



## The Gospel Old and New

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**H**ave you heard the new gospel? It's not been codified. It's not owned by any one person or movement. But it is increasingly common.

The new gospel generally has four parts.

It usually starts with an apology: "I'm sorry for my fellow Christians. I understand why you hate Christianity. It's like that thing Gandhi said, 'Why can't the Christians be more like their Christ?' Christians are hypocritical, judgmental, and self-righteous. I know we screwed up with the Crusades, slavery, and the witch trials. All I can say is: I apologize. We've not given you a reason to believe."

Then there is an appeal to God as love: "I know you've seen the preachers with the sandwich boards and bullhorns saying 'Repent or Die.' But I'm here to tell you God is love. Look at Jesus. He hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors. He loved unconditionally. There is so much brokenness in the world, but the good news of the Bible is that God came to live right in the middle of our brokenness. He's a messy God and his mission is love. 'I did not come into the world to condemn the world,' that's what Jesus said (John 3:17). He loved everyone, no matter who you were or what you had done. That's what got him killed."

The third part of the new gospel is an invitation to join God on his mission in the world: "It's a shame that Christians haven't shown the world this God. But that's what we are called to do. God's kingdom is being established on earth. On earth! Not in some distant heaven after we die, but right here, right now. Even though we all mess up, we are God's agents to show his love and bring this kingdom. And we don't do that by scaring people with religious language or by forcing them into some religious mold. We do it

by love. That's the way of Jesus. That's what it means to follow him. We love our neighbor and work for peace and justice. God wants us to become the good news for a troubled planet."

And finally, there is a studied ambivalence about eternity:

"Don't get me wrong, I still believe in life after death. But our focus should be on what kind of life we can live right now. Will some people go to hell when they die? Who am I to say? Does God really require the right prayer or the right statement of faith to get into heaven? I don't know, but I guess I can leave that in his hands. My job is not to judge people, but to bless. In the end, God's amazing grace may surprise us all. That's certainly what I hope for."



*Kevin DeYoung*

### Why So Hot?

This way of telling the good news of Christianity is very chic. It's popular for several reasons.

1. It is partially true. God is love. The kingdom has come. Christians can be stupid. The particulars of the new gospel are often justifiable.

2. It deals with straw men. The bad guys are apocalyptic street preachers, Crusaders, and caricatures of an evangelical view of salvation.

3. The new gospel leads people to believe wrong things without explicitly stating those wrong things. That is, Christians who espouse the new gospel feel safe from criticism because they never actually said belief is unimportant, or there is no hell, or that Jesus

isn't the only way, or that God has no wrath, or that there is no need for repentance. These distortions are not explicitly stated, but the new gospel is presented in such a way that nonbelievers could, and by design should, come to these conclusions. In other words, the new gospel allows the non-Christian to hear what he wants, while still providing an out against criticism from other Christians. The preacher of the new gospel can always say when challenged, "But I never said I don't believe those things."

4. It is manageable. The new gospel meets people where they are and leaves them there. It appeals to love and helping our neighbors. And it makes the appeal in a way that repudiates any hint of judgmentalism, intolerance, or religiosity. This is bound to be popular. It tells us what we want to hear and gives us something we can do.

5. The new gospel is inspirational. This is what makes the message so appealing to young people in particular. They get the thrill and purpose of being part of a big cause, without all the baggage of the Church's history, doctrine, and hard edges. Who wouldn't want to join a revolution of love?

6. The new gospel has no offense to it. This is why the message is so attractive. The bad guys are all "out there." This can be a problem for any of us. We are all prone to soft-pedaling the gospel, only presenting the attractive parts and failing to mention where Christ does not just comfort but also confronts. And it must confront more than the sins of others. It is far too easy to use the new gospel as a way to differentiate yourself from all the bad Christians. This makes you look good and confirms to the non-Christians that the obstacle to their commitment lies with the hypocrisy and failure of others. There is no talk of repentance or judgment. There is no hint that Jesus was killed not so much for his inclusive love as for his outrageous godlike claims (Matt. 26:63-66, 27:39-43). The new gospel talks of salvation in strictly cosmic terms. In fact, the door is left wide open to imagine that hell, if it even exists, is probably not a big threat for most people.

## Why So Wrong?

It shouldn't be hard to see what is missing in the new gospel. What's missing is the old gospel, the one preached by the apostles, the one defined in 1 Corinthians 15, the one summarized later in the Apostles' Creed.

"But what you call the new gospel is not a substitute for the old gospel. We still believe all that stuff."

Okay, but why don't you say it? And not just privately to your friends or on a statement of faith somewhere, but in public? You don't have to be meaner, but you do have to be clearer. You don't have to unload the whole truck of systematic theology on someone, but to leave the impression that hell is no big deal is so un-Jesus like (Matt. 10:26-33). And when you don't talk about the need for faith and repentance you are very un-apostolic (Acts 2:38; 16:31).

"But we are just building bridges. We are relating to the culture first, speaking in a language they can understand, presenting the parts of the gospel that make the most sense to them. Once we have their trust and attention, we can disciple and teach them about sin, repentance, faith, and all the rest. This is only pre-evangelism."

Yes, it's true, we don't have to start our conversations where we want to end up. But does the new gospel really prime the pump for evangelism or just mislead the non-Christian into a false assurance? It's one thing to open a door for further conversation. It's another to make Christianity so palatable that it sounds like something the non-Christian already does. And this is assuming the best about the new gospel, that underneath there really is a desire to get the old gospel out.

Paul's approach with non-Christians in Athens is instructive for us (Acts 17:16-34). First, Paul is provoked that the city is so full of idols (16). His preaching is not guided by his disappointment with other Christians, but by his anger over unbelief. Next, he gets permission to speak (19-20). Paul did not berate people. He spoke to those who were willing to listen. But then look at what he does. He makes some cultural connection (22-23, 28), but from there he shows the contrast between the Athenian understanding of God and the way God really is (24-29). His message is not about a way of life, but about worshiping the true God in the right way. After that, he urges repentance (30), warns of judgment (31), and talks about Jesus' resurrection (31).

The result is that some mocked (32). Who in the world mocks the new gospel? There is nothing not to like. There is no scandal in a message about lame Christians, a loving God, changing the world, and how most of us are most likely not going to hell. This message will never be mocked, but Paul's Mars Hill sermon was. And keep in mind, this teaching in Athens was only an entree into the Christian message. This was just the beginning, after which some wanted to hear him again (32). Paul said more in his opening salvo than some Christians ever dare to say. We may

not be able to say everything Paul said at Athens all at once, but we certainly must not give the impression in our “pre-evangelism” that repentance, judgment, the necessity of faith, the importance of right belief, the centrality of the cross and the resurrection, the sinfulness of sin, and the fallenness of man—the stuff that some suggest will be our actual evangelism—are outdated relics of a mean-spirited, hurtful Christianity.

### A Final Plea

Please, please, please, if you are enamored with the new gospel or anything like it, consider if you are really being fair with your fellow Christians in always throwing them under the bus. Consider whether you are preaching as Jesus did, who called people, not first of all to a way of life, but to repent and believe (Mark 1:15). And as my friends and I consider if we lack the necessary patience and humility to speak tenderly with non-Christians, consider if your God is a lopsided cartoon God who never takes offense at

sin (because sin is more than just un-neighborliness) and never pours out wrath (except for the occasional judgment against the judgmental). Consider if you are giving due attention to the cross and the Lamb of God who died there to take away the sin of the world. Consider if your explanation of the Christian message sounds anything like what we hear from the apostles in the book of Acts when they engage the world.

This is no small issue. And it is not just a matter of emphasis. The new gospel will not sustain the church. It cannot change the heart. And it does not save. It is crucial, therefore, that our evangelical schools, camps, conferences, publishing houses, and churches can discern the new gospel from the old.

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