

THE FORGOTTEN GOSPEL

By

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The apostle wrote to the Corinthians that he was afraid that their “minds should be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity that is toward Christ” (II Cor. 11:3). He was afraid of their receiving another Jesus and a different gospel (Vs. 4). Today the church is overwhelmed by propositions and gospels which are different from that which was once and for all delivered unto the saints.

In the beginning of the church the gospel was so clear and simple that people could respond to it without prior conditioning, then immediately go forth to present it to others. They did not have to hold seminars on soul-winning nor give special training sessions for counselors before they “went about preaching the gospel” (Acts 8:4). The meaning of Christ’s historic act was clear enough that it could be grasped by every believer and passed on in its entirety without any great loss of understanding and effectiveness.

Before considering the “different” gospels of our day, we must first be able to identify the true Gospel as revealed by the apostles. Paul is an authority on the subject. “Now I make known unto you, brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you, which also you received, wherein also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached unto you, except you believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he has been raised on the third day according to the scriptures” (I Cor. 15:1–4).

The gospel was the good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ. It is history. It happened at a point in time. In fact, it happened only once, and will never be repeated. “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.” The Old Testament Scriptures abound in types, shadows and prophecies which explain the meaning of this expression. Sin is that which alienates man from God, and which ultimately brings His wrath in the Day of Judgment. The Passover lamb was a type of Christ showing that sin deserves death, but that the Lamb of God would be the ultimate bearer of sin. The brazen serpent in the wilderness was a type of Christ. “For as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of man be lifted up” (John 3:14). When dying Israelites looked to the raised serpent they lived, not by merit of their own, but by looking to the brazen serpent. So we look to the Christ raised on the cross. In every case the problem is sin and death, and the solution is given by God in providing a substitute death.

The record of apostolic preaching does not include anything about perpetual torture of immortal souls nor other speculations about sin’s ultimate penalty. The announcement was that death and destruction is the end of all sinners, but Christ to the judgment in His death. He took our sin and exhausted the penalty by his own death. This is the glorious good news. Since Christ had no sin of his own, he was able to raise Himself from the dead, a seal of God’s approval and a guarantee of our own resurrection.

All the things that are essential to having forgiveness of sin, peace with God and the hope of eternal life are accomplished by Christ. By dying our death He removed us

from under the guilt of sin and from under the death penalty. Therefore he made us righteous before God (Phil. 3:21). This was done by Christ once for all (Heb. 10:10–14). The preaching of the Gospel is the proclamation of the historic fact of Christ's great redeeming act. It is the Good News of the experience of Christ. It means that He experienced for us the just punishment for our sin. I cannot imagine the horror of facing God in my sin! Scripture describes men in the day of judgment "weeping and gnashing" their teeth, and praying for rocks and mountains to hide them from God's wrath. But Christ's experience becomes ours by faith when we obey the gospel, by imputation: "He who knew no sin was made to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God" (II Cor. 5:21). The Gospel is the good news of this event, the proclamation of this historic experience of Christ.

This is a far cry from the gospel heralded today throughout the world. The modern gospel speaks of Christ's death and resurrection, but negates the meaning of the event by presenting a human-centered and experience-centered message. It is presented in two ways.

First, the emphasis is on receiving the **person** of Christ. It is expressed in terms such as "Faith is in a person, not a doctrine" or, "It is not **what** saves but **Who** saves." One is urged to receive Jesus into your heart" or "Let the Savior come in and save you." But it was not merely Jesus existing as a person that saves. It is what Jesus DID in dying that saves. The apostles did not just preach Jesus, but they preached the Gospel—the doctrine (teaching) of His death and His resurrection.

As to exactly what is meant by "receiving Jesus in your heart" most evangelists are hard put to explain. But you can go to any religious bookstore and buy scores of books telling you how to find the "key" or the "secret" to the process. There are complicated formulas, often totaling a dozen or more "steps" on how to receive more of Jesus and let Him control your life so you may be assured of salvation. The market is always open for more of these "how to" books, for since the readers have not the true gospel, they must ever keep searching for assurance. The gospel of what Christ came and did once for all has been forgotten and replaced by a mystical Christ and what He can do **in you**, rather than the historic Christ and what He has already done **for you**. The true gospel is simple, while the others are complicated and confusing.

Now, lest we be misunderstood, we know that we do receive Christ by faith, and that through the holy Spirit he dwells in us. He is in our hearts as the object of our love and adoration. But none of this is the gospel, and none of it saves us. It is the product of the gospel and salvation, and not the gospel itself nor the cause of salvation. (There are many things said to be in our hearts.) But scripture specifically say that Christ is in heaven at the right hand of God having purged our sins when He was on earth (Heb. 1:3, Col. 3:1, See Rom. 5:5, II Cor. 1:22, 7:3, Eph. 3:17, Col. 3:15–16).

Second, modern evangelism places the emphasis on the inner experience of the believer. Over and over we are told that we must "experience Jesus" in our lives. People are told that if they receive Jesus in their hearts, their failures will turn to successes, their weaknesses will turn to strength, their problems will be solved and they will experience intense emotional feelings. "Spiritual experiences" are advertised, bragged up, written up and sold by the millions of dollars worth and urged upon Christians until the general impression holds that salvation is guaranteed by inner experiences and not by the outside and historic work of Jesus as expressed in the Gospel. For example, on speaker at a

Christian women's banquet recited for nearly an hour his personal experience with Jesus—how he felt, his meanness, his weakness, his rebellion, then his change, his inner-experience of a good feeling, and finally (Ah, success at last!) how he won out, made peace with God and the world and now has victory all because of his experience. What happened to the great work that Jesus did? Did He not make peace through his blood (death)? Did He not make us righteous by His own righteousness? Did He not overcome the world, as He said? Does not the apostle say “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ?” But this was done in the gospel, which is all but forgotten in the rush to have some kind of inner experience.

Certainly a Christian does experience a change in his life as he grows in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Certainly he must overcome each temptation, by the means of escape provided by God (I Cor. 10:13). Certainly he has intense emotions in recognizing his sinful self and the vast gulf spanned by Christ who took the sin and made him sinless. But all this is the result of the gospel—not gospel itself nor a part of it. Peter said that Christ suffered (died) according to the prophets, “Therefore, repent you and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, and so there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). Repentance is our response and the experience of refreshing is the result, not the means of obtaining forgiveness.

What we are commanded to do is believe and obey the gospel. When we do, then all that Christ has done is applied to us: His righteousness, his death, His Resurrection. His righteousness becomes ours (Phil. 3:9, II Cor. 5:21). His death becomes our death (II Cor. 5:14), and His resurrection becomes ours (Col. 3:1, Rom. 5:17).

Now, of course, this doesn't mean that we suddenly become sinless in actual performance. We have the responsibility of “putting to death” our members, all of the sinful nature, and resisting sin and the devil at every turn. We are servants of Christ and under the divine obligation to keep His commandments. This is the “experience” we are commanded to have! Everyone is to have this experience. It is no secret; there are no mysteries about it. The commandments are given to all of us, and His friends we are if we keep them (John 15:14). Still, they are not the gospel. We know that if we “say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (I John 1:8). At the same time we are cleansed from sin, forgiven of it and released from its damning guilt, because “the blood of Jesus his Son cleans us from all sin” (I John 1:7). That's Gospel!

The Gospel is neither Christ coming into our hearts, nor is it our experiences. Christ came once, to Bethlehem and to Golgotha. He experienced a totally righteous life, total punishment (death) for sin, and resurrection to life—all for us! Our message is not “what Christ can do” but what Christ HAS ALREADY DONE that is the good news. What is now required is man's response in faith and obedience to the gospel.

Having obtained righteousness through Christ's historic death, we have assurance, by faith, of our own acceptance by God and consequently of our resurrection to immortality. Good News indeed!

Why go searching for another gospel? “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:6–7).

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