

What Is the Gospel?

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Bill Muehlenberg's commentary on issues of the day...

There are all kinds of Christians proclaiming all kinds of gospels. But there is a very easy test as to whether or not that which is being proclaimed is the true biblical gospel or just a pale imitation, if not complete counterfeit. The test is quite simple: is God the primary focus and aim of the message, or is man, self, and the flesh?

The sad truth is, many churches today – perhaps most – have a me-centred gospel. It is all about me. This is true especially of many of our big, popular megachurches. The message you will hear each week is all about me. It is an entirely selfish gospel, appealing only to me, to self, and

therefore, to the flesh.

If what you hear each week goes something like this, then you know it is time to leave:

- how I can have a better life
- how I can be happy and fulfilled
- how I can become successful and prosper
- how I can be wealthy and have anything I want
- how I can be completely self-satisfied
- how I can get that job I always wanted
- how I can always get what I want
- how I can succeed in my business
- how I can lose weight for Jesus
- how I can make millions
- how I can feel good about myself
- how I can have great self-esteem
- how I can be everything I wanted to be

My friends, this is not the gospel of the Bible. This is the gospel of self. It is completely focused on self and self-centred. It puts me at the centre of everything, with God as an optional appendage somewhere along the line. This is not the reason why Jesus left the comforts of his heavenly home and suffered a horrific death – so that we could be our own selfish greedy little pigs.

Sure, my above list may be the more blatant version of what we hear so often in our churches. Sure, it is perhaps more often toned down a bit, and the occasional reference to God and Jesus will be found in our churches. But generally we hear feel-good sermons which are hardly any different from secular or New Age therapeutic and self-empowerment talks.

Much of our gospel today is all about how we can succeed, prosper, live the good life, and have it all. Strange, but when I read the words of Jesus I get an entirely different message. He spoke constantly about losing everything for the gospel, of giving everything up for God, of denying self and crucifying the flesh.

So who is right here – Jesus or the bulk of our churches today? I know who I will side with on this matter. And again, it does not have to be so blatantly obvious to be so blatantly bad. Not every pastor writes books with titles like “Become a Better You,” “It’s Your Time Now” and “Your Best Life Now”.

One need not be a Joel Osteen to also preach what is basically a self-centred and me-focused gospel. We can still give just as deadly and carnal a gospel without the obvious appeals to self and the flesh. Simply look at how many churches offer their appeal for salvation.

Does it focus on biblical truths, such as, we are all miserable sinners under the wrath of God

headed for a lost eternity unless we repent, turn from self, and receive the finished work of Christ on our behalf? Or does it go much more along these lines:

“If you want to find meaning and purpose in life, and want the best there is, and find real happiness and peace, then come to Jesus.” That is basically how most gospel invitations are made today in so many churches. It is all about self. It has nothing to do with a holy God who has been rejected and spat upon because of our selfishness and sin who demands our repentance and allegiance.

Now, do things like peace and fulfilment come to those who get right with God through Christ? Absolutely. But they are simply the by-products, not what we should come to Christ for. We come to Christ because we are sinners unable to save ourselves and in desperate need of release from our sins. We come to Christ and give him our all, renouncing ourselves, because he alone is worthy.

All the great saints, preachers and Christian writers have known these truths. And of course they are found in the very Bibles we tend to hardly read anymore. Simply going back to the Word, blowing off the dust, and reading it with an expectant and open attitude will lead any genuine seeker to these vital truths.

But we have so allowed various wolves in sheep’s clothing to tickle our ears and tell us what we want to hear, that we have hardened ourselves to the very basic truths of the gospel. Perhaps some of us need to gather up our collection of Osteen books and tapes and if not consume them to the flames, at least put them to one side, as we make reading the Scriptures our number one priority.

And as the Bible once again becomes the primary focus of our life – as it always should have been – then we should start reading some solid biblical material for a change. We need to replace our cotton candy and sugar-coated pap for some real gospel-saturated volumes.

[Buy this from Amazon: *God is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* by John Piper Click Here](#)

Let me recommend just one to you here. John Piper has long focused on the truths I am discussing here. And his 2005 book, *God is the Gospel* (Crossway) would be a terrific place to begin. Simply his title alone should show you just how many light-years apart his focus is from that of so many pop preachers of today.

Yes God is the gospel – nothing else. God alone should be our entire focus, our sole longing, our

chief priority, and our number one object of devotion. If God is not at the very heart of our faith, then our faith is to be questioned. Let me finish with a few quotes from this brief but utterly important volume:

“It is stunning how seldom God himself is proclaimed as the greatest gift of the Gospel. But the Bible teaches that the best and final gift of God’s love is the enjoyment of God’s beauty. ‘One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple’ (Ps. 27:4).”

“Every person should be required to answer the question, ‘Why is it good news to you that your sins are forgiven?’ ‘Why is it good news to you that you stand righteous in the courtroom of the Judge of the universe?’ The reason this must be asked is that there are seemingly biblical answers that totally ignore the gift of God himself. A person may answer, ‘Being forgiven is good news because I don’t want to go to hell.’ Or a person may answer, ‘Being forgiven is good news because a guilty conscience is a horrible thing, and I get great relief when I believe my sins are forgiven.’ Or a person may answer, ‘I want to go to heaven.’ But then we must ask why they want to go to heaven. They might answer, ‘Because the alternative is painful.’ Or ‘because my deceased wife is there.’ Or ‘because there will be a new heaven and a new earth where justice and beauty will finally be everywhere.’

What’s wrong with these answers? It’s true that no one should want to go to hell. Forgiveness does indeed relieve a guilty conscience. In heaven we will be restored to loved ones who died in Christ, and we will escape the pain of hell and enjoy the justice and the beauty of the new earth. All that is true. So what’s wrong with those answers? What’s wrong with them is that they do not treat God as the final and highest good of the gospel. They do not express a supreme desire to be with God. God was not even mentioned. These gifts are precious. But they are not God. And they are not the gospel if God himself is not cherished as the supreme gift of the gospel. That is, if God is not treasured as the ultimate gift of the gospel, none of his gifts will be gospel, good news.”

“The ultimate good of the gospel is seeing and savoring the beauty and value of God. God’s wrath and our sin obstruct that vision and that pleasure. You can’t see and savor God as supremely satisfying while you are full of rebellion against Him and He is full of wrath against you. The removal of this wrath and this rebellion is what the gospel is for. The ultimate aim of the gospel is the display of God’s glory and the removal of every obstacle to our seeing it and savoring it as our highest treasure. ‘Behold Your God!’ is the most gracious command and the best gift of the gospel. If we do not see Him and savor Him as our greatest fortune, we have not obeyed or believed the gospel.”

“This is the gospel – seeing and savouring ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:6). God, shining in the face of Jesus Christ, for our everlasting and ever-increasing joy, is the best and highest and final good that makes the good news good.”

“The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God. It’s a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy with God. If we don’t want God above all things, we have not been converted to the gospel.”

That last quote alone needs to be read and re-read, prayed over, meditated upon, and contemplated deeply until its truth sinks into our very souls. Is God our focus? Is he our all in all? Is he the one who we think about and care about more than anything else?

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