



TRAIL THOUGHTS

TREKKING TOWARD GOD'S ADVENTUROUS FUTURE

A QUARTERLY PASTORAL LETTER FROM PAUL MUNDEY, MODERATOR, CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

SUMMER 2020

GOSPEL

GREETINGS IN THE STRONG NAME OF JESUS!

It's no secret; the Church is often conflicted and polarized. But why? In part, it's because we differ in our understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For some, the Gospel is primarily Good News concerning life after death; for others, it is primarily Good News concerning life after birth. The Gospel, however, is both, as Jesus prays: "Thy Kingdom come [O God] on *earth* as it is in *heaven*" (Matthew 6:10 RSV; emphasis added).

The Gospel's archenemy is sin, for sin sabotages the prospect of life—either life after death or birth. Thus, adjacent to Jesus' call to Kingdom life today/tomorrow is a summons to address ungodly thought/action—sin. Forgive us our debts and trespasses (Matthew 6:12). We need to reckon with sin, acknowledging its severity, for any thought/behavior rebellious to God (e.g., sin) is deadly, poisoning every system of life. John Piper itemizes the atrocity. Sin is: "The glory of God not honored. The holiness of God not revered. The greatness of God not admired. The power of God not praised. The truth of God not sought. The wisdom of God not esteemed. The beauty of God not treasured. The goodness of God not savored. The faithfulness of God not trusted. The promises of God not believed. The commandments of God not obeyed. The justice of God not respected. The wrath of God not feared. The grace of God not cherished. The presence of God not prized. The person of God not loved."¹

But here's the rub: sin is not only individual but systemic, not only personal but societal. Thus, as we "preach the Gospel," the Gospel is not only Good News for sinners, but those "sinned against,"² specifically, those sinned against by principalities and powers foreign to God. Systemic expressions of inequity such as racism loom large, blighting individuals and networks, sinning against vast numbers of persons and, in turn, the holiness, greatness, power, truth, wisdom, beauty, goodness, faithfulness, promises, commandments, justice, and person of God.

For some, connecting the Gospel to systemic sin is problematic, equal to affirming the social gospel movement of the early 20th century. That brings concern, for, as Elise Daniel points out, the social gospel movement inferred that "... God's Kingdom is built by us." But as Daniel goes on to note: "It's not. Every part of the Kingdom, from its establishment to its construction and eventual consummation, is carried out by Christ. [Yes, Christ uses] us...in this endeavor...[but] we aren't building the Kingdom. God is building it and using us."³ It's a subtle distinction.

Central to the Gospel's advancement, then, is costly participation *in Christ*. Imperative to such bonding is dying to anything that captivates us other than the Savior. Paul portrays such surrender graphically: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20 NIV). Michael Gorman clarifies Paul's intent: as we're crucified with Christ, we meld with Christ, receiving "...God's gracious act of [deliverance] from the power of Sin and [restoration] to right covenant relationship with himself, the righteous/just God, through the Messiah's faithful, loving death and resurrection, giving [us] new life..."⁴

As Gorman infers, restoration of relationship is central to the Gospel. Restoration to God is paramount, but

biblically, restoration is also to occur with self, significant others, and all of Creation. For the goal of the Gospel, as made vivid in Revelation, is the restoration of *all* of life—New Creation. "I saw Heaven and earth new-created...Look! I'm making everything new" (Revelation 21:1,5 MSG). "Then the Angel showed me Water-of-Life River, crystal bright. It flowed from the Throne of God and the Lamb...The Tree of Life was planted on each side of the River...The leaves of the Tree are for healing the nations. Never again will anything be cursed...His servants will offer God service—worshiping...their foreheads mirroring God. Never again will there be any night...The shining of God...is all the light anyone needs. And they will rule with him age after age after age" (Revelation 22:1-5 MSG).

It is God's vision of everything new—the healing of self, relationships, church, nations, creation, flowing from God and the Lamb (Jesus)—that we're to anticipate, contribute to, and preach. Such a synergy of health is the Gospel of Jesus, in all its fulness, destined to transform all of life.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha notes the attraction of persons to an elder in the monastery Alyosha is frequenting. Alyosha did not "...wonder why they loved him so, why they fell down before him and wept with emotion merely at seeing his face. Oh! he understood that for the humble soul of the Russian peasant worn out by grief and toil, and still more by the everlasting injustice and everlasting sin, his own and the world's, it was the greatest need and comfort to find some one or something holy to fall down before and worship. 'Among us [Alyosha reflects] there is sin, injustice, and temptation, but yet, somewhere on earth, there is someone holy and exalted. He has the truth; he knows the truth; so it is not dead upon the earth; so it will come one day to us, too, and rule over all the earth according to the promise...' [And so, Alyosha concludes, the elder] 'carries in his heart the secret of renewal for all: that power which will, at last, establish truth on the earth, and all men will be holy and love one another, and there will be no more rich nor poor, no exalted nor humbled, but all will be as the children of God, the true Kingdom of Christ will come.' That was the dream in Alyosha's heart"⁵ as well.

I pray that dream is in our heart also. For Alyosha's dream is the Savior's dream, the very heart of Jesus—and in turn, the heart of the Gospel—that we're to proclaim, boldly, in Jesus' holy name!

With expectation,



Paul Munday, Moderator, Church of the Brethren

Discussion Starters / Questions

1. Moderator Paul affirms the Gospel is Good News for both life after death and life after birth. Give examples of how that is true, citing Scripture passages to document your conviction.
2. Reflect on John Piper's listing of the results of sin. Discuss how you've seen sin poison life both personally and socially; connect your thoughts to Piper's itemization of how sin is a grievous violation of God.
3. Reflect on ways we can avoid the mistake(s) of the social gospel movement in our quest to preach the whole Gospel of Jesus.
4. Describe your experience of being crucified with Christ. Talk about the difficulty of sacrificing/surrendering cherished but unrighteous parts of life in your quest to participate more fully with Jesus.
5. In the end, as Revelation points out, God does not create a new world but *recreates* our current world. How does such an emphasis on "New Creation/all things new" bring hope amid our current sense of crisis and disorder?

To Dig Deeper

Michael Gorman. *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019.

Brenda B. Colijn. *Images of Salvation in the New Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010.

Brian Hurst and Jeff Maguire. "Whiteboard Whole Church Whole Gospel Whole World." https://youtu.be/Z_4u8TRorUw

Christopher J.H. Wright. "Whole Gospel, Whole Church, Whole World." <https://www.lausanne.org/content/whole-gospel-whole-church-whole-world>

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-is-sin-the-essence-and-root-of-all-sinning>

² This pithy phrase was first coined by Raymond Fung, former staff for evangelism for the World Council of Churches.

³ <https://tifwe.org/three-fallacies-of-the-social-gospel/>

⁴ Michael Gorman. *Participating in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019. p. 148.

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. New York: Random House, 1984. p. 30.