"If you believe what you like in the Gospel and reject what you do not like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself."
—Augustine

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The True Gospel (Part 6)

Maybe the most amazing fact gleaned from Christian history appears in Galatians 1:6: "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel." When the apostle Paul penned this epistle in the early AD 50s, only two decades had passed since the death and resurrection of Christ and the founding of the church! It took only twenty years before someone perverted the gospel into something so different that it was no longer good news (verse 7)!

Paul continues in verses 11-12: "But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ." The glad tidings Jesus, Paul and the other apostles proclaimed throughout the world is revealed—that is, it comes from God and can be learned it only through supernatural disclosure (Romans 16:25-26; I Corinthians 2:10; Colossians 1:26).

The true gospel message, then, is not readily available to all. In fact, a person cannot even pick up the Bible and find it there! One cannot stumble over or happen upon it. God must open one's mind to receive it (I Corinthians 2:7-16).
"because the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Romans 8:7). Jesus says that He designed even His parables—seemingly simple stories with obvious lessons—to hide meaning rather than reveal it (Matthew 13:10-17)!

In the first century, the apostles battled two pernicious false gospels: legalism and Gnosticism. Legalism grew primarily out of Judaism, holding that salvation came through works of the law rather than by grace. Paul preached against this deception repeatedly (e.g., Galatians 5:1-6; Ephesians 2:8-10, etc.), affirming that salvation is by grace, though good works form a necessary part of Christian growth and are indeed what God is working with us to accomplish.

Gnosticism consists of a whole group of heresies, all with the central ideas that knowledge (gnosis) is the means to salvation and that spirit is good and flesh is evil. In practice, it soon devolved into the extremes of asceticism and hedonism, as well as peculiar ideas about the nature of God and Christ (e.g., Colossians 2:8, 18, 20-23; II Peter 2:4-22; I John 1:5-10; 2:18-23, etc.). Eventually, Gnostic ideas came to dominate "Christianity," and its modern descendants are proclaimed far and wide every Sunday.

The most pervasive false gospel today is also quite deceptive: the gospel about Christ. Churches that preach this gospel teach about the Messenger rather than the Message He brought. Certainly, we are to study Christ's life, for He is our example of Christian living (I Peter 2:21; I John 2:6, etc.). However, when He preached the gospel, He did not trumpet His own virtues but revealed the way to the Kingdom of God.

In commissioning His disciples, He says: "And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:7-8). Nowhere does He tell them to "preach Jesus"; His concern is always in proclaiming God's Kingdom! Before His ascension, He tells them "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in [My] name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). He was so fixated on preaching the gospel of the Kingdom—and ensuring that His disciples understood it before He sent them out to preach it—that it filled His conversation during His post-resurrection appearances to them (Acts 1:3).
What gospel we learn is vitally important! We need to be sure that it is the true gospel Christ brought, the revelation of the imminent Kingdom of God. Paul's warning about false gospels should give us the proper perspective: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed!" (Galatians 1:8).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

Elements of Motivation (Part Five)
by John W. Ritenbaugh

When Jesus became mentally exhausted and enervated, He became invigorated and refreshed by seeing God's will completed, regarding it metaphorically as food and nourishment. Similarly, we can become energized and motivated by our high calling and summons to do the will of God, seeing how vitally important we are to God's purpose. Modifying the slogan of the United States Marines, the saints can be characterized as "The few, the humbled, the called."

From the Archives: Featured Article

Works of Faith (Part Two)
by Staff

Christians are saved by God's grace through faith. We cannot deny it. But a Christian's faith is one that wants to keep God's law - not the ritual law, but the law of faith that trusts God and aims to please Him in everything. God's spiritual law, encapsulated in the Ten Commandments and demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ, reveals His way of life, which Christians should endeavor to emulate.
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