

Excursus on the Gospel

I. Becoming All Things to All Men

Luke's treatment of Paul's gospel ministry spotlights a principle that Paul himself emphasized in his first epistle to the saints at Corinth, namely the need to become "all things to all men" in ministering the gospel to them. The gospel heralds what God has accomplished in His Son, and because this accomplishment has cosmic and global significance, it pertains to the entire human race. Every human being is implicated in Christ's work, and therefore He commanded that His gospel be taken to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:3-8). The gospel proclaims God's restorative accomplishment in His Son, and all men are rightly obligated to embrace Him and enter into that restoration.

A. Contextualization – Coherence and Relevance

But faith comes by hearing, and this means that the content of the gospel proclamation must be understood by men if they are to believe the truth as it really is in Christ Jesus. Saving faith is faith in the true Christ in relation to His work and salvation as revealed in the Scriptures. This means that the one heralding the gospel must himself know and understand that gospel. It is precisely at that point that multitudes of Christians falter: *The single greatest need of the Church entering the twenty-first century is to recover the gospel.*

1. Many within the Church will regard this statement as an exaggeration, if not unfounded. Surely Christians understand the gospel; is there anyone within the Christian Church who doesn't know and believe that Jesus Christ died to make atonement for sinners so that they could be forgiven and saved?

All (or virtually all) professing Christians *do* know that much, but that's actually part of the problem. For many who claim the name of Christ, the gospel consists of nothing more than a handful of Bible truths about Jesus and His atoning death and the fact that people who believe those truths will go to heaven. Where the gospel is understood in that way, the notion that it needs to be recovered in the Church seems overstated at best. But if the gospel is more than this – and it most certainly is – then the Church's need quickly becomes evident.

There are arguably numerous reasons for Church's loss of the gospel, but a couple of them are perhaps most significant:

- a. The first is the general *biblical ignorance* that characterizes the Christian community today. Multitudes of professing Christians know next to nothing about the Scriptures and the faith they profess, often after decades of active involvement in churches. Many have some awareness of portions of New Testament content and teaching, but relatively few American Christians have any real understanding of the Old Testament (assuming they've even read it). No wonder the Christian response to the question, "What is the gospel?" is often a set of brief statements that could have been lifted directly from a tract.

- b. That points to a second important reason for the loss of the gospel, which is the “tract mentality” that fills so much of the contemporary Church. Evangelism materials and programs typically fragment and oversimplify the gospel message, and this reinforces the notion that the gospel can be reduced to a few scriptural propositions. The problem with this understanding and approach is two-fold:
 - First, while some such materials are substantially biblical in their language and content, they necessarily leave much unsaid.
 - But even worse, they provide no interpretation of the terms and ideas they contain. They leave the reader – who usually has no biblical grid whatsoever – to pour his own meaning into what he reads. The alternative is to have that content interpreted by the person presenting the material. Unfortunately, the “evangelist” often has only a marginally better grasp of the gospel than the biblically-uninformed individual he’s addressing.
2. The Church cannot bear witness to Christ and His gospel unless and until it understands what that gospel really is. Multitudes of Christians haven’t even gotten this far, but discerning the true gospel is only the starting point. Christ’s witnesses then have to learn how to make His gospel coherent and comprehensible to men.

The message and call of the gospel is for every tribe, tongue, nation, but if it’s to be coherent and understandable, it must come to people at the point of their culture, worldview, and personal experience and perspective. ***This is what Paul meant by “becoming all things to all men”*** (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

Becoming all things to all men means meeting people where they are personally, culturally, linguistically, and experientially. This is sometimes referred to as *contextualizing* the gospel, and it requires two things:

- a. First, it demands that the person bearing witness to Christ have a clear understanding of Him and His gospel as revealed in the Scripture. How can a person communicate what he himself doesn’t understand?
- b. But secondly, he must know his audience. Otherwise, he has no way of knowing whether his words are meeting with an accurate understanding in the minds of those listening to him. Too often Christians assume that non-believers are familiar with Christian terminology and concepts, and this is a critical mistake.

The idea is that the gospel must be *comprehensible* to its audience (Romans 10:11-17).

3. Contextualizing the gospel means making it accessible, coherent and comprehensible to the hearer. But in a subtle shift, contextualization is often conceived in terms of *relevance*. That is, many Christians think that “becoming all things to all men” means making the gospel relevant to unbelievers and their personal needs. The concern becomes demonstrating the gospel’s suitability to the hearer’s situation, desires and expectations.

*This shift in approach results in a shift in the meaning and goal of the gospel itself, with **the result that the gospel becomes personally defined and devised.***

4. This shift is subtle, and a distinction must be maintained, because *there is a sense in which we must testify to the relevance of the gospel.*
 - a. The gospel does address the very real and personal issues of people's lives.
 - b. But it does so because it speaks of a work of God that extends to and transforms the whole of creation, and therefore the issues and circumstances of an individual's life.
5. The gospel is preeminently relevant, but *not in the way people naturally think.*
 - a. The gospel proclaims that God has brought renewal and restoration to His creation.
 - b. But this renewal is *relational*, not circumstantial. The gospel is relevant, not because it promises to change one's circumstances, but because it addresses the most basic human need – *the need to be reconciled to God, oneself, and even the created order.*

B. Content – Problem and Remedy

Becoming all things to all men for the sake of the gospel involves making it coherent and showing how it is relevant to them and their lives. *But doing so presupposes that we understand the gospel ourselves and are able to articulate it.*

Christians and Christian institutions debate the issue of contextualization, but they're effectively putting the cart before the horse: ***For all the concern about contextualization, the Church should first be concerned about the matter of content.***

1. The gospel is in crisis in the Church, and the clearest proof is how few Christians are able to give a clear and even reasonably complete answer to the question of what the gospel is. That which is the very marrow of the Christian life is largely unknown to multitudes who claim to possess that life.
 - a. Some can go no further in their answer than a handful of “tract” propositions.
 - b. Others will articulate a false gospel of moralism, religiosity, or personal benefit:
 - the gospel as a call to a “holy” life;
 - the gospel as a call to follow Jesus. This sort of “following” amounts to seeking to conform one's life and practice to the pattern provided by Jesus. It is the paradigm of Jesus as “way-shower,” epitomized in the WWJD phenomenon;
 - the gospel as God's promise of an “abundant life” in the here-and-now and the blessedness of heaven in the life to come.

- c. Even where Christians have a fundamentally biblical understanding of the gospel, they still tend think of it in purely personal terms:
 - the solution to my problems;
 - the remedy for my sin and guilt;
 - the way in which I escape from future judgment and get to “go to heaven.”

2. If the Church doesn't understand what the gospel is, there's no way the world will.
 - a. The Church is appointed by God as the “pillar and support” of the truth and the mediator of it to the world, but it can't communicate what it doesn't understand.
 - b. In fact, *the Christian community most often reinforces what people already believe*, namely that Christianity is simply another religion. Whether intentionally or not, Christians often leave the impression that, consistent with other religious “faiths,” Christianity calls for devotion to its deity and an obedient life that will result in good outcomes in this life and blessing in the life to come.

3. In the strictest sense, the gospel consists in the totality of what's revealed in the Scriptures. The gospel sets forth God's eternal purpose for His creation and the process and means by which that purpose is being realized. That disclosure begins in the first chapter of Genesis and concludes with the final verse of Revelation. The gospel begins at the beginning of the Bible and ends with John's closing vision, but it may be summarized in terms of *a problem and a remedy*.
 - a. The gospel's first concern is the fundamental and determinative problem that plagues the world. People recognize that there are things amiss in their own lives and those of their fellow human beings, but they perceive and interpret those problems with a natural mind. In general, every human failure and impropriety is reduced to a matter of *ignorance* or/and *disease*.
 - The first is a social and cultural problem resulting from a lack of education, social development, sophistication, example, etc.
 - The second is personal as well as social/cultural. It consists in physiological, psychological and social pathologies, such as poverty, deprivation, abuse, neglect, traumas, mental illness (including neuroses and depression), addiction, etc.

Notable is the fact that, whatever the assumed cause of the human condition and problem (individually as well as collectively), people inevitably conceive of them in ways that leave them both *victimized* and *sufficient*. That is, a person's problems are not entirely (if at all) of his own doing, but he is sufficient to secure their resolution. When it comes to failure and flaw, people naturally regard themselves as victims; in their successes, however, they inevitably ascribe the victory to themselves.

All human beings in their fallen state conceive of their problems in natural – and therefore personally resolvable – terms. The gospel maintains otherwise: It insists that all human problems and pathologies are symptoms of the one great human “disease,” which is *estrangement* and *death*.

- The gospel – as the Scripture itself – acknowledges all the social, moral, and cultural ills mentioned above, but *regards them as symptoms*.
- The actual human problem is estrangement from God and the death of self that has resulted from it.
- Man’s fundamental problem is that he’s been given over to himself – *a self that no longer knows who it is and has no way of discovering or recovering itself*.

A few summary observations are in order:

- 1) Discerning a problem with an entity begins with understanding the entity itself. *A person who knows nothing about a car has no resource for diagnosing a problem regarding it. In truth, he can’t even determine that there is a problem.*
- 2) So discerning the human problem begins with understanding the human creature. One can only determine and assess disfiguration and dysfunction when he understands correct structure and function.
 - The starting point is the fact that man is divine image-bearer. *Unless and until this is recognized, the true solution to the human problem cannot be discerned.*
 - Form follows function, so that man’s identity as image-bearer speaks to his designed function.

The Scripture reveals that man was created as image-bearer to be image-son → to administer God’s dominion over His creation in the context of communion.
 - Form and function are indivisible and mutually referential. Man’s nature was determined by the role God designed him to fulfill. So also, man can only fulfill his role by authentic conformity to his nature.
- 3) Human beings were created to be lords over the created order, and *they cannot avoid or abdicate their role as overseers and stewards of this earth and its creatures.*
 - People can’t escape their created function, but *they can exercise it in a dysfunctional way when their nature - or perception of their nature - is perverted.*
 - ***The separation of form and function renders both incoherent.***
- 4) Man was created as divine image-bearer to be divine image-son:

- He was created to be “lord of the lords,” but in the context of **sonship**.
 - This is why independence from God results in **death**. (Note that the “death” of Genesis 3 is *innate* rather than *imposed*. God pronounced death as His just sentence, but as “due recompense” – as the natural and necessary consequence of the insistence upon human autonomy.)
 - From the Scripture’s standpoint – and so the gospel’s – death represents a thing’s severance from itself and everything else: ***Death is thing’s loss of its capacity to know itself and be what it is.***
 - The human problem is indeed pathological, but is the problem of **death**: *Man has lost himself; he no longer knows who or what he is*: He’s utterly unable to find himself because he doesn’t know what he’s looking for; *he wouldn’t know it if he “found” himself*. So also he cannot fix his problems *because he neither knows what is broken or what it would look like for him to be “fixed.”*
- b. Human beings and the Scripture present different answers to the question of the human condition and individual human problems. This is important because the way a remedy is conceived depends upon how the problem is conceived.

1) People can discern the problem of estrangement between self and God, but they ***conceive and interpret that problem from their estranged vantage point***:

- In their natural state, people are self-isolated and self-referential.
- Estrangement from God may be **a** problem, *but it’s not **the** problem*.

Man is self-isolated: *He has no resource other than himself* (Romans 7 – law & will). Thus he is compelled to believe that he is adequate – even if with occasional support.

- Personal, social and cultural ills must be addressed personally, and so it is with spiritual issues.
- The human remedy for distance from God is *religion* (all religion being *magic*: the employment of personally available resource in order to reach out to, bring near and make amenable and useful spiritual powers and beings).

Whether they hold a monergistic or synergistic view of religion, people inevitably conceive of the divine-human relationship in one of three ways, *all of which reflect and express their self-isolated, self-referential nature*:

- **they are god** (true even of atheism);
- **they are moving toward godhood** (deification);

- **they are able to effect a right relationship with God** (monergistically or synergistically, unilaterally or bilaterally).
- 2) As the gospel conceives of the human problem differently than people do, so it holds out a remedy foreign to the natural human mind. The gospel maintains that *the remedy for the individual and collective human pathology is entirely **divine**.*
- The remedy resides with God Himself and He must act *monergistically* (in His own power) and *unilaterally*.
 - The nature of man's fallenness makes this notion inconceivable. *People will accept a divine remedy as long as it's bilateral and synergistic.*

Once again some summary observations are worth noting:

- 1) The nature of the problem determines the remedy – when the problem is man's *death*, the remedy must be entirely *divine*. If "death" were simply moral, ethical or religious malaise, the remedy would be within human capacity and resource.

But if the problem is man's loss of himself, how is he to recover himself? If he even discerns that something is *wrong*, he doesn't know what constitutes *right*.

- 2) Man has lost himself, and the only way to "find" himself is to find the One whose image and likeness he bears.
- 3) If estrangement is death, life is found in reconciliation and reunification. *The human problem isn't solved by "finding God" as such, but by knowing God and being reconciled to Him* (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Galatians 4:1-9; Philippians 3:1-14; etc.).

- Men are capable of "finding" God, but they cannot escape perceiving and interpreting Him through their estranged, self-referential minds.

People can only "find" God in the sense that they are able to write Him into their own story. This is precisely what religion is all about.

- But finding God means coming to know Him and relate to Him as He really is. ***It is God writing us into His story.*** *In our self-isolated estrangement, all we can do is relate everything to ourselves.* This is where God must act monergistically. He must overcome our self-referential "blindness" and give us eyes to see.
- Only then can we find ourselves: We are created in His image; *He defines us, not the other way around.*
- Moreover, form follows function: *It is only as we find ourselves in relation to God that we can begin to fulfill our calling and live authentic human lives.*