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The Gospel in Crisis

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THE GOSPEL IN CRISIS

“Pop” gospels plagued the early church; are they being preached from today’s pulpits?

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:6-10, NKJV).

What a way to begin a letter! In our sophisticated age, we would spend a few pages working up to our

rebuke. But Paul wastes no time; the issue is too crucial: The nature of the gospel has been challenged; its preaching perverted. With his passion for the gospel running through every sentence, he begins with a rebuke.

Some theologians believe that this letter saved Christianity from degenerating into a form of paganism. If the stakes were that high, we need not apologize for Paul’s lack of diplomacy. Church history reveals

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that confusion, perversion, and desertion came disconcertingly early in the life of the Christian Church. So early in fact that Paul, that great preacher of justification by grace through faith, could not contain his indignation:

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? . . . Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain perfection by human effort?" (Gal. 3:1-5, NIV).

The words are sober and hard, but the discerning reader senses the profundity of God's love—for the truth of the gospel itself and for those who shall hear the gospel and be saved by its power. If the church of today were to be similarly threatened by a false gospel, should not its leaders speak out as earnestly and decisively as Paul?

Some church leaders believe such a threat exists. And like Paul they mince no words. Professor Carl Braaten of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago is one. He has warned his church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), about the preaching of a pseudo-gospel in which "a god without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."¹

If Braaten's gauntlet were not enough, Prof. Robert Jenson of St. Olaf College, throws down another. Attributing the theological problems

facing the ELCA to the "general threat" faced by Christianity in our time, he writes of a "new form of 'gnosticism'" that "balks" at biblical certitudes and "yearns" for a gospel "more amenable to the contemporary mind."²

Are Adventists also beginning to see evidence of a struggle for the "truth of the gospel and the integrity of the Church's mission"? As with the ELCA, are theological plates grinding away at each other under the surface of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Although we may use different labels, the fault line runs between those for whom "traditional theological affirmations remain indispensable and effective and those who regard them as so much baggage to be jettisoned on the way to the future."³ Borrowing further from this provocative article, let's ask whether there is evidence of a struggle for the "truth of the gospel and the integrity of . . . [our] Church's mission."⁴

The "Pop" Gospel

A young man who has responded to a preacher's invitation to "receive Christ," testifies, "I have a relationship with Jesus, and eternal life is mine." He talks of Jesus, of faith, of eternal life. But his behavior gives little evidence of regeneration and conversion. He lives and behaves as if he were never touched by the power of the gospel.

“The softening of the New Testament message has brought with it a putrefying inclusivism that in effect sees almost any kind of positive response to Jesus as tantamount to saving faith.”—John MacArthur.

A contradiction, to be sure, for no relationship with Jesus is based on disobedience. Judas, too, had a relationship with Jesus, but it was surely not a *saving* relationship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that no one can claim to be justified through faith who has not left all to follow Christ—left the old life of sin and left rebellion against God’s commands. It is not the *leaving* that saves, it is the *saving* that results in the leaving. No one can follow Christ who has not died to self-will.

Does the true gospel lead us to seek the approval of society and culture? Paul’s answer is unequivocal: “If I were still trying to please [these], I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10, NIV). The “pop” gospel proclaims a false hope, because it leads sinners to believe that they can have a saving relationship with Jesus while maintaining an ungodly life. This “gospel” separates the biblical call to believe in the Saviour from the biblical call to obey Him as Lord. Says John MacArthur in *The Gospel According*

to Jesus:

“The softening of the New Testament message has brought with it a putrefying inclusivism that in effect sees almost any kind of positive response to Jesus as tantamount to saving faith. Christians today are likely to accept anything other than utter rejection as authentic faith in Christ.”⁵

MacArthur is speaking of evangelical communions. However, often lurking behind pleas for relationship, tolerance of behavior, and theological pluralism in any communion, including Adventism, is a pseudo-gospel, a message not in harmony with the New Testament.

What Constitutes Salvation?

A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is life-transforming. The gospel is the good news of love, acceptance, and forgiveness; but it also rebukes those who are outwardly religious but whose lives reveal no evidence of righteousness. In the Pop Gospel, love makes no moral demands, and there are no behavioral expectations. Such is

not the love of the biblical revelation. God so loved that He gave. Self-sacrificing love is the essence of His character. But while God loves all people everywhere, He forgives only those who repent and accepts into His kingdom only those who turn from sin and rebellion to embrace holiness and discipleship. True salvation does not divorce justification from sanctification, as though they are unrelated experiences, one necessary, the other optional.

A pseudo-gospel is actually a form of legalism, in that “deciding” for Christ becomes the work that qualifies for salvation. True faith in Christ, however, is evidenced in submission and discipleship. “By faith Abraham. . . obeyed” (Heb. 11:8).

True Effects of Divine Grace

The good news of the gospel is not just about justification. It is also good news that by God’s grace we can be regenerated, sanctified, and glorified. Faith that rejects the authority of Christ is not true faith. Faith that is not demonstrated by a transformed life is not true faith.

God’s grace does not allow us to live in the flesh; it empowers us to live in the Spirit. Grace does much more than give us good feelings about Jesus and ourselves—

“It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly

lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:11-14, NIV).

There, indeed, is *great news!* There is the gospel truth!

Preaching that does not include the call to repentance and transformation is not biblical preaching. To tell a congregation to give their sins to Jesus without telling them what that transaction involves in terms of repentance and confession, leads only to confusion and misunderstanding. Only those who confess their sin, rebellion, and need; repent of their sin; hear the message of forgiveness; and are empowered by divine grace to turn from sin and embrace the new life of righteousness can truly give God glory (Rev. 14:7).

Paul, of course, was not the only “undiplomatic” preacher of the New Testament. Peter’s preaching at Pentecost was direct, forceful, and confrontational. And it resulted in the New Testament’s only account of a mass conversion:

“Men of Israel. . . you, with the help of wicked men, put [Jesus of Nazareth] to death by nailing him to a cross. . . . God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ When the people heard this

they were cut to the heart and said to Peter. . . 'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' . . . With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation'" (Acts 2:23-40, NIV).

It is not likely that such preaching as this sounds familiar. A contemporary writer comments:

"Preaching often falls short of prophetic power. Divorced from the monstrous infirmity we carry within, it can speak no good because it shrinks from speaking any ill. Despite what contemporary preachers predict, the spiritual life is seldom a matter of painless, uninterrupted growth. The irony of the gospel is that it becomes good news only for those immersed in the bad news of their normal experience."⁶

God's Church: Agent of Redemption

The church is not a discussion club for the exchange of views, nor is it a debating society. It is an agent of redemption. The church lives from the faithful and powerful preaching of the gospel's full truth. Without gospel reference points, we would not know that we need to repent, or rejoice, or whether our thoughts and

actions are in harmony with God's will and purpose. Thus—

"The gospel is to be presented, not as a lifeless theory, but as a living force to change the life. . . . Those whose course has been most offensive to Him He [God] accepts; when they repent, He imparts to them His divine Spirit."⁷

"In apostolic times he [Satan] led the Jews to exalt the ceremonial law and reject Christ; at the present time he induces many professing Christians, under pretense of honoring Christ, to cast contempt on the moral law and to teach that its precepts may be transgressed with impunity. It is the duty of every servant of God to withstand firmly and decidedly these perverters of the faith and by the word of truth fearlessly to expose their errors."⁸ □

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¹Carl Braaten, "A Lutheran Debate on Theological Integrity," *Christian Century* (June 27-July 4, 1990): 623.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 624.

⁴Ibid., p. 623.

⁵John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1988), p. 37.

⁶Belden C. Lane, "Grace and the Grotesque," *Christian Century* 107 (Nov. 14, 1990): 33.

⁷Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 816.

⁸_____, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 387.