



A Reformed Gospel

by Paul David Washer

The Gospel that prevails in America today is rarely a Gospel at all. It is a cheap, watered down version that is useful for building membership roles, but not much good for building the Kingdom of God. What it declares about man is so careful that it offends no one. What it says about God is so limited that it disturbs no one. What it demands is so bland that it results in little conviction, causes no turning away from sin and makes no call to costly discipleship.

If the Christianity in America is to ever recover from the maladies that has it laying on its death bed, then it must first recover the Gospel first preached by Jesus and the apostles. It must recover a Gospel that is always free, but never cheap. It must learn a Gospel that is more than a human decision, but the very power of God. It must preach a Gospel that not only has the power to save all who embrace it, but has the power to transform all who are embraced by it.

In our last edition of HeartCry, we studied the basic elements of the Gospel: Man's wickedness, God's holiness, the Law's condemnation of our sin, and Christ's death on the Cross

that purchased God's people from eternal destruction. In this edition we will consider the call of the Gospel and the evidences of its work. In other words, we will consider what men must know and do to be saved.

Today's Gospel

Today's Gospel can easily be reduced down to a few "spiritual laws." They are as follows: (1) God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life. (2) We have sinned and our sin separates us from God. (3) Christ died for our sins. (4) We must pray the prayer of faith and ask Jesus to come into our hearts and save us. (5) If we ask by faith, then we can be assured that we are saved. If we should ever doubt our salvation, then we must simply look back to the time we prayed that prayer of faith and see salvation as a certainty.

Before we go any further, it must be said that this method of "sharing" the Gospel has been used to make Christ known to millions and has resulted in the salvation of some. We must also say that the Christian who shares this presentation is a thousand times more useful to God, than the one who knows well the Gospel, but has no passion to share it. Nevertheless it must also be understood that it is not *because* of this Gospel presentation that people have been saved, but *in spite* of it. There are great flaws in our modern day presentation of the Gospel and these must be corrected if the Gospel is to regain its glory and its power.

A Man-Centered Gospel

Today's Gospel begins with man, clearly placing him at the very center of the universe as an invaluable being for whom God would empty all of heaven to obtain. This is simply not true. It is God who stands at the very center of the universe and He alone has inherent and infinite value. Man on the other hand is an outlaw in the universe, a rebellious God-hater who has declared war on his Sovereign, a traitor

who desires the throne of his King, a creature who longs for the glory of his Creator, an instrument created for praise who seeks to be worshiped in the place of God.

The true Gospel does not begin with man's worth or God's wonderful plan for him. The true Gospel begins with a declaration of God's worth and His great concern for His own Glory. Someone has said correctly that the Gospel does not begin with the words "For God so loved the world," but with the declaration, "In the beginning God."

In what has been written so far, we are in no way attempting to diminish or slight the love of God. In fact, we argue that the love of God is so infinite that it goes beyond any human attempt to define or measure it. What we are attempting to do is simply put first things first. We argue that God does not exist for man, but man for God. And it is not man who is the treasure of the universe, it is God. And God does not do everything He does primarily for man, but for Himself and for His own glory and for the love He has for His own name.

It is often argued today that it would be selfish and even egotistical for God to do everything He does primarily for Himself and for His own glory. But it is absurd to think this way. As Bible believing Christians, what do we call it when a man holds something to have greater worth than God or when a man delegates God to second place in his life? We call it idolatry. Why? Because there is a rule in Scripture and in the very fabric of Creation itself that declares God to be above all things and declares all things to exist for Him. The Scripture rightly declares:

"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:36)

God rightfully does all things for Himself, for His own glory and for

the love He has for His own Name. If it were any other way, God Himself would be guilty of idolatry and the universe would be chaos. In light of what has been said we would like to change the “first spiritual law” of today’s Gospel from “God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life” to “God is the Creator and Lord of the universe and is infinitely concerned for His own Glory.”

A Gospel for the Sick

The second tenant of the “spiritual laws” of today’s Gospel is that we have sinned and our sin separates us from God.” The problem with this law is not that it is incorrect, but that it does not go far enough. We have not only sinned, but we are sinners. We not only *do* things that are wrong, we *are* wrong. The Gospel is not good news for the sick or for the dying. The Gospel is good news for the dead.

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”

Ephesians 2:1

It is often preached that the sinner is like a man sick unto death that can do little to save himself, God is the doctor and the Gospel is the medicine. God stands over the dying man with a spoonful of medicine and longs to save him, but the man must make that first step. He must respond to God’s willingness to save him by opening his mouth and receiving the medicine. This is absurd. The Scripture does not say that man is sin-sick, but sin-dead. A dead man cannot respond to any prompting no matter how tender or sincere, and the sinful man cannot and will not ever make the first step so that God might take him the rest of the way. Salvation is not man’s decision to accept God’s help, but the power of God whereby the sinner is made alive and given the grace to repent of his sins and believe unto salvation.

In the Gospel which we preach we must not only share that man has sinned, but that he is a sinner, dead of

spiritual life, deprived of the good will necessary to obey God and totally destitute of hope apart from the mercy of God. We must teach that unless God moves on man’s behalf, he will die in his sins and pass through eternity under divine retribution. We must tell of man’s great need of God and urge him to call out to the God of mercy to do for him what he cannot do for himself.

In light of what has been said we would like to change the second spiritual law” from “We have sinned and our sin separates us from God.” to “We are



“Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name.” Luke 24:46-47

sinners, corrupt in nature and deed, spiritually dead, under the righteous condemnation of God and totally dependant upon His mercy.

An Unexplained Gospel

The third tenant of the “spiritual laws” of today’s Gospel is that Christ died for our sins. Like the last tenant, this one is definitely not wrong, but it is too often left truncated and unexplained. When we share or preach the

Gospel we must also teach. The death of Christ will mean very little to the sinner apart from an adequate explanation of why and how Christ died. The lost man needs more than a few Christian clichés, he needs to know something about God. We hear so much today from secular educators and sociologists about the “dumbing down” of America, but it seems that the same malady has struck the Church. We are convinced that theology and doctrine have no place in the Christian life and that to actually teach doctrines or refer to theology in our witnessing will only hinder the message. We have traded the great truths of the Gospel message for little stories, amusing illustrations and our own personal testimonies. Please do not misunderstand, I am not against anything that will help to communicate the Gospel to men, but when the means becomes the message and the message goes unspoken there is something terribly wrong. What God has done in my life is not important. What is of utmost importance is what God has done in Christ through His life and death. We must pass on to others as of “first importance” that Christ not only died for us, but that He lived a perfect life for us; that He bore our sin on the Cross and became sin in our place; that He suffered the condemnation of God for every Law of God we have ever broken; that He died in our place, separated from fellowship with God and crushed under the weight of God’s wrath; that His death paid our sin debt before God and provided for the salvation of His people; that His perfect life provided for us a gift of righteousness by which we can stand before God as truly the righteousness of God in Christ.

Another problem associated with our shallow teaching of the Cross is that there is not enough emphasis on the Resurrection. We must understand that a Gospel that does not give proper due to the resurrection is not a Gospel at all. If Christ be not raised we are still dead

Theology

in our trespasses and sins. Any man can die on a tree, but only God can rise again. It is the resurrection that makes the story of the Cross into a Gospel (Good News) and keeps it from ever being a tragedy of just another well meaning hero who died for nothing. It is belief in the resurrection that separates the faithful from the infidel. When we preach the Gospel, we must proclaim with great joy and conviction that the One who obtained our pardon through His death has risen from the grave and lives forevermore. Because His story did not end on a cross, ours will not end in a grave. We live because He lives, we can die in hope because He died for us, we will rise again because He has risen! This is the Gospel!

An Unbiblical Call

The fourth tenant of the "spiritual laws" of today's Gospel is that on hearing the Gospel the sinner must pray the prayer of faith and ask Jesus to come into his heart and save him. If he asks by faith, then he can be assured that he is saved. The problem with this spiritual law is that it is just not biblical. I do not want to be flippant and I most certainly do not want to show my limited knowledge of Scripture, but can it be found in Scripture where anyone leads anyone else in a prayer to accept Jesus? Many times Romans 10: 9-10 is used to defend this road to salvation: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved." But this is not a reference to leading someone in the sinner's prayer, but to simply placing faith in Jesus. Other times, Revelations 3:20 is used to defend this way of inviting Christ into the heart: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." But this is not even remotely referring to Christ standing at the door of the sinner's heart waiting to be invited in. It is a reference to Christ standing at the door of the Church from which He has been exiled, because of its pride, self-sufficiency and independence.

Having shared the Gospel with the lost man, what should we tell him to do? We should simply do as Jesus did and as the prophets did before Him and as the apostles did who followed. We should

lovingly tell him, even plead with him to repent of his sins and believe the Gospel. The Scriptures are full of such invitations:

"The time has come," he said, "The kingdom of God is near, Repent and believe the good news!" Mark 1:15

"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:30-31

"I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." Acts 20:21

"First to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds." Acts 26:20

As one can clearly see, there are two common themes that run through the Gospel invitations of the Scriptures - repentance and faith. We are not to call men to pray a prayer by which they simply ask Jesus to come into their hearts, we are to call men to repent of their sins and believe the Gospel.

In most Evangelical Churches in America today, lost men and women, boys and girls are told to pray the prayer if they want to go to heaven, when they should be told to repent of their sins and trust in Christ as Lord and Savior. It is not the prayer that saves, but heartfelt repentance and sincere faith. How many today are led in the sinner's prayer and pronounced saved the moment they say "amen," but they have not repented, nor believed and their lives never change? Not only are they granted a false security, but that same false security many times makes them harden to the true demands of the Gospel. They hold on to their prayer as though it was made of magic words that grant them entrance into the Kingdom, and they close their ears to true Gospel preaching.

The Scripture states quite clearly that the two requirements of salvation are repentance and faith, but what are they? In the Scripture, repentance involves both the emotions and the will. Repentance involves the emotions in that it is sorrow for our sin that leads us to turn away from it. This can be seen in Paul's words to the Church in Corinth:

"Yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance..... Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret..." II Corinthians 7:9-10

True repentance leading to salvation involves the emotions in that there is sorrow in the sinner's heart upon realizing that he has broken divine Law, offended God and is in danger of eternal wrath. This sorrow is so genuine, so deep that it touches the sinner's will and compels him to change from unbelief to faith, from apathy to interest, from hatred of God to love for God, from idolatry to praise, from rebellion to willing submission, from disobedience to obedience.

Repentance is a powerful thing that goes beyond man's capabilities. In fact, repentance causes such a powerful change in the sinner that it can only be attributed to the gracious work of God in conversion. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, God described repentance in the following way:

"I will give you a new heart and [I will] put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and [I will] give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and [I will] move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

After reading this text, can there be any doubt that the repentance that leads to salvation involves a radical change that is from beginning to end a work of God, and that without such repentance there is no salvation?

True repentance is a work of God and it is always accompanied by faith in the promises of God. Therefore, in salvation a man not only repents, but also believes. Now true faith is never as complicated as we sometimes make it out to be. It is simply believing that something is so, because God has declared it to be so. This is the meaning of Hebrew 11:1:

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

The man who has believed unto salvation is he who hopes for salvation and considers it a certainty, even though he cannot see it. Or using the example of Abraham in Romans 4, faith is being fully persuaded that God has the power to bring about the salvation He has promised through His

only begotten Son (v.21).

My dear Christian friend, many have been saved while praying the sinner's prayer, but not because of the words or the asking, but because of a God-given repentance and a God-given faith that were created in their hearts as a result of conversion. At the same time, many have been



lead into a false security of salvation because they said all the right words, but conversion as well as the repentance and faith that spring from it were absent. In light of what has been said, we would like to change the fourth "spiritual law" from inviting the sinner to pray the sinner's prayer to calling upon the sinner to repent of his sins and turn to God through faith in Christ.

A False Security

The fifth and last tenant of the "spiritual laws" of today's Gospel touches on what is commonly called eternal security. The law goes something like this: If the one who has prayed the sinner's prayer should ever doubt his salvation, then he must simply look back to the time he prayed the sinner's prayer and claim his salvation to be true. Sometimes the new convert is told that he should write the day of his conversion in the back of his Bible so that if doubts ever assail him he can assure his

heart by opening up the Bible and looking upon the date when his salvation was settled. Again this is absurd and unbiblical. As a matter of fact, it is a dangerous heresy that has led many down the road to destruction. Assurance of salvation does not come from looking back on the day on which one has prayed a prayer, but from a proper examination of one's life in light of Scripture to see if there exists biblical evidence of salvation. When dealing with the possibility of unbelievers among the Corinthians, Paul did not tell them to look back to the day when they prayed a prayer or to look at a date in the back of their Bibles, he told them to look at their lives in the present tense:

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you - unless, of course, you fail the test?" (II Corinthians 13:5)

To find assurance, we are not to look at a date in the past, but we are to look at our own lives in the present. We must question ourselves and our profession. In the words of John the Baptist, are we bringing forth fruit in keeping with our confession of repentance (Matthew 3:8)? In the words of Paul, are we proving our repentance by our deeds (Acts 26:20)? Or in the words of James, is our faith dead because it is not accompanied by action (James 2:17)? In the words of Peter is our knowledge of God ineffective and unproductive (II Peter 1:8)? In the words of Paul, do we claim to know God, but by our actions deny Him (Titus 1:16)?

In the light of what has been said we would like to change the fifth "spiritual law" from telling those who doubt their salvation to look back to the day when they prayed a prayer, to telling them to look at their present life in light of the Scripture. If there has been no change, no conformity of their life to Scripture, no genuine zeal or love for God, then there can be no security of salvation.

The Five Spiritual Laws Reformed

To end this brief article on the Gospel and sharing it with the lost, we will present the five spiritual laws as they are common shared and as we have reformed them:

(1) God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life.

"God is the Creator and Lord of the universe and is infinitely concerned for His own Glory."

(2) We have sinned and our sin separates us from God.

All men are sinners, corrupt in nature and deed, spiritually dead, under the righteous condemnation of God and totally dependant upon His mercy.

(3) Christ died for our sins.

Christ lived a perfect life for us. He bore our sins on the Cross and suffered the condemnation of God for every Law of God we have ever broken. He then died in our place, separated from fellowship with God and crushed under the weight of God's wrath. His terrible death paid our sin debt before God and provides for our salvation. His resurrection and perfect life provides for us a gift of righteousness by which we can stand before God as truly the righteousness of God in Christ.

(4) Man must pray the prayer of faith and ask Jesus to come into his heart and save him. If he asks by faith, then he can be assured that he is saved.

Man must repent and believe the Gospel. Repentance is a genuine sorrow for sin and a fear of judgement that results in a turning away from sin and a turning to God. Faith is the simple confidence that God has the power and good pleasure to bring about the salvation he has promised through His only begotten Son.

(5) If a man should ever doubt his salvation, he must simply look back to the time he prayed the sinner's prayer and claim his salvation.

If a man doubts his salvation he should examine his life in light of the Scripture. If there has been no change, no conformity of his life to Scripture, no genuine zeal or love for God, then the man can have no security that he has been saved.