

GOSPEL AND UNITY

By

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In his scheme of redemption God has provided no other means of salvation but the gospel. Paul declared that it was the power of God unto salvation and exclaimed, “Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.” He reminded the Corinthians that it was the gospel he had preached, which they had received, in which they stood before God and by which they were saved (I Cor. 15:1–2). Among all the divided groups of Bible believers today there is one thing they will all affirm — that they believe the gospel.

With the gospel as common ground unity would appear to be a simple accomplishment. If by the power of the gospel we are saved and if we all believe the gospel, ergo: we are all united in the gospel. But, obviously, it doesn’t work like that.

Fred P. Thompson Jr., president of Emmanuel School of Religion, writing in “Envoy” (May 1977), pointed out that “The sectarian spirit flourishes in an environment of theological dogmatism.” Complex human theologies divide where the simple gospel of God unites. He wrote, “The gospel rests on a foundation of **fact**. Jesus of Nazareth went about doing good and preaching the kingdom of God. He died by crucifixion at the hands of unbelievers and was raised from the grave on the third day following. The **meaning** of these facts constitutes the good news of forgiveness, reconciliation, justification, eternal life. “Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures “(I Cor. 15:3).

In the first century believers of the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection were indeed united upon the simple message of the gospel. It is significant that these people after hearing this message for the first time immediately went forth to declare it to others and became a great missionary force so that the gospel was heard throughout the whole world in the first century without benefit of schools, mission boards and all the aids to transportation and communication which we enjoy in this day. Apparently the gospel was not only simple enough for a person of common intelligence to understand, but it was also of such great significance in it’s meaning that such a person, upon accepting it, was concerned with seeing that others were able to hear it also.

Why is it different today? Why is it so hard for one to understand the vital significance of the gospel, and why should it be considered practically impossible for the average Christian to go out and share the vital message without benefit of years of training and formal education?

One of the reasons, as Mr. Thompson pointed out, is that the religious leaders have busied themselves with building theological systems rather than preaching the gospel. Another which he ably notes, is that “we are much too law oriented. Our preaching is laden with admonitions to fulfill our responsibilities, to be busy with good works. Salvation by Church related activity is a notion congenial to the pragmatic temper of American society. It is incompatible with the gospel.”

There is yet another reason why the gospel power of the first century is not manifest today. While the facts of the gospel may be simply stated, their meaning is obscure and often totally irrelevant to 20 century man. There have been nineteen hundred years of human philosophy, speculation and interpretation woven into the gospel. It’s true

meaning is hidden under many layers of tradition, opposing opinions, superstition, and beliefs born of ignorance.

To say that “Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures” has little meaning to the person who does not understand what the Scriptures say about death as the wages of sin. “According to the scriptures” has reference to the Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ and the sacrifices under the Old Covenant which typified His death. The entire system of worship under the Old Covenant was designed to portray the fact of man’s fallen condition and his ultimate death as the penalty for his sins. All of God’s judgments presented the simplicity of his divine economy. In Noah’s day the wicked were put to death by drowning in the flood. In Abraham’s day the wicked of Sodom were put to death by fire, which Jude says is an example of the final judgment of the ungodly (Jude 7). The judgment upon Egypt was the slaying of the firstborn, and the only acceptable solution — the gospel to the Israelites in that day — was the putting to death of a lamb as an appropriate substitute for their own firstborn. Death was the punishment and death was also the solution. Under the ceremonial law given through Moses the threat of death was held at bay by the death of the prescribed animals. In all of this the object lesson was plain: man forfeited his right to life and fellowship with God by sin, therefore the appropriate punishment for sin was death; but God in mercy would accept the death of an appropriate substitute of which all the slain animals was but a type. When Jesus appeared John declared, “Behold the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). When the apostles preached that “Christ died for our sins” there was no question as to the significance of His death. He had undergone the judgmental death for the believer, who would not be subject to death and judgment. No wonder this announcement was called the gospel — good news!”

From the beginning the people who have been in touch with God have had this revelation, that man stands under judgment for sin. The fact was demonstrated to Adam, first, by the loss of his original state of deathlessness; second by the necessity of the slaying of animals for his clothing; third, by God’s own announcement that because of his sin he would die and return to dust from which he was taken; and fourth, by the promise of a Savior. The sacrifices under the Old Covenant were designed to keep this fact constantly before men’s eyes and in their minds. The meaning of the atonement is given in Leviticus 17:11. “The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the alter to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life.”

The shedding of blood was the process of dying and giving up life. It was given in place of the sinner’s life thus making atonement for him. Therefore, to say that Christ died for our sins was understood by the family of Israel to mean that Christ underwent death for them, thus removing their guilt as well as the threat of death at judgment.

Because of philosophy and tradition interwoven into the gospel message, the death of Christ has lost its meaning to most people today. Most churches teach that the wages of sin is not death but rather spiritual life under tortuous conditions for eternity. Judgment is no longer as clear-cut as it was in the days of the Patriarchs, or as it was under the Old Covenant. It is feared because of its mystery, because something is to happen to the sinner leaving him in a state of perpetual misery. Just as capital punishment has been rejected in civil law, it has also been denied to God. Since the final death at

judgment no longer means death, so the death of Jesus for sins can hardly be accepted in its simplicity as just that — death.

To make the gospel (the death and resurrection of Jesus) accord with the traditional concept of judgment, new concepts of the gospel must be devised. It is now said that He paid the penalty of sin by the agony He suffered on the cross, not by the actual shedding of blood and dying. For example, some say that in the six hours Christ endured the cross He actually suffered more than all lost humanity would suffer by burning alive for eternity. The atonement becomes not a blood-letting death, but suffering, agony, pain. It requires no special gift of logic to see that this would be no fulfillment of the types of sacrifice in the Old Testament, where the animals were slain in such a way as to require the least amount of suffering. The scripture plainly says that the atonement was in the giving up of the blood, not in the suffering of the victim. Peter wrote, “knowing that you were redeemed, not with silver or gold from your vain manner of life handed down from your fathers, but with the precious blood as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ” (I Peter 1:18–19). There can be no doubt that the suffering of Christ was intense, but the redemption was in the fact that He gave up his life through the shedding of blood, as the sacrificial lamb had portrayed.

That which Christ did to take the place of man’s punishment for sin was to die, not suffer a spiritual life of misery or perpetual torture, as would be the case, if that were to be the ultimate punishment for sinners.

Where men see the final judgment as something other than death of the sinner, the death of Christ loses its simplicity. To some it becomes a demonstration of God’s love. To some it is an example of man’s inhumanity to man. Other believe that God suffered the death of His Son in order to bring about the necessary emotional reaction desired to turn man to Him. To others it has mysterious connotations similar to pagan sacrifices. But according to Scripture, Christ, was “cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due” (Isa 53:8). Peter quoted Moses when he preached: “and it shall be that every soul that shall not listen to that prophet (Christ) shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3:23). The issue of the gospel is intrinsically bound in the punishment for sin. God’s laws are inexorable. They will be obeyed. Death for sin! Christ Himself came into the world to meet the demands of the law. He assumed the sin and sustained the death. The sin is forgiven because the penalty demanded by God’s law has been paid.

The good news as presented by the apostles was never complicated by the Platonic philosophy which teaches that it is not the man himself that is at stake but rather something that he possesses which must endure forever in a state of bliss or agony. Rather the apostles presented the question of life and death: death as the result of sin, and Christ’ death as a substitute for man so that he might be free from guilt and the final death. Without the complications of human philosophy, speculation and tradition the gospel was something that could be shared by every Christian and understood by all. Neither was there any argument over how one was to receive this redemption, because baptism was understood in its simplicity as a baptism “into Christ’s death.” If the death of Christ was a substitute for our death under judgment and if baptism was a means of entering into Christ’s death, then the one desiring eternal life was willing to submit to baptism as the means of identification with the death of Christ.

The many traditions of denominationalism and theological systems proposed by Christian leaders make it necessary today for us to first preach the diagnosis, the actual problem of man in his life and death situation, before we can preach the cure, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Human systems of theology complicate the meaning of the gospel and confuse the purpose of God. For one to say he believes the gospel when he has no idea of the problem that man faces or when he has concepts of this problem that are grounded in speculative philosophy, or even superstition, is an empty profession. The news of Christ can be good news only to the extent that it presents a solution relevant to one's needs. What man needs is a sinless person to die his death for him so he can be free of the guilt of sin and its ultimate punishment. This exactly what Jesus did.

To those who love God and want to live eternally in harmony with Him, this is good news. Where the divine decrees concerning man's nature and ultimate destiny have been distorted by tradition and philosophy, then the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection will be distorted, its power diminished and unity obstructed.

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