

I'm going to do something that I have never done before. I am going to preach an entire sermon about why I am not going to preach through the 9th chapter of Romans. Oh wow, you're probably thinking. That really sounds exciting! You might be surprised.

This morning on the radio I heard about a Norwegian TV station that was trying out some very different ideas. They recorded a 7 hour train ride through the mountains and played that for 7 uninterrupted hours. They increased their market share by 15%, which is a huge amount. So their next big idea was to do a live TV broadcast of a 134 hour ferry ride. This was wildly successful and increased their market share by 36%! So who knows. Perhaps a sermon about why I am not preaching a sermon will be better than you might think.

Four years ago I was preaching through Genesis. Since the New Testament quotes from Genesis so often, during the Genesis series I would occasionally preach on related sections in the New Testament. Romans chapter nine was one of those chapters.

If you were with us back then, you will remember that those three sermons from Romans 9 created more heat than anything else I have ever preached. Many, many people liked and appreciated the messages but a few disagreed with the content. Therefore, I will not be covering Romans chapter nine this time around for several reasons.

But first, let me give you the theme of this message from John Chrysostom. In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ. We have 10 statements in our statement of faith and 6 distinctives. This saying from Chrysostom is a summary of those 6 distinctives. It really gives you a good picture of what EFCA church is all about. It is also the foundation of my reasoning.

First, this was only four years ago. Occasionally a sermon has overlapped with another sermon but there's no reason for me to repeat the same messages over again after such a short time has passed. Second, my views have not changed since that time so that would not make any sense, would it? Finally, there was enough controversy that I am smart enough not to preach those same sermons again. This old dog can still learn a lesson or two.

Having said that, please don't think that I regret having preached them. I think Romans 9 is a very important section of Scripture. As I said, my views have not changed since then and had I not already preached through the chapter, any potential controversy would not hold me back from doing so. This is one of the reasons that my habit is to preach through entire books of the Bible so that I don't get ever stumble into preaching personal hobby horses or get caught up in a long string of topical sermons. In thirteen years I have preached completely through eighteen books of the Bible and Romans will make the 19th.

Genesis

Ruth

1 Samuel

Nehemiah

Daniel

Luke

Acts

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Ephesians

Philippians

1 Timothy

2 Timothy

Hebrews

James

1 Peter

2 Peter

1 John

I share this information with you so that you can see that it would be quite difficult for me to preach on my hobby horse beliefs when 95% of my sermons are preaching through books of the Bible.

Let me explain how I preach by using the old illustration of baseball umpires. Most of you have probably heard this description of three types of umpires.

First umpire: Some are balls and some are strikes, and I call them as they are.

Second umpire: Some are balls and some are strikes, and I call them as I see 'em.

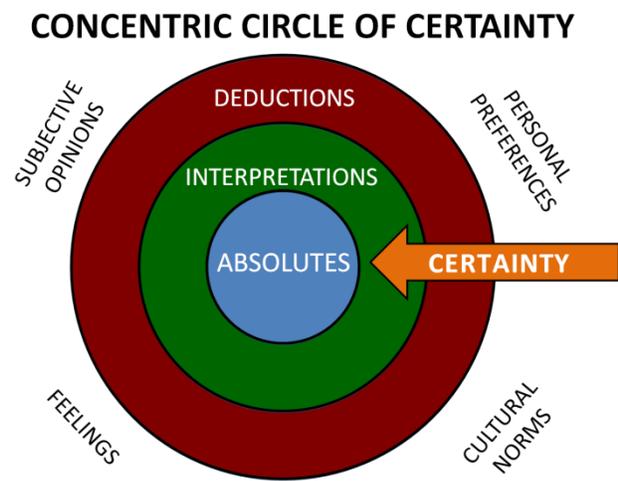
Third umpire: Some are balls and some are strikes, but they ain't nothin' til I call 'em.

This actually is a helpful illustration about how to interpret Scripture. If the first umpire were a preacher, we would re-write this as "I preach it as it is." I would call him a hyper-fundamentalist. Of course every preacher, including me, wants all of their sermons to be "as they are," so to speak. We want and firmly believe that what we study throughout the week and share with you each Sunday morning is the real truth as revealed by our holy God in the Scriptures. Unless we

are some kind of sick cult leader, we would never intentionally mislead you. But if someone categorizes all of their preaching as "I call them as they are," they are living in a fantasy world. This is exactly what the hyper-fundamentalists believe. They are convinced that their version of the truth is THE version of the truth. In their minds, there would be no other way to preach or teach. They believe that they teach exactly what the Bible says--no more and no less.

Each of these three types of umpires/preachers are obviously caricatures. Understand that I am painting with a broad brush here but also that most preachers will fit into one of these three categories. I hope that you can see the problem with this first type of preaching. It leaves no room for disagreement or discussion. If you say "I preach it as it is," then you are obviously right and anyone who disagrees with you is clearly wrong.

I call this person a hyper-fundamentalist in order to distinguish them from a fundamentalist. I am not afraid of the term fundamentalist. I am a fundamentalist, not necessarily in the historic meaning of the term, but in the sense that I spend my time and effort on supporting the fundamentals of Scripture. In this sense, we should all be fundamentalists.



This is where the Concentric Circle of certainty is helpful. I drag this out about once a year to remind us of the difference between major and minor doctrines. This is my attempt to flesh out the famous saying from John Chrysostom. "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ." My assumption and the assumption of the denomination of which you are apart, is that there is a difference between essential doctrine and non-essential beliefs and issues. This makes you a fundamentalist. You emphasize the fundamentals--the absolute, core doctrines of Scripture. But a hyper-fundamentalist is not able to easily

distinguish between an essential doctrine and a non-essential doctrine.

When I preached on Romans 9, someone told me that if I held a gun to his head, he would never agree with me. Can you see the problem with this response? First of all, I never asked anyone to agree with me. I didn't use the umpire illustration, but I more or less said, "Hey listen. I am preaching this as I see it and please feel free to disagree with me." In fact, I outright encouraged dialogue. So to people like this man I would say, "Put down your handgun. there's no reason to risk your life over my interpretation of this passage."

The second problem is that this person was not able to distinguish between essential and non-essential beliefs. Now we have to be careful even with these two words--essential and non-essential, because they imply one is important and the other is not important, which is not at all what we mean. This is why I used the terms absolutes in the center flowed by interpretations and deductions. Perhaps even better than these we should use primary, secondary and tertiary, to

illustrate the various levels of beliefs. We should not call a secondary doctrine "non-essential" because that would imply it is not important. For example, take your position on the rapture. Is Jesus going to return before the tribulation, in the middle of the tribulation or at the end of the tribulation? Everyone has differing opinions on this and in fact, some of you would answer "none of the above" to this question because you have yet a different belief about the rapture and second coming. The timing of the rapture would be a secondary belief. We do not need to all be in agreement, therefore we can be unified in our diverse opinions.

The timing of Jesus' return is a secondary doctrine but the fact of Jesus' return is a primary doctrine. Jesus is coming back again, just as he said. On this we must agree or else part company. Also, the application of Jesus' return is a primary doctrine. Repeatedly in Scripture we see the fact of Jesus' return is supposed to make a huge impact on the way we live our daily lives.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him (2 Peter 3:11-15).

I don't mean to imply that Romans 9 is all non-essential doctrine. Otherwise some of you might be thinking, "Well why would you spend time teaching on non-essential doctrine if all it's going to do is to cause controversy?" Like most passages in Scripture, Romans 9 has both primary and secondary doctrines in it. The two main themes of Romans 9 are God's sovereignty and God's mercy. The fact that God is absolutely sovereign and infinitely merciful are undisputed. I would literally die on both of these hills if I had to. We should be in complete agreement about these beliefs and like the second coming of Christ, we should seek to apply their truth to our lives. But Romans 9 is also about the way God's sovereignty and his mercy impact our understanding of salvation. Your viewpoint on how these work together is a secondary doctrine. It's not "non-essential." It's very important but it does not rise to the level of an absolute, "to die for" importance.

Now there are times to be very dogmatic in one's teaching. I am leaving for vacation on Tuesday so next Sunday Tim Farrell will be giving the message. His topic is the deity of Christ. Since the deity of Christ is an essential doctrine upon which our faith stands or falls, are you able to defend it? If someone held a gun to your head, could you come up with 2-3 Scriptures that would clearly support the fact that Jesus Christ is fully God? Every believer should be able to defend core beliefs such as this one. You should be dogmatic and confident about the doctrine of the deity of Christ. This is one of the "to die for" beliefs. You cannot and must not waver on this belief but as you preach a given passage of Scripture one should be willing to admit that there might be slightly different perspectives.

In other words, you can be absolutely confident that the overall belief is correct--in this case, the deity of Christ--but not everyone has to think exactly alike on every Scripture that might support

the belief. You understand the distinction I am trying to make, don't you? If you can't make a distinction, then you probably fit under this hyper-fundamentalist camp. For you, every last word and every last opinion is gospel truth.

Now for the second umpire. We just left him standing behind home plate so let's see how he is doing.

Second umpire: Some are balls and some are strikes, and I call them as I see 'em.

If this guy were a preacher he would define himself this way: I preach them as I see it. I would call this category Humble Orthodoxy. Humble orthodoxy recognizes that God's word is authoritative and sufficient for all things. The Scriptures cannot be wrong, but the preacher can.

This is the category for which I strive. I am not telling you that I am always humble but when it comes to my preaching, I always start with these two assumptions:

1. The Bible is infallible.
2. I am fallible.

Of course every Sunday I believe that I am hitting the mark, otherwise I would say something else, wouldn't I? I am not going to preach something that I think is wrong or not fully accurate. But as I prepare, as I preach and as I interact with others after the service, I am keenly aware of these two assumptions. Which is why I often tell you to search the Scriptures to see if what I am saying matches Scripture.

Now as you do that, I also encourage *you* to keep these two assumptions in mind at all times. If you are convinced that I am wrong are you also willing to accept the possibility, however slim it may be, that you are wrong? Do you see? It always goes both ways. To be a good Berean and search the Scriptures for accuracy, you must keep in mind that the teacher may have issues with accuracy and the Berean in the pew may have issues with accuracy. This is humble orthodoxy in action. We call them as we see 'em.

This is why the umpire illustration can be so helpful. Imagine if you had a slow motion camera built into home plate somehow. It would record every pitch that was thrown in a game at 10,000 frames per second. Then after each pitch the umpire could look under the hood, as they do in football, and see if the pitch was in fact a ball or a strike. Every pitch is either a ball or strike, correct? If you define the parameters of a ball and a strike and if you slow down the action enough to see where the ball ends up, it will always be either a ball or a strike. I don't like watching baseball as it is, so can you imagine watching a game like this?! Each inning would take an hour.

But my point is that the fact of balls and strikes is like the facts of Scripture. Scripture is unchanging and perfect. (Balls and strikes are not perfect. Don't get too carried away with this imperfect analogy!) Scripture is true but my interpretation of Scripture is not always going to be accurate.

This also fits well with one of the six EFCA distinctives I mentioned earlier.

The Evangelical Free Church of America embraces a humble orthodoxy in partnership with others of like faith.

We believe in the spiritual unity of the Church though not necessarily in structural union. We join with other Christians and other denominations of like, precious faith in common goals and ministries to accomplish the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. But we believe that there is strength in diversity and that it is important to preserve our distinctives. We recognize that union in structure does not guarantee unity of spirit. Our foremost concern is unity of spirit with our Lord, with each other and with other Christians.

This is the spirit in which I preached the Romans 9 series. I preached it as I saw it. And I was very clear that it was my understanding of the passage and it did not need to become your understanding of the passage. We can agree to disagree. That's the beauty of the EFCA. We major on the minors and give freedom of opinion and conscience on the lesser doctrines. More than

So here's what I am going to do. Since I am not going to preach through Romans 9 again, I will post them on the church website right before this message. Read them for the first time if you have to come to Grace in the past four years or read them again if you want. But please keep this order of priority in mind. There were two primary things I was trying to teach in those 3 message and one secondary thing.

Primary #1--God is sovereign and God is merciful.

Primary #2-- Our foremost concern is unity of spirit with our Lord, with each other and with other Christians (from the EFCA distinctive #3, above).

Secondary--Precisely how God works out his sovereignty and his mercy through salvation.

The only possible way we will ever have a problem with these 3 messages is if you moved the secondary teaching up to the primary spot. Using our circle diagram, if you take my secondary point and move it into the center and call it an absolute, then we have a problem. If you are convinced that the precise way that God works out his sovereignty and his mercy through salvation is an absolute belief and you happen to disagree with my conclusions, then we have more an issue on our hands. But if you keep first things first and allow for disagreement in secondary beliefs, we are good to go.

This is such an incredibly important point which will prevent all manner of disunity in a church. Almost all church problems arise out of secondary, less important matters. Imagine what we can do together if we are completely unified on the core issues of our faith? Imagine what church could look like if we all lived out the "to die for" beliefs in the center and allowed for diversity on secondary beliefs? Wow. If we did that, the gospel would spread like wildfire due to our evangelistic zeal for the lost and to our love for one another. What we want is to be burning hot in the center of the circle.

The ability to make these distinctions will also be very important when we get to chapters 12-14 in Romans. This is where the rubber meets the road. Most of chapters 12-14 is all about getting along with other believers. How does one function in a relationship? How do I love my brothers

and sisters in Christ? But if you can't make a distinction between primary and secondary beliefs and corresponding behaviors, this is going to be very difficult for you.

Let me explain the third umpire and then close with a story.

Third umpire: Some are balls and some are strikes, but they ain't nothin' til I call 'em. In a Biblical sense, this guy represent Liberal Christianity. There is no truth until the reader says there is truth. Obviously, we reject this outright.

I want to close with a conversation between John Wesley and Charles Simeon. Most of you know that Wesley was the founder of Methodism. Charles Simeon served as a pastor at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge for 54 years. He practiced and popularized biblical, expository preaching and he pioneered on-campus discipleship among university students.¹

Wesley was the Arminian and just to give you a picture of his passion, he not only disagreed with the Calvinistic preacher George Whitefield, but while Whitefield was on a preaching tour in the U.S., Wesley singlehandedly ruined Whitefield's reputation in London.

Here is the conversation between these two dear saints that wonderfully illustrates what I have been trying to say. December 20, 1784 (the date is given in Wesley's Journal):

“Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions... Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?”

“Yes,” says the veteran, “I do indeed.”

“And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?”

“Yes, solely through Christ.”

“But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?”

“No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.”

“Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?” “No.”

“What, then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?”

“Yes, altogether.”

“And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?”

“Yes, I have no hope but in Him.”

“Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it.

And therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.²

"In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ."

Rich Maurer
August 3, 2014

¹ <http://www.charlessimeon.com/>

² *Horae Homileticae*, Preface: l.xvii f.