

The Gospel-defined Identity of the Church

2 Corinthians 5; 1 Thessalonians 1

May 3, 2015

Prayer: Jeremiah 12:2b-3—“You are near in their mouth and far from their heart. But You, O Lord, know me; You see me and test my heart toward You.”

As ease our way into our new series, *Rediscovering the Church*, we have been recently asking the question, what is to be our identity as the church of Jesus Christ. Last week we discovered that we must have a God-centered, Christ-exalting identity. This week we are reminded that as the church our identity is to be gospel-defined.

In other words, the gospel is the very heart of the church. The gospel is what defines us as the people of God. We are a people who believe the gospel; we love the gospel, we proclaim the gospel; we are called to spend our lives for the sake of the gospel (Mark 10:29¹). The gospel has changed us, and is still changing us. The gospel defines how we are to live in relationship to God and therefore how we are to live in relationship to everyone and everything else. The gospel is the very heart of the church. In fact, Jesus summed up His message in one sentence, “*The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*” (Mark 1:15).

The church will not live out its true identity until it is Gospel-defined. And so it very important for us to be clear about the gospel.

Illus: One of those high-blood-pressure-moments I will never forget. ..There was no mention of the destructive power and nature of sin and no explanation of what the cross was really about. Just that God loved them as though God was just a fuzzy teddy bear-like friend who would make them feel better about their lives. The problem is that this invitation was void of the gospel. If the kids who responded to that “invitation” thought they were now saved because they had gone forward, they were doubly lost. My blood pressure sky-rocketed and the next thing I taught my youth group kids was what the gospel means.

¹ “...whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it.”

So we need to be clear on what the gospel is, and what it isn't.

- The gospel is not simply that God is love and so you are okay.
- The gospel is not just that Jesus wants to be your friend.
- The gospel is not just that we should live right.
- Being a Christian is not something you have always been.

The gospel is the good news of what God has done on our behalf through Christ to reconcile us to Himself for His glory.

Now you don't need to be reconciled to someone unless there is a problem. The problem here, is that we have sinned against God. Romans 3:23 says that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” As we saw last week in Isaiah 43:7, God created us for His glory, but we have shunned His glory to live independently of him.

Sin is not merely a general concept to describe our disinterest in God. It includes very specific decisions, acts, words, thoughts and attitudes that do not reflect the pure character of God. We have been made in His image to reflect Him, but we have rejected the very One we were made to reflect. Colossians 1:14 uses the language of a certificate listing decrees or charges against us for our sinful behavior. So we are talking about real actions, words, choices that you have committed that make you legally guilty before God for breaking His law.

Our problem is compounded by the fact that God is absolutely holy. Hab 1:3—“*Your eyes are too pure to approve evil. You cannot look on wickedness with favor.*” Add to that now that the seriousness of any offense against God is high treason against your Creator and warrants death—spiritually separation from God forever. “*The wages of sin [what we earn/deserve when we sin] is death*” (Rom 6:23).

Now the question is, what is going to get you out of that predicament?—you're guilty, charged and sentenced. You can't just

escape or hide from God. And you certainly can't pay it off or make up for it.

The only hope is for God Himself to do something on your behalf, which He has done through the cross of Jesus Christ. And that is what we call the gospel—the good news that Jesus took your death sentence upon Himself.

The question is, what is the impact of the cross? How does God, the Judge, interpret what Christ has done for us. That answer is found in 2 Cor 5:21.

Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Cor 5. Verse 21 gets us to the heart of what the gospel means, but we are going to begin reading in vs. 9.

[2 Cor 5:9—6:2]

A few notes:

- Vs. 15 ~ new purpose (cf. vs. 9-10) – new desire/ambition/orientation
- vs. 17 ~ new nature
- vs. 18a ~ new relationship with God
- vs. 18b-19 ~ new ministry/mission/responsibility
- vs. 20 ~ we are ambassadors for Christ—we are to be His voice—and our message is urgent: “we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”
- Vs. 21 ~ what does our message mean? → new status (from guilty to forgiven)

Vs. 21

In other words, God treated Christ as though He had committed all of our sins so that through His death-payment for sin, God could treat us as though we had lived His perfect life.

So the gospel is God in His holiness demanding that justice be paid for our sin, yet in His love laying that judgment on Christ, exchanging our sin for His righteousness so that we could be reconciled to God, released of our guilty status, to be regarded no longer as an enemy of God (under His wrath) but now as a child of God (lavished with His favor). And that good news, when we believe it and receive it, redefines what our lives are about—not just personally but together as the people of God, the church. We live out of our new identity as forgiven, loved, children of God commissioned for His reconciling work in this world.

How does this gospel take effect in our lives (not automatic), and what does it look like in a local church? Let's turn now in our Bibles to [1 Thess 1].

Vs. 3: The Thessalonian church is characterized by 3 gospel-effects:

- Working in faith (God)
- Laboring in love (people)
- Steadfast in hope (circumstances)

Ortland, reflecting on the hope we have in the gospel because Christ promised to make all things new (Rev 21:5): “*How does...gospel doctrine lead to gospel culture? It creates churches of bright, resilient, rugged hope. It creates churches that face life as it is and are not defeated. There is nothing petty and small about a church when it believes this massive and noble gospel. And there is nothing this world can dish out to our churches that our Savior won't bend upward and use it to lift us closer to our eternal home... 'So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us and eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor 4:16-17)'*”²

What is the source of this faith, hope, and love? Vs. 4: “knowing, brethren beloved of God, *His choice of you.*” You would not be a believer (simply by choice), if God had not first chosen you—which Eph 1:4 tells us He did before creation. It's not like you just heard the message and then just made a choice to believe it—God had to work in you personally and powerfully by the Holy Spirit to convict you of your sin and of your need for Christ's saving rescue. This is what vs. 5

² Ray Ortland. The Gospel: How the church portrays the Beauty of Christ. Pg. 62

is saying, [vs. 5]. If you think that God just puts the gospel out there like the classified ads and then everyone just decides for themselves whether or not they are interested, you have much too high a view of man's spiritual disposition apart from Christ. Paul is confident that God has chosen them because of the evidence of the Holy Spirit's powerful working to change their hearts and minds.

That change is apparent in [vs. 6].

- Imitators of the Lord, having received the Word
- Receiving the word with joy (even though it is met with tribulation)

Here is vs. 5-6, Paul has left us a trace of how they came to faith in Christ; how the gospel has taken effect in their lives. The Spirit has so empowered the Word to impact them with conviction that it has resulted in believing hearts. Let me summarize this in one sentence and then verify each part of that statement from scripture.

We are born again (we experience spiritual rebirth) **as the Spirit of God works through the Word of God to produce faith in the Son of God.**

- **Rebirth is a work of the Spirit of God**
John 3:7-8—“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
Titus 3:5—“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit
- **Rebirth comes to us through the Word of God**
1 Peter 1:23—“you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God”
- **Rebirth is received through faith in the Son of God.**

John 3:14-16—“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.”

Eph 2:8—“For by grace you have been saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

So the gospel takes effect in us as the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to birth faith in our hearts—that's God work in us. But what is our role? Do we have one? Yes! The Scriptures clearly teach that we must have two-fold response to the gospel—the very same response that Jesus called for—to repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15).

The same response the apostles called for in Acts 20:21, “solemnly testifying...of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

- **Repent**—to repent is to have a change of mind that alters the direction and purpose of your life. It means actual, substantive change, turning from what displeases God to what pleases God. Repentance is what you *do* when your beliefs about God and yourself are true. To repent is to turn to God as the ultimate treasure in your life; to turn from living for yourself to living for God's glory.
- **Believe**—to believe means to agree with God. Agree with what He says about Himself, you, and your need for Christ. A person who believes what God says through the gospel will put his entire trust in Christ, abandoning all reliance on self.

Repentance and faith were evident in the Thessalonian church as we see in [vs. 9-10]. Their repentance meant giving up idols—now longer living for competing loyalties against God. Their faith meant living by the truth in a Godward direction, with their hope staked on Jesus.

So what did a gospel-shaped church look like in Thessalonica? It was...

- Working in faith (vs. 3)

- Laboring in love (vs. 3)
- Steadfast in hope (vs. 3)
- Power of the Spirit working through the Word (vs. 5, 6)
- Joyful in the Word, even in the face of tribulation (vs. 6)
- Broadcasting the word of the gospel everywhere possible (vs. 8)
- Demonstrating substantive repentance and vibrant faith (vs. 9)
- Longing for Christ to return (vs. 10)

How does the gospel take root in us?

Spirit → Word → Conviction → Repentance & Faith

Is the Spirit of God working in you? Is He causing the Word of God to bring conviction that is resulting in a response of repentance and faith?

Is there ongoing, progressive change in your life that confirms the gospel has taken root in you? Don't presume upon the grace of God.

Repent and believe the gospel—let it define your life.

Prayer: Bania people of India