



## “I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel”: The Centrality of the Gospel

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When it comes right down to it, there is really only one thing I as a pastor have to offer my congregation—and only one thing that the church has to offer the world—and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Certainly we can do many useful things. We can help the poor, befriend the lonely, and comfort the sorrowing. We can encourage struggling marriages and families. And we can champion certain moral causes that could have a positive impact on our society. But there is nothing particularly Christian about these deeds of kindness. The one unique and truly indispensable thing we as Christians have to offer the world is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This gospel creates us, this gospel defines us, and this gospel equips us to serve the world in Jesus' name. Nothing is so precious to us; nothing can be so dear to our hearts; nothing can so demand our loyalty and commitment as this gospel.

This gospel can be found nowhere else—not in any government agency, not in any university degree program, not in any corporate product line. In fact, you couldn't buy it if you had all the money in the world. Only the church can offer the world this rare treasure, this pearl of great price.

In my role as a pastor people come to me with all sorts of problems in life, but I confess: I am a physician with but one medicine to prescribe, and that is the gospel of Christ. It may need to be applied in various ways, various aspects of it may need to receive the right emphasis, and it may need to be administered in the right form. But only the gospel of Jesus Christ can heal the deepest wounds of the human heart and can enable us to prosper according to God's design.

The centrality of the gospel for the church is illustrated most clearly in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This was a church with a host of problems, and in every instance Paul's response was to expound the gospel.

Addressing their divisions and in-fighting caused by their pride in wisdom and knowledge, Paul points to the foolishness of the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:17–18). Regarding the sexual immorality that was prevalent among them, Paul urges them to get rid of the old leaven of sin from their midst, for Christ the Passover Lamb has been sacrificed (5:7). Through the gospel we are joined to Christ. How, then, can we be joined to prostitutes? “You were bought with a price,” Paul says, “now honor God with your body” (6:20).

On the issue of marriage, the gospel means you can serve God in whatever circumstance you are in—whether married or single, whether slave or free. You can live out the gospel wherever God has put you, so don't be overly concerned about whether you are married or not (7:17–24).

And as to eating food sacrificed in the pagan temples, the gospel prohibits us from participating in idol worship, for through the gospel we participate in Christ (10:14–17). The gospel also sets us free from laws about what we eat and what we drink (8:1–8). Time after time, Paul's response to the problems of this church centers on the gospel and what it ought to mean in our lives.



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So it should be for us. Are you battling depression? Cling to the hope that is yours in Christ. Are you lonely and insecure? Reflect on the message of God's love and eternal companionship found in the gospel. Are you struggling to get along with your spouse? Consider what it means to follow a crucified Messiah who, in humility, gave up everything for you. Are you racked with guilt? Receive the forgiveness found in the cleansing blood of Christ. Are you angry with a brother or sister? Forgive as you have been forgiven.

Certainly, I'm not so naïve as to think that the gospel gives us a quick and easy solution to all of life's problems, nor that the gospel alone is the treatment for all of life's ills. But I am saying that it is the ultimate answer and the answer we most need if we are to have a real and final hope.

And what is this gospel? The gospel is the good news that in his Son Jesus Christ God has revealed his holy love to the world. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. In Christ God has given us victory over the powers of sin and death. In Christ God has acted to bring us out from under his judgment and into a right relationship with himself. Through Christ's death for our sin we can be justified before him—forgiven for all that we have done to offend him. In Christ we can come to know God as our Father in heaven. In Christ we can be given new life by his Spirit living within, changing us from the inside. In Christ we can be assured of a relationship with God that death cannot destroy. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is the gospel.

This gospel is the very centerpiece of the plan of God to restore and renew his creation. The universe itself was created with Christ in mind. He is the supreme revelation of God—his true image. Jesus Christ reflects God in the world and so brings him glory. Jesus Christ is the one through whom and for whom and to whom are all things. He is the key to the mystery of human existence, giving us a reason for living. Not only that, he give us a hope for the future, for in his resurrection glory he has revealed the destiny of all who are joined to him by faith. God's kingdom will come, his will will be done, on earth as it is in heaven in and through Jesus Christ.

This is the gospel—the revelation of the grace and truth of God in Jesus Christ. That's what has to be at the center of who we are as a church. If we give that up, we have nothing.

An abandonment of the gospel rarely happens by design; it usually happens by degrees. The gospel which was once central in one generation becomes assumed in

the next. Sometimes good things—things like church growth or inspiring music or community service or political action for social justice—these good things begin to crowd their way into the center of the church's life. But where the gospel is simply assumed, it soon begins to be forgotten. May it never be.

We must be deliberate and bold in seeking to keep the gospel at the center of who we are as a church, because by its very nature we will be tempted to set it to one side and put something else in its place. That's why we must take to heart those powerful words of the apostle Paul in Romans 1:16—"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes—for the Jew first, and also for the Greek."

Paul affirms that he is not ashamed of the gospel, for he knows well that that is always a real temptation, for God, in the majesty of his own wisdom, designed it that way. This gospel doesn't come in an impressive manner that appeals to the values of this world. Jesus wasn't born into a noble household in a regal palace as a royal prince, pampered and adored by all. No, he was born the son of a simple teenage girl, under the cloud of moral scandal, in a cattle stall. He lived a humble life as a carpenter in Palestine, before beginning a short career as an itinerant preacher, who was condemned to die as a common criminal on a Roman cross. After that he was proclaimed as the Son of God and Savior of the world by a bunch of fishermen from Galilee who claimed that they'd seen him back from the dead. We now have to take their word for it.

God didn't intervene in history to bring salvation in obvious might and majesty, but in a veiled way that was bound to look to the world like weakness and folly. That's why we are tempted to be ashamed of this gospel.

Paul had heard the sneers of the cultured crowd in Athens when he told them about Jesus being raised from the dead. And he had experienced the rejection of his own people when he preached this message of a crucified Messiah of Israel. Paul knew that this message of the gospel was an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. He knew the temptation to be ashamed of this message.

That temptation is no less real in our day. The "gospel" has all sorts of negative associations in our culture today. Some dismiss it simply for being old-fashioned and out of date. We live in a world where last week's news is old news. How foolish it is to think that this man who lived 2,000 years ago could possibly make any difference today.

Some are offended by its exclusive and absolutist character. “You think you *alone* have the truth?” some ask. What about the sincere Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist or the moral agnostic—are they lost without Christ? It is an offense even to suggest that they are.

Add to that the harsh and judgmental character associated with the gospel. It’s about law, righteousness, and judgment—and even about a blood sacrifice that atones for our sin, appeasing the wrath of God. That kind of language is just not used in polite company today.

And then there is the supernatural nature of this gospel. Christians talk about Jesus’ miracles and his resurrection, and everybody knows that these things just can’t happen. It’s all legend; it’s primitive folklore—nobody can believe in all that anymore.

This gospel is just not in tune with the sophisticated world in which we live. What does it have to do with the network news and the *Washington Post* and the intellectual centers in our major universities? Don’t think you can say you believe this gospel stuff, much less try to speak about it to anybody else, and still fit in to the mainstream of American culture. It won’t work. If you talk about this gospel in public, people will be sure to think you’re one of those religious fanatics, those “fundamentalists” whom they read about in the newspapers.

Let’s face it, there is nothing impressive about this gospel message. This gospel is not about the high and mighty, but the weak and lowly. It’s not about self-promotion, but self-abasement. It’s about serving others rather than being served. The greatest among you will be the slave of all, Jesus said. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who know they are sick. It’s about a road to glory, paved by the stones of suffering. It’s about a Savior who calls us to come and die to ourselves.

The gospel is still a scandal; it is still considered foolishness in many circles today. One might well be tempted to be ashamed of it.

But Paul will not succumb to such temptation, for Paul’s eyes have been opened to see that that gory cross, that bloody cross, that cross of Christ is, in fact, a thing of great beauty.

I’m reminded of the story of the girl who was deeply ashamed of her mother. The mother’s hands were grotesquely scarred from burns, and the girl insisted that her mother always wear gloves to cover up their ugliness. Then one day the girl asked her mother how her hands had become so badly scarred. “I burned my hands when you were only a baby,” she said, “when I reached out to pull *you* out of a fire.” From that day,

nothing gave that girl more pride than her mother’s mangled hands. They became to her the most beautiful hands in all the world.

Are you embarrassed by the old-fashioned, unsophisticated, supernatural, and exclusive message of divine truth known as the gospel? Are you ashamed of the One who endured the humiliation of being spat upon, mocked, beaten, and then nailed to a cross? Are you ashamed of a Savior who shed his own blood for sinners like you and me? You shouldn’t be—for there’s only one thing worse than you being ashamed of him, and that is him being ashamed of you.

We must never be ashamed of the gospel. We can never let the gospel get pushed aside in the preaching and teaching of the church. Nothing is more important than this message of the gospel—this good news of the love of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what the church must be about—learning to live all of life in the light of this glorious good news.

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*Bill Kynes* studied philosophy at the University of Florida, where he also played quarterback and was inducted into the university’s Athletic Hall of Fame. He and his wife, Susan, have four boys: Will, Matthew, Cameron, and Cason.

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