

THE POPULAR GOSPEL VERSUS THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL

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What is the gospel? Are many who claim to be Christians in today's culture *really* born again? For those who have prayed "the prayer" or "walked the aisle at church" or even re-dedicated their life to Christ and invited Him in, should we affirm them in their salvation? Herein lies the very deception of many—indeed, a majority!—so-called "Christians" today. There are millions of people who call themselves Christians because of a magical "prayer" or belief in Jesus who are, sadly, deceived into thinking they're Christians while the highway they're on will plunge them into the depths of hell. Why?

Recently I experienced this first hand. We attended a special Christmas program at a big church in the Los Angeles area. The music was excellent. The lightning was exquisite. The stage performance was fabulous. The dramas were clever. The message was very inclusive. The gospel was absent. "What do you mean," you ask?

After a lengthy drama retelling the Christmas "story" with a very modern-twist to it (e.g., including text messaging jokes), there were choral anthems with four young female dancers that paraded the stage. After the drama recounted the events, the pastor came on stage to give a "message." He stood up and spoke nearly word for word from his notes as he wanted to tell the real meaning of Christmas to a jam-packed auditorium full of people. He went on to discuss how Christmas is not about Santa or presents but it is about Jesus. He said that God is perfect and that man is imperfect. He said that the only way we can get heaven is by believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior. At the end of his brief but seemingly 'canned' gospel presentation in which he read from his notes the entire time, he asked if anyone wanted to become a Christian and pray the prayer. He said at least four times (I counted!) that the "choice" is theirs. He declared that each person in that auditorium had the choice to either choose God or reject God ... the choice is "yours." He proceeded to lead the audience in a "prayer" in which, at the completion of it, he promised and assured those who really and sincerely prayed that prayer that they are now "Christians" and have heaven awaiting them when they die.

Here's the problem. *That's not the gospel.* The gospel is not about *choosing that you want to go to heaven.* The problem is this pastor's misconception about faith. Saving faith is not *intellectual assent.* If it is, then Satan and all of his minions would be saved (read the gospel of John for a full-fledged biblical analysis of true and false faith). This pastor assured people that if they believed in Christ, understood who Jesus was and that He died on a cross, and that if they "invited Him in to their heart" that they would be saved. But is this true? Is this really the case? Does the Bible support such a supposition?

The Word of God repeatedly declares that it is faith alone in Christ alone that saves a person (Rom 10:9-13; Eph 2:8-9). Nevertheless, this faith is not *merely* an intellectual assent or a mere temporal faith (cf. James 2). Nowhere in the Bible does it validate one's salvation on mere 'profession' or a 'prayer.' Rather, the opposite is true. Jesus rebukes the most religious people of His day for their false belief in Him and their hypocritical religion because *their deeds evidence a dead and self-idolatrous faith* (cf. Matt 23). Some of the most religious people in the world today will undergo the hottest hell because of their hypocritical religiosity and insincere faith in Christ which evidences itself in a life void of godly, holy, fruitbearing to the glory of God.

Moreover, the gospel that the pastor presented at the Christmas program described above was not *the gospel.* There was absolutely nothing said about man's dire need of a Savior. Nothing was stated about the hell-bound direction that all mankind (including each person present in that auditorium) heads. There was nothing—at all—stated about *how* the death of Christ attributes to one's life. What does it mean to "believe that Jesus died for me" and how does that affect *me* and my *salvation?* How does Christ's death on Calvary's cross contribute to my regeneration? Not a word was uttered in this regard. Nothing about a holy God condemning sinners to eternal judgment because of His righteous, holy, just, and fair condemnation of them. He spoke nothing regarding Christ bearing the full weight of the Father's angry vengeance on the cross on behalf of sinners which turned away the eternal anger of God toward those sinners who believe. Rather the message was simple: believe and you're saved. But this is all-too-close to universalism. Everyone 'believes' in Jesus. Jews

believe in Jesus. Moslems believe in Jesus. Hindus believe in Jesus. Satan believes in Jesus. But surely they're not saved!

The greatest news that one can hear (indeed, the greatest message that believers can preach!) is that God is infinitely holy, impeccably pure and eternally righteous. Man, on the other hand, is condemned through and through. By just being "human", everyone is spiritually dead in sin, unable to raise himself to life, and headed one for destiny—eternal and personal judgment by God Himself. And in hell, God will justly and ferociously trample on every sinner who has not been pardoned in Christ. This is the predicament. This awaits every unrepentant and ignorant sinner. There is no way out. There is no escape. There is no resistance. There is no bargaining or arguing. It is right, fair, just, and inevitable. It is stamped "TRUE" with the eternally enduring Word of God. It cannot be any other way.

This infinitely great problem was solved by God Himself when He sovereignly determined to send Jesus, His only Son, to live a human life born of a virgin (so that he would not be corrupted by the sinful nature inherited through his parents) and then be qualified to die as a sacrifice for the sins of His people. God had sovereignly chosen, out of his sheer uninfluenced and unbiased grace, to choose certain individuals for salvation. These are the ones for whom Jesus came to live a perfect life and die a sacrificial death—in *their* place. And it was on Calvary's cross that Jesus was condemned as a wretched, vile, guilt-stricken sinner by the Jews and Romans and on the cross, Jesus bore the full weight of the eternal punishment by God His Father for those who would believe. This is the gospel. The gospel is that the just punishment which finds expression in God's eternal fury in hell was poured out upon Jesus Christ in just three hours on the cross. Supernaturally and spiritually, at the same time, all of the perfect righteousness that Jesus had, possessed, and earned through his being God and his God-honoring life on earth is transferred to the sinner who believes in Him for pardoning. This is the gospel. It is a "great exchange." My sins for Christ's righteousness. My transgressions for His perfections. My hell for His pardon. Jesus took the sinner's sin while the believer receives Jesus' righteousness. And, consequently, God now treats that sinner who savingly believes upon Christ and His sacrificial death as a true, genuine, adopted "son" who has all the rights and privileges of a natural-born son into His divine family.

Finally, the Scriptures do not assure someone of salvation because of a profession. It is *always* based upon one's *life of fruitbearing after* one's conversion. Many profess but few walk in holiness. Many pray but few love Christ. Many believe but few find absolute satisfaction and contentment in Christ. Salvation is always by grace, judgment is always based on works, and assurance is always confirmed through godly living. There is no such thing as a person praying "the prayer" and then he is automatically saved (that would be 'works' salvation). Repentance and a complete break with the old, sinful life must take place with a new commitment to holiness, godliness, good works, and a desire for the glory of God. This is *the* gospel. It is *not* the popular gospel but it *is* the biblical gospel.

Your Pastor,

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