

# The Gospel

## Part 3 – Still the Power of God

By Todd Pruitt

*For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...*

*Romans 1:16*

What a great promise on which the church may cling! When the power of God has been identified with everything from “holy laughter” to big budgets it is good to be reminded of the true locus of God’s power. Think of it: The conversion of sinners, the most extraordinary of miracles, is brought about by the Holy Spirit through the simple means of the Gospel made plain. What is more, proclaiming the Gospel does not require money, social status, priestly vestments, or an impressive resume`. Rather, to proclaim the Gospel we need only to understand what it is and then be willing to go and tell. We can be sure that God’s power is present, whether we feel it or not, whenever the Gospel is faithfully proclaimed in churches, living rooms, and front yards.

Unfortunately, when it comes to evangelism the church has come to rely too heavily on technique and not enough on the simple means that God has prescribed. There are I believe two primary reasons for the ascendancy of technique-driven evangelism. The first reason is a lack of confidence in God’s power to regenerate a lost heart. The second reason why evangelism tends to become technique-driven springs from a mistaken notion that the Gospel needs to be made more palatable if people are going to accept it.

### **A Crisis of Confidence**

In recent years the church seems to have been suffering from an increasing lack of confidence in the Gospel. I fear that all too often God’s own people are not aware of the primary means by which He converts the lost. This then leads to an unhealthy reliance on techniques and a tragic neglect of the very thing God *has* promised to use to reach unbelievers.

Paul makes very clear in Romans that proclaiming God’s Word is the primary means by which faith is generated in the unbelieving heart: “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’...So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (10:13-17). The proclaiming of God’s good news from pulpit, in Sunday school, in small groups, and in one-on-one conversations is God’s design for the conversion of the lost. Why is it then that

so many pastors and churches seem to have confidence in almost everything but the clear proclamation of the Gospel?

Of course this trend to rely upon technique is nothing new. In his days as an evangelist during in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Charles Finney advanced the idea that many “excitements” or “enthusiasms” were needed in order to gain a response from those attending evangelistic meetings. He taught that revival was wholly the work of man and that conversion was not the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart but was instead the work of man to change his own ways. Clearly, any theology that so diminishes God’s power in salvation while at the same time exalts man’s power will lead to a technique-driven approach to evangelism. Among the new excitements that Finney pioneered was the altar call which was almost unheard of prior to his time. Don’t misunderstand. I am a strong believer in calling people to respond to the Word of God when it is preached. Indeed, the preaching of God’s Word always demands a response. But it seems that the altar call, along with a host of other traditions and techniques, has been invested with near sacramental powers.

There is no doubt that techniques will often deliver quick and quantifiable results. But what is the fruit of such work? In our own denomination the statistics are not encouraging. Over 50% of Southern Baptist Church members do not attend church with any regularity. For all our success in getting people to pray a prayer or walk an aisle we have not fared as well in seeing genuine converts to Christ.

### **Making the Gospel palatable**

The Second reason for the ascendancy of technique-driven evangelism arises from the conviction that the only barrier between a lost person and salvation is the church’s ability to make the Gospel attractive. However, Scripture tells us that the message of the Gospel will be downright offensive to many. Paul makes it clear that for some the Gospel is sweet while for others it is thoroughly unpleasant. Speaking of those who are privileged to proclaim the Gospel Paul writes, “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (II Cor 2:15-16). Also, we know that the apostles were routinely driven out of towns, arrested, beaten, and eventually killed because of the message they preached.

The message the apostles preached was the matter of “first importance” that Christ died, was buried, and rose again to save sinners (I Cor 15:3-4). Mankind will not come to know Christ through intuition or effort. In his own wisdom man will always wander away from the knowledge of Christ. “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews

and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (I Cor 1:21-24).

Preaching is folly. After all, aren't there more relevant methods available to the church today? I recently read an article about a new church where the pastor never preaches but rather produces dramas each Sunday. Their reasoning is that no one wants to listen to preaching anymore. But this has always been the case. God's means will never make sense to our world. To make matters worse, the message we are called to proclaim is either foolish or offensive depending on who is listening. It is true that we must not allow our own foolishness to interfere with our message. But the only way to make the Gospel palatable to the world is to remove the cross.

Over one hundred years ago J.C. Ryle wrote with characteristic clarity:

*The Gospel in fact is a most curiously and delicately compounded medicine, and is a medicine that is very easily spoiled. You may spoil the Gospel by substitution. You have only to withdraw from the eye of the sinner the grand object which the Bible proposes to Faith, - Jesus Christ; and to substitute another object in His place,...and the mischief is done...*

*You may spoil the Gospel by addition. You only have to add to Christ, the grand object of faith, some other objects as equally worthy of honor, and the mischief is done...*

*You may spoil the Gospel by disproportion. You only have to attach an exaggerated importance to the secondary things of Christianity, and a diminished importance to the first things, and the mischief is done. Once alter the proportion of the part of the truth, and truth soon becomes downright error...*

The Gospel is still God's power for the salvation of all those who believe. Faith still comes from hearing the word of Christ declared. God's gospel will always be the effective means by which Christians are birthed and upon which churches are built.