

4 September 2016

One Gospel
Galatians 1:6-12

The Apostle Paul devoted his life to preaching the good news – the *gospel*. Occasionally, though, the churches he started lost track of what exactly that good news consisted of. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul reminds them in these words, found in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4:

Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

This summary of the gospel was fairly gentle. When Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, he was more blunt. In fact, the entire letter to the Galatians was about what the gospel really was. That letter starts like this, from chapter 1, verses 6-12:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul's fairly vehement about this, isn't he? 'There is *one* gospel, and curse, or "damn," anyone who teaches a different gospel. There *is* no other gospel. In fact, even if it's an angel from heaven who tells you something else, curse him! Because the gospel I gave you is from higher up. The gospel I taught you I received from Christ himself.' Paul's often an emphatic writer, but this is forceful even by his standards.

But what *is* this gospel that Paul's so defensive of? If there's only one gospel, then it has to be broad enough to apply to all people. So what is this boiled down summary of the core teaching of the Church? Let's start with the understanding that many of us grew up with: the gospel as the Plan of Salvation. What must a person do to be saved? This expression of the good news comes in different forms. The hyper-caffeinated gospel-preaching that we know as the Revival Meeting, expresses it like this: You must repent of your sins and make a public profession of faith, giving your heart to Jesus. A more mellow expression of the Plan of Salvation is found in gospel tracts, like the "Roman Road to Salvation": Romans 3:23, *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*; 6:23, *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is*

eternal life; 5:8, But God commended his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us; 10:9, For if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. To summarize: You're a sinner who deserves to die, but Christ died for you, so if you believe in him you will live.

The Plan of Salvation is probably the most common expression of the gospel, and there is much to commend it. It is biblical, at least in the sense that it is supported by individual verses of scripture. It is simple and memorable and general enough to apply to everyone. For all these reasons, it has been a powerful tool of evangelism. On the other hand, it's also fairly confrontational. By starting out with the message that *you* are a sinner doomed to hell, it comes across as a threat rather than as good news. That's a problem. According to one recent study, for every person who responds to this message and becomes a Christian, there are ten others who are turned away, confirmed in their opinion that Christians are judgmental creeps. And I have a deeper concern. This formulation of the gospel seems to imply that the *good* part of good news is that we get a ticket to heaven when we die. People all around us may be doomed, but we prayed the Sinner's Prayer and have a Get-Out-of-Hell-Free card. Sort of like doing the paperwork and getting approval to skip the security lines at the airport. (I think I just implied that hell is run by the TSA.) Doesn't that feel a little shallow and self-serving? And is the good news of Jesus really deferred until we die? Isn't there anything in the gospel for now?

So let's go back to an earlier, and simpler, biblical formulation of the gospel. The Book of Acts is the story of the earliest years of the church, and it records several sermons were preached by the apostles. It's interesting to look at those different sermons side by side, because each one is carefully shaped for its audience. When Peter or Stephen preaches to a Jewish audience, the sermon quotes the Hebrew Bible and stresses that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But when Paul preaches to Gentiles, he leaves out the Hebrew stuff. In fact, in one fascinating example, Paul preaches to a group of Greek philosophers in Athens and quotes Greek poetry, never mentioning the Bible at all. But there is one thing – and *only* one thing – that appears in every sermon in the Book of Acts: Jesus died and rose from the dead.

Do you see how different this is? Where the Plan of Salvation understanding is sort of a How-To list – follow these steps to obtain this benefit – this is a story. The gospel is the story of Jesus, and the climax of the story is when he overcame death itself. This is what Paul says in the passage that we read from 1 Corinthians 15 – *I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.* It's all about the resurrection. Looking ahead, we see that the resurrection is the center of every affirmation of faith in the early church. When we read the Apostle's Creed, as we will in a few minutes, notice that it's basically a story, with Christ's resurrection in the center. The first half leads up to resurrection, and everything afterwards comes as a result. When we do the Communion liturgy, notice that it's basically a story, culminating in our shared confession, 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' This story understanding of the gospel is biblical, simple, and memorable. Moreover, it no longer comes across as shallow, selfish, or judgmental. All that's left is to ask how it applies to us now. So what if Jesus died and rose again two thousand years ago? Sure, it's a great story, but why should I care? What difference does it make to me?

So let me try to put together the story and its significance. We humans are peculiar creatures. So far as I know, we alone of earth's inhabitants are not satisfied just to survive. Yes, we want to survive, but we also want to know why. We sense that there must be a deeper meaning to existence, and we are so constructed that we are not able to rest until we find or invent one. Psychologist Victor Frankl, recalling his years in a Nazi concentration camp, concluded that the search for meaning is essential for human life. Prisoners who lost a sense of purpose died. We are designed to look for meaning. Unfortunately, every purpose that we come up with ourselves falls short. If we put our hope in possessions or power or fame or pleasure or patriotism or morality or anything else that is of this world, we will be disappointed. In a sense, we are pathetic creatures – designed to seek for that which we cannot find ourselves. Only if something breaks into this existence from outside and gives us purpose *beyond* this life are we able to find contentment, peace, joy, and meaning.

That's what the story of Jesus represents. God, the Creator, designed us in this way. As Augustine wrote: "You make my heart restless until it rests in thee." We were restless, seeking meaning and finding none, but Jesus, God Incarnate, broke into our existence from beyond. He embraced our human limitations entirely, up to and including death, yet without settling for any of our false gospels. And when he rose from the dead, he threw open the gates for us also to transcend the emptiness of this world, not just one day, but now. By living lives open to the reality of God, by shaping our own search for meaning around purposes that transcend this world, we can transcend ourselves. Not just one day, but now. This life of openness to God is what we call "faith." And that's good news.

This is why Paul was so frustrated with the Galatians. Some of the Galatian Christians were trying to achieve salvation themselves by keeping the Old Testament law. Paul couldn't believe it. Why would anyone turn back to the futility of trying to achieve one's own salvation? There is only one gospel, and that wasn't it.

But we still do it, and there are still false gospels around. As I close, let me name a couple of those. There's the gospel of enlightenment, for instance, the belief that true faith is all about understanding ourselves, through meditation and mindfulness and reading all the books on spirituality that are recommended by Oprah. The idea is that by separating ourselves from this world and living in blissful contemplation, we can find the meaning of life within our own souls. If this is your gospel, I wish you the best, but I'm not hopeful. Christ's gospel teaches that we must seek meaning beyond ourselves, because at the core of our being is not peace but only a deeper unrest. Or, alternately, there is the gospel of Christian triumphalism, the notion that our task is to transform society in the name of Christ. Some do this in the name of enforcing personal morality – Save the Family! – and others in the name of enforcing their understanding of social justice. Either way, this gospel is based on fulfilling our projects, without reference to God except to assume that God's opinions coincide with ours. Both false gospels are entirely self-driven, suggesting that by this or that means we can find meaning by our own efforts.

But the gospel – the *one* gospel – is the story of Christ, that Christ lived, died, and rose again as one of us, and in that revolutionary event, God broke through the barrenness of our own futile efforts to find meaning on our own. Christ broke down the walls between us and purpose, between us and fulfillment, between us and eternity, between us and God. Faith is living life

beside that broken wall, attentive to God's continual breaking in again. Not just one day, after we die, but now.

I invite those who are able to rise, turn to p. 882 in your hymnals and repeat with me the ancient story, as formulated in the Apostle's Creed. We say this together not because every one of us agrees with every statement in it. There are people here who aren't sure of the "creator of heaven and earth" part or the "Virgin" bit or something else. This is not everyone's personal statement of faith. But is the statement of faith of the Church to which we have joined our lives, and faith is not just something we do individually, but something we do together. Let us begin:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.