

60 George Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward), pp. 18, 19.
61 Ramm, p. 69.

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 3/2 (1992):139-145.
Article copyright © by C. Raymond Holmes.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL? (Galatians 1:6-10)

By C. Raymond Holmes
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

What a way to begin a letter! With a rebuke? The apostle wastes no time with flattery. The issue is too crucial. His concern is with the heart of the Christian faith, the "gospel"—with its nature, with its preaching.

The nature of the gospel had been challenged; its preaching perverted. That riled Paul's mind and soul as nothing else could. He was quick to respond, and his passion for the gospel runs through every sentence. There are those who believe that this letter saved Christianity from degenerating into a form of paganism. If so, does it not need to do so again?

The words are sober, hard. But even so, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we can sense the profundity of God's love in them—love for the truth of the gospel; love for those who will hear the gospel and be saved by its power.

Confusion, perversion, desertion, came early in the life of the Christian church. It came so soon that it astonished the apostle Paul, that great preacher of justification by grace through faith.

Here is a dramatic example of how we should respond when the nature of the gospel is threatened and the preaching of it perverted. We ought to get passionate about the nature of the gospel, about it being preached in the right way, because it is the heart and center of faith.

In Galatians 3:1-5, the perversion of the gospel that riled Paul

so is made clear: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? . . . Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

What About Today?

Do we face the same challenge to the gospel today? Is the preaching of it being perverted? Professor Carl Braaten of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago thinks so. He warned his church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), about the preaching of a pseudo-gospel in which

a god without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross (*Christian Century*, Jun-Jul, 1990: 623).

If Braaten's gauntlet were not enough, Professor Robert Jenson of St. Olaf College, in analyzing the origin of the theological problems faced by the ELCA, throws down another. He attributes those theological problems to the "general threat" faced by Christianity in our time. He calls the threat a "new form of 'gnosticism' which balks at the specificity of biblical particularity and yearns for categories more amenable to the contemporary mind" (*Ibid.*).

Are Adventists also beginning to see evidence of a struggle for the "truth of the gospel and the integrity of the Church's mission?" As with the ELCA, there are "theological plates grinding away at each other under the surface" of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Although we may use different labels, the fault line runs between those for whom "traditional theological affirmations remain indispensable and effective and those who regard them as so much baggage to be jettisoned on the way to the future" (*Ibid.*, p. 624).

Borrowing some more thoughts from this provocative article, let's ask if there is any evidence, in our own church, of a struggle for the "truth of the gospel and the integrity of the Church's mission?" (*Ibid.*, p. 623).

The Current "Pop" Gospel

In practical terms, the problem can be demonstrated this way: "I have a relationship with Jesus" a young man said, "and eternal life is mine." He had responded to a preacher's invitation to "receive

Christ." He talks of Jesus, of faith, of eternal life. But his behavior gives little evidence of regeneration and conversion. He lives and behaves like someone never touched by the power of the gospel.

A contradiction you say, and you are right, for there is no communion with Jesus based on disobedience. But this is what happens when a perverted gospel is preached. Judas had a relationship with Jesus too, but that relationship did not save him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that no one can claim to be justified through faith who has not left all to follow Christ—left the old life of sin and left rebellion against God's commands. It is not the leaving that saves, it is the saving that results in the leaving. No one can follow Christ who has not died to self-will.

For preachers and theologians the way is made clear in Galatians 1:10. Shall we seek the approval of people, of society and culture, or of God? Paul's answer is swift in coming: "If I were still trying to please [these], I would not be a servant of Christ" (NIV).

The "pop" gospel, popular preaching, proclaims a false hope to sinners because it leads them to believe that they can have a saving relationship with Jesus while maintaining an ungodly life. This "gospel" separates the Biblical call to believe in the Saviour from the Biblical call to obey Him as Lord. Furthermore, it means we have drifted into an unAdventist way of interpreting the Bible.

The softening of the New Testament message has brought with it a putrefying inclusivism that in effect sees almost any kind of positive response to Jesus as tantamount to saving faith. Christians today are likely to accept anything other than utter rejection as authentic faith in Christ (John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1988], p. 37).

MacArthur is speaking of the evangelical communions. However, it may well be that in our own church, somewhere behind pleas for tolerance of behavior and for theological pluralism, lurks this softening of the New Testament message.

If all that matters is a "relationship" with Jesus, if obedience is not to be considered in the preaching of righteousness through faith, it means that standing up in response to a preacher's invitation is more evidence of faith than is victorious Christian living.

To invite people to make a decision for Christ without making clear why such a decision is necessary and what the consequences

of the decision must be is to preach a pseudo-gospel, a message not in harmony with the New Testament.

What Constitutes Salvation?

Perhaps the time has come for us to stop talking so much about righteousness by faith, and to start talking about salvation by grace—how to get saved and how to stay saved. What is the evidence of salvation? We seem to gain the impression that when righteousness by faith alone is spoken of today, the emphasis is on “alone.”

The gospel is the good news of love, acceptance, and forgiveness, but it also rebukes those who outwardly are religious but whose lives provide no evidence of righteousness. A personal relationship with Jesus is life-transforming.

We talk a lot about focusing on the “essence” of the gospel these days. Ask what it is, and the answer invariably will be “love.” But what is the nature of that kind of love? Does it make no moral demands, no behavioral expectations? Is faith in Jesus nothing more than hero worship?

God so loved that He gave. Self-sacrificing love is the essence of God’s character. But the New Testament gospel teaches that, while God loves all people everywhere, He forgives only those who repent and accepts into His kingdom only those who turn from a life of sin and rebellion to embrace a life of holiness and discipleship.

The Biblically narrow way is becoming culturally broader today. The depth of commitment to Christ is becoming more and more shallow. This is reflected in debates on Church standards. It was apparent in the debate on the floor of the General Conference at Indianapolis concerning guidelines for Sabbath observance.

Is our doctrine of salvation becoming deficient? Are we preaching justification divorced from sanctification as though they are two unrelated experiences, one necessary, the other optional?

Are we having problems relative to Church discipline because we are bending over backwards to avoid legalism, or is it because our concept of the gospel and salvation is changing?

A pseudo-gospel is actually a subtle form of legalism in that “deciding” for Christ becomes the work that qualifies for salvation. True faith in Christ evidenced in submission and discipleship is

absent entirely. Hebrews 11:8 informs us that “By faith Abraham . . . obeyed.”

True Effects of Divine Grace

The good news of the gospel is not just about justification. It also is good news that by God’s grace we can be regenerated, sanctified, and glorified. Faith that rejects the authority of Christ is not true faith. Faith that is not demonstrated by a transformed life is not true faith.

God’s grace does not allow us to live in the flesh, it empowers us to live in the Spirit. Grace does much more than give us good feelings about Jesus and about ourselves. It is not only the way in which God’s love is demonstrated, but it also provides a powerful spiritual force in the believers life as Paul says:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:11-14, NIV).

These certainly are not human works. It takes the grace of God to overcome sin. And that’s good news! That’s the gospel truth! Furthermore, those who live by the Spirit

will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other (Gal 5:16, 17, NIV).

Preaching that does not include the call to repentance and transformation is not the Biblical gospel. To tell a listening congregation to give their sins to Jesus without telling them how to do it, what that transaction involves in terms of repentance and confession, leads only to confusion and misunderstanding.

Only those who confess their sin, rebellion, and need; repent of their sin; hear the message of forgiveness; and have been empowered by divine grace to turn from sin and embrace the new life of

righteousness are in a position where they can give glory to God. They are the kind of people God addresses in Revelation 14:7.

The day of the big congregation—the mega-church—has returned, appealing particularly to the ambitious, aspiring, young preacher. But size should not be the issue. The preaching of the true gospel should be. There is only one account in the New Testament of a mass conversion, on Pentecost—a most unusual event in itself. Pentecostal power produces pentecostal preaching—preaching like Peter's. Peter's preaching was direct, forceful, confrontational.

“Men of Israel . . . you, with the help of wicked men, put [Jesus of Nazareth] to death by nailing him to a cross . . . God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” When the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter . . . “what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” . . . With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:23-40, NIV).

A contemporary writer comments:

Preaching often falls short of prophetic power. Divorced from the monstrous infirmity we carry within, it can speak no good because it shrinks from speaking any ill. Despite what contemporary preachers predict, the spiritual life is seldom a matter of painless, uninterrupted growth. The irony of the gospel is that it becomes good news only for those immersed in the bad news of their normal experience (Belden C. Lane, “Grace and the Grotesque,” *Christian Century*, Vol. 107, Nov. 14, 1990: 33).

God's Church: Agent of Redemption

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about salvation He challenged his entire lifestyle and called for total regeneration (see John 3:1ff). Being born again is something we cannot accomplish for ourselves.

Nicodemus' problem was his religion. He had done all the right things, such as coming forward at a preacher's invitation. But without spiritual regeneration and renewal he could not enter the kingdom. Regeneration is not an option. It is a necessity. It is the result of hearing and receiving the gospel.

The church is not a discussion club for the exchange of views, nor a debating society. It is an agent of redemption. The church lives from the faithful and powerful preaching of the gospel's full truth. On this there can be no compromise. For the very existence and evangelistic success of the church depends on giving the gospel.

When the whole gospel is preached, our relationship to God is objectified. Without gospel reference points we would not know that we need to repent, or rejoice, or whether our thoughts and actions are in harmony with God's will and purpose.

The gospel is to be presented, not as a lifeless theory, but as a living force to change the life . . . Those whose course has been most offensive to Him He freely accepts; when they repent, He imparts to them His divine Spirit (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 816).

In apostolic times he [Satan] led the Jews to exalt the ceremonial law and reject Christ; at the present time he induces many professing Christians, under pretense of honoring Christ, to cast contempt on the moral law and to teach that its precepts may be transgressed with impunity. It is the duty of every servant of God to withstand firmly and decidedly these perverters of the faith and by the word of truth fearlessly to expose their errors (Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 387).

(Additional Reading: chapter 36, “Apostasy in Galatia,” in *The Acts of the Apostles*.)