



# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

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## PERPLEXING PASSAGES (7)

### SELECTED TEXTS

**B**ACK IN ISSUE 113 (JULY/AUG. 2018), WE BEGAN A NEW category of TOTT articles that combines the other two categories: a “tough text” (or important topic) and reader questions. This installment addresses three such important topics, all of which are excerpted from the author’s most recently released book, *Church History in the Light of Scripture: Exercising Discernment Then and Now*.

#### What is an Evangelical?

The term “Evangelicalism” has fallen on hard times. There are many nowadays, in fact, who call themselves “evangelicals” when they clearly are not simply because they have compromised one or more of the basic tenets of the Faith. It is tragic indeed that this term is often used so broadly that it has lost its biblical meaning. Let us, therefore, look first at the biblical term and then note the modern trends.

#### The Biblical Term

In his short but stunning epistle, Jude wrote: “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once [for all] delivered unto the saints” (v. 3). Jude wanted to write about the glorious salvation we have in Christ, but as grand and glorious as that subject is, the Spirit *compelled* him to write about the *core* of the Christian Faith.

The word “faith” (along with the definite article “the”) is not a verb here, that is, it is not about the *action* of faith. Rather, it is a noun that refers to “the body of revealed truth that constitutes Historical, Evangelical Christianity.” This does not mean an entire system of theology on which we all can agree; that would be impossible. Rather it refers again to the unique revelation of God through Christ. More specifically, this body of truth is the very essence of the Gospel, *the redemption by blood and salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*. That is *the Faith*. This one faith is clearly stated in Romans 1:16–17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” While that is the biblical Truth the Reformers recognized, it has

the biblical Truth the Reformers recognized, it has always been repudiated by Rome and was violently assaulted at the Council of Trent (1545–47; 1551–52; 1562–63), Catholicism’s focused and furious response to the Reformers.

Also implicit in “the faith” is where this body of revealed truth is located: *the Scriptures*. In other words, it is obviously the completed Scriptures that contain the record of “the faith which was once [for all] delivered unto the saints.” In fact, a basic acknowledgment of Scripture as the Word of God is automatic in salvation. Why? Because the person is saying, “I believe what the Bible says about sin, salvation, and the Savior.” Here is an acknowledgment of Scripture being true in its revelation of Christ. As Paul also declared to Timothy, “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Those early Christians had a body of basic doctrine (the Apostles’ doctrine; cf. Acts 2:42) they believed and committed to others. We need to further examine this wonderful term, *Historical Evangelical Christianity*, for it truly encapsulates the Faith, that is, NT Christianity.

First, our faith is foremost and primarily an *historical* faith, as the words “once delivered” demonstrate. Literally, this phrase reads, “once-for-all delivered,” which refers to the preaching and teaching of the Apostles as the historical base of our faith. Again, we find this principle in Acts 2:42: “And they continued stedfastly in the Apostle’s doctrine.” “Doctrine” is *didachē*, which means not only teaching but also stresses what is actually taught, that is, a body of doctrine.

Even more instructive is the basic meaning of “delivered.” This is *paradidōmi*, “to hand over, deliver up.” But when used in a context such as here in Jude, it means “to hand down, pass on instruction from teacher to pupil” and also “conveys the idea of handing down” teaching.<sup>1</sup> Other examples of this idea are found in Scripture (1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3). So, our faith is historical! We can look at many religions, cults, systems, and “faiths,” but not one of them is historical, that is, based on historical fact, except Christianity. Our faith is based on the historical fact of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our faith is not mystical, hypothetical, or philosophical (even though many early church fathers blended philosophy with Theology). *It is historical!* For example, several skeptics have tried to disprove the resurrection, many of whom later

came to Christ because the historical evidence is undeniable.

*Second*, our faith is *evangelical*. This term refers to believing the “evangel.” This word simply describes “the Gospel message.” The Greek for “Gospel” (*euangellion*) literally means “good message” (or good news). This is the word from which we get the English “evangelism.” W. E. Vine defines it beautifully, “Denotes the good tidings of the Kingdom of God and of salvation through Christ.”<sup>2</sup> This word has an interesting etymology. It is a compound comprised of *eu*, “good,” and *aggellō*, “to proclaim, tell,” and so to tell something good. The English “Gospel,” however, is even more fascinating. It comes from the Old English *gōdspel*: *gōd*, “good,” and *spel*, “tale.” Witches were said to cast a *spell*, that is, say certain words that supposedly had magic powers. To *spellbind* is to speak in such a way as to hold people’s attention. To *spell* a word means to name or write the letters of the word. So, the Gospel is, indeed, the good *spell*, the good *tale*, the good *story*, the good *message*, the good *news*.

Even more significantly, the Gospel is *the only* good tale. The definite article (“the”) is present quite often in the Greek. One of the best examples is Ephesians 1:13, where Paul wrote that they had heard of “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” What is notable here is that while the definite article is present only twice in the English, it appears three times in the Greek. We can literally read it: “*the* message of the truth, *the* good news of your salvation.” Paul wants to make it clear that there is *only one good news*. While there are teachers who claim they have other “good news,” salvation is found only in the good news of Jesus Christ (John 14:6). So, to be “evangelical” means believing in the “evangel,” the Gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ.

We should also note something subtle here. While Jude did not write about salvation *directly* (as he intended), he nonetheless writes about salvation *indirectly*—he still manages to slide it in there. He writes about contending for “the faith,” but which faith? The evangel! The Gospel message, the glorious salvation in Jesus Christ.

*Third*, our faith is *Christianity*. Is this not self-explanatory? Sadly, it is not because it is quite often confused with “Christendom,” which is vastly different. *Christendom* is a global term that describes countries or communities that, to one extent or another, adhere to principles and practices gleaned from the Bible. Further, it does not imply regeneration or any other aspect of biblical salvation. It is only *professed* Christianity (what we might call “Christianity lite”). *True Christianity*, in dramatic contrast, is not about *religion*, but rather *relationship*, a personal relationship with its founder Jesus Christ. It is not about a creed, a code, or even a conviction. It is about being right with God because of His grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone and about recognizing His Word alone (not tradition or human reason) as authoritative and sufficient. So, not all those who live under the giant banner of **CHRISTENDOM** are true, born-again Christians. While many European nations, for example, were once mostly *Christian*, they are today simply part of the 2.2 billion members of *Christendom* because they replaced Biblical Christianity with Secular Humanism. Finally, note verse 4, in which Christianity is not only *implied* but also *stated*: “The only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Finally, while Catholicism contains the first of those three, it fails in the other two. It does not declare the true Gospel because its system is not based on grace alone through faith alone, but rather adds human works—that is *bad* news, not good news. It is therefore not *true* Christianity at all, despite some “evangelicals” today who call it another “branch” of Christianity. It is merely about *religion*, not a *relationship*. The only relationship it has is with a priest, not Christ.

Even more specifically, true Evangelicalism consists of the following doctrines (verses for each in the endnote): the inerrancy (infallibility) of Scripture; the Scripture being the authority for all matters regarding faith and practice; the doctrine of the Trinity; the deity, incarnation, and virgin birth of Jesus; the substitutionary atonement of Jesus (i.e., Jesus’ crucifixion was a saving act because His death substituted for our own deserved death); the bodily resurrection of Jesus; the imminent second coming of Christ; the new birth through regeneration by the Holy Spirit; the resurrection of the saints to life eternal and the resurrection of the ungodly to final judgment and eternal death; and the fellowship of the saints, who are the Body of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

### The Modern Trends

In stark contrast to what we have just recounted, Modern Evangelicalism is a different type of Evangelicalism than its historic ancestor and is sadly only a shadow of its former self. It developed as an attempt to unify all “Christians” from every denomination and bring about a national revival in America. J. Elwin Wright (1890–1973) of the New England Fellowship traveled the U.S. in search of ministers who would unite and stand on the fundamentals of the faith. In 1942, he assembled four speakers at a national conference, and out of this was born the *National Association of Evangelicals* (NAE) in May 1943: Harold J. Ockenga (1905–85), William Ward Ayer (1892–1985), R. G. Lee (1886–1978), and Stephen W. Paine (1908–92).

Now, all that sounds good and is certainly admirable. The desire was to emphasize the basic truths of Christianity, promote unity in those truths, and spark revival. But when we look closer with discernment, we find that there are two subtle problems here.

*First*, while its foundational motive was sincere and commendable, it is biblically flawed. The idea that all Christians from every denomination working together can *cause* or even *contribute* to bringing about revival is clearly unbiblical. Both biblically and historically, revivals have always been spontaneous and the work of God alone. Man has nothing to do with the moving of the Holy Spirit or God’s sovereign purpose and work.

*Second*, ecumenism is a driving force in Modern Evangelicalism. The first effort in the modern era to attempt to bring about cooperation was the establishing of the *Evangelical Alliance* in London in 1846. Still around today, the EA operates across 79 denominations, 3,300 churches, 750 organizations, and thousands of individual members. It is a case in point of the compromise ecumenism creates. Not only does the EA bring together many doctrinally weak (even aberrant) Protestant denominations (Episcopalian, Methodist, Vineyard, etc.) but has supported ecumenism with the Roman Catholic Church.

While the EA has always been about uniting individuals, the *Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America* was formed in 1908 to unite churches. Most of the larger Protestant denominations joined. Its theology was modernistic, and its emphasis was on social, economic, and political issues, all of which are not the mandate of the Church.

As if the *FC* were not bad enough, it was replaced in 1950 by the more well-known *National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.* Its rank modernism and culture-driven agenda weighs in on leftist social issues such as so-called racist speech, affirmative action, open borders, gun control, and even global warming, to name only a few. Its “Statement of Faith” has no doctrinal content whatsoever and no biblical foundation. The bottom line is that the NCC does not represent biblical Christianity in any way, shape, or form. At its very core, it is anti-biblical, which is also reflected in the Bible translation it produced, the *Revised Standard Version*, the most liberal ever produced. (Note: The popular ESV is technically *not* a new translation; it is in reality a *revision* of the RSV, which the NCC licensed to Crossway,<sup>4</sup> but Christians sadly continue to buy it.)

Still worse, the international, inter-denominational *World Council of Churches* (1948) “is the broadest and most inclusive among the many organized expressions of the modern ecumenical movement” (as stated on their website).

In practice, then, ecumenism blurs denominational lines through compromise so that “all can work together for a common goal.” This means that a Baptist can work along side a Methodist, who in-turn, can work beside a Pentecostal, who can then join hands with a Presbyterian, who can then embrace a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, and so forth for the cause of the Gospel. Why is that a problem? Simply because some of these define salvation and other fundamental truths very differently (indeed heretically). Now, we most certainly believe in unity with diversity (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1–4), but how can there be unity when there is not agreement on basic, foundational truths (cf. Eph. 4:4–6)?

In case the reader might think I am being narrow-minded and intolerant here, consider this. As we have noted, Historical Evangelicalism was theologically conservative. But this simply is not so in the modern version and has become less and less distinctive. No longer is an “evangelical” defined as “a born-again Christian,” one who is conservative or “fundamental” in his theological viewpoint. Many consider Evangelicalism as synonymous with “Protestantism” itself, whether conservative or liberal. In fact, Evangelicalism is often equated simply with conservative politics. Now, we can agree that a Biblical Worldview will result in conservative political views—such as rejecting any form of Socialism, for example—but politics is clearly not the focus of the NT and, therefore, not the focus of true Evangelicalism. Scripture does not focus on *politics*, rather it focuses on the *person* of Jesus Christ and each person’s relationship with Him.

### Church Councils

The so-called early Church Councils (Nicaea, 325; Ephesus 431; Chalcedon, 451; etc.) were supposedly representative of the whole Church, but how often are these examined *bibli-cally*? While I am well aware that I am in a minority here, I would submit, in fact, that in the final analysis, they were un-

biblical for at least five reasons.

*First*, these councils were sanctioned by a “Church” that had already drifted *far* from biblical Truth. By this time the Roman Catholic Church had departed from the simplicity of biblical Church government and founded a thoroughly unbiblical hierarchy. For example, 318 bishops (a position unbiblically elevated over pastors<sup>5</sup>) plus a large number of priests (another unbiblical office of the NT church) gathered at Nicaea. Further, baptismal regeneration<sup>6</sup> was in full force by this time, and the Lord’s Supper was well on its way to becoming a grace-infusing sacrament in the eventual full-blown doctrine of transubstantiation. With that in mind (and we could add much more), how could the Roman Church be trusted to decide *any* doctrinal matter? Further still, it should be noted that the council at Nicaea was called by and presided over by the undoubtedly unregenerate Constantine,<sup>7</sup> who was notorious for controlling the bishops and just wanted the fighting to stop for political reasons.

*Second*, issues at such councils were settled by the voting of the delegates. Where is that in Scripture? That was certainly not the precedent set at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Further, decisions were often little more than compromises to please the majority. This leads to another reason.

*Third*, such councils were not really needed in the first place because Scripture declares the answers. In other words, it is not necessary to get together to *decide* doctrine because God’s Word *declares* doctrine. For example, if someone wants to deny the Deity of Christ (as Arius did), they are apostate and will be recognized as such by those who know Scripture. Besides, who wants to give such an apostate a forum to proclaim his blasphemy? Why was the Jerusalem Council valid? Simply because that even though the NT Scriptures were not completed yet, there was *apostolic authority* present that could squelch apostasy.

*Fourth*, such councils completely ignore the autonomy of the Local Church (as we will examine below). Scripture could not be clearer that each local church is independent and self-governing, not bound to any hierarchal system or controlled by the edict of some council.

*Fifth*, such councils never really settled any problems. As noted earlier, for example, the “decision” at Nicaea settled nothing. Arianism lives on today, and biblical believers must recognize it. Further, Roman Catholicism most certainly could not *solve* controversies, since it has *created* many of them.

### Autonomous Local Churches

As the aforementioned book, *Church History in the Light of Scripture*, details, over the centuries the Church devolved from a small gathering of believers with simple doctrines and only two offices of leadership into a juggernaut of added traditions and a hierarchy that would dwarf most modern corporations. As the renowned nineteenth century German Lutheran church historian, Johann Lorenz Mosheim, observed:

All the Churches in those primitive times were *independent* bodies, none of them subject to the jurisdiction of any other. . . . On the contrary, it is clear as the noon-day, that all Christian churches had *equal rights*, and were in all respects on a footing of equality. Nor does there appear in this first century any vestige of that *consociation* [or alliance] of the Churches of the same province, which gave rise to *councils* and to *metropolitans*.

Rather, as is manifest, it was not till the *second* century that the custom of holding ecclesiastical councils began, first in Greece, and thence extended into other provinces.<sup>8</sup>

Mosheim was dead on target. There is no ambiguity whatsoever that both biblically and historically each local church is to be completely independent of any ecclesiastical hierarchy and autonomous (self-governing).

### Exegetical Principle

The Apostle Paul repeatedly addressed individual local churches that were clearly independent. For example, as one Greek authority observes, when Paul wrote to “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), he used the word *ekklēsia* (assembly, congregation) to indicate “that it belongs to the people of that place and that it has a new and different quality. This is also true when he speaks of the [church at Thessalonica] (1 Thes. 1:1 [and 2 Thes. 1:1]). Whoever is drawn into the *ekklēsia* and belongs to it, lives in the sphere of power of” it.<sup>9</sup> We see the same truth in Paul’s reference to “Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea” (Rom. 16:1), as well his letter to Philemon and “the church in [his] house” (v. 1). Further, Paul addressed the leadership directly in the church at Philippi, indicating that they were responsible for leadership, not some ecclesiastical hierarchy or ruling body. Finally, the letters Jesus Himself sent to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2 and 3) are aimed at each one individually, clearly demonstrating that each was accountable for its actions. Nowhere do we see in any of that a hint of ecclesiastical authority over independent churches.

### Historical Precedent

When we then turn to the historical record of the spread of Christianity recorded in the book of Acts, we see independent churches being founded. While the Church began in Jerusalem, there is no indication that it had any authority over any other church that was founded. Further, the Church at Antioch in Syrian was Paul’s sending church, but there is not the slightest hint that the Church at Jerusalem was even consulted simply because it should not have been. Likewise, every church Paul founded was independent and free from any authority except God’s Word. Yes, Paul had authority over these, but that authority was only apostolic not ecclesiastical. In other words, he *proclaimed* the Truth but did not *presume* to rule. An example outside the biblical record of such independence is the Celtic Church, which was led by the fascinating Patrick (c. 389–461) and was at first completely independent from Rome but later swallow by it.<sup>10</sup>

### Applicable Practice

The application of all this in practice is unmistakable if we adhere to Scripture alone. A local church should be just that: a church that is local and independent of any other church, governing body, or ecclesiastic hierarchy. We should, however, consider two tempering principles.

*First*, does independence negate the idea of a fellowship of churches? Certainly not. In fact, such fellowships are enormously encouraging. Such fellowships, however, must never be governing bodies that control either the polity or ministry of individual churches.

*Second*, and more importantly, does independence negate

input from other Christians outside our local church? Again, certainly not. For example, there was a conference in Chicago in October 1978 that was sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (although I wish they had not used “Council” because of the historical implications). Some 200 evangelical leaders formulated the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. That statement was not an edict from a ruling body that all evangelical churches are required to obey, but it is certainly a strong statement that evangelicals do well to consider in the face of liberal conceptions of Scripture. To refuse input from others is simply prideful, if not arrogant.

Scripture, in fact, provides us with a virtually identical situation in Acts 15. Certain Jewish teachers (Judaizers who had bewitched the Galatians) were insisting that Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law to be saved. The Church at Antioch voluntarily sent Paul and Barnabas, along with some others, to the Jerusalem Church to address the issue. While the council came to a firm position, it was not presented in the form of a binding edict, rather strongly suggested. In fact, no verbs are used in the Jerusalem letter to the congregations that indicate a strong command. This clearly demonstrates a respect for the independence of the church at Antioch. In stark contrast, the so-called Church councils over the centuries declared binding edicts that do not recognize the autonomy of local churches.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (Zondervan), Vol. 3, 772–773.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, “Gospel” entry.

<sup>3</sup> *Inerrancy (infallibility) of Scripture* (Ps. 12:6; 18:30; 19:7; Jn. 16:13; 17:17; Heb. 4:12; etc.); *Scripture being the authority* (Ps. 19:7–11; 119:89, 142, 151, 160; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21; etc.); *the doctrine of the Trinity* (Gen. 1:1–2 with 3:15; Matt. 3:16–17; 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Jn. 5:7–8; etc.); *the deity* (Jn. 1:1–3; 8:58; 5:16–18; 10:30–33; etc.), *incarnation* (Jn. 1:14; Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim. 3:16), and *virgin birth of Jesus* (Is. 7:14 with Matt. 1:23; Lk. 1:27, 34); *the substitutionary atonement of Jesus* (Is. 53:5; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18); *the bodily resurrection of Jesus* (Matt. 28:5–6; Jn. 2:19–21; 1 Cor. 15:20–22); *the imminent second coming of Christ* (Matt. 25:1–13; Acts 1:9–11; Rev. 1:3; 22:10); *the new birth through regeneration by the Holy Spirit* (John 3:1–3; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:1–6; 1 Pet. 1:23); *the resurrection of the saints* to life eternal (Rev. 20:4–6) and the *resurrection of the ungodly* to final judgment and eternal death (Rev. 20:12–14; 21:8); and *the fellowship of the saints*, who are the Body of Christ (Acts 2:42, 46; 1 Cor. 12:4–31; 1 Jn. 1:7).

<sup>4</sup> The ESV’s copyright page has this ambiguous note: “The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV) is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.”

<sup>5</sup> See TOTT issue 19 (February 2007), detailed in the book.

<sup>6</sup> See TOTT issue 112 (May/June 2018), detailed in the book.

<sup>7</sup> See TOTT issue 110 (Jan./Feb. 2018), detailed in the book.

<sup>8</sup> *Mosheim’s Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, Part 2, Chapter 2, 35 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Vol. I, 299.

<sup>10</sup> This is detailed in the book.

**NEW BOOK: Church History in the Light of Scripture: Exercising Discernment Then and Now**

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