

Hey, about the church that's down the street in your neighborhood...just what is it proclaiming? Is it the true gospel embodied in the New Covenant? Or is it oftentimes something foundationally different—yeah, an approach that actually competes with the true gospel? And, whatever the answer to that is, how are we as individual believers to respond to whatever might be going on?

Well, let's start by stating what is truly amazing: each believer's privilege is to shout the Good News from the rooftops—to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ! And that's not just for pastors and formally appointed missionaries. Well, then, just what is the true Gospel? You may recall that, just a few episodes ago, we asked "what is the gospel?" And here's part of the answer we gave...yeah, what Paul specifically wrote about the gospel in Romans 1:16 (ESV), "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."

Yes, that's definitional: gospel is all about salvation for all, for everyone who believes. That's why the gospel is the gospel—the word "gospel" is translated from a Greek word which, when broken down into its two parts, means "*good news!*"

*And Jesus Himself started the big ball rolling.* Jesus's unique mission and ministry was introduced early in Mark's Gospel narrative with these striking words: "Now after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming 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)

And Jesus built upon that baseline in his last words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew—He commissioned His disciples with these powerful words: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Then, later, the Resurrected Jesus said this to His followers in His final words before He ascended to heaven: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

As we've noted before, those are Jesus's commands that the prophet Isaiah spoke to in chapter 52. "....my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"

Think of it: the Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote glowingly of those "who bring"—*and that's us!* And we indeed are to *bring the good news*, we are to *publish the news of God's peace and salvation*. We are to be proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, doing exactly what Jesus did as recorded by Mark in his Gospel. You want to be like Christ? Bring the Good News! There's absolutely nothing holding us back! ...But, truth be told, sadly, often it's something else often deemed more important by many church folks...

You see, over the centuries, segments of the Church—in fact, very large numbers of individuals and their churches—have often proclaimed or acted upon priorities other than the gospel both within and outside their four walls, yeah, *priorities that are not the true gospel*. And speaking of such other priorities, I am specifically speaking of other social, political, cultural, and theological traditions and priorities that are emphasized and acted upon and then endlessly repeated in such a fashion that those traditions and priorities *work to crowd out the true gospel*. That's right, these churches crowd out the true gospel, not only within their congregation but with those they influence outside their churches.

But what is an individual believer to do about this? Well, let's start by taking a brief look at some sources that feed this problem—and some such sources go all the way back to the early church. We find some of the issues quite clearly handled in the prescriptions and observations found in the New Testament.

For example, the letter to the Hebrews makes a clear delineation between the New Covenant found only in the Cross and the Old Covenant. Here's the stunning Hebrews 8:6: "...Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises." Later in that same chapter, verse 13, the writer says, "In speaking of a new covenant, [God] makes the first one obsolete." Yet, even today, some essentially ignore the book of Hebrews and teach that there is only one covenant. The result is that they quite incoherently mix the requirements of the Old with the freedom of the New. Sadly, they quite often view that this amalgamation indicates their paramount insight and sophistication as compared to others in the interpreting of the Bible.

Paul deals with the unfortunate consequences of this overall mindset and approach at key points in his epistles, specifically manifested in Spirit-breathed passages about law and grace. How about this from Paul's hand?... Romans 6:14 says, "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." Yes, *sin will have no dominion over the believer because believers are not under the law!* And then there's Romans 8:2: "...The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." That's right, *believers are set free in Christ from the law of sin and death!*

But here's the thing: countless churches and their leaders over the centuries have emphasized their highly-selective laws and traditions that work to overlook their sinful behaviors while condemning the behaviors of others. That's right, they carefully orchestrate displays of their selectively-emphasized rules and laws. And that ongoing, repeated posture is often represented as the key measure of real Christianity!

When folks do that, they falsely substitute their ever-failing law-keeping for the manifestation of God's freedom, love and grace in believers' lives as they rightly touch the lives of others. In fact, in some countries with heavy influence by such leaders, this is not only manifested inside churches, it often also ostentatiously spills out into politics and culture where *both* politically-liberal Christians and politically-conservative Christians compete to impose laws that supposedly make their nations more righteous.

*But the Cross manifested the only authentic righteousness...that only through faith in Christ alone!* Still, it's in this distorted way that Christians lapse into a corrupted mix of law and condemnation of others in different eras...in different countries...in different denominations.

How so, though...*specifically?* Some churches and leaders simply substantially ignore the Cross and lapse in their self-made concoction of what specific good deeds and laws together will make them approved before God. The counterfeit ways and paths of such lapsing are countless—*they are vain philosophies masquerading as correct Christian theology*. And Paul has something powerful to say about that: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." (Colossians 2:8)

What is diabolical is the common manifestation of these issues into never-ending theological debates held out as legitimate contending for the true faith. In this very way, fruitless arguments sap the strength of believers and divert them to ineffectiveness. Or another destination occurs, when debilitating fatigue sets in and people start accepting a false, big-tent ecumenicalism of supposed acceptability of every theology.

Both these types of circumstances have manifested a lot throughout history. But here's the thing: just like He did in the events of the Old Testament, God allows lesser and even false paths to be followed then ultimately to be found lacking. And He is clearly allowing that in our era, too. But hear this: neither fruitless contention nor a compromised ecumenicalism packaged as "unity" is worthy of our strivings.

But what we must do is to stick to what God has set before each of us—to *differentiate the true Gospel to hearers!* Here's what Jesus said: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:35-36) So don't be discouraged by messaging of others that seems to crowd out the Gospel. Just respond with confidence...with a true-gospel witness here, there, and everywhere! What a privilege!

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. In the time and place of modern America, do you think that the politically-focused communications of both “liberal” and “conservative” Christians have often worked to crowd out the message of the true gospel of salvation for all who would call upon the name of Jesus? Discuss.
2. In preparation for your witness to others, do you believe in your heart and act upon the truth that the New Covenant is a better covenant “enacted on better promises” as spelled out in the letter to the Hebrews? Discuss.
3. Do you believe that your witness of the true gospel as empowered by the Holy Spirit can cut through the fog of contentious discourse to effectively reach a hearer? Discuss.