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IT IS GOSPEL

“If it bleeds it leads. What I really want, though, is some *good* news.” “No news is good news.” “What a relief. Finally, some good news.”

In this world we are so inundated by hearing about disasters, wars and rumors of wars, dirty politics, and crime that we crave good news. It has gotten to where some of the broadcast networks always close with a “human interest” story so that their audience feels that they at least got a little good news.

On the other hand, we have made the word “gospel” mean something it was never intended to mean. We speak of something being the “gospel truth,” as if that justifies spreading bad news just because it is the truth. There was a musical that premiered in 1971, based mostly on the parables in Matthew and Luke, whose title was “Godspell.” Some people thought that was an intentional misspelling or even a satire on the word “gospel.” Actually, that is the word which time has shortened to gospel. It is an Old English (OE) word that breaks down to mean good (god in OE) and news (spell, similar to German *spiel*). While the gospel is truth, Paul says it is a specific truth.

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. (1 Cor 15:1-8)

It is a specific truth. But Paul says it is a specific truth which contains three elements. Those three elements that comprise the gospel are of supreme importance. Without the gospel there is no salvation from sin.

Christ died for our sins

Whether or not one believes the gospel, there is no disputing that the death of Jesus was a pivotal event in human history. It ultimately led to the transformation of the Roman Empire. From there it is essentially the history of Europe and post-European Americas. Nevertheless, Paul says it is more than just a pivotal event in history. That Jesus became the touchstone for a sociopolitical movement is meaningless. That Christ died for our sins is of supreme importance.

Many people portray Jesus, even if they accept that he is the Messiah/Christ, as a great teacher. They fail to recognize that Jesus never taught anything new. Everything he taught had been taught before. Even the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is riddled with the formula, “You have heard it said ..., but I tell you” And what he then said was an explanation of what the Law of Moses had actually said before the traditions of men had changed it. He was a great teacher, but that is not his importance.

Others point to the miracles, particularly the healings, and say that Jesus was important because of what he did for the people of his day. They propose that to be followers of Jesus simply means doing good for others. They fail to realize that if the miracles were the important thing about Jesus, then his importance died with him. Once he was dead, or even resurrected and ascended, he no longer directly performed miracles. His purpose had to be much more than the social-altruistic.

Paul says the importance of Jesus, more than the teaching and the miracles, was that he died for our sins.

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IT IS GOSPEL (CONT.)

Teaching people how to live is meaningless if their good lives are marred by unforgiven sin. Even in one of his miracles Jesus healed by saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” (Matt 9:2; Mk 2:5; Lk 5:20) The importance of the Christ, his whole reason for existence on earth, was the act of his death. “For this cause came I unto this hour.” (Jn 12:27)

The writer of Hebrews spends two chapters (by our division of the writing) proving that Jesus was a superior sacrifice because “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.” (Heb 10:4) Ultimately, sin required the blood sacrifice of a sinless person; and Jesus was the only one who qualified.

The gospel, or at least one part of it, is that we can be forgiven of sin. Furthermore, this sin-remitting death was “according to the scriptures.” It was not an afterthought. God did not give the Law of Moses to the Jewish people as an experiment, and when it failed he had to come up with something else. Everything in Torah and the prophets points to the death of the Christ for sin.

Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall

Jesus not only predicted his resurrection, but also the timing of it.

prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa 53:10-12)

Buried and Rose Again

Some might consider this two elements of Paul’s gospel. In reality it is one element made up of two parts. The burial is meaningless without the resurrection, and the resurrection is impossible without the burial. They are inextricably tied together.

Many people have died and been buried. That is no big deal. A few have been died and were raised back to life. Examples include: the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17); the son of the widow of Shunem (2 Kings 4); the daughter of Jairus (Lk 8); the son of the widow of

Nain (Lk 7); Tabitha Dorcas (Acts 9); and Eutychus (Acts 20). One was even buried and raised from the dead—Lazarus of Bethany (John 11). All of these, though, were returned to life through the actions and prayers of an outside, human influence, such as a prophet, Jesus, or an apostle.

The burial and resurrection of Jesus is an important part of the gospel because it was different than all of these. Only he was raised without human intervention. People may argue for a lifetime about whether he raised himself or was raised by God. That doesn’t matter. The important thing was that he was buried and rose again through no other agency.

More importantly, he “rose again the third day according to the scriptures.” None of these other people could predict the date of their return to life. None of them even had an inkling that they would return to life. Jesus, however, not only predicted his resurrection, but also the timing of it.

And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. (Matt 17:22-23)

Then he took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: And they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again. And they understood none of these things. (Lk 18:31-34)

That Jesus predicted that he would be raised on the third day seems to have been common knowledge. Even the priests of the Jews knew of this prediction.

Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. (Matt 27:62-64)

Some have wondered what scriptures (in what we call the Old Testament) predict the three days. Jesus himself answers that. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matt 12:40) Few among the Jewish people consider this a prophecy of Messiah, but Jesus clearly did. Apparently so did those who heard him, including the Pharisees.

The burial and resurrection are an important aspect of the gospel for at least two reasons. First, the resurrection affirms the validity of the death. Without it, Jesus is just any other man although perhaps a prophet, as the Muslims believe. By the resurrection he establishes himself as the son of God. (Rom 1:4) Second, he establishes for us a glorious hope. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3)

That is where most people end with the gospel. “The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” But that is not where Paul stops.

He was seen

Paul says that part of the gospel is that there were witnesses to the resurrection. It would stand up in court.

Remember the passage quoted earlier from Matthew 27. The chief priests and Pharisees wanted the tomb sealed so that the disciples would not steal the body and pretend he rose from the dead. Pilate complied with their request. After the resurrection there was another conversation.

Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor’s ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. (Matt 28:11-15)

In contrast to the purchased testimony of the guards, Paul enters the testimony of witnesses to the risen savior. Against what might have been as many as ten witnesses to the contrary, Paul calls hundreds of witnesses that saw Jesus alive after his death. Many, preferably most, would have known him during his life.

His first witnesses had spent the better part of three (or four) years with Jesus. It could be presumed that they knew the man well enough not to be fooled by an impostor. The first witness, in fact, is Cephas, better known to us as Simon Peter. Within the twelve were the three: Peter, James, and John. Even when the other apostles were left behind, these three were privy to the most private moments in Jesus’ life. These were the ones with him at the transfiguration. These went with him farther into the garden than the others on the night he was taken into custody. Peter was later taken aside for a private conversation after the resurrection. If anybody knew Jesus by sight, and could cause an impostor to slip up at some point, it would be Cephas. And yet Paul calls him as a witness that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Then he calls the rest of the twelve. Well, except for Judas of Kerioth, who had killed himself. And James, who had been killed. But James had seen him. The other Judas, and the rest of the twelve had seen him. Thomas, who had not been with the apostles the first time Jesus appeared had doubted. But his doubts had been put to rest. Even the one who had replaced Judas had to be “a witness with us of his resurrection.” (Acts 1:22) Paul does not use that term loosely. Matthias had to be an eyewitness; he had to be able to testify to what he had seen personally.

Now some might say that the twelve had the most to gain by testifying to the resurrection. Their credibility could be questioned. After all, they were accused of stealing the body just to make it look like Jesus had been raised. If that’s all Paul can call as witnesses, the trial would result in a hung jury. But Paul mentions over five hundred that saw him at one time. The gospels do not record such an incident, but Paul knew about it. He admits that some of those people have since died, but the majority is still available. While these people might not have known Jesus as intimately as the apostles, many may have

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been among the crowd that always followed him. At any given time Jesus was accompanied not by a mere twelve people, but upwards of 250. Some women traveled with them and provided funds for them to live off of. (Lk 8:3) Many of this group of 500 may have spent a significant portion of that three years with him. They are probably not just people who might have known Jesus. Paul says they were legal witnesses to the resurrection.

Then, of course, there was Paul. He claims the right to be a witness because almost ten years after the resurrection he personally spoke with Jesus. Even if he did not know him personally previously, the circumstances of his conversation left him with no doubt of the veracity of the incident, and the resurrection.

Why is this an important part of the gospel? It establishes the truth of the death, burial, and resurrection. Daily, criminals are convicted on less evidence of their guilt than there is of the Christ’s resurrection. The post-resurrection appearances establish beyond a reasonable doubt that the death, burial, and especially the resurrection did happen.

The gospel is important. It is our hope; it is our only hope. It is not something to take lightly. It is not something to minimize by calling all truth “gospel.” It is “godspell”—good news. It is the best good news. Too bad the nightly news doesn’t end with it every day.

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

If one listens to Christian radio these days it is easy to get a faulty impression of the gospel. It seems that half the songs today are about overcoming major problems like drug abuse or a faulty sense of self-worth. Most of the other songs tell us that we should be doing more about homelessness, poverty, and various kinds of abuse. The gospel of gospel music seems to be a social gospel. Jesus died so that we might go out and feed the hungry.

This world is full of social ills that need to be addressed by Christians. If we don't deal with the world's ills, who will? Jesus even requires it of us.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matt 25:27-40)

In one of the basic theories of motivation, Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs. Until one meets the lower levels of the pyramid (the lowest including physiological needs such as food, shelter, and water), one can never move to the next level. Jesus understood that until such things as food, drink, clothing, and freedom were addressed, people would never see the need to address the problem of sin.

Yes, the songs are right; we do need to do something; but that is only the very beginning. Our programs to help people are good, but they are meaningless without going beyond the basic needs. It is good to help others, but the best and only lasting help is to teach them the gospel. Not the social gospel; the gospel of salvation.

We all have needs, but the truly basic need is forgiveness of sin. We may not understand that until other needs are met, but ultimately the only permanent need is forgiveness. As much as we hate to admit it, food and all the other basic needs are only temporary. We do need them while we live in this world; indeed, without them we cannot live in this world. Ultimately, though, this life is not all there is. We have a better world waiting for us in which we don't need these things.

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:42-44)

A return to God is what we all need for eternity. Sin is the basic problem of life. Not all poverty, hunger, or sadness is a direct result of sin, but we will not realize our sin and our need of a savior while these things exist. But we need to realize those things. Until we understand that we are sinners in need of God's forgiveness, our most basic need will never be met.

The songs do remind us of our need to meet other peoples' needs. The problem is that they make it sound like that is the be-all and end-all of our existence. Doing something should not be the end; it should be the means to an end. Unless the gospel is preached along with the social, we are no better than unbelievers who do the same things we do. Paul spoke of physical training, but what he said is valid in meeting physical needs as well: "For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." (1 Tim 4:8)

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