Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Getting the Gospel Right
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I am amazed at some of the things that have been said and written in recent years about the gospel. I fear that in many circles a different message is replacing the good news of salvation. I'm not talking about the attacks on the gospel from liberal religion or the theology of the cults, but a skewed message that has sprouted from right within conservative evangelicalism.

I have a copy of a training film now being used internationally to teach Christians what they should and should not say when leading someone to Christ. A respected, conservative organization produced the film, but frankly, the warped view of the gospel it presents is appalling.

In the entire half-hour film, there is not one mention of the resurrection. It speaks of forgiveness without defining sin, and it talks of trusting Christ without describing faith. Incredibly, the film counsels believers *never* to speak to a non-Christian about the lordship of Christ, submission to Him, surrender of the will, forsaking one's sin, or obeying God. Those truths, according to the film, have no place in the gospel message but should be saved for later, after someone becomes a Christian.

That sentiment reflects a viewpoint that is rapidly gaining momentum within evangelicalism. A handful of outspoken and increasingly vocal teachers are popularizing it. To their credit, most of those men are motivated by a passion to keep the gospel of God's grace free from the influence of human works. Their desire, I'm sure, is to make clear the biblical truth that salvation may in no way be earned or obtained by man's effort. Their approach, however, has been to eliminate from the gospel message anything that sounds like a work of righteousness, and to speak only of believing the objective data. They have erased the biblical words *repentance*, *obedience*, and *submission* from the vocabulary of evangelicalism.

Such teaching has taken a heavy toll. Faith has become merely an intellectual exercise. Instead of calling men and women to surrender to Christ, modern evangelism asks them only to accept some basic facts about Him. A person can believe without obeying. Thus faith is robbed of any moral significance, and righteousness becomes optional.

Even the way we invite people to Christ reveals this shift. "Make a decision for Christ," we say. When was the last time you heard an evangelistic message that challenged sinners to repent and follow

Christ? Yet isn't that the language Jesus Himself used (Matthew 4:17; Mark 8:34)?

Those were the questions that prompted me to write *The Gospel According to Jesus* --I wanted to study the message Jesus preached to unbelievers. How could any issue be more important? The gospel we present has eternal consequences. If it is the true gospel, it can direct men and women into the everlasting kingdom. If it is a corrupted message, it can give unsaved people false hope while consigning them to eternal damnation. This is not a trivial matter for theologians to speculate on. It is an issue every lay person must understand and get right.

Here are some questions that need to be answered biblically:

Do we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, or as Savior only? Some say a person who refuses to obey Christ can still receive Him as Savior. They teach that the gift of eternal life is available by faith even to one who rejects the moral and spiritual demands of Christ. They accuse others of teaching "lordship salvation," implying that it is novel to suggest that submission is a characteristic of saving faith.

Until relatively recently, however, no one would have dared suggest a person can be saved while stubbornly refusing to bow to Christ's authority. Nearly all the major biblical passages calling for saving faith refer to Jesus as lord (cf. Acts 2:21, 36; Romans 10:9-10).

Is repentance from sin essential to salvation? Some say that turning from sin is a human work and therefore cannot be part of salvation. To accommodate the biblical call to repentance, they redefine repentance as nothing more than a change of mind about who Jesus is.

Biblically, however, repentance is a total about face--turning away from sin and self and unto God (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:9). That is no more a result of human effort than faith itself. Nor is it in any sense a pre-salvation work required to prepare a sinner for salvation. Real repentance is inseparable from faith and, like faith, is the work of God in a human heart. It is the response God inevitably generates in the heart of one He is redeeming.

What is faith? Some say faith is merely believing certain facts. One popular Bible teacher says saving faith is nothing more than confidence in the divine offer of eternal life.

Biblically, however, the object of faith is not the divine offer; it is the Person of Jesus Christ. Faith in Him is what saves, not just be-lieving His promises or accepting facts about Him. Saving faith has to be more than accepting facts. Even demons have that kind of faith (James 2:19).

Believing in Jesus means re-ceiving Him for all that He is (John 1:12). It means both confessing Him

as Savior and yielding to Him as Lord. In fact, Scripture often uses the word obedience as a synonym for faith (cf. John 3:36; Acts 6:7; Hebrews 5:9).

What is a disciple? In the past hundred years or so, it has become popular to speak of discipleship as a higher level of Christian experience. In the new terminology, a person becomes a believer at salvation; he becomes a disciple later, when he moves past faith to obedience.

Such a view conveniently relegates the difficult demands of Jesus to a post-salvation experience. It maintains that when He challenged the multitudes to deny self, to take up a cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34); to forsake all (Luke 14:33); and to leave father and mother (Matthew 19:29), He was simply asking believers to step up to the second level and become disciples.

But how does that square with Jesus' own words, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt 9:13)? The heart of His ministry was evangelism, and those difficult demands are evangelistic appeals.

Every believer is a disciple and vice versa. A careful reading of Acts shows that the word disciple has been a synonym for Christian from the earliest days of the church (cf. 6:1-2, 7; 11:26; 14:20, 22; 15:10).

What is the evidence of salvation? In their zeal to eliminate good works as a requirement for salvation, some have gone to the extreme of arguing that good works are not even a valid evidence of salvation. They teach that a person may be genuinely saved yet never manifest the fruit of salvation--a changed life.

A few have even taken the absurd position that a born-again person may ultimately turn away from Christ into unbelief, deny God, and become an atheist--yet still possess eternal life. One writer invented a term for such people: "unbelieving believers"!

Scripture is clear that a saved person can never be lost. It is equally clear that a genuine Christian will never fall back into total unbelief. That kind of apostasy proves an individual was never really born again (1 John 2:19).

Furthermore, if a person is genuinely saved, his life will change for the better (2 Corinthians 5:17). He is saved "for good works" (Ephesians 2:10), and there is no way he can fail to bring forth at least some of the fruit that characterizes the redeemed (cf. Matthew 7:17). His desires are transformed; he begins to hate sin and love righteousness. He will not be sinless, but the pattern of his life will be decreasing sin and increasing righteousness.

You need to settle these critical questions in your own heart. Study the gospel Scripture presents.

Listen with discernment to every speaker you hear. Measure everything by the Word of God. Above all, make sure that the message you share with unbelievers is truly the gospel of Christ.

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