

IS THE CONTEMPORARY GOSPEL “ANOTHER GOSPEL”?

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Central to every genuine spiritual revival, has been the public preaching of the gospel. Directly through this means (Titus 1:3) the Holy Spirit has awakened multitudes to a proper sense of the dreadfulness of their sin against heaven. They have been stripped of all self-righteousness, broken in repentance and have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who satisfied God’s demands against their sin at Calvary. Sadly, in the evangelical scene today, such true and lasting manifestations of the convicting and converting power of the Holy Spirit are now rarely seen. So where did it all go wrong?

During the 20th century, there were two major developments in relation to gospel preaching. Up until World War 2, practically all evangelical churches held two preaching services every Sunday; one aimed at edifying the church; the other at converting sinners. The first move was to jettison the gospel service (with its accompanying prayer meeting), in favor of another study teaching session for Christians. The indoor evangelistic service was not replaced with a ‘street meeting’. It was simply dropped. Secondly, there was a fundamental change in the content (not just the style) of the gospel message itself. Several major features of the historically tried and tested gospel sermon were abandoned. Thus, if you compare the sermons preached by Peter and Paul in the book of Acts, along with those preached during genuine revivals since that time (by men like Nettleton, Edwards, Wesley, Whitefield, McCheyne, North, Spurgeon, Torrey, Moody, Rea, Marshall, Laidlaw and Frank Knox) with the contemporary gospel, you will find a world of difference.

All of this has serious consequences, because the contemporary gospel produces altogether different results to the historic Biblical gospel. For example, in 1991, a major ‘evangelical’ denomination in the USA – consisting of 11,000 churches — launched a huge push in evangelism. After securing 294,000 ‘decisions for Christ’ in 12 months (26.73 per church), only 14,000 new members came ‘into fellowship’ (1.27 per church). Are we really to believe that within 12 months of being saved, under the sound preaching of

the Holy Spirit empowered Biblical gospel, 95.2% of the ‘converts’ (over a quarter of a million people) had become ‘backsliders’? And what of the general membership of contemporary ‘evangelical’ churches? Where have all the serious Bible students gone? Where is the clear line of demarcation between today’s Christians and the secular world — in language, entertainment, music, dress, associations, ambition, interest and outlook? These are symptoms of a root problem, namely the abandonment of public gospel preaching and the alteration of the content of the Biblical gospel message. But what is the true gospel? Let us examine four essential elements which are missing from most of today’s evangelical sermons, gospel tracts and ‘introduction to Christianity’ courses.

1. THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL BEGINS AND ENDS WITH GOD.

Firstly, the Biblical gospel begins and ends with God, whereas the contemporary gospel begins and ends with man. Here, in abbreviated form, is how it runs.

“People today are suffering from feelings of emptiness, loneliness and low self-esteem. However, the aching ‘God shaped vacuum’ within you can be filled, when you say sorry for your sins and commit your life to Jesus. God has a wonderful plan for your life and wants you to be personally fulfilled and have a real feeling of happiness and satisfaction. You matter to God — that’s why Jesus paid for your sins on the cross. He loves you and wants you to ask Him into your life today You cannot save yourself, that’s why you really need God in your life. You have tried everything else — so why not give Jesus a try too? All you have to do is ask Jesus to be your personal Saviour and you will be saved. Why not pray this prayer after me . . .”

Writers like George Barna, Bill Hybels, Lee Strobel and Rick Warren, tell us that our churches will only be ‘seeker-friendly’ when we start addressing the needs of ‘21st century unchurched Harry and Mary’ (the ‘me’ generation). Thus the contemporary message has moved away from the New Testament God-centered pattern, and tailored itself to appeal to the self-centered generation of secular relativists who dominate our society. By contrast, the Biblical gospel begins and ends with God. When Paul preached to the Gentiles in Lystra, he opened by saying, “We . . . preach unto you that you should turn from these vanities unto the living God, who made heaven . . .

earth . . . sea and all things that are in them” (Acts 14:15). He began by laying a foundation of a ‘creator God’ who is sovereign, good and patient. Again, when preaching to the Gentile philosophers in Athens he stated, “. . . God, who made the world and everything in it . . . since He is Lord of heaven and earth.. now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.” (Acts 17:22-31). This was always Paul’s approach when preaching to pagans. His message to Felix was the same. He told him about God’s righteousness, his own lack of self-control and judgment to come (Acts 24:25).

Since repentance is a change of mind towards God, how can a sinner repent until he has a true concept of God? Many 21st Century Westerners imagine that there are two Gods; the God of the Old Testament — harsh and unmerciful — and the God of the New Testament — loving and forgiving. Such is their fatal misconception. Or again, the average Westerner thinks that God, if He exists at all, is a most unfair God. He argues; “If there’s a God why is there all the suffering in the world?” How foolish are his thoughts. Until he truly understands the good and holy nature of the God against whom he has grievously rebelled, he will never be saved. Thus, unless the ‘true God’ is clearly preached, all that will be produced is a multitude of false converts, who have never so much as caught one glimpse of the holiness, goodness and sovereignty of their almighty creator, “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

2. THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL MAKES A PROPER USE OF THE LAW OF GOD.

Secondly, the Biblical Gospel makes proper use of the law of God. A sinner must understand the gospel to be saved (Matt 13:15,19, 23, Acts 8:30-31, Rom 3:11). But before a sinner can understand the mercy of a loving God, he must understand the requirements of a righteous God. Now, the law is not the gospel and the gospel is not the law; but the gospel establishes the law (Rom 3:31). That law which the Gentiles have in their hearts by nature (Rom 2:15), Israel also had written on stone — and the purpose of this law is clearly stated by Paul: “by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). Paul further states that he would never have known he was a guilty sinner without the law (Rom 7:7). Since no one can be saved without repentance (Luke 13:5) and no one can repent unless they know they are guilty, the true Biblical gospel must

make proper use of the law, the chief end of which is to convince the whole world of its guilt (Rom 3:19).

The book of Romans contains the only systematic setting forth of the gospel in the whole Bible. Paul uses the word 'law' 38 times before he mentions the word 'love'. From Romans 1:17-3:19, Paul sets forth the case against the sinner. It is a sorry tale of condemnation, wrath and guilt. Finally, in chapter 5:8, Paul states that God commends his love towards sinners. Why does Paul present the gospel in this order? Because the gospel will not make any real sense to the sinner until he realizes he is guilty of rebellion against the law of a holy God. If we start by telling the typical Westerner "God loves you", he will puff out his chest and say in his heart "Why shouldn't He; I'm a good person?"

Preachers of the old school believed that a man would not grab a spiritual lifebelt, until he was convinced he was drowning; nor submit to medical treatment until was sure he had a disease — so they never set the remedy of the gospel before the sinner's mind until thoroughly convincing him of his sin. But the contemporary gospel knows better. It uses the carrot of 'benefits' instead of the stick of the law. It says, "If you come to Jesus you will be happy, fulfilled, be part of a loving family and spend eternity in a golden mansion — if you would like to have all of this, just say sorry for your sins and ask Jesus into your heart to be your Saviour." If only this were an unfair caricature or a straw man — but it is not. This is exactly how it is presented universally today in print and in the pulpit. The net result is that sinners 'come to Christ' with a false motive. Then when persecution and pressure come their way, they discover that they were not told the whole story. They are offended and quickly disillusioned. However, they have now been vaccinated against true salvation. After all, they tried Jesus and He failed.

As we seek to restore the true Biblical gospel we must remember that the issue is righteousness not happiness. True peace and joy are the fruits of salvation, but they are never to be presented in Biblical sermons as a draw card, to encourage sinners to 'make their decision for Christ'. We must understand that simply quoting "All have sinned", followed by a quick "But the good news is . . ." will never awaken anyone. Sinners must be faced with the fact that covetousness (the love of things) is idolatry (Col 3:5), hate is murder (1 John 3:15) and lust is adultery (Matt 5:28). Driving down the

motorway, there are a number of excuses one can think of to justify going at 85 mph. ..until the law enters. When you see a Police car on the side of the road, your foot hits the brakes. By the law is the knowledge of sin. That is what will make a man, rushing headlong down the highway of life to hell, sit up and listen. He simply must see his precarious position or he will never repent.

Presented with a choice of either diamonds or a glass of water, who would not choose the diamonds? But take a man who has been lost for four days in the Sahara desert with nothing to drink and present him with the same choice. He takes the water. What has changed? The inherent value of the goods on offer? No. His perception of need. And so, let a man be utterly convinced from scripture, by the Holy Spirit, that he is lost, guilty and helpless and he will cry out, “What must I do to be saved?”

The proper initial reaction to the gospel on the part of the sinner is conviction of sin (John 16:8, Acts 2:37). But what is conviction of sin? It is more than just the ordinary smiting of the conscience (Rom 2:15). It is more than mere fear of hell. Simply being scared of the consequences of sin is not true Holy Spirit conviction. Nor is conviction ‘admitting you are a sinner’. Balaam, Pharoah, Judas and many others admitted “I have sinned”, but went to hell. Nor is conviction a mere head knowledge of the doctrine of the fall of Adam. Conviction is ‘a proper sense of the dreadfulness of my sin against God’. Have you ever realized this? All sinners must echo David’s realization in Psalm 51:4 when he said “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight.” Conviction of sin is vertical, not horizontal.

We must return to the true Biblical gospel and preach that men are sinners by nature and practice (Eph 2:1-2); that their very best endeavours are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6) and that they are utterly helpless to save themselves (Eph 2:8). As a sinner acknowledges that he is condemned, unclean and guilty, he draws near to salvation, for “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart; and saves such as have a contrite spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

3. THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL SOUNDS A CLEAR NOTE OF REPENTANCE.

Thirdly, the Biblical Gospel sounds a clear note of repentance. Summarizing 3 years of ministry in Ephesus, Paul stated that he had preached “repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). Summarizing his whole life, he stated that he had preached that men should “repent and

turn to God, and do works” answering to that repentance (Acts 26:20). Nowhere in the Bible did any apostle or evangelist preach that, “all you need to do is accept that Jesus died and rose again, ask Him to be your Saviour and you will go to heaven.” Why? Because the Lord Jesus had commissioned them to preach three things: firstly, Christ died; secondly, He rose again; and, thirdly, repentance for the remissible of sins (Luke 24:45). Would we be happy with a cross-less gospel or a resurrection-less gospel? How then can we be content to preach a repentance-less gospel?

Contrary to contemporary thinking, salvation is not just mental assent or a mere nodding of the head to the death and resurrection of Christ. There is no saving faith without repentance. If you are a stranger to conviction, you are a stranger to repentance and therefore a stranger to salvation, for no one ever truly believed without repenting and vice versa. The first sentence the Lord Jesus uttered in His public ministry was, “Repent and believe the gospel ” (Mark 1:15); and He continued to repeatedly warn that unless sinners repent they will perish. Jesus said “believe or perish” (John 3:16) and “repent or perish” (Luke 13:3. See also 2 Pet 3:9). All that will matter a million years from today is, did I repent and believe the gospel?

Only one sentence in the Bible states that God loves the world (John 3:16). A handful of other verses speak of God’s love for undeserving sinners. Yet this precious and sublime truth is cheapened today, by its overemphasis at the expense of repentance, a subject which is mentioned 58 times in the New Testament alone. That is the reason why there is little or no true convicting power and blessing in the preaching of the gospel today. The Holy Spirit will not endue with power a message He has not authorized. A gospel without a clear note of repentance is another (false) gospel that brings God’s curse on those who preach it (Gal 1:6-10). Why would God curse a ‘preacher of the gospel’ (one who adds or takes away from the essence of the true message)? Because his repentance-less message is damning souls, corrupting local churches and hindering revival.

But what is repentance? It is not penance or restitution (Judas paid the money back — he regretted, but never repented, Matt 27:3). It is not merely tears, fear of judgment (Felix trembled) or sorrow for sin (godly sorrow may lead to repentance, but is not the same as repentance, 2 Cor 7:10). It is not mere confession or admission of sin. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*

(from *meta*, ‘after’, and *nous*, ‘mind’). It means a complete change of mind — involving turning from sin to God, which results in a change of life. It is illustrated by David in Psalm 51 and the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. It is defined in the following text: “Let the wicked for-sake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him” (Isaiah 55:7). Let us be sure to sound a clear note of repentance every time we preach the gospel.

4. THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL PRESENTS A WHOLE CHRIST FOR THE WHOLE MAN.

Fourthly, and finally, the Biblical Gospel presents a whole Christ for the whole man. The object of faith is not ‘the fact of the atonement’ but the person of Christ. Paul did not tell the jailor to just believe the ‘facts about Calvary’. He was told, “Believe on the LORD JESUS CHRIST” — Master, Saviour and promised anointed Messiah (Acts 16:31). But belief never simply means mental assent. It is trust, reliance on and commitment to Christ as Lord and Saviour. This is not the ‘cool buddy Saviour only Jesus’ of the contemporary gospel, who says “Come as you are and stay as you are”. How solemn to see a large number who call Jesus Lord, shut out of the kingdom, despite their many religious works (Matt 7:21).

‘Evangelical’ churches are full of people who do not exhibit the fruits of salvation, but who are not embarrassed to say they are Christians. But if a man says he has faith and has not works, can that faith save him (James 2:14)? God saves people so that they will do good works (Acts 26:20) and live as His bond slaves (1 Thess 1:9). Therefore, any salvation experience that does not turn a rebel sinner into a basically obedient servant is spurious. “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance . . . every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast in to the fire” (Matt 3:8).

Liberal theologians have filled churches and preached a blood-less gospel and a deity-less Christ. Now, evangelicals have filled churches with a gospel that lacks a call to repentance. Which is worse? The net result is the same. Let us ensure that our sermons, our gospel tracts and the missionary endeavors we support present every aspect of the true Biblical gospel.