

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

written by Bob DeWaay

“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void. For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1Corinthians 1:17,18)

The Meaning of the Gospel

The word “gospel” is familiar to most people in America, but its meaning is confused or obscure for many. Some equate “gospel” with television hucksters whose ulterior motives are quite transparent, causing many to disregard the message. For others the gospel has to do with church liturgy or sacraments. It is considered a fundamentalist buzz word by many, warning them to avoid those who use it (i.e. “fundamentalist Bible thumper at hand, head for cover”). For some the gospel of Jesus Christ is so important that they would lay down their lives for it.

Our concern is what the Biblical writers meant by their use of the word “Gospel.” In the passage quoted above, Paul uses a synonymous phrase to show what he meant by “gospel.” The gospel is “the word of the cross” that saves people through the power of God. The Greek word Paul uses is the basis for the English word “to evangelize.” The “evangel” (gospel) is the proclamation of good news that in the New Testament particularly concerns the person and work of Jesus Christ. Hearing this proclamation and responding in faith brings a powerful salvation that changes lives now and changes the eternal destiny of those who hear, believe, and repent. They are to abide in relationship with the One who is the subject of the message.

The Message of the Gospel

Paul said that Christ did not send him, “To baptize, but to preach the gospel.” In 1Corinthians 1:14 he stated, “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius.” There are many today, because of the influence of certain denominational teachings, who think that the act of baptism saves them. This is true for some who practice infant baptism and some who baptize only adults. If the act of water baptism saved, it is strange that Paul stated that he was not sent to baptize and that he was thankful he had not baptized more of the Corinthians than he had (because they would have wrongly attached significance to **who** baptized them rather than their relationship to Christ). This aspect of the Corinthian error survives today in those who, asked about their salvation, state, “I was baptized . . .” (fill in the denomination). Asked about the personal significance of the message of the cross in their lives, some who were thus baptized have only a puzzled look. They have never heard or understood what the cross of Christ means and what demands it places upon those who believe in Christ.

Paul's message was the cross. The cross as used by Paul in these passages has reference to the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. This cornerstone of redemptive history that took place before credible witnesses holds the whole human race in account before God. That God Incarnate, the Jewish Messiah who lived a sinless life and demonstrated His deity through many miraculous works, was crucified and raised bodily from the dead is the gospel that must be believed if our sins are to be forgiven and our lives changed. The “cross” as used in this sense is a literary device called “metonymy.” This means that a part or

something associated with a greater whole is used to designate it. For example, we hear on the news that “the White House announced a new aid package for Russia.” We do not understand this to mean that the literal building in which the president resides made the announcement. It does not necessarily mean that the president himself made the announcement (often an official spokesperson does this). It means that the presidency, the executive branch of the American government headed by an elected president, in its official capacity announced its policy.

In this sense, the “cross” stands for the whole redemptive event that is central to the Christian message, including the person of Christ whose life, death and resurrection provide the meaning and legal authority to the message. This is the gospel. Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon states under the entry for *euangelion* (gospel):

After the death of Christ the term *euangelion* comprises also the preaching of (concerning) Jesus Christ as having suffered death on the cross to procure eternal salvation for men in the kingdom of God, but as restored to life and exalted to the right hand of God in heaven, thence to return in majesty to consummate the kingdom of God; so that it may be more briefly defined as *the glad tidings of salvation through Christ; the proclamation of the grace of God manifested and pledged in Christ.*¹

“Cross” in its most narrow sense could mean the wooden instrument of death upon which Christ died. Clearly Paul has more than the wooden object in mind when he writes about the message of the cross that is the power of God for salvation. “But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14). The effects of the cross in the apostle's life altered his relationship to the world. It changed the meaning and purpose of his life. He could say “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

The Power of the Gospel

Those who believe upon Christ and accept the “scandal” of a crucified Messiah can know that they have eternal life. “But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (**1Corinthians 1:23,24**). The crucifixion of Christ (Messiah) was a scandal or “stumbling block” to the Jews because of their expectation that He would deliver Israel nationally from Roman oppression and restore autonomy and prosperity to the nation. “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him” (**Matthew 27:42**). These words that were hurled at Jesus as He was dying for our sins show this attitude. Messiah was rejected because of the cross.

The Bible teaches that for us to be “saved” (in the eternal and spiritual sense of the word) we must believe the message of the cross. “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (**1Corinthians 2:2**). The cross is not optional.

Paul said that the cross was “foolishness” to the Greeks. In their “wisdom” the brilliant thinkers of the day considered the gospel to be too foolish to be taken seriously. Paul preached to some Greek philosophers in Athens on Mars hill where they gathered to debate the Greek philosophies of the age (**Acts 17:16-32**). Represented there were Epicureans and Stoics (verse 18). These philosophies (as others have said) roughly represent two of the more prevalent philosophies popular in America. The Epicureans were hedonists (believing that pleasure is the primary value in life) and secularists who had little time for spiritual matters. This is similar to secular humanism in America. The Stoics were more spiritually oriented but were pantheistic. They did not make the distinction between the Creator and the creation that Biblical Christianity and Judaism make. In this case God is

somehow everything and we are all by nature a part of God. This is very similar to the New Age and Unity philosophies popular in America.

Paul preached to these philosophers a unique, Creator God who is above all things. He concluded his message: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (**Acts 17:30,31**). This message of the resurrection of Christ (**Acts 17:18** says that he “was preaching Jesus and the resurrection”) caused the Greek philosophers to “sneer” (**Acts 17:32**), though some believed.

The message of the cross receives the same response today. It is ridiculed, mocked and rejected. Yet, those who believe that Christ, the only-begotten (unique, only one of His kind) Son of God, was crucified for their sins and raised from the dead are saved and transformed by the power of God. **Romans 1:16**, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Paul said this concerning his eagerness to preach in Rome, the contemporary capital of power and prestige. No matter how foolish or ridiculed this message may be, it is the only real “power” that can change people’s lives and eternal destinies. We should not be ashamed of it either.

The Effect of the Gospel

The message of the cross has a transforming effect on the lives of those who embrace it. “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’” (**Matthew 16:24**). The cross is not just a piece of wood or a gold-plated religious symbol, it is an instrument of death. It is like the hangman’s noose or the electric chair in modern times. To believe in the message of the cross is to accept God’s judgment upon sin (death) and

God’s mercy upon sinners. Christ died for us that we might live. Yet to live in Christ is to live for Christ. The cross that we must “take up” to follow Christ is our willingness to die to our old way of life. Christ linked our cross bearing with self denial. This does not mean giving up a couple of things for Lent!

“And He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (**2Corinthians 5:15**). This passage shows that we all were in one way or another living for ourselves. This means that we were going our own way and doing our own thing as it seemed good in our own eyes. To embrace the cross of Christ, to “take up one’s cross,” is to have a radical change in purpose. We change from living for ourselves to living for Christ. We find joy, hope, purpose, fulfillment, and meaning in life through our relationship with Christ as our Lord. Outwardly, some things change, others may not. Repentance means giving up rebellion against God’s revealed will. Other things that are necessary and good, yet conceivably done for self rather than Christ, are now viewed differently. We still eat, work, sleep, and love our families, but we do these things thankfully and by His grace.

The Response of the Gospel

Mark begins his Gospel with the following introductory statement, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (**Mark 1:1**). That the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ makes a claim upon the lives of the hearers is shown in the following passage: “And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (**Mark 1:14,15**). The Gospel calls for a response. Repentance (a change of thinking and direction) and faith are the responses to the Gospel that Jesus called for. This is true for all who hear the message throughout the age. After His resurrection Jesus instructed the disciples, “. . . that repentance for

forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

The gospel without repentance is lacking an essential element and is therefore a deficient message. **The Good News requires a response.** One cannot be neutral about Jesus the Messiah. Some say, “I never rejected Christ so I do not need to accept Him.” The Biblical message is that we rejected Christ by putting ourselves in His place, as lords of our lives.

Sin is any missing of God's mark or standard for our lives. Every one of us has the need to repent and turn in faith to Christ. Jesus did not say “preach repentance unless you are speaking to people who never rejected Me.” He commanded this message to be preached to all. In ourselves, outside of faith in Christ, we did not honor Him as the Creator He is (John 1:3 & Colossians 1:16). We did not confess His as the Lord that He is, “. . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9). Repentance is to begin to worship and honor God by responding to Jesus Christ, the second person of the trinity, in faith and obedience.

The Uniqueness of the Gospel

A major error that is prevalent in people's thinking about Christ is not that He never existed, or that He was not a great man of God, but that He is not unique. The New Age teaching (borrowed from Hinduism) is that the “christ spirit” was in Jesus, but also in many other great “avatars.” Ultimately these are not unique either, just more advanced than the rest of us. Supposedly we can all come to the realization that we are the christ. Some who do not go this far will say that there are many ways to God and that Jesus was merely a way to God (contrary to John 14:6 where Jesus claimed to be **the only way** to the Father).

The Bible teaches the deity and humanity of Christ (John 1:1-18). Jesus, who existed with God and as God from

all eternity, was born of a Virgin, lived a sinless life, died and was bodily raised from the dead and ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father in glory and authority. All of these facts about Him make Him unique. God chose to reveal Himself to us and speak to us with final authority (Hebrews 1:1,2) through the incarnate Christ. If these Biblically asserted truths are believed, then it is not unreasonable to accept also Christ's exclusive claim of being the only Savior of humankind. One cannot believe either the Bible or the traditional creeds of the church that are based on it and simultaneously reject the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel.

“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It is only reasonable that the Creator God should decide the means whereby people should come to Him. Why should it seem reasonable to us that the creature should be able to reject the Creator's revealed will on this matter and choose his own way to God?

Some confuse the uniqueness of the Gospel with a distorted notion of exclusivity. God always intended His salvation to be **inclusive**. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God reveals His plan to **include** all the nations. God said to Abraham, “. . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3b). God chose Abraham to be the progenitor of the special people, the Hebrews, who would not exclusively obtain salvation, but would be the means of bringing salvation to all who would believe. God repeated this promise to Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 26:4 & Genesis 28:14). Even under the Old Covenant the Jews were commanded to include the alien who came to join with them (Deuteronomy 10:19). The story of Ruth the beloved alien shows this theme. The Old Testament predicted that Messiah would bring the nations into God's plan of blessing when He came.

The New Testament message is not designed to **exclude**, but to **include**. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Jesus com-

manded that the gospel be preached to all nations. Paul said, “For there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11).

Whatever one believes about election and predestination, clearly the gospel is to be preached to all, making the invitation to repentance and faith for salvation clear. Those who do not respond are (for whatever reason) doing exactly what they want to do in rejecting the offer. No one can claim that they heard the gospel, truly desired to confess Christ as Lord and serve Him by God's grace, but was rejected and excluded by God. This is simply not the case. The Bible ends with an invitation, “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (Revelation 22:17).

The exclusivity to which people object is usually that Christ is the only way to eternal fellowship with God. This is true, but this **only way to God** is a way that is **open** to all, regardless of nationality, gender, economic status, or religious background. However, it is required that we confess Him as Lord and be willing to live according to His purpose and plan for our life. If our objection is that the only way to God that the Bible reveals is unpleasant because it requires us to do things differently than we would like to do them, it is not a valid objection. We cannot demand a way of salvation that requires God to relinquish His sovereign right to rule over His own creation and turn it over to us. Such a “salvation” would be no more than putting us back into the autonomous “hell” we are already in, replete with despots and tyrants. People often do not clearly contemplate the ramifications of what they think God should do if He were to be fair. God's plan of salvation is wiser than any conceived by the rulers of this world. Paul wrote of this in 1Corinthians 1 & 2. The “foolish” message of a crucified Messiah is God's wisdom revealed.

The Faith of the Gospel

A key aspect of one's response to the Gospel is the willingness to believe. Romans 10 states this:

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"-- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. **(Romans 10:8-10)**

Faith in Christ (including the historical fact of His resurrection from the dead) along with the willingness to confess His Lordship is necessary for salvation. Confessing His Lordship shows repentance since, as we have already seen, we previously lived for ourselves, as our own "lords." It is reasonable to assume that this confession must be legitimate - that the one making it is in fact willing for Christ to be the Lord of his life.

It is not that certain utterances are magically able to save, or else people would be saved by uttering the apostles creed with no intent to live with sincere faith in Christ as the resurrected Lord and legitimate authority in their lives. Cultists who blatantly deny the deity of Christ will utter the phrase "Jesus is Lord." The utterance is not efficient for salvation if a belief in one's heart of the Biblical claims about Jesus as Lord and Messiah is absent.

Faith as used by the New Testament is not "blind faith" as some understand it. The Bible is not requiring that we believe that which never happened and is not historically true in order to be saved. Paul makes this clear in **1Corinthians 15:**

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five

hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. **(1Corinthians 15:1-8)**

This is the content of "the faith" that is asserted to be the truth. It is not merely a religious myth existing only in the minds of believers. We are asked to believe the truth, not lies and falsehoods that are alien to the nature of God who cannot lie.

The Gospel would not be good news if its claims were false. Paul openly states that if the claim of the historical resurrection of Christ from the dead was false, then the gospel would have only vanity (futility) to offer.

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.

(1Corinthians 15:14-17)

Yes, there is such a thing as "worthless faith." It is faith in falsehood.

Faith that is subjective only and has no real, objective content is worthless, futile, and miserable.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ says that God Incarnate, the second person of the trinity, died a substitutionary death and was raised bodily from the grave. The "scandal" of a crucified Messiah is God's wisdom revealed that calls everyone to faith and repentance leading to eternal life. Jesus Christ is our Creator and by divine nature and by the appointment of the Father is Lord. To confess Him as such is not to make Him something that He was not already, but to submit to that Lordship that was always rightfully His.

To do so is to find the promised blessing of Abraham that extends to the nations through his seed (Messiah). God has invited you to participate in His plan of blessing and eternal benefit. Turn to Christ in faith if you have not

already and confess Him as your Lord. This is the way the "good news" of the gospel becomes a reality in your life. Do not let Easter after Easter go by merely enjoying the family holiday without personally knowing the One who was raised for your salvation.

End Note

1. Joseph H. Thayer, Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) p. 257.

Written by Bob DeWaay, Twin City Fellowship, P.O. Box 8068, Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1993.

Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

www.twincityfellowship.com/cic