

against racial segregation. Lord Shaftesbury dared to stand for justice for the poor in the midst of the Industrial Revolution of the early nineteenth century. All these men shared in God's desire for justice based on love. Speaking of their heroic example, the late Francis Schaeffer said: "These men did not do these things incidentally, but because they saw it as a part of the Christian Good News" (*A Christian Manifesto* [Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1981], 65).

The gospel is not only a creed to believe, but a life to live! With untold billions still unevangelized; with escalation of violence and unrest all over the world; with the economic hope of the world waning as nations from the Third World sink deeper and deeper into debt; what better gift can come from Manila than to call on the church of Jesus Christ "to take the whole gospel to the whole world!" The need is more desperate than ever; the call is more urgent today! Like the apostle Paul, may the Lord lay the burden upon us so that we may say: "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

## THE GOSPEL AND SALVATION II

# How to Teach the Truth of the Gospel

Peter Kuzmic

The saying "It's the gospel truth" is frequently used by people who insist on the total reliability of their statements. However, in our age of relativity, agnosticism, and denial of absolutes, the very truth of any truth is questioned and the validity of the gospel truth denied. Carl Henry rightly asserts that at the heart of the "modern eclipse of God" is the crisis of truth:

Such double loss of the gospel's truth and of all truth—as an objective and transcendent claim upon the human mind—is an unmistakable facet of the civilizational crisis that has engulfed modern Western culture.

Belief in God is considered to be part of an obscurantist, outdated, and pre-scientific way of thinking. Not only in the communist dominated areas and under the influence of Marxism, but also in the so-called Christian West. Henry continues:

God's very existence, and with this the objectivity of truth, have been submerged in tidal waves of modern doubt. The spiritual crisis of mankind is also intellectual crisis, in as much as the modern temper is now disposed to consider God unthinkable, unchanging truth an illusion, and gospel truth a fiction.

The result of the denial of divine revelation is stated by the apostle Paul, "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). Similarly, people today have become victims of modern idolatries and secular substitute religions. Modern man seems to be caught between the materialistic individualism of the West and the ideological totalitarianism of the East. Individualistic consumerism and collectivistic communism are both inherently idolatrous and are dangerously enslaving in their fanatic forms. Carl Henry again has said:

Multitudes of people are gripped by totalitarian lies, snared by commercial slogans and popular cliches, entranced by vogue ideas and warped words. It is fashionable to be committed to scientific revisability, resigned to the historical character of all men's knowledge, fascinated with evolutionary development, reliant upon historical method,

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devoted to dialectical paradox, preoccupied with existential decision, and derisive of God talk.

In this context, and in the context of “relativity of all religions,” we must insist on the factual Christ-event and the historical reliability of the gospel story. According to David Read, the “first question about religion is not whether or not it is useful but whether or not it is true.” Truth is foundational for trust. Stephen Neill in his *Call to Mission* says “The only reason for being a Christian is the overpowering conviction that the Christian faith is true.”

Jesus is the heart of the gospel; he is the truth of God incarnate, the truth that liberates (saves) men (John 8:32,36; 14:6). By his claim, “For this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth,” he provoked Pilate into asking the resounding question of all ages: “What is truth?” (John 18:37–38)

The apostle Paul considered himself to be a herald and defender of “the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:5). He was convinced that faith, love, and hope are fruit of the hearing of “the word of truth, the gospel” (Colossians 1:5). “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13).

Due to the truth-character, historical accuracy and doctrinal content of the gospel, a preacher is inevitably also a teacher. “We proclaim him [Christ] . . . teaching everyone with all wisdom” (Colossians 1:28). In one of his succinct summaries of the grace and power of the gospel, Paul brings the divine revelation and the human apostolic task together,

It has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher (2 Timothy 1:10–11).

Paul saw himself as a trustee of “the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:10–11). We are called to the same sacred task and trust.

Proclamation of the gospel is communication of knowledge: exposition and explanation of the glorious facts of incarnation of the eternal *Logos*; of the life, teachings, and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ; of the meaning of his atoning death; of the significance of his resurrection; of the convicting and equipping power of the Holy Spirit; and of Christ’s offer of forgiveness and a new life to all who would put their trust in him.

By this gospel you are saved . . . That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared (1 Corinthians 15:2–5).

Wherever the gospel is preached, these foundational facts of the universally valid truth must be taught. William Temple said, “The gospel is true always and everywhere, or it is not a gospel at all, or true at all.”

Though not always equally emphasized, *kerygma* and *didache* are actually inseparable. Evangelism does not bypass the God-given intellect of the hearer by appealing to his more responsive emotions. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus explains why such an approach remains without fruit. “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his

heart” (Matthew 13:19). Theology and evangelism should not be viewed as separate fields of activity.

In the chapel of Trinity College in Glasgow, there was a stained-glass window in memory of James Denney, with the inscription: “Supreme alike as scholar, teacher, administrator, and man of God, to whom many owed their souls.” It was Denney’s view we would be closer to an ideal church if “evangelists were our theologians or theologians our evangelists.” His major theological preoccupation was the analysis of the atoning work of Christ. His conclusion: “The simplest truth of the gospel and the profoundest truth of theology must be put in the same words—he bore our sins.”

We are not faithful to the gospel, nor will our work of evangelism be effective, unless we are gripped by the soteriological significance of the Cross-event, the death of Jesus, and the importance of his resurrection apart from which “our preaching is useless” (1 Corinthians 15:14).

May it be said of us, as it was of James Denney by one of his successors as principal of Trinity College:

As theologian and as man, there is no one like him. I have known many theologians both scholarly and devout, but I have never known his equal for making the New Testament intelligible as the record and deposit of an overwhelming experience of redemption and for generating in those who listened to him the conviction that the gospel incarnate in Jesus is the only thing that matters.

## Renew the Credibility of the Christian Witness

The answer to the question of world evangelization, *How shall they hear?* is inextricably linked to and conditioned by the answer to the related question, *What shall they see?* It is not primarily a question of methodology but rather of authenticity. Our message has no credibility apart from its visibility as expressed in the quality of new life, new sets of relationships in the believing community, and a loving concern and sacrificial service on behalf of the needy.

The evangelist is not only a proclaimer and teacher of the gospel, he is an inseparable part of the message he communicates. So is the Christian community. The problem today is not that we lack a credible message—for indeed the gospel of Christ is the most glorious and powerful Good News for the world—but, rather, that we so often lack credible messengers, those whose lives are irrefutably in harmony with the gospel, and are thus able to carry it with authenticity and power.

Christian religion has a long and heavy historical ballast that presents a serious hindrance to world evangelization. In Eastern Europe we have learned that Marxist criticism of religion is not all wrong and have come to acknowledge that the rise and spread of both Western and Marxist atheism is proportionally related to the shrinking credibility of the Christian church. Much of communist atheism is at least partially a reaction against a backslidden Christianity and may even be interpreted as God’s judgment on the historical unfaithfulness of the church.

When going out to evangelize in Yugoslavia, I tell our seminary students that our main task may be to “wash the face of Jesus,” for it has been dirtied and distorted by both the compromises of the Christian church through the centuries and the propaganda of atheistic communism in recent decades.

Viewing it from the biblical perspective, no one can justify the “unholy alliance of throne and altar” and its many negative consequences since the Constantinian era up to the present. We must humbly acknowledge that frequently religion was used as a

manipulative tool of the powerful and mighty, and has often served as an ideological screen justifying the actions of the oppressors and deceptively comforting the oppressed and exploited. Whitewashing unjust wars, justifying economic injustices, and smokescreening racial discrimination are only some of the obvious evils the Christian church has practiced for ages and, in some of its segments, participates in even today. In the perception of many, especially the youth and the intelligentsia, the church is not a credible institution. That is why, when challenged with the claims of the gospel, many today will respond with the slogan: “Jesus—yes! Church—no!”

Evangelism is a life before it is a task; it is a question of being before it becomes an agenda of doing. The believing community will either evangelize by its attractive quality of new life or it will create barriers to the gospel by its old way of life. It will by its integrity enhance the gospel or it will discredit and hinder it by lack of it.

This is illustrated by recent scandalous behavior and related worldwide negative publicity of prominent American television evangelists and other evangelical leaders. These TV scandals show unmistakably what the “cheap gospel,” based on financial gain rather than rooted in the Cross of Christ, does and how it links with the sinful human nature. Asked to comment on this by a provocative communist journalist, I blurted out: “Charisma without character is catastrophe!” I was forced to categorically deny that their “gospel” and the gospel of Jesus Christ are the same.

How unfortunately prophetic appears the statement of Charles P. Templeton in his *Evangelism for Tomorrow* of more than thirty years ago. He said:

The church stands in danger that the time will come when (to paraphrase G. K. Chesterton) it can pick up a microphone and address the entire world—only to find out it has nothing to say.

The world is watching carefully to see whether the Christian people really believe what they proclaim and live up to the demands of the holy gospel.

The eloquence of the preacher, the size of the annual budget, the rise of modern technology, and the employment of social sciences, effective strategies, top management, and impressive missionary agencies will not do it. It will take genuine repentance, divine cleansing, holy living, and a new empowerment by the Holy Spirit if the world is to be evangelized in the last decade of our millennium.

Much Western “evangelical religiosity” is shallow and selfish. It promises so much and demands so little. It offers success, personal happiness, peace of mind, material prosperity, security, and a moral fiber for the nation; but it hardly speaks of repentance, sacrifice, self-denial, holy lifestyle, and willingness to die for Christ. It tends to forget that Jesus Christ is not only a Savior to be trusted, but also the Lord to be obeyed.

Our modern preoccupation with money, buildings, and programs, however validly we try to justify it, is still foreign to the New Testament and may be the most serious sign that Christianity has been captivated by a secular, materialistic “cash-register” culture.

Evangelical leaders and evangelists must be aware of the potential sin of professionalism. Perfected techniques and visible results can easily make evangelism degenerate into “patterns without power.” We need to remember that people are not digits to be totaled on an adding machine.

### Recover the Whole Gospel

Our Congress is “A Call to the Whole Church to Take the Whole Gospel to the Whole World.” We need to recover the whole gospel and renounce all “half-gospels”

that have invalidated much of the Christian mission around the world. According to P. T. Forsyth, “Half-gospels have no dignity and no future. Like the famous mule, they have neither pride of ancestry nor hope of posterity.” Carl Henry agrees: “Half-gospels deceive and defraud, demote and degrade, and dead-end in disillusion and dishonor.”

The whole gospel means total commitment to all the demands of Jesus Christ, including the whole spectrum of ethical requirements that are inherent in the gospel message. It means for us to live “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). The whole gospel implies joyful celebration of God’s gift of salvation and continuous openness to the Holy Spirit to confirm the Word by signs and wonders. The whole gospel covers proclamation of truth and exhibition of love, manifestation of power and integrity of life. In the task of world evangelization, it will also require less competition and more cooperation, less self-sufficiency and more self-denial, less ambition to lead and more willingness to serve, less of the drive to dominate and more of the desire to develop.

We need to continue asking ourselves the painful question: *How can a sinful and divided church announce to the world the gospel of salvation and reconciliation?* Our distinction between the visible and invisible church is not biblical and is totally meaningless and hypocritical to the watching world. The whole gospel reminds us that although salvation is primarily a spiritual and personal experience, it has much wider cultural, social, and political implications. The Lausanne Covenant (article 5) states:

The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression, and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.

The New Testament does not drive a wedge between a “personal gospel” and a “social gospel.” There is only one gospel of Jesus Christ which is both personal and social because it has two focal points: the individual person and the kingdom of God. This is clearly taught and consistently practiced in the ministry of Jesus.

We want to bring the whole gospel to the whole world, but we must never allow it to become captive to the spirit of the world. The church is a fellowship of pilgrims, never completely at home, nor comfortable in any culture of socio-political order. We are a *communio viatorum*, still on the way to the eternal city. The scenery around us is constantly changing but our mandate remains the same: to authentically represent Christ and faithfully proclaim the gospel to our lost contemporaries so they may join us in the way of salvation.

### Translate the Gospel

The evangelical reading of the New Testament leads to the inevitable conclusion that there is only one gospel. It is the gospel of God (Romans 1:1,9,15–16), because it came from God; and “the gospel of Christ” (Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 9:13), because he and his redemptive work are its content. The New Testament never uses the word *gospel* in plural. It “is not something that man made up” for it was received “by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11–12). That is why, in expounding and defending it, the apostle Paul speaks of eternal condemnation for those who would dare to preach a “different gospel” (Galatians 1:6,9). However, Jesus and other New Testament evangelists portray considerable flexibility and creative freedom in adapting and variously communicating the gospel in different settings.

While the basic content is always recognizable and unchanging, the presentations are never the same. There are no “pre-packaged, universally applicable” formulations. The *Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture* summarized it well:

The Bible proclaims the gospel story in many different forms. The gospel is like a multifaceted diamond, with different aspects that appeal to different people in different cultures. It has depths we have not fathomed. It defies every attempt to reduce it to a neat formulation.

Messengers of the gospel are called to be bridge-builders spanning the wide gap between the ancient world of the biblical story and the modern technological age and culture. We are to bring the answer of Christ in a relevant and meaningful encounter with the spiritual needs of our contemporaries. The late Helmut Thielicke reminds us:

The gospel must be preached afresh and told in new ways to every generation, since every generation has its own unique questions. This is why the gospel must constantly be forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence.

We must be firmly rooted in the Word of God, while at the same time lovingly concerned and knowledgeable involved in the world of men. There is no effective evangelism without transposition and translation of the biblical *kerygma* into the lifestyle, culture, and thought forms of our audience.

For missionaries, this requires a thorough knowledge of the history, language, and customs, accompanied by constant cross-cultural sensitivity and respect for the people to whom God has sent them. For all who are involved in evangelism, this means that while faithfully expounding the divinely revealed truth, our preaching must also be people-, situation-, and issue-oriented.

Along with renewing the credibility of the Christian witness, we must also renew the intelligibility of the Christian message. In some parts of the world, the radical, ideologically inspired secularization and other developments in the society have either totally distorted or completely abolished the basic facts of the Christian faith. Most of the young people in Eastern Europe are biblically illiterate to the extent that they don't understand much of the famous historical art and literature in which biblical personalities and motifs are used. The message of the Cross and salvation can have little meaning for those who grew up in a system which claimed monopoly on truth, thought that historically Jesus never existed, and scientifically argued that any belief in God is superstition. Soviet government, for example, claims that one of the successes of its educational system is evident in the fact that around 90 percent of their young people, ages sixteen to nineteen, adhere to atheism as their worldview.

All of these and billions of other people need to hear and read the gospel translated into their thought categories in order to understand its significance for their own salvation. If we love them with the love of Christ, we will grapple with their prejudices and study their beliefs in order to understand them better and to be able to respond by articulating the gospel with intelligence, clarity, and relevance. The Holy Spirit will help us to be courageous and creative, and the love of Christ in us will cross all barriers in order to find, understand, and redeem.

Attempts to interpret the gospel in order to make it relevant are not without dangers. Some Western Protestant “apostles of modernity” have amputated the biblical message and rendered it powerless. In their almost neurotic anxiety about the relevance of

Christianity in an age of prevailing secularity, they have emptied their faith of its biblical contents. While seeking to incarnate the gospel, they have instead buried it in the process.

We must avoid total rigidity and pious “other-worldliness” in the name of faithfulness and also avoid “this-worldliness” in the name of relevance and modernity. Both betray the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the first renders it meaningless and the other leaves it powerless. We have no freedom to restructure, reduce, or in any other way compromise the message in order to make it more attractive and palatable to secularized minds or adherents of other religions. We must firmly refuse to participate in any syncretistic processes, remembering always that “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Our theology must not be reduced to ethics or our agenda set by the world rather than by our Lord. Dialogue with the world is a constant necessity. Its purpose in the evangelistic arena is not content transformation, but, rather, the contextual translation of our message. If the message is transformed in the process of communication, it will lose its own transforming power and cease to be the gospel of Jesus Christ. If it is faithfully preserved while meaningfully translated in order to be understood, it will retain and effectually manifest its evangelical power to transform human lives. This, and nothing less, is the task and purpose of the Great Commission.

While identifying in redemptive love with the lost humanity, we must watch to preserve our own spiritual identity and power, for in it lies the secret of our spiritual authority in this world. The incarnation of Jesus is the supreme example of identification without the loss of identity. John Stott reminded us that in this complex, and yet joyous task of world evangelization, the incarnational model of Jesus is not only instructive but also normative. For as John stated in his version of the Great Commission: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).