

Which Gospel?

Today there are many evangelism 'tracts' and 'plans' of salvation. I am convinced the content of many such Gospel messages is fast becoming 'another Gospel' and seducing people with 'another Jesus'. It's that serious.

The so called 'Plan of Salvation' in many tracts and books often begins with a statement to the effect that '*God Loves You*'. I argue that today this is possibly the worst way one could introduce Christ and Him crucified! It also completely contradicts the methods of the great Reformers, evangelists and church leaders of old. They started their Gospel presentation with the opposite idea - 'man is a sinner'!

It was the Puritans who invented evangelistic literature. Richard Baxter, Hugh Clark, John Cotton and many others were all great evangelists. Baxter's classic '*Call to the Unconverted*' or Alleine's '*Alarm to the Unconverted*' showed the evangelistic heart of the Puritans. Yet modern evangelism has increasingly moved away from what the Puritans established. The great evangelists in previous centuries maximised the *preparation* of a mind for an understanding of the Gospel - ie. sin and its consequences; the judgement of God; and thus the *reason* for the Gospel and the need to be saved.

The common way of presenting the Gospel today is 'God loves you'. But this is actually a misrepresentation of what scriptures say of the unsaved. The statement 'God loves you' is true of God's elect, His beloved and His church. But the Bible never says that God loves the sinner. The Scriptures tell us clearly that those in unsaved states, those who are not believing - that the wrath of God abides on them, (Jn.3:36; Rom.1:18; 2:8; 13:4). The Bible clearly says that unsaved people are '*children of wrath*', '*children of disobedience*', (Eph.2:3; 5:6; Col.3:6). The scriptures tell us that God '*hates all workers of iniquity*', (Ps.5:5) and God is '*angry with the wicked every day*', (Ps.7:11). Nowhere does the Bible say that God loves the unsaved, yet today this 'love gospel' is often the *first* message in tracts and salvation messages. The problem is that not only is it unscriptural but it thwarts the very reason why man needs to be saved - because of his *sin* nature!

The apostles and the great evangelists who forged revivals and saw God sweep millions into the Kingdom, did not pander to such *pragmatic methods* in an effort to secure souls. One author writes: '*The typical presentation today starts exactly opposite where Paul started. He wrote of 'the wrath of God...against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men'. But modern evangelism begins with 'God loves you and wants to make you happy'*'. (1)

The messages of salvation today often quote John 3:16 '*For God so loved the world...*' to show that God loves everyone. But the rest of the verse tells us that it is the believing ones or those who will believe that God gives eternal life to and who will not be judged with God's 'wrath'. This is the literal Greek for John 3:16: '*For so loved the God the world that the His son the unique [only begotten] He gave that all the believing ones in [on] Him no perish but have life eternal.*' The '*whosoever believes*' is literally translated '*all the believing ones*'! (2)

How could God 'love' those who He knows will end up in Hell? If this is 'love' than is it the same 'love' He has for His elect, 'the beloved' who end up in heaven? The

contradiction here is sadly not seen by many who begin the Gospel with 'God loves you'. Yet the scriptures do not lie. To begin a presentation with the statement 'God loves you' hides man's greatest need - to be saved from the wrath to come, (Matt.3:7; Lk.3:7; 1Thess.1:10). It arguably holds people back from seeing themselves as offending a holy and righteous God. Beginning a Gospel presentation with 'God loves you' may well also detract from the '*offense*' of the cross, (Gal.5:11-20).

The Gospel is not about God loving us in our unsaved state but that Christ died as a substitute for our sins and was buried and rose again, (1Cor.15:3,4). God is not at peace with the unsaved! They cannot approach God without having their sins atoned and that atonement calls for repentance from sin. The word 'atonement' literally means to bring two warring parties together. The atonement solves the *enmity* that God had with sinners.

The importance of the doctrine of sin in any 'plan' of salvation cannot be minimised. *Sin is an integral part of the Gospel*. 1Corinthians 15:3,4 spells out the Gospel clearly and it includes the reason why men need to be saved - SIN: '*For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures*'. The Gospel 'facts' are fivefold: the *death, burial and resurrection* of Christ as a *substitute* for our *sins*. The only part in the Gospel concerning 'us' is '*our sins*'. The rest of the Gospel is all about Christ and His work.

The great revivalist and Puritan evangelist, Jonathan Edwards, was one of the most successful evangelist in history. He taught that no man can or will come to Christ to be saved from sin until he knows what he needs saving *from*. The first step was knowledge, the second step conviction...then this leads to contrition. The Puritans urged ministers not to short circuit the *preparation process* but to plow up the ground of the heart by exposing sin and its consequences.

The many 'plans' of salvation put forth today also emphasise a 'decision' and often give the unsaved something to do: '*Pray this prayer...I do now receive and confess Him as my personal Saviour*'. Then...'*after making your decision to receive Christ...*' Yet, we are not saved by receiving Jesus as a personal Saviour nor by making a decision. Rather we receive Jesus as our saviour when we understand and believe the Gospel. I am not 'knitpicking' here. This concept of receiving Jesus as a 'personal saviour' by a 'decision' is actually not found anywhere in scripture. We are saved when we understand and believe the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ and his substitutionary atonement on the cross.

The Gospel is not man giving his heart or his life to Jesus but that Christ gave His life in the place of sinners. The Gospel is not man receiving Christ into his heart, but that God received the Lord Jesus into heaven as the mediator of sinners. *The Gospel is not anything man can do but what Christ has done 2,000 years ago!*

We do not receive Jesus by our own energies or our own will, (Jn.1:13). '*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God*'.

Urging people to 'receive Christ' by a 'decision' misleads people into thinking that by performing some ritual, they can be saved. The Bible says we can only be saved by the work of Jesus Christ imputed to us through faith. True faith does not come by anything we do, including any 'decision' or 'sinner prayer', but by God's gift of regeneration whereby the Spirit of God 'quickens' our dead spirit to life. **'And you has he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins'**, (Eph.2:1). We are saved when Jesus saving work is applied to us through regeneration and faith. **'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost'**, (Tit.3:5).

But some of these modern plans of salvation get worse: They often quote Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says: **'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me'**. But *who* was this speaking to? Was it to unsaved sinners? No! The words are specifically addressed to *Christians* and more specifically to a *church* at Laodicea that needed correction. This church would be no different to many churches today and if Christ came and spoke to such churches today why would we wrongly then use it and address it to the unsaved? Many who use this scripture do not look at the context - it is to *professing believers*! Well known ministries are using this passage to explain what is just not true. This is offensive to God because *it makes salvation a work of man* instead of a sovereign work of God. The Bible says **'there is none that seeks after God'**, (Rom.3:11). Even if it were true that God is waiting patiently for us to 'open the door' then it would contradict numerous scriptures that emphatically teach that in our unsaved states, we are unable to 'open the door' unless the Spirit does so: **'Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be'**, (Rom.8:7); **'No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day'**, (Jn.6:44).

Some of the modern plans of salvation are arguably a 'works' gospel and worse, a throw-back to the Pelagian and Arminian heresies of centuries ago - heresies which were fought against by most of the great church leaders and Reformers down the running centuries.

Why don't we just call people to believe in what Christ has *done*, rather than what we can *do*? Why don't we call them to *repent* and to *believe* in a finished work and plead with them to call upon the name of the Lord? (Rom.10:13) The real Gospel will expect and call for faith. The rest will be left to the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit and us discipling the person as co-workers with God. Do we trust the Holy Spirit to save, or do we have to add so much extra-biblical material to 'woo' people into a 'decision'?

Many Gospel plans and programmes are making the Gospel 'easy' to believe. The 'Alpha course', introduced in the nineties, watered down sin. If one reads many of the testimonies one will find that many have 'accepted Jesus' for the wrong reasons - that He might make their life better or fix some problem or addiction. But Jesus did not come to make our sordid lives better, but rather to 'crucify' them! (Gal.2:20; 5:24; Rom.6:6)

God requires us to deliver the Gospel to all. But how shall they *understand* it without *preparation of the heart*, (Matt.13:1-9; 18-23; Lk.8:5-15)? How shall they truly

'confess with the mouth' and 'believe in the heart' without being shown *the reason as to why they need the Gospel?* - that is, the depravity of the heart; the inability to keep and fulfil God's law; the sin nature and its consequences.

We are not required to dress up the Gospel or make it more 'appealing', for one cannot soften the cross! We are not 'PR officers' to bring goodwill between Christ and the world - to make Christ acceptable to businessmen, sportsmen or the Press. We are not mediators making the Gospel more palatable to man.

The power of the Gospel is in the message itself! It needs no outside influence to generate its power. Paul said: **'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written. The just shall live by faith'**, (Rom.1:16,17). The word 'power' here is 'dunamis', referring to intrinsic power, *power of itself*. We get the words 'dynamite' and 'dynamo' from this word. The Gospel message generates power of itself and needs no outside help. This reasoning is further extended in verse 17: **'For therein is the righteousness of God revealed...'** The Gospel itself contains the revelation of the righteousness of God himself in the flesh through the message of the substitutionary death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Which Gospel will we set before the people? Will we begin with 'God loves you'; or 'man is a sinner'? Will we begin with explaining who God is and why He cannot tolerate sin; or will we speak of 'what a wonderful plan God has for our lives'? Will we be patient in the preparation of a soul and teach the law broken; or will we minimise sin by pandering to human ability? Will we destroy the 'offense' of the cross by not mentioning the wrath of God on the unsaved which was then placed on Jesus Christ? Will we turn the Gospel from what Christ has *done* to what man could *do*? Will we call for repentance and faith, or call for a 'decision'? Will we trust the sovereign Holy Spirit to bring the understanding of 'Christ crucified'; or will we tell them their 'decision' has made them a 'Christian'?

These are serious challenges we face today. Galatians chapter 1 presents this Gospel dilemma as deadly serious! There is **'another gospel'** which **'perverts the gospel of Christ'**, (Gal.1:6,7). The judgement on any other gospel is to be **'accursed'**, (Gal.1:8,9). Paul says **'For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ'**, (Gal.1:10).

The Gospel is one doctrine we must get right! It cannot be diluted or made appealing to the carnal needs of man. The cross is offensive to man in his sin. But it is the power of God contained in the message that leads man to repentance from sin and shows God's love for his soul.

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(1) 'Ashamed of the Gospel' by John MacArthur, P.132,141

(2) The verse is not about 'anyone' but about 'the believing ones'. The Greek has 'the believing ones' with the definite article 'the' referring to a definite number, quantity or entity. The common misconception is that 'whosoever' is an indefinite phrase, but this is plainly refuted by the Greek definite article 'o' which is attached to 'believing ones'. (The definite article modifies a particular object - the object here is 'the believing ones'). Thus this is a definite group of people, not an indiscriminate or indefinite group.