

Another Gospel

By John Cheeseman

Many who have read thus far may well feel that they do not recognize the gospel with which they are familiar in what has been said. It is my contention that there is a real and basic difference between the biblical gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and the prevailing manmade substitute. To substantiate this claim, I must examine the modern gospel and compare it with Scripture, for our final authority must be Scripture alone, where we find many warnings against false gospels (for example Gal. 1:6—9, 1 Tim. 6:3, 20, 2 Tim. 1:13—14). If we are to be true to our duty to 'Test all things; hold fast what is good' (1 Thess. 5:21), we must test all formulations of the gospel against the one true gospel revealed in the Word of God.

If the gospel commonly preached today is indeed found to be unscriptural, it follows that much of modern evangelicalism has gone astray on doctrines which are not just of secondary importance, but are at the heart of the Christian faith. This is not a welcome conclusion, but we must not avoid it for that reason. In the last few years the Lord has laid a desire for the revival of true, deep, vital and powerful Christianity on the hearts of many. It may well be that the recovery of the purity of the gospel will, by the grace of God, lead to a healing of the many ills and weaknesses of the evangelical churches and to a demonstration of the Holy Spirit's power amongst us both in the growth in grace of believers and in the salvation of the lost.

I am convinced that much modern preaching which purports to be evangelical falls short of scriptural teaching and has little in common with the example of the Master Evangelist, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. How would much modern evangelistic preaching and writing answer the question of the rich young ruler, 'What must I do to inherit life??' The following answer is probably typical: 'If I am to benefit from Christ's death I must take three simple steps, of which the first two are preliminary, and the third so final that it will make me a Christian: I must believe that I am, in God's sight, a sinner, that is, I must admit my need; I must believe that Christ died for me; I must come to him, and claim my personal share in what He did for everybody.' Under the third and final step is explained how the willing sinner must 'open the door of his heart to Christ', the Christ who waits patiently outside the door until we open it to Him.

It is undeniable that such an answer, or something like it, is frequently presented today, and those who use this method probably justify it by claiming that it includes the central doctrines of the gospel — repentance, faith, conversion, substitutionary atonement, the sinfulness of man, and so on. If someone 'takes the step' but later questions the validity of his conversion, he is assured, 'You took a simple step, you committed yourself to Jesus Christ, but then God performed a stupendous miracle. He gave you new life; you were born again.' The concluding advice is often given: 'Tell somebody today what you have done.' This answer bears little resemblance to Jesus' reply to the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17—22).

The following is a summary of some of the [faulty] basic doctrines or presuppositions of this modern gospel:

- Unregenerate men can repent and believe.
- Christ died for the sins of every man individually.
- Committing oneself to Christ, or deciding for Him, or coming to Him, is an act which the sinner can do as he wills at any time; that is, it is an act of free will.
- Although God may be said to have taken the initiative in a general sense by sending Christ to die to make salvation possible, in any particular conversion it is the sinner who takes the initiative by coming to Christ, and it is God who responds.

Now let us compare these doctrines with the teaching of scripture:

The unregenerate man cannot believe the gospel, because it is foolishness to him; spiritual truths are spiritually discerned, and he lacks the requisite faculty, being spiritually dead in trespasses and sins (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14, Eph. 2:1).

It follows that he must be born again (which is the sovereign act of God) before he can repent and believe. Faith in Christ is the gift of God. Thus salvation is wholly of the Lord; He takes the initiative (John 3:3—8, Phil. 1:6, 29, Jon. 2:9, 1 Pet. 1:2).

There is no gospel command in Scripture to believe that Christ died for your sins. No one can have legitimate assurance of this until he has been saved and can make his 'calling and election sure' by wholehearted trust and obedience. Rather, the gospel command is to repent and believe in Christ as the only Saviour, believing his promises and casting oneself on His mercy. We have already seen that Christ died for the elect (or, for those who believe) (John 10:11—16; 15:13—14, Rom. 5:6—11, Eph. 5:25—27, Heb. 9:15).

This modern gospel is presented with no hint that God is sovereign and active in drawing to Himself those whom He has chosen. In Scripture these truths are not hidden lest they should cause offence; they are declared and even emphasized, since God is glorified when man can boast of nothing in himself as the cause of salvation. 'I contribute nothing to my salvation except the sin from which I need to be saved' (Acts 13:48, Matt. 11:25—30, John 6:63—65; 15:16, Rom. 9:14—24).

It is implied that Christ's death merely made salvation possible for all, the salvation becoming actual only on the condition of belief. But the Scriptures without exception speak of Christ's death as actually effective in itself, because of its substitutionary nature, to redeem, reconcile, ransom and save to the uttermost (Rom. 5:10, 2 Cor. 5:21, Eph. 2:13, 1 Thess. 5:9—10, Heb. 10:10, 1 Pet. 1:18—20, 1 John 4:10, Rev. 1:5).

Having examined this new gospel in its essentials and shown that it is not the true gospel of the Bible, I want to show that its subsidiary terms are equally erroneous. These are some examples of the sorts of points that are often made.

The benefits enjoyed by the Christian — joy, peace, fulfilment, meaning in life — are often made the ground of an appeal to the unsaved. This is, of course, a motive well-designed to lead the natural man to 'make a decision' for Christ, but it is misleading when divorced from the preaching of the wrath of God against sin, the need for a complete change of nature and the demand for true repentance, all of which are found in the New Testament gospel.

Jesus is represented as a loving but impotent figure, standing and knocking outside the door of our lives. There is only one door handle, on the inside, where the sinner alone can control it. The feeling excited is one of pity: 'He has done so much for you; will you not now open the door to Him and allow Him to bless you with His salvation?'

This leads the hearer to feel that he has done God a favour by agreeing to believe! What could be more different from the spirit of the tax collector in the parable, who dared not approach God but stood afar off and cried in humility and repentance, 'God be merciful to me a sinner?'

This is what the modern gospel says. Equally important is what it does not say. Jesus' answer to the rich young ruler who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life was: 'You know the commandments' (Mark 10:19), thus pointing him to the holiness of God to show him his sinfulness. The failure to preach God's law and the depth of man's sinfulness and guilt is responsible for the evident lack of true conviction of sin in the souls of so many who profess conversion. Furthermore, it leads sinners to believe that there is no need of a change of nature which it is not within their power to effect. 'To be incessantly telling a sinner to "come to Christ" is of little use, unless you tell him why he needs to come, and show him fully his sins' (J. C. Ryle). The modern evangelist often seems to proceed as if unaware of texts like 'Without holiness no one will see the Lord' (Heb. 12:14).

Secondly, what the modern gospel does say about sin, repentance and faith is too often a weakened version of what Scripture says. There are probably very few who would not be willing to 'admit their need'. But is 'admitting one's need' the same thing as repentance? True repentance is much more than 'saying sorry'. The word literally means 'a change of mind', a determination to turn away from all those things which we know to be wrong in our lives, and a willingness to go God's way. Furthermore, is believing that Jesus Christ died for sinners all that is involved in faith? On this basis, the very devils are believers! Real saving faith in Christ is much more than an intellectual assent to the truths of the gospel. It means a personal trust and dependency on Christ as the one who paid the penalty for sinners on the cross. It is to be feared that many are taught to believe that they are saved when in fact they are still in their sins.

Thirdly, is it wise to lay stress on how easy it is to become a Christian? It is true that the grace of God is free, yet Scripture exhorts us to strive to enter the kingdom, to lay hold of God while He may be found, to examine our souls, to seek the grace of God, to

repent of and forsake our sinful ways. Did not Jesus say that the gate is narrow and the way is difficult that leads to life? Let it never be forgotten, however, that sinners cannot come to repentance and faith unless grace is given to them by God. One of the mischiefs of much modern evangelism is that it speaks as if conversions could be manufactured at man's pleasure. Accordingly, as man is in full control, and as it is all 'up to him', this type of preaching seeks to bring it within the power of all to be born again, merely by sincerely echoing the evangelist's closing prayer. Does this not resemble the Roman Catholic doctrine of grace conferred 'ex opere operato', mechanically, by the works of man?

In this kind of preaching, there is a movement away from a heart transaction with God towards the performance of an outward act. This is the danger of an invitation to stand up or sign a decision card, or even to pray a suggested prayer of commitment. The problem is that men and women can go through a form of words and yet never truly repent of their sins or put their trust in Christ. But then, on the basis of having prayed such a prayer or come forward at the close of a meeting, the sinner is often told, 'You did this, therefore Christ has come into your life. You are definitely a Christian, and if you doubt it, that is tantamount to doubting the very words of Christ Himself.'

This particular methodology can so easily give false assurance to sinners who have never truly come to Christ in repentance and faith. Moreover, it can have the serious effect of inoculating them against the true gospel. How sad it is when one hears folk say, 'I've tried Christianity: I made a commitment to Christ, but it didn't work.' The reality is that such people never encountered the gospel of the New Testament in the first place. Instead they were presented with a manmade substitute which in truth does not work!

Surely we must encourage our hearers not to trust in any outward act, not even in saying a particular prayer, as a guarantee of eternal salvation. The emphasis must always be on the heart transaction with God. And so the questions that we must ask are these: 'Have you truly repented of your sins? Are you trusting in Jesus as the One who alone can save sinners through His death on the cross?' To all such the Lord says, 'I will never cast you out. I will never turn you away.'

In making the above comments, I am not condemning the practice of encouraging interested enquirers to stay behind for counselling at the end of a meeting. But the danger is to confuse the act of staying behind with the reality of true conversion. That we must never do.

What then is our conclusion? There is today, as there has been in other periods of history, a gospel which looks plausibly like the biblical gospel but which differs from it in several vital respects. We must give no place to this but, like Paul, ensure that the truth of the gospel remains with us (Gal. 2:5).