip side of making my experience final is the claim that everybody has a right to his own opinion.

There is opinion, and there is that which we can measure, and that's real. You are welcome to your opinion, but what is really, really, really real is what can be observed and measured. That's what's really real. And those who believe that reality is what we can measure think that it's only a matter of time before we can measure accurately and know for sure. They're more like the Spiritualists than they realize.

NASA's James Webb Telescope recently released stunning pictures of outer, outer space. The Telescope is reaching into millions of other galaxies and points to more beyond what it can now "see."

People think that scientists, physicists, astronomers, and the like can just go out there and measure things. But really it's like playing blind-man's bluff. It's as if you go into a room which is completely dark and you can't see anything. It's absolutely dark and when you touch something it may be moving or not. And you try to measure it and try other such experiments and guesswork, trying to figure out what's there.

What does Galatians say is real? In Galatians 2 Paul talks about confronting Cephas. ("Cephas" is Aramaic for "Peter." Peter ironically meant "Rocky." Peter was rocky, somebody who wobbled; for example, he denied Christ three times.) In Galatians 2:11 Paul writes: "I condemned him." He doesn't say: "We disagreed." Paul says in effect: I condemned him because he was against "the truth of the gospel."

What is "the truth of the gospel"? Paul writes in Gal 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." "Gave himself" means gave up on the cross.

At this point we come to a fascinating point of grammar: the difference between the "objective" and "subjective" genitive. In many languages there is the genitive case, the "of," belonging to or pointing to. You can't tell here whether it is it "the faith of Christ" or "the faith in Christ." We have the idea that it means faith in Christ so everything depends on our faith. It cannot be determined by the grammar. Both

could be true. If it's a subjective genitive, then it's Christ's faith. If it's an objective genitive, then it's my faith.

The same question arises in Galatians 2:16 and 2:20. The context is decisive. Remember that Paul had poor eyesight and sometimes he dictated letters to a secretary or stenographer (6:11). Look what happens in Gal 4:9: "Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God." He had started out: "Now that you have come to know God" but immediately realized he misspoke and he corrects himself, rather "that you are known by God." That tells us that it isn't our faith; it's what God has done through Jesus Christ that produces faith.

He makes this point not just this one verse but in other places, too. Go to Philippians 2:12-13: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Some recent translations try to obscure this point.) He does it. He does the willing. He does the work.

Go to Philippians 3:12: "I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own." He has already made me his own.

A modern echo of this gospel truth is found in a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In World War II Bonhoeffer was part of a plot to kill Hitler. The plot failed and Bonhoeffer and others were imprisoned and eventually executed. While Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, he wrote letters and essays to people. In 1944 he wrote a poem "Who am I?" He asks: What's it all about? Where is it all going? After several verses he concludes with these two lines: "Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."

This is exactly what is said in the sixth chapter of John. After the feeding of the 5,000 the people fall away, everyone except Jesus' inner circle. John 6:44 states: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." And then in John 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father." Or John 1:13: "[But to all] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

Who am I? I am the one who has been made his own no matter what my experiences. No matter what my measurements. What is finally real, what finally counts, is that he has made you his own no matter what.

As it says in John 10:29 (the Shepherd chapter): "My Father . . . is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." That is "the truth of the gospel." Amen