

NO OTHER GOSPEL

by Hudson T. Armerding, Ph.D.
Wheaton College President

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Clyde C. Price, Jr. email: 76616.3452@compuserve.com]

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IF ANY MAN preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:9.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has been the subject of challenge, imitation or modification ever since it was first proclaimed. Indeed, the challenge has often been most effective when a plausible imitation is advanced that purports to be the gospel in a more attractive dress, more consistent with the accepted religious norms of the culture.

MAN SEEKS TO REFORMULATE THE GOSPEL

What prompted the Apostle Paul to insist upon the distinctiveness of the gospel? In essence, it is man's persistent reluctance to accept the fact that he cannot redeem himself or determine the conditions of his salvation. This reluctance proceeds from an assumption that man essentially has the right of self-determination. Such an assumption requires that the biblical doctrine of God be modified to make His benevolence dominant, His holiness incidental, and His sovereignty limited.

Man's concern then is not so much with a divine standard of righteousness as with the authenticity of his own humanity. Despite this a vague uneasiness persists that there is after all an ultimate accountability for which man is responsible. Yet even the nature of this accountability is thought to be more by human endeavor than divine favor and ultimately man's responsibility, not God's.

Once it is assumed that salvation depends upon man, then he is obligated to take the initiative and is never really certain whether he has effectively made his case. Despite this, the fact that he is doing something of merit, however incomplete, reinforces his concept of self-determination.

PAGAN GOSPELS

To satisfy this fundamental desire for autonomy the pagan religions offer a plausible "other gospel" that attracts millions of followers. Some of the most extraordinary acts of devotion are performed by those who expect that by such means they will gain the attention of their gods and merit their favor. Far from their having a sense of security, however, there generally persists a mood of uncertainty. Something may be left undone or performed improperly which will displease a capricious deity who has no commitments to those who seek his favor.

By contrast, western man has sought to solve this problem by eliminating God. With the development of modern science man has considered it unnecessary to explain the mysteries of life through a "God of the gaps." What once was thought to be an act of God is now understood to be the result of natural causes. As man is thus able to explain all questions and solve all problems without reference to God, the anxiety of pleasing an arbitrary Deity is removed.

DEPERSONALIZATION AND DESPAIR

The results have not been satisfactory. This "other gospel" has tended to produce a mood characterized by alienation, meaninglessness and despair. The very insights that man has gained through scientific advance have caused him to raise important questions about whether he can really control his destiny. Consequences of drastic importance threaten his survival.

Faced with this dilemma, many are turning to the occult or to drugs. They seek to escape the harsh realities of life, or to fashion a scheme of reality that may somehow fill the spiritual void left by scientism. The rapid rise in popularity of these alternatives underscores the need of contemporary man for a fulfillment denied him in a world without God.

Granted such circumstances, the need to proclaim the gospel of Christ has never been more evident. Those who pledge an allegiance to organized Christianity, however, differ widely in their response to this opportunity. Essentially, this is because some think the biblical message needs to be modified or reinterpreted in the light of contemporary conditions.

THE GOSPEL OF INVOLVEMENT

For example, in an increasingly inter-dependent world there has been a growing impatience with the distinction historically made by some religionists between secular and sacred. With some justification there has been an insistence upon the fact that God not only created the world and ordained its major institutions but also is now at work in the world to fulfill His sovereign purposes. Throughout his life Dietrich Bonhoeffer

opposed the dividing of life into sacred and secular and insisted that the place of the church was in the world where God is.

This has caused some to conclude that the gospel should be addressed to man's current dilemma rather than the question of his ultimate destiny. Langdon Gilkey of the University of Chicago Divinity School has observed that the emphasis "has shifted from matters of ultimate 'salvation' and of heaven or hell, to questions of the meaning, necessity, or usefulness of religion for this life." From this perspective God is at work wherever there are efforts to combat war, racism, poverty and prejudice. To witness to the gospel is to join others in these endeavors, presuming that whether the other participants are professing Christians or not, they are doing the work of God.

THE GOSPEL OF REVOLUTION

For some, just to be involved is not enough. Instead they believe that the true follower of Jesus is to be a revolutionary who is prepared to side with forces and events that seek to overthrow the existing system of things. In the fall of 1967 a National Council of Churches conference on Church and Society in Detroit became dominated by a group of radicals who insisted that this should be the mission of the church. A similar philosophy seems to underlie the moral and financial support given by church groups to revolutionaries in some of the developing areas of the world.

In short, it is appropriate to use whatever means are necessary, including violence, to achieve an end that is believed to be consistent with Christian ideals. The parallel between this and the Inquisition cannot be overlooked.

The focus of this "gospel" is temporal rather than eternal and stresses the work of man rather than the grace of God. Whatever betterment may come to man now, the question of his ultimate destiny remains unresolved.

THE GOSPEL OF ENCOUNTER

Those who recognize this problem but still believe that biblical concepts need to be reinterpreted in the light of contemporary ideas have advanced other versions of the gospel. Even the evangelical community has manifested a degree of accommodation to contemporary thought by being preoccupied with the popular idea of encounter. As a result some of the basic elements of the Gospel have been obscured.

With today's stress upon personal relationship it is understandable why the biblical statements relating to this should be so very attractive. As a result, Christ is presented as an exciting, dynamic personality, especially as portrayed in His pre-Calvary ministry. The commitment to Him that is encouraged often has a striking similarity to that of the followers of a charismatic political leader. A theological student (not an evangelical) told me his relationship to Christ

was because of a meaningful encounter with Christ. However, if he had a meaningful encounter with communism he would probably make a commitment to communism.

What is often stressed is the ability of the Savior to give meaning and purpose in this life to those who follow Him. Too often His humanity seems to overshadow His divinity so that He is a kind of "first among equals," rather than the Lord of Glory. Furthermore, the emphasis upon His life and ministry tends to overshadow His going to the Cross as our representative, substitutionary sacrifice. Thus, the relationship to Him appears to be open to renegotiation or termination as subsequent circumstances may dictate.

I shall never forget a young man who had made a commitment to Christ and indicated that at the time he found this very exciting and fulfilling. Then the excitement diminished and, in his words, he was ready to "chuck Christianity."

THE GOSPEL BEGINS WITH GOD

It is important that evangelicals make certain of their message. The Gospel begins with God rather than man and includes not only His love but also His holiness and His justice.

Contrary to the pagan religions, the gospel declares that it is God Who initiates and consummates human redemption. Furthermore, this has been accomplished in a series of historical acts rather than through an ongoing process of involvement, whether in works or sacraments. It is in the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ that God has shown His redemptive purpose in history and has provided the substantive basis for the gospel message.

The demonstration of the transforming power of that message is first of all inward, then outward. It is first personal, then social. It begins in commitment and continues in obedience. It confesses the all-sufficiency of God and the utter dependence of man. It is first of all for the glory of God and then for the blessing of man.

A HIGH VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Paul in Galatians summons us to preach no other gospel than that which is enunciated in the Holy Scriptures. The importance of biblical revelation as the authoritative source of the gospel can hardly be overestimated. Without this divine disclosure Christians are trapped in the same dilemma as the rest of the world. With it, they are in a unique position to declare with confidence the truth of God.

Because of the significance of this issue, it is not surprising that the Scriptures continue to be subjected to persistent criticism and question.

We are now at the point in time where fundamentals are questioned. Young people must confront the issue of the

validity of Scripture. THIS IS GOD'S WORD. GOD HAS SPOKEN.

THE VALIDITY OF PREACHING

There remains the question as to how this good news is to be shared. Today there is not agreement on this. The apparent ineffectiveness of preaching has caused some to inquire whether other means should take precedence in conveying the message. This in turn has prompted the suggestion that demonstrating it may be more effective than telling it. Accompanying this has been a growing impatience with what seems to be a needless debate over theological niceties. The coldness and barrenness of mere intellectual assent has been contrasted with the vitality of a meaningful experience with the living Christ.

The abuse or misuse of a particular means, however, does not provide sufficient grounds for its being abandoned. Instead, it is well to recognize that witness is a comprehensive term that includes both proclaiming and doing. Indeed, it is precisely this balance that is found in the Scriptures.

Our Lord Jesus Christ as the Living Word both taught the people and went about doing good and healing those that were oppressed. The same pattern can be found in the ministry of the early church. Theirs was a mission of proclamation that was splendidly validated by their entire manner of life.

Some may ask whether, in the multitude of words broadcast through today's media, the gospel really has a chance of being heard. It is here that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential. The Word which is authoritative in itself is commended to the hearer through the convicting and convincing ministry of the Holy Spirit. Nor does this ignore the messenger. Indeed, it is as the Holy Spirit has come upon him that his message has the compelling significance of a divine pronouncement. Moreover, it is by the same Holy Spirit that the believer's manner of life is transformed so that the fruit of the Spirit becomes manifest as a result of obedience to the whole counsel of God.

It is this blending of the temporal and the eternal that can effectively confront modern man in his alienation and despair. It can give him a vision of wholeness and purpose in spite of the fragmentation and confusion all about him.

This will be achieved only as there is brought to man no other gospel than that which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, personified in our Lord Jesus Christ and manifested through the transformed lives of His servants. Indeed, there is no more eloquent corroboration of the fact that there is "no other gospel" than those who by their manner of life clearly demonstrate their commitment to it.

Let our message then be biblical rather than cultural, spiritual rather than human, a word from God rather than a speculation from man.

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