

GOSPEL 101

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When I returned to the church where I previously served as a teaching pastor to assume the lead role, I was committed to preaching the biblical Gospel. In many of my messages, I talked about the importance of building everything on the gospel of God. After I had been there for a few months one of the other pastors said to me, “You had better define what you mean by the term *gospel*. “*After all,*” he said, “*many people assume you are talking about a certain style of music.*”

That was an eye-opener! I learned not to make the fatal assumption everyone knows what is meant by the term *gospel*. I once asked a group of Middle School homeschoolers in our church what the gospel is. One young man, who grew up in the church answered, “rules and regulations about how to live.” I spent the rest of the morning talking about the difference between law and grace and how his response was a perfect description of the law. Many of the kids acted like they had never heard about grace before except in a vague way.

The term ‘*gospel*’, while arguably one of the most well-known terms, is least understood. Ask people what is meant by it, and you are apt to get an array of different answers, even among Christians. Not everyone agrees as to what the gospel is.

We must help people *clearly understand* the GRACE of the gospel (*getting the gospel right*), so that they are *constantly* being TRANSFORMED by the SPIRIT *working through* the Gospel (*letting the gospel in*), so as to CARRY OUT the WORK of *advancing* the Gospel in our world (*getting the gospel out*).

In our local church we identify three things that must be learned if we are going to have a firm grasp of the gospel:

- Getting the gospel *right*
- Letting the gospel *in*
- Getting the gospel *out*

What do we mean by these three things? Simply stated, we must help people clearly understand the grace of the gospel (*getting the gospel right*), so that they are constantly being transformed by the Spirit working through the Gospel (*letting the gospel in*), so as to carry out the work of advancing the gospel in our world (*getting the gospel out*). In the material we use in our partners class (we call our members partners), at our local church, we sum up this way: we are *grace-based*, *Spirit* empowered and *outwardly* focused.

Is there a passage in Scripture that

sets forth these three thoughts in a clear and comprehensive way? To my mind, none does so more clearly than Isaiah 6, which contains the prophet Isaiah's commissioning. This account records three visions (or a threefold vision): an *upward* vision, an *inward* vision and an *outward* vision. Each vision pertains to the three categories (getting the gospel right, letting the Gospel in, and getting the Gospel out).

The upward vision Isaiah received is one of the exalted Lord in all of his holiness (Isaiah 6:1-4). It is the ultimate vision of God's holiness recorded in all of Scripture. It came at a time of national crisis as the godly king Uzziah succumbed to his leprosy and died prematurely, (Isa. 6:1). But it was an opportunity for Isaiah to see *another* King, the Lord of hosts (6:3). This has often been referred to as the vision

of the 'thrice Holy One'. The angelic beings around the throne cry out day and night, "...Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3).

In the Hebrew language, there is no way to emphasize something by bolding or italicizing it as we have in English. Rather, the Hebrew writers would double a word for the sake of emphasis or in some extreme cases triple it for maximum emphasis. That's what we have here; a vision of God's holiness which is so glorious, it is given a triple.

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proper VISION of God.

To get the gospel right we must begin with a proper vision of God. Unless we see God clearly, we will remain man-centered in our approach. That doesn't mean we must have the same experience Isaiah had; very few are ever granted such a glorious revelation of the throne of God. It simply means that we must start with a clear view of God if we're going to understand the gospel properly. Paul refers to the gospel in the opening chapter of Romans as the 'gospel of God' (Romans 1:1). This may mean that the gospel he preached had its source *in* God or that it was *about* God. Assuming it's the latter (probably both are true), it essentially means the gospel contains a revelation of God we can't receive anywhere else. And we know this to be the case in that the Lord Jesus Christ brought a unique

revelation of God as Father to the world.

But the vision of the exalted God (upward vision) always produces a corresponding *inward* vision. For Isaiah, it meant that his sinful tongue was exposed ("I am a man of unclean lips") as well as those of his nation ("I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips"). That is incredible when one realizes that Isaiah was considered to be the golden-tongued orator of the Prophetic Period. Reading the Hebrew text of Isaiah, one realizes that he was highly educated and well-spoken. But the very thing deemed to be his strength, he now views as sinful and wretched in God's presence. As Isaiah sees the awful vision of the holiness of God, he now sees his lips as an instrument of his depravity.

But God never leaves us convicted of sin without directing us to the only fount for sin—*Calvary*:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.

Isaiah 6:6-7

That coal was drenched with sacrificial blood from the altar and applied to Isaiah’s lips, and immediately his sin was atoned for. The upward vision of God became an inward vision in which his sin was revealed. But

transformation occurred as the work of Calvary was powerfully applied to his sin so that he now receives the forgiveness. In this context, ‘*letting the gospel in*’ means experiencing that personal transformation forgiveness of sins and regeneration produces.

Finally, Isaiah received the *outward* vision:

“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am I Send me.”

Isaiah 6:8

The exalted vision of God produced a vision of his need which resulted in a call to be a ‘*sent one*’. In the same way, we must not only be sure we are getting the gospel right and letting the

gospel in, but also be prepared to 'get the gospel out'.

Getting the Gospel Right

What comes to mind when you hear the word *gospel*? Most people when hearing the term think of a response to an evangelistic message. But why do we only think of the gospel in terms of only initial entry into the kingdom? It seems clear from the writings of the apostles that they treated the gospel not merely as the message which gets us in, but that which keeps us in and empowers us as well. When Paul writes his letters to the churches, he almost always deals with them from the standpoint of how they are relating to the gospel. If they are having problems, Paul concludes it is almost always due

to the fact that in some way, they have departed from the gospel of grace. In Galatia, *legalism* replaced the gospel; in Corinth it's *Charismania*; in Colosse, *mysticism*; in Thessalonica weird *eschatology*.

The gospel therefore is not just the plan of salvation (although it does inform us of what salvation consists of), but the declaration of God's work which he accomplished through the perfect work of the Son. But sadly, that's not what most people think of when they hear the term. I once shared a message with a church on knowing Jesus, the Incarnate Son. After the message, the pastor wondered why I failed to preach the gospel. (What he meant was that since there had been no invitation at the conclusion, I had failed to properly preach the gospel).

But ‘*getting the gospel right*’ is not about offering a way to respond at the end of the message, it is unpacking the *theology* of the gospel. What is the ‘theology of the gospel?’ *It is the core beliefs which define biblically what the gospel is.* It is what Paul describes as the “*word of the cross*”, which he says is “*folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*” (I Corinthians 1:18 *italics mine*). The Greek term translated *word* in 1:18 is *logos* referring to the content of the message rather than the audible message itself.

If there is a book in Scripture containing an in-depth summary of the theology of the gospel it would have to be Romans. It’s the closest thing the apostle Paul ever wrote to a book. No other portion of Scripture

so completely and systematically sets forth the great doctrinal structure of the Christian faith. Luther in his preface to Romans wrote:

“This epistle is the chief book of the New Testament, the purest gospel. It deserves not only to be known word for word by every Christian but to be the subject of his meditation day by day, the daily bread of his soul. The more time one spends in it, the more precious it becomes and the better it appears.” Calvin said of it, “when anyone understands this epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole Scriptures.”

J.I. Packer says,

There is one book in the New Testament which links up with almost everything that the Bible contains: that is the epistle of the Romans. In Romans, Paul brings together and sets out in systematic relation all the great themes of the Bible—sin, law, judgment, faith, works, grace, justification, sanctification, election, the plan of salvation, the work of Christ, the work of the Spirit, the Christian hope, the nature and life of the Church, the place of Jew and Gentile in the purpose of God, the philosophy of Church and of the world history,

the meaning and message of the Old Testament, the duties of Christian citizenship, the principles of personal piety and ethics. From the vantage-point given by Romans, the whole landscape of the Bible is open to view, and the broad relation of the parts to the whole becomes plain. The study of Romans is the fittest starting point for biblical interpretation and theology.”

Romans contains the unfolding story of redemption, the tale of what has happened to us after first believing the Gospel. When we first partake of the grace of God, we don't fully understand what has happened to us. We know we have entered a new

sphere of life as old habits drop off. Still, we don't fully understand all that it means. That's where the book of Romans comes in. Romans is an attempt to explain what has happened to us when we entered the domain of the grace of God.

Many people think that Romans is too difficult for the average believer to grasp. But Romans wasn't too difficult for the Christians at Rome to understand, many of whom were of the lower classes of Roman society, including slaves who couldn't read or write. But they were expected to understand the letter Paul sent to them when they heard it read on a Sunday morning. If they were expected to understand it, there is no excuse for us in America today. The logic of this book is spiritual logic that the average

believer can understand.

The Unsettled State of the Believer in the Church Today

There is another reason every believer should want to engage in a serious study of Romans: It remedies what is often called, *'the unsettled state of God's people.'* The norm for most believers today is to be tossed about with condemnation, frustration, failure, sin, and bondage. A recent survey revealed that the greatest problem Americans have today is dealing with unresolved guilt. Perhaps, the Church world suffers the most from this malady. When I was in the world, I had guilt, but I didn't have that many absolutes to match it up.

When I became a believer and came into the Church though, I now had the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and ten thousand church rules rooted in traditions that aren't in Scripture! What is the remedy for this condition? *By the Holy Spirit we must find a full and sufficient Christ who is able to answer every need that human beings have.* In order to discover this full Christ, we must be willing to be taken into the heart of the problem—the blackness of human sinfulness.

One of the main reasons the gospel is not understood today is that much of what passes for the gospel addresses men and women's *felt* needs instead of their real need. Listen to what author J.I. Packer has to say about this:

We have all heard the

gospel presented as God's triumphant answer to human problems—problems of our relation with ourselves and our fellow humans and their environment. Well, there is no doubt that the gospel does bring us solutions to these problems, but it does so by first solving a deeper problem—the deepest of all human problems, the problem of man's relation with his Maker. And unless we make it plain that the solution of these former problems depends on the settling of this latter one, we are misrepresenting the message and becoming false witnesses of God—for a half-truth presented as if it were the whole truth becomes

something of a falsehood by that very fact. No reader of the New Testament can miss the fact that it knows all about our human problems—fear, moral cowardice, illness of body and mind, loneliness, insecurity, hopelessness, despair, cruelty, abuse of power and the rest—but equally no reader of the New Testament can miss the fact that it resolves all these problems, one way or another, into the fundamental problem of sin against God.

Knowing God J.I. Packer, pg. 189-190

In other words, the problem with human beings is not that they drink or smoke (which are symptoms), but rather, are part of a race called *Adam*. The entire race is in rebellion to its Creator. This is what the apostle Paul

in the second half of chapter 5 of the Roman epistle teaches—that our connection to our federal head *Adam* is the root of our problems. In theology, federal headship is one theory used to explain *imputation*; how Adam's sin was imputed to all of his descendants and Christ's righteousness to those who believe the Gospel. Since the problem is we were born under a federal head who rebelled, the only way to get out of that is through death. But can the believer cause his or her own death? No; at conversion we are severed from the old Adam and born into a new race, Christ. Paul unfolds how the believer now shares in the death of Christ by which he is severed forever from Adam in the next chapter (Romans 6).

As I write, my local church is about

to embark on a sermon series teaching through Romans on Sunday mornings. Every church would do well to spend considerable time studying and preaching through this book if they want to ensure they're 'getting the gospel right.'

Letting the Gospel In

By '*letting the Gospel in*' we refer to the inevitable transformation which results from properly understanding the Gospel. It is impossible for someone to truly believe the Gospel and not be transformed by it. That does not mean that a person's entire life is changed immediately (although there are people in Church History like the apostle Paul who were utterly transformed at conversion). Sanctification is a process in which a person slowly begins to be

transformed into the image of Christ. Nevertheless, a person begins to take on the image of Christ if truly converted.

The word 'letting' suggests that sanctification is *synergistic*, both a divine and human work. It is included in those things that occurred at our conversion (I Corinthians 6:11). But the New Testament also clearly teaches that sanctification is a process requiring our fullest cooperation. I once heard a pastor make the statement, "If we want our gospel to go out of us in power, then it first must come into us in power."

As we believe the gospel, it releases the power of God in our lives so that we slowly conform to the image of the Son. We saw this previously in the account of the commissioning of Isaiah

in the sixth chapter of his book. When the vision of the holiness of God came into view, Isaiah was deeply convicted of his sin.

Yet God atoned for his sin by taking a blood-drenched coal and applying it to his lips (the root of his sinfulness). Isaiah was forgiven of his iniquity through atoning love (Isaiah 6:6-8). That blood drenched coal is a perfect type and shadow of what later the New Testament makes plain; nothing but the blood of Jesus can take away sin.

But such redeeming love is costly as the Psalmist reminds us of:

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

Psalm 130:3-4

If we want our *Gospel* to GO OUT of us in POWER, then it FIRST must *come into us* in POWER.

If God held our sins against us there is no one who could stand. But the Psalmist says that He is a forgiving God even as the prophet Micah says:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.

Micah 7:18

While this forgiveness is free, rooted in the nature of God Himself, it is not free in the sense that we can accept it without it affecting our lives. Bible teacher Bob Mumford tells of a dream he had many years ago where he was in a spiritual grocery store. As he pushed his cart through the store, he was taking the groceries off the shelves and loading them in his cart. The shelves were filled with various things such as the blessings of God, the promises and the gifts of the Spirit and other spiritual riches. After filling his cart with as much as he could hold, he was heading for the exit when he heard a voice say, "Wait a minute; you haven't paid for all this." When he asked how much it would cost the voice said, "Everything."

The phrase *'letting the Gospel in'*

implies we must fully cooperate with the process of sanctification. When we are saved, we are immediately delivered from the *penalty* of sin which means we are no longer under the wrath of God (Romans 5:1-11). The result is we immediately have peace *with* God (although we may not yet have the *peace of* God, 5:1). Peace with God is the incredible gift of knowing that the work of Jesus fully appeased His Father's wrath. But then the real work begins. Slowly, and at times imperceptibly, he begins to deliver us from the *power* of sin. This is the work of sanctification whereby sin gradually loses its grip on us. This process is never completed until the coming of the Lord when we will actually be delivered from the *presence* of sin forever.

Peace with God is the *incredible* GIFT of *KNOWING* that the WORK of Jesus *fully* appeased His Father's wrath.

The process is painful, involving frequent repentance and confession of sin. But we can cooperate with it because “sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). Sin's power has been broken by the work of Jesus on Calvary and we should notice a decreasing of its power practically in our lives.

I grew up in a church with a heavy emphasis on sanctification, with little focus at all on the grace of God. It was

simply a matter of will-power as to whether or not one lived a sanctified life. That meant that the strong-willed in our church had an advantage when it came to living the Christian life. But that is a distortion of the gospel. The ability to live the Christian life properly is not a by-product of being strong-willed but is deeply rooted in our dependence on the grace of the Gospel which alone makes sanctification possible.

Getting the Gospel Out

After Isaiah was purged from his sin by having a blood-drenched coal applied to his lips, he overheard the voice of the Lord (Isaiah 6:8). Many writers and Bible teachers have pointed out that this wasn't a typical commissioning of a prophet in that the Lord did not speak directly to Isaiah.

He overheard the voice of the Lord and immediately responded. His soul was now so broken by the vision of the Holy One and the sight of his own sin that he could overhear the pleading heart of God asking, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* Isaiah immediately responded by saying, *“Here am I; send me.”*

That is the cry of all those who properly understand the gospel and have been transformed by its power. God has entrusted the gospel to every believer so they might share it with others. While there are specialized vessels whom God calls to spread his word such as the apostle Paul and Philip the Evangelist, everyone is called to cooperate with the Lord of the harvest in reaping a harvest of souls. Every believer should know the joy of

sowing and reaping (see Psalm 126:6).

A number of years ago, I attended a prayer meeting where many were gathered to pray for revival. The focus was primarily on the harvest that would follow such a move of God. My Bible was open on my lap and as fervent prayer for harvest ascended to God, my eyes fell on these words: *“the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest”* (Matthew 9:37-38). Instantaneously, I believe I heard the Lord say to me, “They’re praying amiss; I didn’t tell them to pray for harvest, but for workers I can send into the harvest.”

For years I assumed that the Greek word translated by the English word

send in the text (“pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to *send* out laborers into his harvest”) was *apostolos* from which the word apostle (‘a sent one’) is derived. After all, the Lord spoke this to the disciples which undoubtedly included the twelve apostles of the Lamb who would later be sent out to a worldwide ministry. So, I never bothered to look up the word, assuming that it was the basic word for *send*. How surprised I was one day when I did look it up and discovered it was not *apostolos* but *ekballo*—the word used throughout the New Testament for casting out demons!

What do laborers in the harvest share in common with demons? They both resist leaving and must be compelled to come out. By using this word, Jesus is saying that the same is

true of workers in the harvest—they must be ‘cast out’ to cooperate with the Lord of the harvest. The tendency of laborers is to want to hide in the church.

A good example of how God gets workers to go into the harvest fields can be seen by observing how a mother eagle teaches her young eaglets to fly. She actually begins to tear up the nest and forcing them out on her wings, suddenly drops them until they learn to use their wings on their own. Up until then, they lived a secure life in the nest. But an eagle was not meant to spend its days in that comfortable environment of a warm nest. Rather, they were made to soar in the heavens, catching the winds which lifts them far above the earth. So, it is with laborers in the harvest. They were not called to

spend their days in the warm confines of the local church, but to be sent on the mission of reaping the harvest.

It's About the Mission

In the Message paraphrase, John 17:18 reads, *“In the same way the Father gave me a mission in the world, I give you a mission in the world”* (John 17:18, The Message). Behind that statement is the idea behind the word *apostle* in the New Testament. Jesus was the first Apostle, the Sent One from the Father. The ministry of Jesus was about accomplishing his Father's *mission*. All during his earthly ministry he spoke about his mission:

- In the synagogue at Nazareth he said, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon*

me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of God's favor”

- In dealing with his disciple's pride he said, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”*
- When Zacchaeus' repented after Jesus had gone to his house he said, *“For the Son of Man came to seek and save that which is lost”*

That mission consumed our Lord during his ministry; it was the passion of His life.

He came to bring the kingdom of God and eventually gave his lifeblood to make it happen. Gene Wilkes, in his book *Jesus on Leadership*, gives what may be the best definition of leadership I've ever read: "*Leadership begins when a God-called person becomes consumed with a mission.*" That statement was never truer than in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. No matter what he was doing at the time, no matter the demands made on Him, he never departed from his mission. At times in his ministry while headed to a particular place, He suddenly went in a different direction. Others saw it as an interruption, but He saw it as part of his mission.

What is amazing about this is that Jesus now invites the Church to

continue the mission. "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19). In the same way that mission consumed Him, so the Father intends for disciples to be consumed with the mission.

Notice his words: *Follow Me...* not just go to church, be religious, do Christian things, but pattern your entire life after Me. Christianity is primarily *Christological*, which means that God has called us to really follow the Son of God so that our entire lives are patterned after Him. There is an enormous difference between Christological and Christendom. What's the difference? Christendom says 'What God is really interested in is how well you perform on Sunday' while Christological means people are really

following Jesus and patterning their lives after Him. 'Follow Me' is more than having religious experiences. It means we are fully dedicated to following a Person.

...*And I will make you.* Why does he have to make us into something? Because we are too selfish to care about others, so he has to radically change us by his grace. His promise is that if we follow him, we will be utterly changed. It is not something that happens because we *will* it to happen, but by a miracle of grace. His promise is that if we follow him, he will utterly transform us.

What will he change us to be? Respectable? Religious? Moral? No; He says if we follow Him, he will make

us *fishermen*. In other words, when he finishes with us the same passion which consumed Jesus for the mission will consume us. Alan Hirsch in his book *Shaping of Things to Come*, reminds us that when Jesus said he would make them fishers of men we should not think of fishing in terms of how we do it in the West—a single fisherman with his pole in the water reading the *New York Times*. Huge nets dragged through the sea in Jesus' day. It was a very violent and messy process. When they pulled the nets up, they not only had fish but probably a lot of other things as well (which goes along with my translation of the statement, "You are the light of the world; a city set on a hill cannot be hidden" as "a city set on a hill attracts all kinds of weird insects").

Summing it Up

When we think about learning the Gospel, we must do so on three levels— ‘getting the Gospel right’, ‘letting the Gospel in’ and ‘getting the Gospel out.’ First, we must be educated in the theology of the gospel, the so-called ‘doctrines of grace. Theology proper is the study of God, so it starts with having a proper vision of God. But seeing God as He is always leading to a second vision; a *vision of ourselves as we are*. That is how we let the gospel *in*.

Finally, that leads to our ‘getting the gospel *out*.’ Everyone gets to participate in this privilege since God has made everyone a missionary. While there are definitely specialists when

it comes to evangelism (evangelists and missionaries), everyone should be asking for God to continuously open a “door for the word” (Colossians 4:3).

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