

HOW TRADITIONAL THEOLOGY NEUTRALIZED THE GOSPEL

By

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Tens of thousands of church leaders and preachers are in a constant agony over finding means by which they might motivate people to receive the gospel and take seriously the commands of the Lord. Books, tapes and seminars by church-growth specialists have become big business, all designed to make the gospel effective.

Especially involved are those engaged in the effort to “restore” the primitive faith and policy of the first century church and this is what is surprising. One would think that if the original gospel preached by the apostles produced great results, then the same gospel would produce great results today. But it doesn’t, or at least what is being presented doesn’t seem sufficient to do the job.

The question is: How did the early Christian evangelists and witnesses, even without all the modern mechanical tools, motivate a generation to commit themselves so fully to Christ and His purpose that they were willing to leave all, to give all, to do all and even to lay down their lives in order to live the faith and promote it in the face of cruel opposition?

The answer must include the fact that they presented a message that was so completely revolutionary and yet so challenging and inviting that it captured not only the imagination and intellect but the very energy and lives of those who believed it.

The first gospel sermon was preached by Peter on Pentecost to Jews who had gathered from many nations for the great annual celebration. They were strongly tied to the ancient traditions, and not easily moved to new concepts. But Peter, using Old Testament prophecies, showed them that Jesus not only had been put to death, which they all knew, but that he had returned from the dead and was alive as no other person had ever been before!

Wherever the apostles preached, this was the heart of their story: a man who had been totally dead, had then become alive again. Furthermore, the good news of this event was that all those who had faith in Him could also be made alive and live even as he lives.

Now, is this the same thing preached today in the name of the gospel? Conservative or fundamental preachers would probably say, Yes. All evangelical preachers and teachers affirm that Jesus arose from the dead and lives today, and that there will be a resurrection of the dead.

But somewhere between this affirmation of Christ’s resurrection and the message that is heard by the world there is a great difference. The words no longer seem to mean the same! Death as the wages of sin is now said to be “spiritual death,” although this qualification is not made in scripture. Salvation from this death now becomes salvation of the “soul” — not salvation of the person but the saving of something thought to be a separable part of man that fares very well, or even better, without the rest of the person. Eternal life also must be redefined, as the traditional teaching of the church is that the

detachable part of man called the “soul,” whether of saint or sinner, is immortal and goes on living forever after death.

The revolutionary news of resurrection is practically vaporized away by this prevailing notion that the “real” person survives death and is going to be living forever anyway. The amazing fact of life being restored by resurrection is neutralized and loses any practical significance.

When Jesus announced that He would raise up the dead from their graves (John 5:28–29, 6:39, etc.) he was directing it squarely in the face of this prevailing philosophy, which had evolved from pagan thought.

During the period between the Testaments, there was a concerted effort made by Alexander the Great and others to impose Greek culture upon the Jews, and the effort succeeded in large measure, even to the extent that the Jews adopted the Greek games and their custom of exposing the nude body, against which the Maccabees bitterly campaigned. Strong in the Greek philosophy were the Orphic and Eleusion mysteries in which Egyptian, Babylonian and Greek views were blended. The Greek doctrine, championed by Plato and exported world-wide during the golden age of Greece, held that there is an invisible and mysterious something (called soul) which survives death. From this evolved the belief that the soul is immortal and indestructible. The body was considered evil and unnecessary. Sins of the body were not too serious, since the body was to be left behind anyway.

Then Jesus came preaching a resurrection of the body as man’s only hope! He did not promise that he would survive death, but that He would die and then live again by a bodily resurrection. Finally, He proved it by coming forth from the tomb, not invisible, but visible; not spirit, but with flesh and bones; not a ghost, but a man who could be felt and who could eat solid food (Luke 24:36–43). He was not less man nor part of man, but a whole man, restored from death and made immortal. Paul said that He is the ONLY one with immortality (I Tim. 6:16).

The apostolic message was the man in all his human nature is a sinner and deserving of death, not just death of body, but death of the person, a death that affects all of man and which is inevitable unless God provides a solution. **This is exactly what is done in Christ.** By the power of the gospel man now has the prospect of being reclaimed from death by a resurrection “in the last day,” at the coming of Christ. The “blessed hope” of the Christian was not in dying to go to him, but in His coming to redeem our bodies (Rom. 8:24).

It was this preaching of death and resurrection in sheer contrast to the Greek philosophy of soul-immortality that turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). For opposing the traditions with his resurrection preaching Paul was viciously attacked by the Jews and opposed by the Greeks. At Athens, center of the “immortal soul” philosophy, Paul preached the resurrection (Acts 17:31). Before King Agrippa he claimed that it was because he preached the resurrection of the dead as the hope of Israel that the Jews had opposed him and made him prisoner (Acts 26:6–8).

In his letters Paul wanted against the popular philosophy of his day, which embraced the Greek idea of surviving death by means of an indestructible soul (I Cor. 1:19–21, 2:6, Col. 2:8).

Traditional theology has long since come to terms with Platonic philosophy. The church has cowered from challenging the world with such a revolutionary doctrine

(which might lead to persecution of some kind) and has accommodated its theology to the world.

Billy Graham, in a television address, said that ‘deep down inside you’ there is an immortal soul and that “it will live in one of two places forever, either in heaven or hell.” It is **this** “soul” that evangelists usually tell us needs saving, in spite of the fact that Jesus talked about saving our lives through the resurrection from the grave.

What this doctrine says, in common Christian literature and expression, is that there is a “death-proof” substance in man which survives, no matter what. Therefore all men go on living in another form. This idea is very easily accommodated to the popular stories about “after-death” experiences. Some fail to notice that the same kind of experiences are related by the heathen as well as by believers(?).

Religious papers and bulletins often announce the death of Christians and comment that they are “now enjoying their reward in heaven” or “reaping the reward for their labors” or that they are “now conversing with the apostles and singing in the heavenly choir.” What need have they of a resurrection? And if every person who dies is immediately transferred into eternal life in a purely spiritual bodily existence, why all the great emphasis in scripture on the fact that Christ’s physical death was necessary to meet the death penalty of sin, and that His resurrection demonstrates the meaning of life and immortality? (II Tim 1:10).

Traditional theology of the surviving soul greatly neutralizes the message of resurrection. When we tell the world that Christ offers “eternal life” there is nothing particularly different or challenging about that. According to the general orthodoxy everyone has eternal life, only with differences in quality. To say that Jesus is alive doesn’t seem so startling when the church commonly teaches that everyone who ever died is alive also! (On this, please read Heb.11:39 and Acts 2:29, 34).

Even common scriptural terms have lost their meaning because of this theology. Words such as “saved,” “lost,” death,” “immortality” and many others no longer convey the meaning of God’s purpose. They have been neutralized to accommodate them to the traditional view.

In an article on “The Great Fear and the Great Faith” Rousas Rushdoony points out that rock music “openly declares the death of all meaning; it celebrates death, contempt for purposes, and a resolute refusal to be other than suicidal.” He says that “The popular culture around us is empty and suicidal...modern youth is passionate, and it is also futile; its passion is death-oriented; towards life and work its reaction is one of boredom and retreat.” This contempt for purpose and life is obvious to all of us. But what has the church offered in its place? Instead of upholding life as Jesus revealed it, the church compromises. It opposes the suicidal culture, but fails to offer the opposite — life. Instead it offers something in between, a nebulous, mystic something unlike the man God created, an undefined and indescribable soul.

This kind of “gospel” generally gets no one persecuted or martyred, but neither does it excite anyone. It is safe ground. The pagans believe the same thing; the spiritualists preach it all the time, that people do not die, they just go on living in another dimension.

Some try to reconcile this idea with scriptures with two or three “proof-texts,” which if taken alone might appear to support it. But this requires that one ignore a great amount of plain talk by Jesus. Jesus talked not of death as a door by which to enter

another sphere of life, but as a threat! He talked of the dead being restored to life and plainly said that He was the one Who had power to do it, and would do so upon His return at the last day.

This issue is one which has been raised in every denomination at various intervals since the days of Martin Luther, who dubbed the doctrine of “soul immortality” as a “monstrous fable” of the Roman Church. Usually the issue is silenced by those who claim it is controversial and divisive! I have been told by some Bible College professors that although they agree that the traditional view is not scriptural, they dare not openly confront the issue because it is too controversial and of little importance. What in Heaven’s name is important and worthy of controversy if not the very hope for which Christ died? What is Christian faith if it is not faith in truth? Jesus said, “I am the truth.” The power of preaching is diminished as long as it fosters this idea that the truth about man and death and life is of no great importance. We wonder where Jesus would fit in the modern non-controversial Bible College.

There are signs that at last the subject is breaking out of the prison of traditionalism and is being (pardon the pun) resurrected by some of the foremost conservative minds. When we first approached brethren with the subject over twenty years ago, we received severe criticism and opposition on every side. But today preachers and teachers are willing to take another look, and many are renouncing the “traditions of men” and taking a stance for the simple scriptural doctrine that man is mortal and his only hope of life (any life at all) is through Jesus and the resurrection.

Of course, truth is not determined by how many believe it or by who believes it, but by what God has revealed. But there are many who hesitate to speak out on the subject because they think they are alone. Hear what F.F. Bruce, foremost among conservative Bible Scholars, says, “Paul evidently could not contemplate immortality apart from resurrection; for him a boy of some kind was essential to personality. Our traditional thinking about the ‘never-dying soul,’ which owes so much to our Graeco-Roman heritage, makes it difficult to appreciate Paul’s point of view.” And I might add that it also neutralizes the impact of the gospel Paul preached. (F>F> Bruce, “Paul On Immortality,” quoted from *Verdict*, Aug. 1978).

Several years ago a prominent Bible College professor admitted to me that he had concluded that man has no inherent immortality and that only those in Christ will live eternally, but that this is an “emotion-laden subject” and could not be openly discussed. (Since then he has openly taught and written his convictions.)

The apostles grabbed the “emotion-laden” fact that man was mortal and death-bound and preached the good news of resurrection in spite of controversy. They knew something the rest of the world didn’t know, but needed desperately. It was costly. They paid for their knowledge with their lives.

It is easier to allow people to believe tradition, or nothing at all. But if we are going to present Christ to the world, we must present the truth He came to bring about life and immortality. There is power in the gospel, the whole gospel, and nothing but the gospel.

To give consent by silence to the traditional belief that everyone has a basic element of life that is death-proof and immortal is to neutralize the impact of the gospel. The gospel of the resurrection of the dead as the only hope is still a revolutionary

message, and the church must be willing to present it in the face of all opposing philosophy, as was done in the first century!

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