
The Gospel of Jesus Christ

By David Wilkerson

May 10, 2004 What is the true gospel of Jesus Christ? Even most non-believers know the Bible contains four gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. So, what is the essence of these gospels, or “the good news”? When Christians speak of the gospel of Jesus Christ, what is it we’re talking about?

Scripture gives us several definitions of what this gospel is. And we’re to use these biblical definitions to determine whether the true gospel of Christ is alive in his church. Consider:

1. Jesus says his church is one of self-denial and a cross. The Lord told Peter, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

Clearly, belonging to Jesus’ church means more than merely believing in him. Many Christians today merely “cast a vote for Jesus.” Their attitude is, “I voted for Christ. That makes me a member of his party.” But once they cast their vote, they walk away and forget all about his Lordship over their lives.

Jesus says belonging to his church goes much further than that. It means committing to follow him. And that involves a life of self-denial and taking up a cross. “He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:38).

Our Lord makes it clear: “If you’re in my church, then be prepared to suffer and be persecuted for your faith in me. Be prepared to deny yourself all fame, acceptance and worldly pleasure-seeking. People are going to nail you to a cross of ridicule, a cross of condescension, a cross of alienation. And they’ll do it because you hunger and thirst after me. If you belong to my church, a cross is sure to follow.”

The fact is, Christ’s church has never been approved or accepted by the world. And it never will be. If you live for Jesus, you won’t have to separate yourself from others’ company; they’ll do it for you. All you have to do is live for him. Suddenly, you’ll find yourself reproached, rejected, called evil: “Men shall hate you, and...they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake” (Luke 6:22).

Yet, Jesus adds, this is the path that leads to true fulfillment. “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25). In other words: “The only way you’ll find meaning in life is by selling out your all for me. Then you’ll find true joy, peace and satisfaction.” Christ tells us, “My church is without spot or wrinkle. So, when you come to me, you must be willing to lay down all sins. You must surrender all to me, to die completely to self, to all ungodly ambition and ego. By faith, you’ll be buried with me. But I will raise you up into new life.”

Think about what it means to be without spot or wrinkle. We know a spot is a stain. But what about a wrinkle? Have you ever heard the phrase, “a new wrinkle”? It means adding a new idea to an existing concept. A wrinkle, in that sense, applies to those who try to improve on the gospel. It suggests an easy way to attain heaven, without full surrender to Christ.

That’s the kind of gospel that’s being preached in many churches today. The sermons are aimed only at meeting people’s needs. Yet as I read Jesus’ words, I see that this kind of preaching doesn’t work. It doesn’t accomplish the true work of the gospel.

Don't misunderstand: I'm not against preaching comfort and strength to God's people. As a shepherd of the Lord, I'm called to do exactly that. But if I preach only to people's needs, and ignore Christ's call to lay down our lives, then true needs will never be met. Jesus' words are clear: our needs are met by dying to ourselves and taking up his cross.

2. Jesus' church is a place where sinners repent of sins, with their heart and their mouth. Jesus declares, "My church is a place of shameless, open repentance." Indeed, the apostle Paul attests: "The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

"For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" (Romans 10:8-11).

Simply put, we're brought to salvation through our open confession of repentance. Jesus states, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13). And, he says, repentance is how we're healed and restored: "They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32).

Beloved, this is good news. Jesus is telling us, "In my church, everyone is healed through repentance. It doesn't matter who you are — the physically broken, the mentally ill, the spiritually sick. Everyone must come to me the same way. And all find healing through repentance."

I ask you: how many churches still open their altars for heart-smitten people to come forward and repent? How many pastors have stopped giving invitations for this all-important spiritual work? And how many believers have lost all sense of their need to confess sin?

So, what is the central message of Christ's gospel? He makes it plain throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In these four gospels, he tells us, "Here is what I preach in my church. This is my message to all sinners."

First of all, "Jesus came...preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). What was Jesus' first message? He preached repentance.

To some Christians, this may sound like strong language. They may respond, "Okay, but how strongly did Jesus preach repentance?" Luke answers that in his gospel. Jesus told his listeners, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).

Welcome to the church of godly sorrow. You may think Christ's gospel of repentance sounds like a downer. But Paul says otherwise. A repentant heart brings true life: "Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Repentance was also at the heart of the very first sermon after Christ's resurrection. Peter told the crowds gathered at Pentecost, "Jesus of Nazareth...ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:22-23).

When the people heard this, they fell under powerful conviction. The preached Word pricked their

hearts, because the Holy Spirit had come in all his power. And according to Jesus, that's precisely the Spirit's work. He said the Holy Ghost comes to "reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8).

The crowds were so stirred, they couldn't move. Suddenly, before them were the very issues of life and death. So they cried out to Peter, asking what they should do. He answered, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins... Save yourselves from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:38, 40).

This passage illustrates the repentance at the heart of Jesus' message. If there is no conviction in the message — no truth about sin and guilt, no smiting of the heart — then the Holy Ghost simply isn't in it. He's simply not present in such preaching.

I think of all the "conviction-free" preachers who are responsible for the souls of multiple thousands of Christians. Their congregations are laden down with sin, and their iniquities crucify Christ afresh daily. It's absolutely tragic. What these people need is a message from a preacher who's not afraid to tell them, "You've sinned against Christ." But just the opposite happens. The people are actually affirmed in their sins by compromised shepherds.

Ezekiel says of such preachers, "With lies ye have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him more life" (Ezekiel 13:22). The prophet is saying, "You've saddened the righteous with your frivolous preaching. And you've empowered the sensual to sin even more, without guilt. You've given them lies about eternal life. No! You're robbing these people of eternal life. You've turned God's grace into lasciviousness."

Paul says a day of judgment is coming soon. And for that reason, we're to preach the gospel with even more conviction, as the day approaches. We're to reprove and rebuke, and to do it with long-suffering and love. Indeed, the day is coming when every shepherd will stand before the Lord and account for all he's preached. Did he make the righteous sad? Did he strengthen the hands of the wicked? Or, did he bring a fearless word that convicts, under a holy anointing?

The fact is, Peter wasn't interested in offending those crowds at Pentecost. His only purpose was to show them the truth. And when the Holy Spirit reveals the truth, it convicts. It goes down deep and roots out every area of the heart.

Sadly, this isn't happening in many churches today. Not only is the Holy Spirit not present in such churches, he isn't welcome. Our ministry receives letter after letter echoing the same refrain: "I have a neighbor whom I've witnessed to for months. He's going through a divorce...she has a drinking problem...he's having an affair..."

"So I take them to church, hoping they'll hear a word about their condition, and their need for the Lord. But my pastor never says a word about sin. There's never a word that brings conviction, that spells out the need for Jesus' cleansing, freeing power. So my neighbor leaves even more comfortable in his sin."

What a tragedy! How grievous it must be to God that more people are affirmed in their sins inside churches than outside of them.

Others write, "I go to a sinner-friendly church, but I can't take it any more. Every week, we're handed a survey, asking how we liked the service. They want to know, 'Was the music too loud? Were the skits too long? Was the sermon witty?' Pastor David, I go to church to find hope for my lost relatives. But instead I get asked to judge the entertainment."

According to Jesus, no one can be delivered from sin — no one is ever faced with truth — without the convicting presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

3. Jesus' church is a place where you may hear a hard, troubling message. Consider this scene, as Jesus spoke to his followers: "This is the bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever. These things he said in the synagogue... Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you?" (John 6:58-61).

Note that Christ was speaking to believers here. What was the hard saying they reacted to? It was, "You must eat my flesh and drink my blood, or else you have no life in you. My flesh is meat, and my blood is drink. And eternal life comes only through consuming them."

Now, the sinner-friendly gospel says, "You can't preach that kind of thing. Sinners would never understand it. Drinking blood and eating flesh? They would think we're barbarians. We have to change the words to make them more palatable. Otherwise it's going to offend people, especially non-believers."

In Christ's true church there will come offensive words. Yes, in this church you will hear a message of good news, a gospel of love, mercy, grace and long-suffering. But in Christ's church, there are also messages that dare not be tampered with. And those messages include the preaching of Christ's blood and his cross.

Jesus saw that the people were shocked by his words. So he asked them, in essence, "Did I offend your senses? Are you bothered by my truth-telling?" Then he states, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). He made it crystal clear: "The very thing you're offended by is what brings life." How did his followers respond? "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (John 6:66).

What is Jesus saying about his gospel here? Simply put, he's stating that the message of his blood and his cross is offensive. Yet it's the only gospel that leads to eternal life. Even so, some are not going to accept it. "But there are some of you that believe not" (John 6:64).

Jesus' words here are being borne out in many churches today. Incredibly, some congregations have removed every reference to Christ's blood from their worship services. Pastors don't mention it in their sermons. Hymns about the blood have been removed from the church. It's all considered too offensive.

But Jesus warns, "It doesn't matter how offensive my words may seem to you. You can't change them. My words produce life. And you have to consume them as you would food and drink, to make them the very fiber of your being. Therefore, you're not to soften what I've said. If you remove the blood and the cross from your preaching, you're cutting off seekers from their only hope for eternal life.

“The blood-salvation message can only be understood through the Spirit. But it is to be preached even if it’s misunderstood. So, stand boldly and preach my gospel, no matter what response you get. It’s the only Word that saves.”

We see a similar scene in Matthew. “When he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue... And they were offended in him” (Matthew 13:54, 57). Even Jesus’ close circle of disciples came to him saying his message was offensive: “Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?” (15:12). In this scene, it wasn’t the people who were offended, it was the religious leaders. Apparently, the multitudes received what Jesus said. But the shepherds were outraged.

If we belong to Christ’s church, we’re going to hear strong, convicting messages that offend our flesh. If you’re in Jesus’ church, then hard messages are going to come from the Holy Spirit. Why? Because the Spirit cries out in us against everything we think, say or do that’s of flesh. Jesus says, “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matthew 15:19).

Yet, the sign of every true follower of Jesus is that he surrenders to Christ’s every word. This servant loves reproof because of what it produces in his heart. He sees the change it brings, and he knows it’s life to him.

Deep down, that’s also why a sinner comes to God’s house. It’s not to just be counted as one more number in a large congregation. It’s to be found by God, because in his heart he knows he’s lost. His soul isn’t at rest, and he’s had too many long, sleepless nights. He wants answers, truth, real change, because he senses he’s bound for hell. And he doesn’t need a believer or a minister to tell him he’s okay.

Of course, if this sinner hears Christ’s gospel, he might be offended by it. He might get angry and stomp out. But he won’t forget what he heard. And the Holy Spirit will use it to reveal truth to him.

We’ve all been taught that Christ is the cornerstone of his church. Paul says this stone is a rock of offense: “As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Romans 9:33). Peter also calls Jesus a rock of offense: “The head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient” (1 Peter 2:7-8).

Peter could tell you firsthand what happens when you try to do away with the message of the cross. He was offended when Jesus foretold his death to the disciples. So, “Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee” (Matthew 16:22).

But Jesus answered him with these stinging words: “He turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (16:23).

Here is a clear example of how Satan can plant a deception in even a godly, Christ-loving shepherd. And you can bet Peter never forgot his Master’s words. Likewise today, every minister and believer is to heed Christ’s warning: “My cross and my blood may offend you. But if you’re ashamed of my message, or you try to soften it, then you’re an offense to me. You don’t represent my Word or my church.”

4. How do you think Jesus would start a church in your city or town? The first thing Christ would do is to go on a weeping tour throughout your city. Scripture tells us, "When he was come near, he beheld (Jerusalem), and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes" (Luke 19:41-42).

What made Jesus weep? It began with a heartbreaking walk he took around the city. He was overcome with grief at the sight of so-called religious people who had no peace. These people had rejected the truth for fables. And now they were following a dead form of religion. They were sheep without true shepherds.

Now, I'm not out to judge any minister. But I want to ask everyone reading this message: can you imagine your pastor driving through your town and weeping over it? What a different image Jesus gives us from so many of the plotters and planners building churches today. These men go door to door, surveying people, asking what they want in a church: "How long would you like the sermon to be? Fifteen minutes? Ten?"

Jesus witnessed a form of this in his own day. As he walked through the temple, he saw tables of moneychangers, ministers who merchandised the things of God. There was no real prayer, no fear of the Lord. And Christ wept over it all, crying, "It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Luke 19:46).

I ask you: would Jesus weep over what he sees in your church today? Would he find your pastor anguishing over lost souls? Or would he find him profiting from things that are holy in God's eyes? Would Christ find his people praying? Or would he find them occupied by busyness and programs, focusing on their own interests?

Once Jesus concludes his weeping tour of your city, would he commend his people? Or would he bring this warning: "You're blind to the times. Judgment is at the door, but you look more like the world than ever. Why aren't you praying, seeking me for strength and wisdom to redeem the time?"

God help us never to soften his gospel. If you have a pastor who preaches the true gospel of Jesus Christ, I urge you, encourage him. And pray for him. Thank the Lord that your appointed shepherd doesn't rely on personality preachers to bring in crowds.

And be grateful that the presence of the Holy Spirit is allowed to do his true work in your midst. When the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached with conviction, heaven opens and devils flee.

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