

# **Voices: A tale of two gospels: Reclaiming the transforming power of God's word**

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The preaching of the Apostle Paul was remarkably simple. In the first few verses of 1 Corinthians 2, Paul summarized the message he preached to the Corinthian church and other churches he visited:

And when I came to you, [brothers and sisters], I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-2).

Paul's message to the Corinthians has a single subject: "Jesus Christ, and him crucified." His message was not meant to be a display of wisdom but was meant to demonstrate the Spirit and power of God and the transforming work in the lives of its hearers (2:4).

## **The gospel misunderstood and understood**

The same gospel Paul preached launched the church at Pentecost and has sustained it ever since. Oftentimes, though, the church has added to *and* subtracted from the message of the cross—and resurrection—for reasons other than the demonstration of the power of God.

The word of God often has become instrumental in the life of the individual believer and the wider church. This means that we, as those who live *under* the word of God, mis-explain or explain away certain inescapable portions

of the biblical message in order to prop up our individual—and many times collective—purposes or preferences.

I recently attended a series of lectures delivered by Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest and pastor-theologian from New York. Throughout her lectures, Rutledge helped her hearers understand that the gospel is an announcement or proclamation rather than a suggestion.

The gospel of the crucified Christ is announced as truth that has a total claim on the life of the disciple of Jesus *as well as* the lives of those who reject him. For both disciples and those who reject Christ, this gospel is an offense to a human race held captive by the power of sin (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

## **The gospel offensive and salvific**

Paul clearly understood there are many who hear the gospel of the crucified Christ who will reject it as “out of touch,” “ridiculous” or even “unwise.” *And all of these descriptors are true.*

The fact that an entire faith movement would be initiated by the gruesome murder of an innocent God-man hardly makes sense. One would not expect any sort of salvation to come out of such a bloody and shameful death. As Paul wrote, however, only those who submit themselves to the power of God by his word—both in the Scripture and incarnate in Jesus Christ—can and will come to know the simple and radically transforming truth contained within the gospel of the crucified Christ.

The church, too, often has been scandalized by the gospel with which it is entrusted. There are many Christians today—and especially Christians in America—who preach the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth but leave out—intentionally or unintentionally—his crucial title: Christ.

Without the crucial title “Christ,” Jesus of Nazareth is no different than any other great religious teacher who has come and gone. The untitled Jesus is one who guides the individual believer on a “journey” towards spiritual “wisdom” and “knowledge.” It is difficult to see this Jesus as the same Jesus who was crucified and who called—rather, *commanded*—his disciples to follow him, suffering as he suffered (Luke 9:23), a hard and offensive command that throws a wrench in our expectations of Jesus Christ.

## **The gospel unwanted and wanted**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, during his imprisonment by the Nazis, that the crucified Christ is not what a religious person expects or even wants from God. Many Christians—on both the left and the right of the theological spectrum—select for special attention the most offensive portions of the Christian life as described in the New Testament and upheld in the rest of Scripture in order to explain these portions away.

At some point or another, every Christian is guilty of such selection. But this guilt is no excuse to give up the fight of faith, which means submission to the word of God, who is Jesus Christ. Such submission is the only way believers—both new and seasoned, both wrestling with God and resting in him—are able to experience the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Jesus of Nazareth who only offers moral and spiritual suggestions has absolutely no power. I am afraid many churches in America today suffer from the preaching of just such a domesticated Jesus who has no power whatsoever to transform lives. Jesus is, as stated in the Gospel of John, “Teacher *and* Lord” (13:13).

# The gospel of man and the gospel of Jesus Christ

Yes, Jesus teaches us how to live. But what we quickly forget is that for life to be considered Christian, it must be patterned after the life of the suffering and risen Christ.

We cannot live this kind of life under our own power. Rather, the Christian life requires the power of God to be lived effectively and to the fullest extent. We cannot simply be taught to live this life. We also must be transformed by grace into the image and likeness of God in Christ, an action done to us rather than by us (Philippians 2:12-14).

Too often today, the church trusts in human agency alone to effect cultural or individual change. But human progress is a myth. Humans are not bad, they are dead (Ephesians 2, Colossians 2:12-13).

God's business is—by his word incarnate and written down—offering transforming life into his image. For Jesus the Christ is, as Paul wrote in Colossians 1:15, “the image of the invisible God,” for and through whom all things have been created, and through whom all things will be made new—and yes, transformed.

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