

The Gospel

Part 1 – A Matter of First Importance

By Todd Pruitt

One of the trends taking place in the modern evangelical church that is most alarming to me is the disappearance of the Gospel. That sounds ironic doesn't it? Of all places that the Gospel is missing it certainly couldn't be the church! You may be tempted to dismiss me as an alarmist. "How is the Gospel disappearing?" you may ask. After all, didn't Mel Gibson make five zillion dollars on his Jesus movie and didn't Amy Grant have a TV show for a little while? True enough I suppose. But as I survey our rather substantial corner of Christendom I cannot help but notice the appalling lack of attention the *Gospel* garners in our preaching and writing and *Larry King Live* appearances. This is worth our sounding the alarm. Could it be that a significant portion of evangelicalism is neglecting the very centerpiece of our faith? Have we sold our birthright for a bowl of sweet tasting but un-nourishing pottage? At this point it would probably be valuable to make sure we are speaking the same language.

In our day the good news has been so generalized that any "God talk" is often classified as the Gospel. It seems that anytime a man stands in the pulpit and merely mentions God, fumes about a political hot topic, or makes reference to a verse in the Bible he is said to have "really preached the Gospel." But contrary to current trends, the Gospel is very specific. It is not a general word meaning all things Christian from *Prayer of Jabez* shofars to *Testamints*.

Scripture tells us exactly what the Gospel is. It is the doing and dying of Christ in the place of sinners. The Gospel is the announcement that in Christ (that is through His perfect obedience and sacrificial death and glorious resurrection) God was reconciling sinners unto Himself. Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you...For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." (I Cor 15:1-5). The Gospel is not political action or family values. It is not even discipleship. The Gospel is Jesus dying on a cross at the Father's sovereign decree so that sinners might be saved and God's righteousness vindicated.

The apostles were slaves to this Gospel. Their ministries, indeed their very lives made little sense if they did not faithfully trumpet God's good news. Everywhere they went, even in hostile towns, the apostles "continued to preach the gospel" (Acts 14:7). Paul's commitment to proclaiming the Gospel was singular. "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel..." (I

Cor 1:17). Explaining why he willingly subordinated his own rights for the sake of others Paul writes, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel..." (I Cor 9:23). On behalf of his fellow apostles Paul prayed for a widening influence in Corinth "so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you..." (II Cor 10:16). To the Thessalonians Paul explains that he and his companions had come not to flatter them to gain favor but "just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts" (I Thess 2:4). Unfortunately too many pastors and churches seem to be asleep at the wheel in this most important of duties. How else can we explain the number of church members and professing Christians who do not understand this most elemental part of Christianity?

One Southern Baptist church I know of in the northeast wisely asks all prospective members to give a sixty second explanation of the Gospel. What they have found is that many of the people coming into their church from other Southern Baptist congregations have a hard time faithfully articulating the Gospel. Similarly, a Christian radio producer in California recently attended the national conference for the Christian publishing industry. He interviewed approximately seventy individuals with one question: "What is the Gospel?" Sadly, only one of the persons interviewed in this Christian conclave was able to offer an answer that was even remotely biblical. All this begs the question, can one be a Christian and not understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The struggle for the Gospel is a struggle for conversion. Since the Gospel is "the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes" then the stakes are sky high that we believe and proclaim this Gospel. There are many "new gospels" operating in the world today just as there were in the first century. There is the gospel of self-improvement which holds that we need only to do our best in order to get in God's good graces. There is a cross-less gospel which holds that salvation is found in looking to Jesus as a moral example to emulate rather than a crucified Savior to believe upon. But God's judgment of these gospels and those who preach them still stands. Addressing the Galatians Paul writes, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8).

From the time Adam and Eve rebelled in the garden all of history pointed toward the cross in hopeful anticipation that God would redeem His people from their self-imposed sentence of death. One dark Friday some two thousand years ago all that God had promised came to fulfillment on a Roman cross. Since that time the church's highest obligation has been to faithfully steward the Gospel of our crucified Savior. It was for the apostles and remains for us today the matter of first importance. May we therefore be zealous to get the Gospel right.

*When from the dust of death I rise
to claim my mansion in the skies,
ev'n then this shall be all my plea,
Jesus hath lived, hath died, for me.*

*Jesus the endless praise to thee,
whose boundless mercy hath for me -
for me a full atonement made,
an everlasting ransom paid.*

*O let the dead now hear thy voice;
now bid thy banished ones rejoice;
their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, thy blood and righteousness.*

von Zinzendorf, 1739