

TANGLED TANGENTS

The Apostle Paul made a sobering declaration to the Ephesian elders just before his trip to Jerusalem, “And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all *men*. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:25-30).

Paul spent several years in Ephesus prior to his speech that is recorded in Acts 20. When he first arrived in Ephesus, Paul had found some disciples who had only heard of the baptism of John the Baptist, which was a baptism unto repentance, and did not yet know of the baptism of the Holy Ghost or of water baptism in Jesus’ Name (Acts 2:38). Paul later baptized them “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:4-5).

Afterward, Paul spent time teaching in the synagogue and, when he was hindered there, taught at the lecture hall, and “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). “The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

Later, Paul said goodbye to the disciples in Ephesus before going to Macedonia. Then, several months later, Paul, on his way to Jerusalem, called the Ephesian elders to Miletus to meet with him. It is here that Paul reminds the Ephesians that he had “not shunned to declare . . . all the counsel of God.”

Paul declared “the whole counsel of God” (ESV) or “the whole will of God” (NIV) or “the whole purpose of God” (NASB) in that he preached and taught to them the gospel in its fulness. He had given them the whole truth about God’s salvation. He also revealed to them the “mystery” of God (Ephesians 3:9).

Paul, as he stated, had spent many hours and days among the Ephesians teaching and preaching the kingdom of God, in its completeness, even from house to house. Paul was no preacher of tangents for he emphatically declared that he was “pure from the blood of all men,” and this he accomplished in that he had “not shunned to declare. . . all the counsel of God.”

Tangent: diverging from an original purpose or course. To “go off on a tangent,” for our purposes here, means to leave the completeness of the gospel and diverge into a narrowly focused idea or theory. Tangent preachers cannot say as Paul said, “I have not shunned to declare all the counsel of God.” Preachers who “go off on a tangent,” soon or later, discover that their tangent has led them headlong into a tangle!

The tangle in the tangent is that somewhere the circle becomes egg shaped then it continues to elongate itself as the tangent becomes the main thing; the chief point; the principal matter; the summa. Then, instead of scripture qualifying a point—the point becomes the qualifier of scripture!

A tangent is the opposite of balance. The tangent looks for its reflection in every mirror, it sings to hear its own voice, and its song is the same verse over and over again. The tangent deems itself as being revelatory and should be applauded and admired by all who hear it.

Proverbs 27:15-16 speaks of a woman whose continual nagging is like the drip, drip, drip of a leaky faucet; You can't turn it off, and you can't get away from it. Instead of a full flow of water the restriction set by the valve allows only a small amount of water to drip from the faucet. It is a repetitive dripping—each drop mimicking its predecessor and is a duplicate of its successor. Preachers who cease to declare all the counsel of God find themselves allowing only a repetitious dripping of an idea of their own making.

Perhaps, to a preacher, no greater compliment can be received than that of being known as a “gospel preacher.” We often hear of men who are “faith preachers” or “inspirational preachers” etc., because their overall ministry has a particular nuance to it, but those same men must be balanced in their preaching curriculum in order to fulfill their calling.

It is understood in the medical profession why doctors are expected to specialize. The question that usually follows the announcement of “I am a doctor,” is “what kind?” There are doctors who are heart specialists; doctors who are brain surgeons; doctors who specialize in cancer treatment, and the list, of course, could continue. These doctors focus their learning and skill onto specific areas of the human anatomy – they are not “doctors of the whole body” but rather “doctors of selective parts of the body.” Even the humble GP doctor is only someone who refers an individual to certain specialists when the need arises. This scenario, however, was not God’s design for the ministry.

While God did design a five-fold ministry for the perfecting (maturing) of the body of Christ, He, however, did not intend for us to wrongly interpret those five offices as being specialized in preaching only “parts” of the gospel but rather, to be specialized in operation and function of the “whole” gospel.

In the world of chess competition there was an American competitor, Bobby Fischer, who worked on improving at chess like no one else. He was considered, at one time, to be the best chess player in the world. Fischer devoted his life to the game of chess. It was said he lived only for chess. His defeat of the great Russian chess players of that day brought him fame and fortune. But unlike Fischer, none of those Russian champions were “full-time” chess players. They all had jobs, degrees, and family lives, Fischer, however, knew just one thing, how to play chess.

Fischer, someone noted, when anyone spoke to him of something unrelated to chess, Fischer was known to interject, “What’s that got to do with chess?” Fischer made the following remarks to reporters and other curious individuals when asked about his life: “Chess is life;” “All I want to do, ever, is just play chess;” “You can only get good at chess if it’s all you do;” “Chess demands total concentration;” “I give 98 percent of my mental energy to chess. Others give only 2 percent.” Fischer had learned the moves of chess at age six. At age 16 he dropped out of high school to devote himself fully to the game. Fischer was a man off on a tangent when it came to the completeness of life.

Sadly, there have been preachers who, like Fischer, left “all the counsel of God” and struck “off on a tangent” in their ministry. One pastor comes to mind, who once pastored a large and growing church, received what he called “a revelation” on a particular aspect of the Word of God. This aspect (an idea of his own making) became the obsession of his ministry.

Every sermon, regardless of its beginnings, had its ending in his beloved tangent. It wasn't an aspect that other preachers espoused, therefore, it was up to him (or so he must have thought) to divulge it to the world. Many years later, he still clung to his tangent after having divorced himself of any semblance of his early years of ministry. Gone was the ministry of salvation; holiness lifestyle had evaporated – and all that remained was his cherished idea that became only a tangled tangent.

Paul's charge to Timothy was explicit in nature; "I charge *thee* therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away *their* ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry." (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

Paul's commitment to declare all the gospel is evidenced in (notice Paul's use of "whole" and "all" in these verses); "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel," (Ephesians 6:10-20).

There is a bird, the cuckoo, who is common in England and certain other parts of the world. The first sign of spring is the call of the cuckoo. The cuckoo mother never builds her own nest. When the time comes to lay her egg, she finds some other species' nest with eggs and no parent bird present. The cuckoo lands, hurriedly lays her egg, and takes off again. That's all the cuckoo does in terms of parenting. The victim thrush, whose nest has now been invaded, comes back, circles, and comes into the wind to land. Not being very good at arithmetic, she can't imagine why her nest contains more eggs than previously and one rather large one. She gets to work hatching the eggs. Four little thrushes and one large cuckoo eventually hatch. The baby cuckoo is two or three times the size of the baby thrushes.

Mrs. Thrush, having hatched her five birds, goes off early in the morning to get the worm. She comes back, circles the nest to see four petite thrush mouths and one cavernous cuckoo mouth. Who gets the worm? The cuckoo. Guess what happens. The cuckoo gets bigger and bigger; the little thrushes get smaller and smaller. In the process of time - to find a baby cuckoo in a nest, simply walk along a hedge row until you find little dead thrushes. The cuckoo throws them out one at a time. Here's an adult thrush feeding a baby cuckoo that is three times as big as the thrush. The tragedy of an out-of-balance preaching ministry is that a tangent will have future disastrous consequences because the tangent will begin to devour the life of the things that should have been nourished and protected. Tangents are dangerous because they allow the starvation of other vital spiritual necessities. Keeping balance in the ministry of the Word is only possible by avoiding tangents.

We must be careful to "declare the whole counsel of God." While we are not advocating a premise where every message must contain the wholeness of the gospel, as that would be both ludicrous and impossible, however, the overall ministry of a preacher should complete the circle of wholeness.

"The whole gospel to the whole world," should not be just a catchy phrase, but the mission of every God-called man of God! "Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God."

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