

What's Wrong With the Gospel?

By
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Section 1: "The Missing Parts"

Introduction

I know that the title of this article will possibly raise some worried eyebrows. At first glance, some might say to themselves, "Oh no, Keith has gone too far this time!" But let me quickly put those possible reactions to rest. To the question, "What's wrong with the Gospel?" I can easily answer, "Absolutely nothing!" That is, of course, if you're talking about the Gospel of the Bible - the very message that Jesus preached - what the apostles Peter, Paul, John, and the others devoted their very lives (and deaths) to. (*Phil. 1:20-21*)

No, there's nothing at all wrong with this message from heaven. But what about the stuff that's being preached today? Is it truly "gospel-preaching"? Are the evangelists that preach in churches and arenas, on radio and television - are they preaching what Jesus called the Gospel?¹ And what about the mountains of modern "gospel literature"? You know, the tracts, pamphlets, comic books, newspapers, etc. Do they really contain the same message - the whole message - about the salvation that Jesus offered? How are we answering the awesome question that people are still asking the Church, as they asked on the day of Pentecost, "Men and brethren, what shall we do to be saved?"²

Is Our Gospel The Gospel?

I believe with all my heart that Jesus would be ashamed of most of the "gospel" messages and sermons that are being preached today, mainly because they lack almost every major point He Himself preached on. (*Mark 8:38; Rom. 1:16; II Tim. 1:8*) How dare we try to change the Gospel. We remove most of its vital parts, and replace them with artificial limbs of our own. (*Gal. 1:6-7*)

Isn't Jesus the master evangelist? Shouldn't we judge our evangelism by His example?³ Was His message anything like what we're hearing today? It is my intention to try to briefly cover in Section 1 each of the major parts of the Gospel that have been "surgically" removed in most of today's preaching. And in Section 2, we will go over each of the "new additions" that have become a very part of our modern gospel.

The Removed Parts Of The Gospel

¹ Matt 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 3:16-18.

² Luke 3:10,12,14; Acts 2:37,16:30

³ Eph. 5:1, I Peter 2:21; I John 2:6

The Blood of Jesus.

It's a fact that the very word **blood** scares people. It's also a fact that the blood of Christ scares the devil, because it is the only cleansing agent for a sin-sick soul.⁴ Can you imagine what the preaching and writings of Paul would have been like, if he had been as squeamish in proclaiming the magnificent power and beauty of the blood of Jesus as our generation of preachers are? **What we have now is a bloodless gospel!**

Today, people are afraid to think and preachers are afraid to make them. The whole concept of Jesus being the Passover Lamb of the Old Testament⁵ has been lost - "It takes too much time and thought to explain," you will hear some say. (*Heb. 5:11-14*) "We need to simplify the Gospel so that we can reach the masses." Oh, what logic! Remove the blood from the preaching of the Gospel, and you remove the power to conquer the devil for the souls of men!

The Cross of Jesus.

Paul said, *"I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."* (*I Cor. 2:2*) Nowadays it's "Jesus Christ and what He can do for you!" You cannot have more exact opposites than the Bible's Christ-centred Gospel,⁶ and our modern, cross-less, me-centred gospel.

Today, if anyone preaches self-denial as a condition of discipleship, you can hear the comments afterwards: "old-fashioned," "harsh," "legalistic." I dare say that our Lord would have as much trouble finding acceptance among our preachers as He had among the religious leaders of His own day.

Here's what A.W. Tozer says about the cross...

"The cross is the most revolutionary thing ever to appear among men.

The cross of Roman times knew no compromise, it never made concessions. It won all its arguments by killing its opponent and silencing him for good. It spared not Christ, but slew Him the same as the rest. He was alive when they hung Him on that cross. and completely dead when they took Him off of it. That was the cross the first time it appeared in Christian history.

"With perfect knowledge of all this, Christ said, 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself take up his cross and follow Me.' So the cross not only brought Christ's life to an end, it also ends the first life, the old life of every one of His true followers...this and nothing less is true Christianity. We must do something about the cross, and there's only one of two things we can do - *flee it or die upon it!*"

The Threat and Terrors of Hell, and the Guilt of Sinners.

We often hear people say, "I'm tired of hell-fire and brimstone preaching!" "Well," I often reply, "when was the last time you heard any?" It is true, very few people preach on hell anymore - it is no longer in vogue. We shouldn't scare the poor sinners, no, that wouldn't do. They're just unfortunate, misguided souls, right? Wrong! The Bible

⁴ Matt. 26:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 3:25, 5:9; Eph. 1:7, 2:13; Col. 1:20; Heb. 9:14,22, 10:19, 13:12; I Peter 1:2; I John 1:7; Rev. 1:5, 5:9, 12:11, 19:13.

⁵ Exodus 12:23-24; Isaiah 53:7; Luke 22:15; John 1:29,36; I Cor. 5:7; I Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:6,12, 7:14, 22:1,3.

⁶ Matt 10:38; Luke 14:27; I Cor. 1:17-18; Gal. 6:14; Eph. 2:6; Col. 1:20; I Peter 2:24

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clearly shows that they are rebels who have robbed and dishonoured the living God, infinitely offending Him.⁷ They have no right to look at themselves in any other light.

But we, smart as we are, have decided to help God along. He doesn't understand our generation as well as we do. The things Jesus emphasized in His preaching were all right for the Jews, but our generation needs a more gentle, loving tone. "Tell 'em about heaven!" We talk about heaven, about the "rewards of being born-again," but we completely neglect the other side of the "two-edged sword." (*Heb. 4:12*) What right do we have to remove things from the Gospel that Jesus Himself gave great place to in His own preaching?⁸

The Law of God Preached to Convict One of Sin.

Pages could be written on this subject, but there is room for only one brief example. When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, he asked a very direct question: "Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Can you imagine what our preachers would answer him today? "Just admit you're a sinner, accept Jesus as your Personal Saviour, go to church, pay your tithes, try to be good, and you're in!" But what was Jesus' answer? "You know the commandments... if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." (*Matt 19:17; Mark 10:19*) **The commandments??** Why they went out with Cecil B. DeMille! Isn't this the "age of grace"?

Well, the truth is Jesus wasn't preaching the commandments to him as the way of salvation, He was using the commandments to specifically convict him of his particular sin - greed. That rich boy loved the bucks, and Jesus knew just how to flush him out of the bushes - **preach the Law!** And that's exactly what the Law is for- "*For through the Law comes the knowledge of sin*" (*Rom. 3:20*), that's what Paul said. The Law must be preached - not as the way of salvation, but as a searchlight put on the sinner's heart, so he can see how utterly rotten he is, compared to the way God requires him to be. (*Gal. 3:24*)

But today again, we are wiser than God. Our preaching isn't filled with "dos and don'ts." No, we don't want to scare the "liberated generation" away. Why, if we said that fornication was wrong, or drugs, or abortion, or any other specific sin, people would feel all condemned and then how could they get saved? But that's just it, Jesus preached the Law to the rich young ruler so that, after feeling condemned about his greed, he could turn and obey Jesus and find true treasure in heaven. "*Go and sell all you possess and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me.*" (*Mark 10:21*) Unless people are truly convicted of sin, if they do not fully see that they are totally condemned by the requirements of God's Law, then it is virtually impossible to show them the need for a saviour. Why, what would they need to be saved from? **Fun?**

That is why our modern gospel must dwell on "all the good things God'll do for you if you'd just accept Him!" We can't convince a sinner that he needs a saviour by just getting him to admit that, "Well, generally, yes, I am a sinner." He must see how the Law of God totally condemns him as a sinner,⁹ and then the beauty of the Gospel, the

⁷ John 8:44; Acts 13:9-11; I Cor. 6:9; Gal. 4:16; Eph. 2:1-3; James 4:4; II Peter 2:12-19.

⁸ Matt. 5:22; 8:12, 10:28, 13:41-42, 49-50, 22:11-14, 23:13,33, 24:48-51, 25:30,46; Luke 13:26-28.

⁹ Rom. 2:12,20, 3:20-21, 4:15, 5:13,20, 10:4; I Cor. 15:56; Gal. 2:16,19, 3:10-11; James 29:11.

glory of the cross, the marvellous power of Christ's blood will be able to penetrate his anxious, waiting mind and heart. Only by the preaching of the Law can a man fully desire to be saved from his sin. For, *"I would not have come to know sin except through the Law."* (Rom. 7:7)

The Fear of God and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Instead of the awesome majesty of Jehovah, today the Lord is presented as a sort of "ice cream man-Santa Claus." And the Church is the "candy store" where you can get "every goodie your heart desires." Jesus Himself is portrayed as "a sweetie pie," so good, so loving, so forgiving, and so gentle, that you can almost hear the preacher whisper, "Aw, He wouldn't hurt a fly..." But what happened to *"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Heb. 10:31) or *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"*? (Proverbs 9:10)¹⁰

The wise, new editors of modern preaching rhetoric have conveniently wiped out every reference to the Almighty's severity while emphasizing only His kindness. This they do, ignoring the balanced, biblical view of Paul, *"Behold then the kindness and severity of God."* (Rom. 11:22)

Repentance as Necessary for Forgiveness.

It has always amazed me how the Church could have evolved to such a state as it is in now, with such clear, direct teaching from the Lord Jesus as to what is necessary to be right with God. Please read the first five verses of the 13th chapter of Luke. Here, Jesus is told the news about some Galileans who were executed by the Romans. He then says, *"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."* Using another example, He then repeats the same exact sentence.

I cannot conceive of conversion without repentance. The teachings of Jesus and the apostles are full of commands to "repent and be saved!"¹¹ Repentance is not just "being sorry" - that is only conviction. Repentance is not merely a change of heart and a change of mind, it is a change of action! God requires that if we are sincerely convinced that sin is wrong, then we will turn from it to God, and commit ourselves to not take part in sinful deeds any longer. God blesses such decisions and commitments with abundant grace. And it is by that grace that we can fulfil the desires of the Spirit within us.

But because there is so little real conviction of sin brought about by the preaching of our modern gospel, we cannot truly require repentance anymore. If we did, no one would "come forward" at all. For repentance is easy to him who sees how ugly and horrible sin is, but repentance is impossible where the Law does not convince the sinner of his wicked heart, compelling him to turn from his sin into the arms of a waiting, compassionate God. You see, all these removed parts of the Gospel are

¹⁰ See also Deut. 5:29, 10:12; Joshua 24:14; II Kings 17:39; Psalm 2:11, 15:4, 19:9, 25:14, 31:19, 33:18, 34:7,9,11, 52:6 60:4, 67:7, 72: 5, 85:9, 86:11, 103:11,13,17; 111:5, 112:1, 147:11; Proverbs 8:13, 10:27, 13:13, 14:26-27, 15:16, 16:6, 19:23, 23:17, 28:14, 31:30; Isaiah 8:13; Jer. 32:39-40; Malachi 3:16, 4:2; Matt. 10:28; Luke 1:50; Acts 10:35, 13:26; II Cor 7:1; Eph 5:21; Phil. 2:12; Heb. 12:29; I Peter 1:17; Rev. 14:7

¹¹ Psalm 7:12; Isaiah 30:15; Ezek. 18:32; Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:5, 6:7,12; Acts 2:38, 3:19, 8:22, 17:30, 26:19-20; Rev. 2:5,16, 3:3,19

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connected. In God's wisdom, every aspect of the appointed way of salvation is irreplaceable.

It is true that without God loving us first, we could not be saved. He made the first move, He always does. But He will not do what He requires of the sinner himself to do - and that is to repent!

God's Sorrow and Broken Heart Over Sin.

The picture of God as presented today by evangelists is that of an optimist - a positive-thinking good ole boy who lives in heaven, high above the trouble on earth, where everything is rosy, "and the skies are not cloudy all day." Why, how could anything bother the living God? He isn't really troubled by all the mess down here, He has **everything under control!**

But again, the Bible paints a different picture of our King. Just look at Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (*Luke 19:41*), or the pleadings of God with the nation of Israel through the prophets Isaiah or Ezekiel.¹² This God, the one in the Bible, is continually striving with men through His Spirit. It says in Proverbs, "*The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good.*" (*Proverbs 15:3*) That means that God saw every rape committed today, He saw every murder, every person that starved to death, every pornographic film and book, every abused and battered child. **How can anyone believe that He sees this and does not grieve?** Of course God can grieve. Doesn't the Bible implore us not to "*grieve the Holy Spirit of God*"? (*Eph. 4:30*)

You see, God is the most hurt and dishonoured being in the universe. He could stop all this mess, all the perversion and crime and corruption any time He wishes, but He doesn't! Why? Because He waits for the souls of men and women. "*Regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation,*" Peter said. (*II Peter 3:15*) But the Church, which doesn't have one millionth of the compassion that God has, has turned around and created a god in its own image and likeness. A carefree, cheerful, above-it-all God. And then the Church has conveniently removed from the "gospel" it presents all reference to the pain and sorrow in God's heart. The Church doesn't want a God who's grieved with sin, because then this God would be grieved with them... (and He is!)¹³

¹² Isaiah 1:18, 54:7; Ezek. 18:23,32, 33:11; Hosea 11:8.

¹³ Psalm 78:40-41; Mark 3:5.

The Necessity of Holiness to Please God.

Hebrews says without holiness *"no one shall see the Lord."* (12:14) It is true that Jesus commands us to be perfect. (Matt. 5:48) It is also true that you most likely have never met a perfect person, nor do you probably ever expect to be perfect yourself. Nevertheless, we still have those uncomfortable words of the Lord, *"Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect!"*

Now, because of our dilemma in finding ourselves to be such numskulls, and seeing the demands of Jesus, we have invented some pretty interesting and *caraaazzeey* doctrines. Some Christians have said, "Well, when God looks at us, He doesn't really see us anymore, He sees Jesus instead. And when there's ever sin in our hearts, if God should happen to look at the wrong moment, He'll see a smiling face of Jesus there, instead of seeing our sin. So God sees me as holy - even though I'm not! But...I really am...er, well, you know what I mean!" (I don't happen to believe that God is that easily fooled, not even by Christians.)

Another stranger-than-truth doctrine is that blessed refuge of backsliders called "the carnal Christian." In this example of pretzel-logic, we are led to believe that any "believer" who isn't really "walking with the Lord" at the present time, and is indulging in the things of the world and the lusts of the flesh, can still be considered a "Christian," but not a Christian of the 1st class, no, a Christian of the 2nd class... a "**carnal** Christian." Here we have a case of the "believer" who doesn't believe. Oh, he still "believes" that God is God, and that there is a heaven and hell, and so on (but don't forget, the devil believes all these things too!-James 2:19). He knows all the right things to say to convince granny, the pastor, and his Christian friends that he's still hanging in there. He even sort of believes it himself. Seems he's got everybody fooled - everybody that is, except God! The Bible is clear that *"If we say we have fellowship with Him, and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."* (I John 1:6)¹⁴

Today, possibly the greatest insult to the Gospel has been the almost total neglect of the preaching of holiness for the Christian. Jesus doesn't want to make believe that we're holy, He wants to impart His holiness to us by the Holy Spirit. But because people are not being driven to the cross, convicted by His Law to repentance and real rebirth, then we have to spend hours in our seminaries trying to find suitable, complicated ways to explain away the obvious meanings of Scripture.

To all this you might be saying, "But what about all those people getting saved by the efforts of good men and ministries out there? They're not preaching the way you say they should, and **they** still have converts!" Well, the immediate answer to that question is, "The people are not getting saved **because** of their messages, they're getting saved **in spite** of them." But unfortunately, many of the people who make "decisions for Christ" through large evangelistic crusades, do not even attend church regularly in the years that follow. (And as you probably well know, "attending church regularly" does not guarantee that one is a true believer.) But let's take a closer look at what kind of "converts" today's gospel usually produces.

¹⁴ Here are only a few of the many Scriptures that say this over and over again, in the clearest possible terms: Psalm 5:4,6; Matt. 7:22; John 3:20-21; II Cor. 6:14; I John 2:4,9-11, 3:10, 4:20

What's Specifically Wrong With Our Modern Gospel?

It's Me-Centred Instead of Christ-Centred.

First and foremost, it is the gospel that appeals to the selfish. Instead of honouring God, it places the sinner at the centre of God's love and plan. But the Bible places Jesus at the centre of God's plan, **not** the sinner.

One of the most well-known phrases of modern evangelism is "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life!" But the sober, biblical truth that needs to be presented to the sinner's mind is "You have made yourself an enemy of God, and in your present state of rebellion there is absolutely no hope for you." In fact, God's "plan" for the sinner at this point in his life is to separate him from His presence forever, in hell. However unpopular or unlovely that may sound, it is the only truth and reality about anyone who is an enemy of God through sin.

The whole line of reasoning in our modern gospel continues on and on in this mistaken way. "Sin has separated you from God, 'and His wonderful plan for your life.' Jesus came and died on the cross, so that you may experience 'His wonderful plan for your life.' You must accept Jesus now, so that you will not miss out on 'His wonderful plan for your life!'" **You, you, you, you!!! It's all for YOU!** I'm not sorry to say this, but Jesus did it all in obedience, for His **Father's** glory. (*Phil. 2:8-12*) Of course, it infinitely benefits those who love, serve, and honour Him, but that was a secondary consideration, not the primary one. (Please read Ezek. 36:22-32.) If people come to Jesus mainly to **get** a blessing, or only to **get** forgiveness, they will ultimately be disappointed. But if they come to **give** Him their lives in honour and worship, then they will truly have forgiveness and joy - more than they could ever imagine! (*I Cor. 2:9*)

It's Shallow, Cheap, and Offered as a "Bargain."

Our gospel reduces the good news to a "come and get it while you can" sale. We make every effort to take all the bones out - everything that might offend someone, might make them hesitate or put off their decision. Jesus didn't do this. He never lowered the requirements for anyone. One had to be completely sincere, totally humbled, having counted the cost, willing to leave everything, family and property, "count all things loss" so that they might "gain Christ." (*Phil 3:7-8*) When that same rich young ruler "*went away sad, for he had many possessions*" (*Matt. 19:22*), Jesus didn't go running after him shouting, "Hey, wait a minute! Let's talk this thing over, it isn't as bad as it might sound. Maybe I was a little too harsh!"

Maybe we're so eager to "see the converts," to publish "how many got saved at our last concert" in the bulletins to our supporters, that we'll do anything to rush someone into a "decision" before he's had a chance to really make one. The problem is, if you have to rush him into it, he probably will change his mind later anyway. For as a friend of mine says, "If somebody can talk them into it, somebody can talk them out of it!" (*I Cor. 1:17*)

Salvation is Shown as a Barter or Trade, Instead of the Result of Obedience by Faith.

We offer forgiveness of sin like Monty Hall on "Let's Make a Deal." I've even heard, "You give Jesus your sin, and He'll give you salvation in return!" No one in the Bible ever thought so low of the grace of God to talk about the gift of eternal life like it was for trade. **It is a gift!** You can't earn it, or buy it, or give anything in return for it. How it must offend the Holy Spirit to hear people talk of His Jesus so. (*Acts 8:18-23*)

It Produces Selfish, "Blessed," and Feelings-Oriented "Converts."

Anyone who is made to believe he becomes a Christian under such preaching will seldom bring forth the true fruits of a real convert. He will remain just as selfish as he always was, only now his selfishness will take on a religious form. If he wants something for himself, he will say he "has a burden" for something, or he will say, "It is the desire of my heart," or some other religious-sounding phrase like that. He will pray selfishly, desiring blessings for himself, and even if he does pray for others, it usually will be for selfish reasons. After all, when he "accepted the Lord," he was told how much Jesus wanted to bless him and how much God had stored up for his account, and how the Bible was like "a chequebook full of promises, just waiting to be cashed!"

Such a person always seeks to "feel" good about himself, his own church, his own pastor, etc. His whole world is built on **feeling blessed**. He was never shown how he was created to bless God... God was not created to bless him. (*Psalm 149:4; Phil. 2:13*)

As you can see, the "converts" described above are not like those pictured in the book of Acts, when the Church was new and the fire was hot. Take a look at *Acts 2:41-47* and *4:31-35*, and you will see the tender spirit of love, and the mighty spirit of power that prevailed among the brethren in those early days. I believe that one of the great reasons that "*everyone kept feeling a sense of awe*" (*Acts 2:43*), was because "*they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to prayer.*" (*vs. 42*) I believe that Peter and the others made every effort to convey the whole message of the Gospel when they preached and taught, and that is why the Spirit of God could anoint and bless the new converts so powerfully- **God always anoints the truth!** (*Isaiah 55:11*)

Section 2: "The Added Parts"

Introduction

In each generation there have been various ways and means used to secure the attention of sinners so that they may be shown the truth and then led into a saving knowledge and true relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a fact that man is a creature of habit. He loves form, doesn't like things to change "too quickly," and he clings to tradition. Unfortunately (for man), God is no such person. Though something has never been tried before, God simply does not care. His only concern is that it is the wisest and most direct way of accomplishing His desire.

This of course, threw the children of Israel into many a panic. "What's God doing now?" If there was a big sea in the way, no problem, He just split it. If there wasn't any water, snap! A drinking fountain from a rock. Food running low? Presto! It'll rain bread in the morning. And Jesus had the same way of dealing with things. When His disciples were far from shore, it didn't matter, Jesus just strolled over the waves. Problem with the weather? "Shut up wind!" And so it went .¹⁵

Now as you can see in the Bible, God had a lot of problems with man and his traditions. Just take a look at the Jews - how they loved their temple, their sacrifices, their Sabbath - too bad they didn't care much for their God. And Jesus ran up against the whole stubborn lot of them. "Did you see that? Why, He healed on the Sabbath!" (*Luke 13:14*) At every turn, Jesus tried to show them the truth, using the wisest reasoning and the best examples, but they kept getting hung up on His methods - touching lepers, raising the dead, hanging out with sinners, whipping moneychangers - it scared them to death!¹⁶ Their religion was basically peaceful, very solemn and quiet. But Jesus... why Jesus had the whole town in an uproar at least once a week!

¹⁵ Exodus 14:21-22, 16:4, 17:6; Matt. 14:25; Mark 4:39.

¹⁶ Matt. 8:2-3; 9:11, John 2:15, 11:43-44.

You can see why He bothered them; He disturbed their nice little religion... with the *truth!* (*John 8:44-45*)

It is obvious that God anoints men and women who are completely yielded to His Spirit. He also anoints methods and tools that we use - meetings, tracts, books, music, witnessing, preaching, etc. - when they are also fully submitted to Him in faithfulness. But there is a great danger when man (or even God) designs a tool to be used for God's glory, and then as time passes, people's attention starts to be fixed on the tool itself, rather than on the glory of God (which it was originally designed to promote).¹⁷

The following is a list of just some of the tools, methods, and concepts that I believe have become so much a part of presenting the modern gospel, that they have become just about inseparable from it. In fact, they are to such an extent considered necessary, that if many of them are left out of an evangelistic meeting, Christians can hardly believe that anyone can be saved there.

Some Inventions Of Man That Have Become Essential Parts Of the Modern Gospel

The Term and Concept of "Personal Saviour."

I find it very disturbing when something unnecessary is added to the Gospel. The use of the term "Personal Saviour" isn't very harmful in itself, but it shows a kind of mind - set that is willing to "invent" terms, and then allow these terms to be preached as if they were actually found in the Bible.

But why must we do this? Why must we add needless, almost meaningless things to the Gospel? It is because we've taken so much out that we have to replace it with "spiritual double talk."

That's right, double talk! Would you ever introduce your sister like this: "This is Sheila, my personal sister"?! Or would you point to your navel and say, "This is my personal bellybutton"? Ridiculous! But nevertheless, people solemnly speak of Christ as their personal Saviour, as if they've got Him right there in

¹⁷ See II Kings 18:4- Because it had become an idol, King Hezekiah had to destroy the same bronze serpent that Moses had made in Numbers 21:8, which was used to stop the plague of death among the Israelites. This is the same bronze serpent referred to by Jesus in reference to Himself, in John 13:14!

their shirt pocket - and as if when He returns, He will not have two, but three titles written across His thigh: King of kings, Lord of lords, and PERSONAL SAVIOR! (See *Rev. 19:16*.) This is only one example of how a non-biblical term can be elevated to reverence by the Church, as if to say, "Well even if it isn't in the Bible - it should be!"

The Alter Call.

Imagine if you can, Jesus having people bow their heads after hearing the Sermon on the Mount, and then very slowly and softly (while Bartholomew plays "How Great Thou Art" on the accordion) saying to the crowd, "While your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed, if you really want to be My disciple tonight, if you really want to show My Father and I that you truly mean to follow this sermon I have given, then I want you to slip your hand up slowly, so that I may see it. There now... yes... yes... I see that hand ... and that one ... and the one way back by the fig tree ... yes! Now, please, while Bart plays another chorus, I'd like you to start moving down through the centre of the crowd ... yes, those who raised their hand. I want to know if you really mean business. I'd like to lead you in a prayer ...

I realize that there are some who will see such an illustration as sacrilegious. And that's just the point. They think that making fun of the "altar call" is making fun of God. But it isn't. Traditions die hard, because they take so long to form. Once I received a very intense letter from the pastor of a church who had sponsored me in a city-wide concert in his area. He was upset that I had "let several hundred souls go ungathered" because I had not given an altar call. He said, "It seems you have no burden for souls." (Nothing could be further from the truth.) But because I had not given the recognized "official invitation," this pastor could see no value in my presentation of the Gospel. Or as Tony Salerno, (director of "The Agape Force"), once remarked, "If you don't give an altar call, they think you have committed the 'unpardonable sin!'"

The Gradual Altering Of the "Alter Call"

Believe it or not, the altar call was invented only about 150 years ago. It was first used by the American evangelist, Charles Finney, as a means of separating out those who wanted to talk further about the subject of salvation. Finney called the front pew "the anxious seat" (for those who were "anxious" about the state of their souls) or "the mourner's bench." Finney never "led them in a prayer," but he and a few others would spend a great deal of time praying with and giving specific instruction to each, one by one, until finally, everyone was sent home to pray and continue seeking God until "they had broken through and expressed hope in Christ," as Finney would say.

The early Salvation Army, going a bit further on Finney's innovation, developed what they called "the penitent form" or "the mercy seat." After a rousing time of singing and preaching, they would invite any sinner present who wanted to confess his sins to God and repent, to come to the front, and they would be prayed for individually. I have met a few older Christians who used to attend some of these early meetings, and they said that sometimes people would stay there all night, and on a few occasions, even a few days, weeping and confessing their sins with broken hearts. There were always some who would stay right there to instruct them further, encouraging them to make a clean sweep of sin from their lives.

This is what the early "altar call" was like. But gradually, it began to become a fixed part of every meeting, and like all other traditions, it began to lose its original spirit. The "coming forward" part started to be more important than the "sorrow, confession, repentance, and instruction" parts. Eventually, anyone who would "come down the aisle" was excitedly proclaimed "a new believer in Christ!" No matter how they felt, they still were told, "Your sins are forgiven, brother! Rejoice in Christ!" How many a miserable, defeated, and confused person has come away from a meeting like this? (*Jer. 6:14*)

The Sinner's Prayer.

Can you also try and imagine this scene where Jesus is leading some new "disciples" in the "sinner's prayer"?

"Wow! There are so many that came forward for salvation tonight!" (The multitude applauds.) "Now, it is very simple. You just repeat this little prayer after Me, and then you're a Christian! Now it doesn't really matter whether you fully understand the prayer . . . it works just the same. Now ready? Repeat after Me... 'Dear Jesus... Come into my heart...' and so on ...

As you can see, when we try to picture Jesus Himself using our modern methods of evangelism, it seems completely foolish. I think this is a very good test for any method. "Could I see Jesus doing this?" or "Could I see Jesus preaching or teaching this?" Since the Bible tells us, "*Walk in the manner that He walked*" (1 John 2:6), we should always try to compare our actions and message to the Master's.

It is obvious that there is no "set" sinner's prayer. There are many variations, with different lengths, different wordings, different endings, etc., but the contents are usually the same. The prayer usually includes phrases like, "Dear Jesus," "Come into my heart," "I admit I have sinned" (at least the better ones contain this last statement - there are some who do not even like to mention sin in their "sinner's prayer"), "Fill me with Your Spirit," "In Jesus' name. Amen." Extremely harmless . . . nothing wrong with a prayer like that, right? Wrong! It isn't the wording that's important, it's the state of heart of the one saying it.

I believe that a true "sinner's prayer" will gush out of anyone who is truly seeking God and is tired of being enslaved to sin. (Matt. 5:6) The very act of "leading someone in a prayer" is utterly ridiculous. You will find nothing even remotely like it in the Bible, or among the writings and biographies of those in Church history. It completely savours of crowd and peer pressure tactics, and (please forgive me) brainwashing techniques. I do not believe that Jesus wants to have His disciples "repeat after Me," I believe He wants them to follow after Him!¹⁸

¹⁸ Matt 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21; Luke 9:59; John 12:26, 21:19,22; I Peter 2:21; Rev. 14:4.

Premature Birth

As with the altar call, the practice of having someone repeat a prayer with the minister probably originated from the best of intentions. And no doubt, there are those who have "followed through," continuing to pray and walk with God, entering into the path of righteousness through God's infinite grace. But also, like the altar call, the so-called "sinner's prayer" is one of those tools that make it alarmingly easy for someone to consider himself a Christian, when he has absolutely no understanding of what "counting the cost" (*Luke 14:28*) really means.

The greatest reason I believe that God can be grieved with the current use of such tools as the "altar call" and "sinner's prayer" is because they can take away the conviction of the Holy Spirit prematurely, before the Spirit has time to work repentance leading to salvation. With an emotional splash that usually doesn't last more than a few weeks, we believe we're leading people into the Kingdom, when really we're leading many to hell - by interfering with what the Spirit of God is trying to do in a person's life. Do you hear? Do you understand that this constitutes "spiritual abortion"? Can't you see the eternal consequences of jumping the gun, trying to bring to birth a baby that isn't ready?

We are so afraid that we'll see a "big one that got away," that we'd rather rush someone into a shallow decision, and get the personal gratification of seeing him "go down the aisle," than take the time to fully explain things to him, even if it takes long hours and nights of travailing prayer for his soul. We just don't "have the time" to do things God's way anymore.¹⁹

But God would rather see one true convert than an ocean full of "decisions." Oh, can't you see what a mess we're in? What we've done to the Gospel? And when those "converts" no longer want to fellowship with us, when they want to go back to their old friends and their old way of life, we have the nerve to call it "backsliding," when we stood in the very way of them ever "front-sliding" toward the cross! Oh, it breaks my heart to think of that awesome day

¹⁹ In contrast to this, look at the amount of time and effort Jesus took to explain salvation to one mere Samaritan woman - John 4:3:42

when God will judge those who have "stumbled one of these little ones."

(Mark 9:42)

Other Man-Made Methods That Have Made the Modern Gospel Very Shallow, And Therefore Unbiblical

Quick and Easy "1-2-3 Steps-To-Salvation" Booklets. I certainly cannot fault the intentions nor the integrity of the men and organizations responsible for these little tools. One of the best known of these booklets has been printed in over 30 languages, and has over 100 million copies in circulation. With that in view, it is even more urgent for me to say that unless these or any other "gospel" booklets contain the same message that our Lord preached (and commanded His disciples to spread "to every kindred and nation"), then they are worse than "inadequate tools," they are wicked!

For the Bible says in Proverbs, *"Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the unfaithful messenger to him who sends him."* (Proverbs 10:26)

Paul said that if we are really Christians, then we are "ambassadors of Christ" (II Cor. 5:20) - we are God's sole representatives in this foreign land called "the world."

With that analogy in mind, consider what a president would think of an ambassador to a foreign country, say Russia, who is told to deliver an extremely urgent message that will involve the peace of the whole world. And that ambassador (even with the best intentions) gives only a small part of the message, in such a way as to make a very different impression - in fact, the exact opposite impression - than what the president wanted to make. What do you think that president will do to the ambassador when he finds out the damage done?

Booklets like these usually mention a "sort-of" repentance like, "you must turn from your sins, to Jesus." But they rarely explain what "turning" really means. This is also true of such other vital terms such as "Lord" - they usually refer to Jesus as "Lord," but again, they seldom define "lordship" - and people go their merry way, believing they have the full right to continue running their own lives as long as they call Jesus "Lord." (See *Matt 7:21; Luke 6:46.*)

I don't care how many letters I get saying how much good has been done by such and such a ministry, or how many have been "saved" through such and such a booklet. Jesus said, *"You will know them by their fruits "* (Matt. 7:16) and in another place He said that *"Your fruit should remain"* (John 15:16), which means it should last! I believe we shall see in that great day, when God spreads out the lives of men in judgment, how many were truly converted by the efforts of these ministries, and how many were turned aside from the path of righteousness - being led to believe the pleasant half-truths contained in these shallow and false epistles that have been printed to the ends of the earth by people with "the best intentions, and the highest integrity." (Matt. 23:15)

The "Poor Jesus" Syndrome.

This is the form of preaching that misuses the Scripture in Rev. 3:20, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock . . . "* How many evangelists have used that Scripture to paint a pathetic picture of Jesus standing outside a door, waiting, knocking, knocking, waiting, for the sinner to open up and let Jesus in? Sometimes these preachers go on and on, until it starts to sound like, "Aw, poor Jesus is out there in the cold, shivering, waiting for someone to let Him in. Won't you go ahead and let poor Jesus into your heart?"

What a line of reasoning. First of all, this statement by the Lord in Revelation is not to the unsaved, it's to the Church in Laodicea (*see 3:14*). The picture is truly pathetic. Jesus is standing outside of His own church, knocking for them to let Him in! (Sound familiar?) And if there's any doubt left as to who He's talking to, look at verse 22, *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches."*

Second of all, the truth of the matter for sinners is the exact opposite. Jesus is not outside of their world, knocking to come in - they are outside of His Kingdom! And they can knock all night like the five foolish virgins (*Matt. 25:11*), but Jesus will never let them in unless they meet the requirements: a humble and contrite heart, and a complete disgust for sin. Then, and only then, will God deliver them from their slavery to sin - and transfer them by His grace to the Kingdom of His loving-kindness. God will never repent for someone - He will take every step possible to make the sinner see the folly of

his ways, but the final move is up to the individual himself. Each person must make the final surrender, the desperate gasp of "I am a fool to run my own life! Lord, show me the way to your door, and I'll knock and knock, and beg forgiveness ...I'll do anything, anything, ANYTHING YOU SAY!" Then, and only then, will God save a sinner.²⁰

Bumper Stickers, Cheap Clichés, and "Christian" Slogans.

It pains me to see the beautiful truths of Scripture being plastered about like beer advertisements. Many think it is wise to "get the word out" in this way but, believe that we are really just inoculating the world with bits and pieces of truth - giving them their "gospel shots." (And we're making it hard for them to "catch" the real thing!) People become numb to the truth when we splash our gaudy sayings in their eyes at every opportunity. Do you really think this is "opening them up to the Gospel"? Or is it really just another way for us to get smiles, waves, and approval from others in the "born-again club" out in the supermarket parking lot, who blow their horns with glee when they see your "Honk if you love Jesus!" bumper sticker?

What about those "other sayings"? You know, the quasi-biblical ones, like "Please be patient, God isn't finished with me yet," which can really be a horrible replacement for "I'm sorry." (And besides, it puts the blame on the wrong person - "The reason I'm such a creep is because God isn't finished with me yet.")

And if you really want to play "Stretch the Bible" there is that other fabulous excuse that absolutely ends all quests or expectations for holiness:

"Christians aren't perfect... just forgiven!" Ah, how convenient. You might just as well say, "Christians aren't moral, just forgiven!" or what about "Christians aren't nice, just forgiven!" How about the ultimate? "Christians aren't saved . . . just forgiven!" (That might be a little too deep.) What we're saying by this glorious piece of prose is, "Madam, you cannot trust your teenage daughter with my Christian son, you'd better keep your eye on him . . . he's not safe . . . he's just forgiven!"

²⁰ Psalm 34:18, 51:17; Isaiah 66:22; Luke 18:14; James 4:10

Maybe I've gone a little too far to make a point, but I think the world is completely sick to its stomach with our sayings and "witnessing tools." It's time for us to be expressing the truth with our lives, and then the whole truth of God with our lips!

"The Follow-Up Program."

There is one last great mistake being committed in the name of evangelism. It is rightly called "follow-up." I say "rightly called" because it is following up the same miserable and incomplete gospel with a miserable, incomplete, and false replacement for what the Bible calls "discipleship."

Our "follow-up" usually consists of a "packet of literature," which almost always includes a complete list of all church services and functions. This "packet" also may include many "essential" items like a complete Bible study on "tithing." Also enclosed is usually at least one tithe envelope. (It's amazing that this is one "principle" that nearly every new believer learns right away!)

In my studies of the life of Jesus, it has amazed me that He never had "a follow-up program." It was usually His habit to let people "follow Him up." He never had to go door to door, looking for that fellow who He healed last week, wanting to share another parable or two. He always seemed to have the attitude of, "If they want life, then they'll have to come and follow Me."

Can't you see what fools we are? We preach a man-made, plastic gospel. We get people to come forward to "the altar" by bringing psychological pressures that have nothing to do with God. We "lead them" in a prayer that they are not yet convinced they need to say. And then to top it all off, we give them "counselling," telling them it is a sin to doubt that they're really saved!

Conclusion

And now we come to the end of this "Bible study." Yes, that's just what it has turned out to be. I hope you will take the time to look up each of the Scriptures given, and see for yourself what God has said in His Word about all these things. I realize that these articles will step on many toes, and some might even be deeply offended, but that is not my intention at all. My only prayer is that through this little effort, many will begin to take up the cross and preach

What's Wrong With the Gospel?

the good news of our salvation with the same power and anointing that Jesus promised and gave to the early Church, and that when we ministers stand before Him on that great day, we will be able to say with Paul, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith . . . I have fully preached the Gospel of Christ"* (II Tim. 4:7; Rom. 15:19), so that we may hear those sweet words from our King's lips, *"Well done, good and faithful servant!"* (Matt. 25:21)

Beloved family, the world around us is going to hell. Not because of communism, not because of television, not because of drugs, or sex, or alcohol, or the devil himself. It is because of the Church! We are to blame! We alone have the commission, the power, and the truth of God at our constant disposal to deliver sinner after sinner from eternal death. And even though some are willing to go... into the streets, the prisons, foreign lands, or even next door, they are taking a watered-down, distorted version of God's message which He has not promised to anoint. That is why we are failing. And unless we admit that we are failing, then I'm afraid there is no hope for us or the world around us. We have the choice between causing eternal tragedy for our whole generation, or bringing our beloved God a whole family full of "good and faithful servants."

Please pray over all of this. God is waiting to meet you in the closet. (Matt. 6:6)

The following list is a list of books for further in-depth study on evangelism and the content of the Gospel:

- Today's Gospel by Walter Chantry - The Banner Of Truth Trust
- Finney On Revival by Charles G. Finney - Fleming H. Revell Co.
- Gems from Tozer by A. W. Tozer - Christian Publications, Inc.
- That Incredible Christian by A. W. Tozer - Christian Publications, Inc.