
The Grammar of the Gospel

Sunday 6th May 2018
John 15:9-17

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"I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus; No turning back, no turning back."

This is a song that originated in Assam, a state in northeast India. The words form the last testimony of a man who, along with his family in the mid nineteenth century, decided to follow Jesus Christ through the efforts of an American Baptist missionary.

Called to renounce his faith by the village chief, the convert declared, *"I have decided to follow Jesus."* His two children were killed and in response to threats to his wife, he continued, *"Though none go with me, still I will follow."* His wife was killed, and he was executed while singing, *"The cross before me, the world behind me."*

This display of faith is reported to have led to the conversion of the chief and others in the village. Much of northeast India, today, is solidly Christian.

I have visited this region of India, which borders Tibet and the northern region of Myanmar, a number of times. William Carey, founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, served there. As a strong Christian area, the region has a long tradition of revivalism and mass crusades. Here people are called upon, through lively, evangelistic preaching, to make decisions and commit their lives to Jesus Christ.

This is an approach not unknown to many of us. Growing up as young teenager I remember being challenged during a Sunday night youth service as a visiting preacher appealed to us to come forward and accept Jesus Christ as our saviour. *"This may be your last chance"*, the impassioned preacher proclaimed.

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“Jesus is knocking at the door - what if you were to die tonight without Jesus? Come forward now and invite him into your life!”

I didn't go forward that evening and I must admit that I went home after the service with the forbidding thought that I had missed my chance. Making a decision for Christ, I was told, is the most important thing in your life. And it seemed that, on that night, I had blown it!

Now, I don't want to trivialize or diminish, in any way, the sincerity and commitment of those converts in northeast India after making their decisions to follow Jesus. Neither do I intend to devalue or underrate the cost of what that decision involved.

But it seems to me there are some issues here. Is one's acceptance to God and one's salvation in Christ actually dependent on whether one responds to an altar call? I suggest not.

Let me explain.

There is a thing we refer to as 'the Grammar of the Gospel'. Here we affirm that the basic sentence in English consists of a subject, a verb and an object. This means something or someone does something to someone or something – 'the cat sat on the mat', 'my friend caught the train', 'I drove to work'.

So we say 'I have decided to follow Jesus', 'I have chosen God', 'I love the Lord'. But, you see, there is a problem here.

Look at the text of John's Gospel that we read this morning. Here Jesus says: *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.....love one another as I have loved you”*.

Do you notice something?

In the words from the Gospel note who is the subject, who is the one doing things? It isn't 'I' who is the subject. It isn't the case that 'I love Jesus'. Rather, Jesus is emphatic that it's Jesus who loves me! Here Jesus is the subject. God is the subject.

And this means, in terms of the 'Grammar of the Gospel', God always needs to be the subject of our sentences. In terms of Christian faith, God is the subject. It is always about what God has done for us that matters. It's not a case of what we do for God.

And that means we are not to start with the words: 'I have chosen God', 'I have decided to follow Jesus', "I love the Lord'. Rather, it's always the case that we start with 'God chooses me', 'God calls me', 'God loves me'.

These are, if you like, 'Gospel sentences'.

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“You did not choose me” Jesus says in John 15:16, ***“but I chose you”***. Think about it. Here Jesus reminds us that our place as a Christian community and as a people committed to following Jesus has nothing to do with our own efforts.

Rather, it’s all about God’s initiative. Here we are called by God, we are chosen by Jesus. Everything we are and everything we do as Christians is the result of the unmerited, unconditional, out-reaching no-strings attached love of God. And this is what we call grace!

Here the message to each one of us and to others is this – it’s not so much that we accept Jesus and make a decision for Christ - as it is that we acknowledge we are loved by God and are chosen by Christ to be his people.

So, what does this mean in real terms?

Well, I believe it means we need to be bold and confident about our faith. We do not have to defend God, protect God, persuade God, or, indeed, prove to ourselves or to others that God is a viable option. Rather, we need to simply say it as it is. God loves you, God chooses you. You and everyone around you belong to God. God has claimed you as God’s own.

This, my friends, is what it’s all about. Our calling this - is just share this incredible news with courage and with conviction!

Secondly, I believe this ‘Grammar of the Gospel’ says how we live our Christian faith and what we do as a church should never be about us. How we live and what we do should never be about what we want. It should never be about our perceived needs or desires.

Being Christian and being church is first and foremost about God. It’s about living in that love so freely given to us in Jesus Christ. It’s about being a people of God who are chosen and called to be God’s people. It’s about putting God first in everything we do!



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Thirdly, I believe the 'Grammar of the Gospel' says very clearly that who we are and what we do is part of a mission that is of God. Mission is God's mission. It's not our mission. Nor is it West Epping's mission. Rather, we are invited into God's mission to be part and parcel of what God intends.

Friends, remember these points and take hold of them. What I would like us all to do here is this - I would like us, here in West Epping, to pause for a moment and ask some questions:

Are we bold and confident about our faith? Are we willing to share our faith with others with courage and with conviction? And if not, why not? What needs to be done to address this matter?

After all, the fact that God loves you, that God gave his Son, Jesus, that we can have life, life in all its fullness, the truth that we are chosen by God and that we belong to God for all eternity - is surely the most wonderful news of all. Why keep quiet about it? Why shut it down for ourselves?



Then we need to ask the question regarding what we do here in West Epping. Is what we do about us - or is it about God? In what way do the programs we are involved in proclaim the love of God and offer hope to the world around us? In what ways do our West Epping activities demonstrate we are a people called and chosen by God to engage in what is God's mission?

And, if these programs do not measure up, then why do we continue them?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I would like every person and every group activity in West Epping to ask these questions of themselves:

Are you confident about sharing your faith? And, is what we are doing focusing on ourselves, our needs, our desires and our personal agendas - or it all about God?

These are two questions that are critical to our being the church today. For, we, as a Uniting Church, are facing huge challenges. And as we do so, it's vital that we continually ponder and reflect on these questions.

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In the next Uniting Church Assembly that meets in Melbourne during July, proposals will be discussed to change the church's understanding of marriage. If these proposals are accepted, the celebration of marriages between same-gender or same sex couples will be permitted within the Uniting Church under certain conditions.

How do we respond to this controversial issue? And how do we move forward? These are questions we all face. I hope we will not run away from such matters but, rather, wrestle with them in the knowledge and in the confidence that God loves us, that God has chosen us, that God calls us to be the church today.

Friends, what matters here is God. The 'Grammar of the Gospel' makes God the subject of who we are and of everything we do.

May this truth be so now - and always.

Amen.

