



The Demise of Gospel Preaching in Modern Evangelicalism Part 2

By Bob DeWaay

People do not come with a built in knowledge of who Jesus is, what He did, why they need Him, and what He expects from them. In the previous article we examined the person and work of Christ. Now we shall look at what the sinner needs to know about God's law and the need for repentance.

Preaching Repentance

The term "repent" means more than merely changing one's mind. Some assert that to repent is no more than to change one's mind, based on the word's etymology. But context, not etymology, shows the author's meaning.^[i] The Biblical idea of repentance is to turn from serving self to serving God. Repentance in the New Testament has to do with conversion.^[ii] Paul's concept of what true repentance looks like is shown in his description of the effects of the Gospel in the Thessalonian Christians:

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1Thessalonians 1:8-10)

Conversion is turning to God from idols. The self is the universal idol of fallen man. To repent is to be converted.

Some accuse those of us who teach the necessity of repentance of teaching salvation by works. Nothing could be further from the truth. By preaching the gospel and including a call for repentance, we are appealing to the need for grace, not to human ability. The New Testament sees repentance as something God grants:

And the Lord's bond_servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (2Timothy 2:24-26)

Preaching human guilt before God's holy law shows people their need for the gospel. By including the preaching of repentance, we show the sinner his utter need for God's grace. One must be fully converted, turned around completely - made to serve God rather than self and the world. Preaching anything less than this gives the sinner hope for self-improvement through works. Preaching the whole demand of God's righteousness shows that outside of God's gracious provision through the gospel we are all hopeless sinners. Preaching repentance is central to the message of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus preached repentance: “*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). When the gospel spread to the Gentiles, here is how the apostles responded: “*And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’*” (Acts 11:18). It is obvious that the gospel is not “self-help.” God “grants” repentance, but through His ordained means - the preaching of the gospel. Preachers who do not make the gospel clear and do not preach repentance are not preaching for conversions. They may be preaching to get people interested in joining a church, or being religious, but the idea of a radical conversion that turns a hell-bound sinner totally around to being a heaven-bound saint is absent in many supposedly evangelical churches.

What is amazing about the resistance to preaching repentance in order to convert sinners through the gospel is the fact that preaching repentance is included in the Great Commission: “*He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem’*” (Luke 24:46, 47). C.F.W. Walther comments on this section of Luke:

Why is repentance required as well as faith? Our Lord gives the reason in these words: “*They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick . . . I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.*” Matt. 9:12, 13. With these words the Lord testifies that the reason why contrition is absolutely necessary is that without it no one is fit to be made a believer. He is surfeited and spurns the invitation to the heavenly marriage feast.^[iii]

If the need for repentance is never placed before the perishing, we do a disservice to the gospel and the Great Commission. Walther also asserts that repentance is not the cause of forgiveness, but is what happens when the Law shows the sinner the need for forgiveness. God graciously opens one’s eyes to this need. Walther writes, “As long as a person has not been reduced to the state of a poor, lost, and condemned sinner, he has no serious interest in the Savior of sinners.”^[iv] Forgiveness is received by faith.

I see repentance and faith as two aspects of the same conversion experience. Repentance is turning from self to God. It emphasizes the turning away from our previous sin of trusting self. Faith is trusting God through the gospel for our salvation. The whole of conversion is granted by God’s grace and is not a meritorious human work. John MacArthur explains:

Conversion occurs when a sinner turns to God in repentant faith. It is a complete turnaround, an absolute change of moral and volitional direction. Such a radical reversal is the response the gospel calls for, whether the plea to sinners is phrased as “believe,” “repent,” or “be converted.” Each entails the others.^[v]

Repentance cannot be taken out of gospel preaching without changing the idea of what it means to come to Christ. Without repentance we are just adding Christ to the self we intend to continue serving.

The Failure to Preach God's Law

Paul wrote three chapters of Romans about man's failure before God's law before he explained the doctrine of justification. He obviously thought that sinners needed to know the true nature of their lost and fallen condition. Sinners need to know what it means to be lost, and that one day they shall face the holy and righteous Judge. They need to know clearly that they have disobeyed God's law and desperately need a savior. Those who preach the law and the gospel are preaching for conversions, not just religious followers.

Evangelist Ray Comfort interviews people he is preaching to and finds that the vast majority do not believe they are sinners heading for hell.^[vi] Comfort points out that when we tell sinners, "come to Jesus and have a better life" we are likely to create disillusionment. He calls this "life enhancement" preaching. I call it "better living through Jesus." Whatever it is, it is **not** the gospel. The gospel is "good news," not "nice news." The "nice news" approach offers the possibility of things going better in this life if one becomes religious. The good news is that hopelessly lost, hell-bound, sinners can be saved from the wrath of God through the finished work of Christ on the cross. All this is a gift of grace, received by faith.

The sad fact is that few who hear Christian preachers on radio and TV ever hear the gospel. We evidently have millions of dollars to spend putting out Christian material, but very little time to use these resources for gospel preaching. This statement sometimes shocks people. You can see for yourself if this is true. Turn on a Christian TV network like TBN, and listen. Check out the Angel Network on satellite TV. Take my challenge. Listen to the preachers. Count how many times you hear the gospel preached, if ever at all. I have done this myself and rarely have heard the gospel even after dozens of hours of listening. The demise of gospel preaching is not just a melodramatic statement: it is the sad, harsh reality.

The Christian media most people see and hear is not the gospel. The preachers mention Jesus, but they do not tell us who He is or what He did. They preach about better living, but never tell us how to escape God's wrath against sin. They rarely explain the cross and its implications. They preach a morality of sorts, a Christian morality of works righteousness that is not derived from God's grace. The implication is that we can be better people than those around us by being Christian. But this is more the preaching of a Christian culture than a gathering of redeemed sinners whose only hope is in Christ and His cross.

The Humanistic Gospel

At the heart of the demise of gospel preaching is what may have begun as a subtle shift. In Jonathan Edward's day, evangelical preachers preached for conversions. They believed the lost were truly lost and powerless to do anything about their wretched condition. The only hope was the grace of God through the gospel to convert sinners. The nineteenth century marked a major turning point in American evangelicalism. The

turning point is epitomized by Finney's "new measures."^[vii] Because Finney believed in human ability (as Edwards did not), Finney preached to "arouse dormant powers."^[viii] From Finney's day on evangelism changed and has continued to change. We have gone from belief in conversions through gospel preaching to "decisions for Jesus." This seemingly subtle shift is actually a major chasm that is as deep and wide as the chasm between heaven and hell.

If this shocks some people that may be what is needed. I have recently attended several evangelistic functions. In each case I did not hear the gospel. I heard stories about people who had made decisions for Jesus and now had better lives. Who Jesus is, was never explained. Why do we need Jesus? - To find meaning in life that we are now missing. We did not hear about the resurrection. We did not hear about the blood atonement. We did not hear the demands of the Law or the promise of the gospel. But every one there was given an opportunity to make a decision for Jesus.

I do not say this to criticize the motives of those who organize such events or many others who approach evangelism the same way. I know many of these people and believe that they truly love God and want to reach the lost. However, well-motivated or not, there is a huge difference between the gospel as preached by Jesus and His apostles and the idea of "making a decision for Jesus." Some are converted through the efforts of such evangelicals. If somewhere, somehow, buried under the many layers of activities and evangelical culture, those who get involved eventually do find out who Jesus is, what His claims are, and their need for the blood atonement, they may indeed be converted. But why should the conversion of sinners be pushed to the background so that a slick, user-friendly Christianity is all that is apparent to most observers?

In part 3 of this series we will examine several false conceptions that many evangelicals have believed that have seriously damaged the integrity of gospel preaching. These include decision theology and the perceived need to make God and His message look attractive to the world.

[i] See John F. MacArthur, Jr. *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1994) 38.

[ii]. see Theological Dictionary of the New Testament; G. Kittle ed.; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1967) s.v. metano'o_ 1000 - 1006. It is argued that the idea is conversion, which is a radical, once for all change that is caused by God's grace.

[iii]. C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, (Concordia: St. Louis, 1986) 249. Originally published 1897. Walther is the founder of the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church.

[iv]. Ibid.

[v]. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, 33, 34.

[vi]. Ray Comfort, *Hell's Best Kept Secret*, video; available at: <http://www.crosstv.com>
Look for video # wp0017.

[vii]. see CIC issue # 53, July/August 1999.

[viii]. Finney wrote: "There must be excitement sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers, and roll back the tide of degradation and sin." *Lectures on Revival, Lecture 1, 8*. Ages Software, CD ROM (Ages Software: Rio, Wisc.; 2001). After writing this Finney goes on to claim that revival is not a miracle or act of God, but the right use of means. Here is what he says: "A revival is not a miracle according to another definition of the term "miracle" — something above the powers of nature. There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else." Page 9.

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