

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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What Is the Gospel?

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There are more than two thousand organizations in the United States alone in 1988 that profess to be Christian. Yet these organizations, let alone the particular individuals who compose them, differ dramatically.

Historically, for example, both the Roman Catholic Church and the Puritans claimed to be Christians. Yet will anyone deny that Roman Catholicism—with its veneration of saints; its adoration of Mary; its use of images, beads, and statues; its clerical hierarchy; and its elaborate ritual and ostentatious costumes—is a different religion from iconoclastic Puritanism? Which one, then, is Christian?

Today the contrast is equally dramatic, if not so obvious as in the seventeenth century. There are small groups of people who still believe the religion of the Protestant Reformers and the Puritans. They believe that the Bible alone is the Word of God and that it is therefore without error; that Jesus Christ was an actual figure of human history, like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln; that he was God incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary; that he was crucified for the sins of his people, he rose again the third day and later ascended into Heaven, from where he will return to judge the living and the dead. They believe that Christ died to save only his people, and that he, being all-powerful, actually saved them from both sin and Hell. They believe that sinful men obtain right standing with God only on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ, not by any thing they have done or can do, and not

by anything God has done in their lives, nor by any experiences they may have had, but simply by the work Christ did on Earth two thousand years ago.

In contrast to these few heirs of the Protestant Reformation, there is not only the 800 million member Roman Catholic Church, there are also large Protestant churches that have repudiated the Reformation with its resounding affirmations of "The Bible alone" as the source of truth, "faith alone" as the means of justification before God, "grace alone," not human merit, as the reason for man's salvation, and "Christ alone" as the provider of that salvation. There are also groups such as the Mormon church, which claims to be Christian; the Unification church, which claims to be Christian, the Christian Scientists, and so on indefinitely. In the twentieth century there are thousands of different groups that claim to be Christian. What then, in all this confusion, is Christianity?

The confusion that plagues the religious world is not restricted to the meaning of the word *Christian*. The Gospel itself, which all who call themselves Christians should agree on, has become so confused by the opinions of men as to be almost meaningless. The ancient Tower of Babel has been replaced by radio and television towers as dozens of religious leaders teach their own gospels on the airwaves every day.

Pat Robertson, like many other American religious leaders, is called an "Evangelical." The word has its roots in the Greek New Testament, where the

Gospel is called *euangelion*, the Good News. At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the word *Evangelical* was applied to the Reformers; for they believed and preached the Good News, the Gospel, that Christ had earned salvation for his people, that men need not and could not earn salvation by their own works and experiences, and that this Good News—this Gospel—was found in the Bible alone. The word *Evangelical* originally meant two things: (1) that the Bible, not church leaders, nor clergymen, nor human experience, is the sole source of truth; and (2) that a sinner received right standing before God by having Christ's righteousness reckoned to his account through faith in the person and work of Christ. These ideas were expressed in two slogans: *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone—and *sola fide*—faith alone.

Today, however, there is a great deal of confusion about what the Gospel is, and what an Evangelical is, just as there is confusion about what a Christian is. Because of this confusion, many people are called Evangelicals who do not believe the Gospel. It might be best to begin to sort out this confusion by spelling out some of the popular religious ideas that are not the Gospel.

Counterfeit Gospels

The Gospel is not "You must be born again."

The Gospel is not "You must be filled with the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel is not "You must be baptized in the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel is not "You must speak in tongues."

The Gospel is not "You can perform miracles."

The Gospel is not "Let Jesus into your heart."

The Gospel is not "You must have a personal relationship (or experience or encounter) with Christ."

The Gospel is not "Repent."

The Gospel is not "Expect a miracle."

The Gospel is not "Put Jesus on the throne of your life."

The Gospel is not "Jesus set an example for us so that we may follow him to Heaven."

The Gospel is not "Trust Jesus."

The Gospel is not "Let go and let God."

The Gospel is not "Draw nigh unto God."

The Gospel is not "Christ died for all men and desires the salvation of all."

The Gospel is not "Decide for Christ."

The Gospel is not "Christians should take dominion over the Earth."

The Gospel is not "Make Jesus Lord of your life."

The Gospel is not "Jesus is coming again."

All these messages, and presumably many more that I have neither heard nor thought of, are being preached from American pulpits and television studios as the Gospel. A few of them are commands taken from Scripture. But none of them is the Gospel. Not everything in the Bible is the Gospel. The Gospel is Good News.

But the Gospel is Good News of a particular sort. It is not good news about what Christians will enjoy in Heaven. It is not good news about what God can do in changing your life. It is not good news about the success, prosperity, health, money, and powerful living that God wants you to enjoy. Many people, like Pat Robertson, confuse the Gospel with stories about what God has done or can do in their lives. One looks in vain through Pat Robertson's books and newsletters for a presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What one finds instead are numerous accounts of miracles, speaking in tongues, and other amazing and exciting religious experiences. None of these things is the Gospel.

Robertson and the charismatics make the same mistake that seventy disciples did, as Luke reports in chapter 10. Let me repeat the story:

After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before his face into every city and place where he himself was about to go.... Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name."

And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven. Behold, I give you authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in Heaven.

Unlike many religious people who falsely claim they can perform divine miracles, here were seventy men who could truly perform divine miracles. God was doing wonderful things in their lives. They had dominion even over demons. But Jesus tells them explicitly, "Do not rejoice in this." Christ gave them a direct and explicit command not to rejoice in their own experiences—experiences that some people today would promote as "power evangelism" and "power healing." The disciples were focusing on their own experiences rather than what God had done from all eternity and what Christ was going to accomplish on the cross. They were rejoicing in their subjective experiences. But Christ told them to rejoice in something that they had never experienced, something that God had done wholly outside of them, even before they were born. He told them to rejoice in the doctrine of election—that their names are written in Heaven. That election is permanent: Their names are *written*. But many, if not all, of those who are promoting healing and miracles today actually deny the doctrine of election. They believe that man is free of God's control. Therefore, they have nothing to rejoice in but their own experiences.

Most of what are called "Evangelical" books, essays, television programs, and sermons consist of little more than stories about the wonderful things God is doing in this movie star's life, or that football player's life, or what he can do in your life.

They do not contain even the least suggestion of the Gospel. It is impossible to over-emphasize this point. Virtually all of what is preached from the pulpits and television studios of America, in conservative as well as in liberal churches, is not the Gospel. It is a clever counterfeit, and millions of churchgoers and television viewers are being cheated.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

In contrast to Robertson's near total reliance on his subjective religious experience, the apostle Paul tells us what the Gospel is in *1 Corinthians 15*:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the Gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: 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.

That is the Gospel, and that Gospel is preached in very few so-called Christian churches today: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

Because of contemporary religious confusion, there are several aspects of Paul's Gospel that demand elucidation. First, the Gospel concerns history, not legend or myth. It is not, as Peter says, "cunningly devised fables." When Paul mentions Jesus Christ, he means an actual historical character like George Washington or Julius Caesar. He is not speaking of an experiential "Christ" whom we imagine. There are many different "Christs" and "Gods" being talked about today. The words *Jesus*, *Christ*, and *God* have become almost meaningless in the twentieth century, as we have seen, and unless one says exactly which "Christ" he means, no one, including himself, can know. Paul does that. His Christ is an historical figure, not a voice, nor a vision, nor a dream.

Second, the Gospel concerns the past, neither the present nor the future. It is history. The Gospel does not describe any present or future action that God or man might take. The Gospel is news about actions God in Christ took 2,000 years ago to save his people, actions that are wholly outside of our experience. Just as all men are condemned by Adam's sin, which was wholly outside of us, so are all of God's chosen people saved by Christ's obedience unto death, which is wholly outside of their experience. Just as the Gospel is history, not legend; and just as the Gospel concerns the past, not the present nor the future; so the Gospel is about something that God did, not something that we must do or can do. Christ is both the author and the finisher of our salvation. We do not complete what he began; Christ said, "It is finished."

Third, the Gospel concerns what Christ did for *his* people: Christ died for *our* sins, not for the sins of everyone in the world, but for the sins of his people only. He did not die for the sins of Judas, for example, for Judas went to Hell. If Christ had died for Judas's sins, why was Judas sent to Hell? Was it for his unbelief, his failure to "let Jesus into his heart"? But unbelief and failure to "accept" Christ admittedly are sins, and Christ, according to this false but popular gospel, died for all of Judas's sins. So the question remains unanswered: If Christ died for all men, why are some men punished in Hell?

The Scriptures teach that Christ did not die for all men. He came to Earth to save some men, whom the Bible calls "his people," "the sheep," "friends," and "the church," among other names, and he actually earned salvation for them. He did not come merely to offer salvation to all men and hope that some men would accept his offer. He came to save his people, and he did so.

The Gospel is an objective and historical message. It does not concern our experiences at all. It does not concern our works, but God's works. It does not concern our alleged miracles, but Christ's death and Resurrection. Regeneration—sometimes called the new birth—sanctification, faith, and the Second Coming—are all consequences of what Christ accomplished 2,000 years ago in Judea. They must

not be confused with the Gospel, for effects should not be confused with causes.

The Whole Counsel of God

But there is more in Paul's account of the Gospel than might appear in a superficial reading. What we have discovered so far is totally different from what passes for the Gospel in this decadent age. But there is a great deal more. Paul uses the phrase "according to the Scriptures" twice in this concise account of the Gospel. His whole summary of the Gospel takes only twenty-seven words in the *New King James* translation (and fewer in the Greek), and eight of those words are "according to the Scriptures ... according to the Scriptures." The phrase is obviously very important. Why does Paul repeat it? What does it mean?

The Gospel, according to Paul, is embedded in some thing much larger: It is embedded in all the Scriptures. Not only are the Scriptures the only reliable source of information we have about the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but the Scriptures alone explain those events. The Gospel is not merely that Christ died; so did Paul. The Gospel is not merely that he was buried; so was Abraham. The Gospel is not merely that Christ rose again, so did Lazarus. The Gospel is that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. And that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. The Gospel is in accord with and explained by the Scriptures, all sixty-six books of them. When Christ explained his resurrection to the disciples, he did so by explaining the Scriptures:

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.... Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him: and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us? ... And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

By emphasizing the phrase "according to the Scriptures," Paul is emphasizing the fact that the Gospel is part of a system of truth given to us in the Bible. All of the parts of this system fit together. All the statements in the Bible are logically consistent with one another. To give but one example of this, Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection fulfilled specific prophecies given centuries earlier. The exact town where he would be born was predicted hundreds of years before his birth; the fact that his birth would be unusual, for his mother would be a virgin, was predicted centuries before his birth; his death among the wicked and his burial among the rich were predicted; and Christ himself predicted his resurrection. The specific propositions that Paul calls the Gospel in *1 Corinthians 15* do not stand alone. They imply and are implied by many others. The choosing by God the Father of those that should be saved, the suffering of the punishment due them for their sins by Jesus Christ at Calvary, and the gift of faith to the elect people by God the Holy Spirit are all part of the system of truth taught in the Bible. They are the three great aspects of redemption: election, atonement, and faith. And the Gospel, the doctrine of the atonement, is the central theme. It is impossible to defend the Gospel, or even to preach the Gospel, without defending and explaining the system of truth of which it is a part.

Paul's emphatic phrases in *1 Corinthians 15* indicate that those who wish to separate the Gospel from the system of truth found in the Bible cannot do so. The Gospel, while a distinct *part* of the Biblical system, is nevertheless a part of the *system*. This system is fully expressed in the Scriptures. The propositions that Paul calls the Gospel are some of the propositions of Scripture. Because the Gospel is part of the Scriptural system of truth, it is impossible to defend the Gospel without defending the whole system. An exclusive emphasis on the "fundamentals" of the faith, rather than the "whole counsel of God," which is the phrase the Bible uses, is futile. Six or eight unconnected truths, even if they be major doctrines of Christianity, are not the whole of Christianity, and cannot be defended effectively. Fundamentalism poses no serious threat to secular philosophies because it is logically unsystematic and disjointed, a mere shadow of the robust Christianity we find in the Bible.

Paul emphasized the Scriptures, but this emphasis upon the writings is not unique to Paul. When explaining and defending Christianity, Christ always appealed to Scripture, and never to his own experience. During his temptation in the wilderness, Christ quoted Scripture in reply to each of the Devil's temptations: "It is written," "It is written," "It is written." What makes this appeal more significant is the context in which it occurred. Christ had just been baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. He had heard a voice from Heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well-pleased." The Holy Spirit had descended on him in the form of a dove. Talk about religious experiences! No one else, before or since, has ever had such an astonishing experience. Yet Christ did not tell the Devil what had happened to him, the voice from Heaven and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Why not? Why did Christ ignore all this and quote what many today call the dead letter of the Bible? Why does Christ answer the Devil by quoting Scripture rather than recounting his recent and unique spiritual experiences? Because the Scriptures are the objective written word of God. The Bible, not our experience, is authoritative. If Christ did not appeal to his experience, and it was a far greater experience than any mere man could ever hope to have, there is absolutely no justification for our appealing to our miserable and possibly deceptive experiences.

It was, in fact, the Devil who wanted Christ to appeal to his personal experiences: He wanted Christ to perform a miracle; Christ refused. He wanted Christ to take a leap of faith off the pinnacle of the temple, presuming God the Father would perform a miracle; Christ refused. He wanted Christ to worship him, avoid the hellish suffering of the cross, and thereby gain dominion over all the kingdoms of the world; again Christ refused.

The Devil used the same appeal to experience in the Garden when he tempted Eve: He promised Eve that she would become godlike when she ate the forbidden fruit. And Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise." Relying upon her experience, and seeking a still more wonderful experience, Eve abandoned the Word of God. The

secret of Christ's intransigent resistance to diabolical temptation was precisely the fact that he did not prefer his own experiences to the Word of God.

The apostle Peter also emphasizes the written Word of God. He climaxes his account of the testimony concerning the truth of the Christian faith by mentioning Scripture. In his second letter, Peter says,

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to him from the Excellent Glory: "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased." And we heard this voice which came from Heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain.

We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

A few verses earlier Peter had written that God's "divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us." Please notice the phrase "all things." Later in the same chapter Peter again says that Scripture is the *only* way we have of getting this knowledge: Scripture, the prophetic word made more sure, is the light that shines in a dark place—not a brightly lit place, nor even a dimly lit place, but a dark place. There is no other source for this knowledge, including knowledge of the Gospel, than the Scriptures. The Bible claims to have a monopoly on truth. The charismatics, like all other cults and false religions, deny that monopoly. They denigrate the Bible and base their religion on their personal experiences.

But the Gospel is neither accounts of our personal experiences nor commands that we are to obey. The Gospel is the Good News of what Christ did for his people 2,000 years ago. It is not about the new

birth, nor the Second Coming, nor the activities of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Gospel is propositions about historical events that happened wholly outside of us. It has consequences and implications for us today, to be sure, but these consequences are *effects* of the Gospel, and must not be confused with the Gospel itself. The fatal error of the Dark Ages was to confuse God's work for us with God's work in us, and so pervert the Gospel. The same error is widespread among so-called Evangelicals today who do not distinguish between what Christ has done for us and what the Holy Spirit can do in us. We are rapidly re-entering the Dark Ages because the light and clarity of the Gospel has been lost.