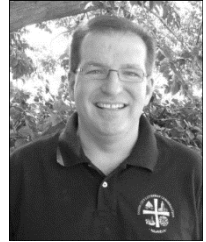


The Gospel on the Mission Field

Thorsten Prill*

** Dr. Thorsten Prill is a Crosslinks mission partner lecturing in missiology, practical theology and systematic theology at Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS). Before coming to Namibia in 2008, he was pastor of two churches in the UK and International Chaplain at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of three books, Migrants, Strangers and the Church in Southern Africa (2013), German Protestantism and the Spirit of God (2010), and Global Mission on our Doorstep (2008). He has also edited several other books and published articles in various theological journals. Thorsten Prill is a minister of the Rhenish Church of Namibia (Rynse Kerk).*



When we read our English Bibles we come across the word *gospel* quite often. The English word ‘gospel’ is the translation of the Greek word *eu-angelion*, which means ‘an announcement of good news’. Instead of gospel we can simply speak of ‘good news’. But what is this good news about? And to whom is it good news? Well, missionaries and church leaders in sub-Saharan African countries are confronted with many different answers by people who call themselves Christians.

The Prosperity Gospel

For some, the Christian gospel is the good news that God wants to give us power, success, wealth and health. Various versions of the prosperity gospel are promoted not only by African preachers but also through the books and TV programmes of well-known (often American) mega church leaders. The Namibian theologian Basilius Kasera distinguishes between two dominant forms of the prosperity gospel: the militant and the diffused form.¹ At the heart of the militant prosperity gospel lie radical, blatant claims, such as ‘God’s will for you is wealth’ or ‘God’s will for you is healing’.² One principle promoted by the advocates of the militant prosperity gospel is the principle of a hundredfold return: *The more money you give to God the more mon-*

¹ B.M. Kasera, ‘The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and its Impact among the Poor in Namibia’ (Unpublished MTh thesis, Pretoria, South African Theological Seminary, 2012), 24.

² Kasera, ‘The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and its Impact among the Poor in Namibia’, 25.

ey you will receive from God in return.³ Jones and Woodbridge comment: ‘The prosperity gospel’s doctrine of giving is built on faulty motives. Whereas Jesus taught His disciples to “lend, expecting nothing in return” (Luke 6:35), prosperity theologians teach their disciples to give because they will get a great return.’⁴

In contrast to the militant version, the diffused version of the prosperity gospel is much more subtle. It stresses that successful living is possible in a world without suffering, in a world with ‘limitless possibilities and victories’.⁵ Kasera writes:

Basically the path to successful living is to ignore all external symptoms of sickness, problems, bankruptcy, pain etc. Instead of thinking about the problems, one should concentrate on the opposite of any challenge. The idea is that positive thoughts coupled with faith, hope and right actions are guaranteed to always bring forth the desired outcome in every situation.⁶

The Gospel of Liberation

While the prosperity gospel is very popular in sub-Saharan Africa, we can find also those who argue that the gospel is first and foremost to be understood in socio-political terms. They define it as the good news that God wants to make this world a more humane, just and stable place, and that He does so by helping people to liberate themselves from all kinds of political and social oppressions.⁷ The idea of personal sin, i.e. rebellion against God, from which people need to be saved, and the need of repentance are more or less missing. Zephania Kameeta, the former bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, for example, writes: ‘The Church of Christ is sent into this world to proclaim the Good News to those who until today do not believe that they as human beings are not inferior, but equal to anybody. This cannot only be done by word, but concurrent with a continuous process of empowering.’⁸

³ Kasera, ‘The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and its Impact among the Poor in Namibia’, 26.

⁴ D.W. Jones & R.S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 102.

⁵ Kasera, ‘The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and its Impact among the Poor in Namibia’, 30.

⁶ Kasera, ‘The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and its Impact among the Poor in Namibia’, 30.

⁷ E.g. P.J. Isaak, ‘The Story of the Rich Christian and Poor Lazarus: Christianity, Poverty and Wealth in the 21st Century’, in *Journal of Religion and Theology in Namibia*, vol. 2, 2000, 72-94.

⁸ Z. Kameeta, *Towards Liberation: Crossing Boundaries between Church and Politics* (Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan, 2006), 83.

For African liberation theologians Jesus is not only the Saviour but also the Victor and Liberator.⁹ Consequently, Christians are seen as ‘minor liberators engaged in securing provisional and relative yet joyful victories of establishing healing and reconciling communities that are a reflection of God’s reign here on earth’¹⁰.

The Feminist Gospel

Closely related to the gospel of liberation is the feminist gospel. As a matter of fact it may be considered a variant of the former. For advocates of the feminist gospel, the good news is that women ‘have the right to name themselves’¹¹. By this feminists mean the right of women to determine their roles in all areas of life including the Church. They hold that there are no differences between men and women as far as intellect, psyche, and emotions are concerned.¹² Any differences between the two sexes are a result ‘of cultural conditioning rather than biological fact’¹³, or as Chimwemwe Harawa-Katumbi from Malawi puts it: ‘[G]ender is not physiologically determined but socially constructed.’¹⁴ In other words, women have been ‘wrongly named by men’¹⁵. This misconception, it is argued, needs to be corrected.

The correction of this misconception also applies to the Church. Consequently Christian feminists seek to de-differentiate ‘between the roles of men and women in the Church’¹⁶. In order to achieve that many Christian feminists have set out to liberate what they consider is a male-biased Bible ‘from the human fetters of misogyny’ that has shackled the Scriptures.¹⁷ Some argue that a new hermeneutical approach is necessary in order to use the Bible

⁹ Cf. P.J. Isaak, ‘The Contribution of Missiological Theology to the Theological Education in Africa’, in P.J. Isaak, *The Story of Paulinum Seminary in Namibia* (Windhoek: Namibia Publishing House, 2013), 139.

¹⁰ P.J. Isaak, ‘The Contribution of Missiological Theology to the Theological Education in Africa’, 139.

¹¹ M.A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1992), 30.

¹² Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church*, 31

¹³ Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church*, 31.

¹⁴ C. Harava-Katumbi, ‘The Bible, Gender Equality and Teaching Theology in Malawi’, in J. Hendriks, E. Mouton, L. Hansen & E. le Roux, *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew? Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2012), 105.

¹⁵ Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church*, 31.

¹⁶ Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church*, 33.

¹⁷ Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church*, 136.

in the teaching of gender and gender equality. Thus, the Kenyan theologian Hazel Ayanga, for example, calls ‘for an interdisciplinary approach to the interpretation of texts related to gender’¹⁸. Others argue that particular Bible passages are either culturally conditioned or that the authors were simply mistaken. Some do not even shy away from adding to the biblical texts in order to make them fit their agenda. An example for such an approach is Wilhemina Shikomba, a Namibian Lutheran theologian:

Furthermore, the ordained ministry of women should be read in the light of the Pentecost story. When the Holy Spirit filled the people, they were changed spiritually and all of them started to speak, women and men alike. At that moment, at the start of the Christian Church, both women and men were given the gift of preaching by the Holy Spirit. At that morning, on the day of the Pentecost, women and men had been equally empowered to be ministers of the Word of God and entrusted with the twofold ministry: to preach and to administer the Holy Sacraments... Women and men are capable of being used in God’s service. Jesus loves women, as illustrated in the New Testament, and there is no discrimination between Jesus Christ and women. In Pauline theology, there might be some mistakes in some of his utterances, but at the same time, Saint Paul forcefully and brilliantly emphasised the equality of all people in Galatians 3:28-29...¹⁹

It is noteworthy that while liberation theologians emphasize structural sin some feminist theologians have totally redefined the concept of sin. The sin of women is no longer to be understood as rebellion against God, i.e. egocentric behaviour or selfish attitudes, such as pride. Female sin is seen as ‘*too much* sacrificial love and *not enough pride* in themselves’²⁰.

The Postmodern Gospel

Another understanding of the Christian gospel which is gaining popularity especially among tertiary educated people in Southern Africa is the postmodern gospel.²¹ The postmodern gospel makes no exclusive claims and allows

¹⁸ H. Ayanga, ‘Inspired and Gendered. The Hermeneutical Challenge of Teaching Gender in Kenya’, in J. Hendriks, E. Mouton, L. Hansen and E. le Roux, *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew? Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2012), 90.

¹⁹ W. Shikomba, ‘Lutheran Theological Education from the Perspective of One of the First Namibian Female Theologians’, in P.J. Isaak *The Story of Paulinum Seminary* (Windhoek: Namibia Publishing House, 2013), 90-91.

²⁰ Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church*, 32.

²¹ V. Light, *Transforming the Church in Africa: A New Contextually Relevant Discipleship Model* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2012), 543.

for subjective experience and insights: Jesus is only one way towards a more fulfilling and happy life. The rejection of absolute truth, the uniqueness of Christ and the Bible as the authoritative written revelation of God, has of course consequences. Johan Malan mentions one of these consequences when he writes:

The people of Africa are also free to either practise ancestor worship from the premodern period or one other version of Christianity, or any of the non-Christian religions. They can also try to mix the various traditions. No pressure should be exerted on any person to conform exclusively to the principles of one system of one or other system of faith.²²

In other words, the postmodern gospel allows Africans to maintain all their traditions, including those which are not reconcilable with orthodox Christianity.²³ Another reason why this gospel is increasingly appealing to many Africans is the wide spread 'trust in subjective revelation stemming from belief in and experience of the spirit world'²⁴. Finally, just like the gospel of liberation, the postmodern gospel hardly mentions sin. However, if it is mentioned it is no longer seen as an offence against a holy God but in terms of the damage it causes to human beings.

The Syncretised Gospel

In some way related to the postmodern gospel is the syncretised gospel. In most Southern African countries, African Initiated Churches (AICs), which are pre-Christendom in their theologies and pre-enlightenment in their worldviews,²⁵ are very successful in reaching out to their country men and women. They take traditional African worldviews seriously and avoid the mistakes of many early missionaries who imposed Western culture onto the indigenous population. However, it has to be said that in some of these churches we can find a blend of Christianity and traditional beliefs. As a result Jesus is no longer at the centre of the gospel. His sacrifice on the cross competes with the sacrificing of goats and sheep which are slaughtered in order to remove a curse or to improve one's chances on the job market. Jesus

²² J. Malan, 'The Dangers of Postmodernism', <http://www.bibleguidance.co.za/Engarticles/Postmodernism.htm>, access: 16.03.2014.

²³ V. Light, *Transforming the Church in Africa: A New Contextually Relevant Discipleship Model*, 53.

²⁴ Light, *Transforming the Church in Africa: A New Contextually Relevant Discipleship Model*, 53.

²⁵ J.J. Bonk, 'Africa and the Future of Christianity: Pre-Christendom Faith in a Post-Christendom World', McClure-Lectures-Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 2013, 3. <http://www.pts.edu/userfiles/file/pdfs/mcclure%201%20africa%20and%20the%20future%20of%20christianity.pdf> access: 17.03.2014.

who said ‘Come to me, all you who are wearied and burdened, and I will give you rest’²⁶ is facing stiff competition from traditional witchdoctors and independent prophets who practice ancestor worship and offer solutions to all kinds of life problems.

Such practical syncretism, however, can also be found among members of mainstream churches. When facing a personal crisis, members of Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, or Methodist churches consult the local witchdoctor but not their pastors. Tite Tienou not only identifies the reason for this phenomenon but also suggests a remedy:

[S]yncretism is practiced by many Christians in our churches because they have not been given clear scriptural teaching which has grappled with the realities of everyday living in Africa. Missionaries and pastors need to have a right attitude towards culture and a sympathetic understanding of it, if they are to help Christians out of this devastatingly syncretistic way of living. Practical syncretism will weaken Christianity even if our official theology remains orthodox.²⁷

The Gospel of Universalism

There are also those to whom the gospel is the good news that there are many ways that lead to God. God, they argue, loves all people whatever religion they have and as a result they will all enjoy eternal life in His kingdom. Personal faith in Jesus Christ is not needed for salvation. Klaus Nürnberger, a South Africa Lutheran theologian, for example, writes:

[T]hose who have practically lived a life that was in line with God’s redemptive intentions, or those who would have wanted to be part of it, if they had only encountered it in a clear and credible form, have consciously or unconsciously identified themselves with it and will most certainly not be cast out, even if they had not managed to go very far with it in their lives.²⁸

Another prominent advocate of this view is the former archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu. In his book *Made for Goodness* he states:

Perhaps we too, are shaken by the thought that our enemies will not burn in Hades throughout eternity. But, ultimately, the reality of heaven cannot tolerate the existence of hell. Even our worst ene-

²⁶ Matthew 11:28.

²⁷ T. Tienou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1990), 22.

²⁸ K. Nürnberger, *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestors in a Changing Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster Publications, 2007), 84.

mies are God's beloved children...If we believe in the good God, we must believe that we are all made to inhabit heaven.²⁹

The Gospel of Holism and Transformation

Finally, an increasing number of missionaries and church leaders in sub-Saharan Africa hold that the gospel is holistic and transformational in nature. In recent years their understanding of mission has broadened significantly and so has their understanding of the Christian gospel.³⁰ Verbal communication of the gospel is no longer seen as the heartbeat of mission.³¹ Evangelism, church planting, and leadership training are considered to be merely some of many dimensions of mission which are equally important. Mission has become multidimensional.³² Among these other dimensions are, for example, development, political advocacy, and nature conservation work.³³ Consequently, the gospel is much more than the message of salvation from sin, death, and the power of the devil. As a matter of fact, the gospel of holism and transformation shows many similarities to the gospel of liberation.

For Tobias Faix, extraordinary professor of missiology at the University of South Africa and a prominent member of the emerging church movement, the gospel is the good news that through Jesus' death and resurrection people can be liberated from all their broken relationships: human being and God (John 3:16), human being and self (Matthew 22:36-40), human being and neighbour (Matthew 5:38-48), and human being and nature (John 3:17; John 12:47).³⁴ Faix writes that at the cross Jesus practises solidarity with all suffering and marginalised people.³⁵ At the same time the perpetrators are granted reconciliation. In the same way as the oppressed need to be liberated from their sufferings, the oppressors need to be liberated from the injustice which they have caused. The cross means reconciliation for sin, injustice, and vio-

²⁹ D. Tutu (together with M. Tutu), *Made for Goodness: And Why this Makes All the Difference* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 134.

³⁰ Cf. T. Prill, 'Theological Controversies on the Mission Field in Southern Africa: Reasons, Implications and Responses', in T. Prill, *Mission Namibia: Challenges and Opportunities for the Church in the 21st Century* (München: Grin, 2012), 89.

³¹ Prill, 'Theological Controversies on the Mission Field in Southern Africa: Reasons, Implications and Responses', 89-90.

³² E.M. Conradie, 'Creation at the Heart of Mission?', in *Missionalia* vol. 38, no. 3, 385.

³³ E.g. A. Balog, *Toward an Evangelical Missiology of Humanitarian Aid Ministry* (Osijek: Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2007); C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006).

³⁴ T. Faix, 'Exodus, Jubeljahr, Kreuz und die Gemeinde heute: Biblische Aspekte der Befreiung, Erlösung und Transformation', in T. Faix & T. Kunkler, *Die verändernde Kraft des Evangeliums: Beiträge zu den Marburger Transformationsstudien* (Marburg: Francke, 2012), 82-83.

³⁵ Faix, 'Exodus, Jubeljahr, Kreuz und die Gemeinde heute: Biblische Aspekte der Befreiung, Erlösung und Transformation', 83.

lence on this earth. Faix goes on to say that from the cross flows a power which can redeem, liberate, and transform political, social, economic, cultural, ethical, ethnic, ecological, emancipatory, and spiritual aspects of human life.³⁶

In sum, people hold that the gospel is good news for those who are willing to give away their money, it is good news only for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, or it is good news for all people regardless of their religious beliefs. But are these gospels of prosperity, liberation, feminism, post-modernism, universalism, and transformation identical to the good news that we can find in the Bible? The answer to that question has to be ‘No!’ So what is meant by the word gospel that is mentioned in the New Testament seventy-six times?

Life without the Gospel

If we want to understand the meaning of the gospel, we will first need to ‘understand how bad our situation is without it’³⁷. The Bible tells us that every human being is by default a sinner. We have ‘all sinned and fall short of the glory of God’³⁸. We ‘have all gone astray’³⁹. The truth is that ‘there is no one who does not sin’⁴⁰. We are by nature sinners; we are ‘by nature children of wrath’⁴¹. As such we lead lives that are not pleasing to God. We lead rebellious lives. We rebel against God who created not only us but the whole universe. We try to keep our Creator out of our lives or let Him play only a minor role. We may still call ourselves Christians, we may go to church on Sundays, sing the familiar hymns and songs, say our prayers, and pay our membership fees, but we give other things, activities, or people the central position in our lives that only God deserves. These things, activities, and people are not necessarily morally wrong, but we sin against God by worshipping them. Instead of trusting in God who has provided us with all good things, we trust in our own abilities, in the power of money, the power of wealth, the power of sex, the power of alcohol, the power of drugs, the power of fame, or the power of power. We worship ourselves and all kinds of things but not the one and true God who deserves all our worship. We separate ourselves from God. Because of that sin the Bible calls us not only ‘God’s enemies’⁴² but also people who are spiritually dead. The apostle Paul puts it this way: ‘As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of

³⁶ Faix, ‘Exodus, Jubeljahr, Kreuz und die Gemeinde heute: Biblische Aspekte der Befreiung, Erlösung und Transformation, 83-85.

³⁷ A.L. Barry, ‘What about the Gospel?’ (Kirkwood, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, undated), 1, lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1080 access: 05.03.2014.

³⁸ Romans 3:23.

³⁹ Psalm 14:3.

⁴⁰ 1 Kings 8:46.

⁴¹ Ephesians 2:3.

⁴² Romans 5:10.

the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.⁴³

As sinners, our lives are not driven by God and His moral standards but by Satan and our own human standards. As sinners, we disobey God and His moral law that we find summarised in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). The result is lives that are characterised by greed, hate, envy, deception, gossip, quarrelling, pride, boasting, unfaithfulness, adultery, murder etc.⁴⁴

In Namibia we can see this kind of rebellion against God in many different areas of life. We can see it in men who think they are good men because they only have one mistress and not two or three like their friends. We can see it in young students who think that drugs and alcohol are the solution to all their problems. We can see it in male managers and supervisors who ask their female employees to sleep with them so that they can keep their jobs. We can see it in fathers who abuse their children and young mothers who dump their newborns. We can see it in terrible traffic accidents caused by reckless driving. We can see it in business people and government employees who offer or take bribes. We can see it in students who steal exam papers. We can see it in families where people fight over money, land, or cattle and do not even refrain from bewitching one another. We can see it in the income gap between rich and poor (which is the highest in the world). We can see it in the divisions that still exist between different ethnic groups in this country. Yes, we can even see it in churches, where so called 'pastors' fight for power and influence instead of tending the flock.

The Bible tells us that such sinful lives have consequences. These consequences are rooted in the character of God. God has created us to be in a close and everlasting relationship to Him, but as sinners we fail to stay in that relationship; we break relationship with Him. God has created us to be holy and pure but as sinners we are frequently unholy and unclean. God, however, holds us accountable for the way we live the lives He has given us.⁴⁵ And since He is a just and righteous God who hates sin,⁴⁶ the punishment of sin is unavoidable. It is God's righteousness that demands such punishment. We are told in the Bible what the punishment for sin, what the punishment for our rebellion against God, is. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans writes that 'the wages of sin is death'⁴⁷. Death here refers to three realities. Firstly, it refers to physical death. All sinners die, no matter what their age, gender, education, ethnic background, or status in society is. Secondly, it refers to spiritual death. Sinners have broken relationship with God, they are

⁴³ Ephesians 2:1-2.

⁴⁴ Cf. Romans 1:29-31; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 2 Timothy 3:2-3.

⁴⁵ Cf. Romans 3:19.

⁴⁶ Cf. Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 45:7.

⁴⁷ Romans 26:23.

therefore spiritually dead. Thirdly, it refers to the ‘second death’⁴⁸, i.e. everlasting banishment from God and punishment in hell. Jesus himself often spoke about it. He described hell as a place of bondage, darkness, weeping and torment.⁴⁹

Without God and His mercy we are in a hopeless situation. Without the gospel we are in a mess and we cannot pull ourselves out of it. It does not matter how hard we try. It does not matter how much money we give to the Church or how much charitable work we do. It does not matter how much we help others in need. It does not matter how hard we try to live a morally good life. We will never be able to meet God’s standards. We will stay what we are: sinners who deserve God’s punishment. That is why we need the gospel desperately!

The Gospel of Salvation

God, however, is not only a just God who hates sin, He is also a God of love and grace who has started the greatest of all missions to save us from spiritual death, our bondage to sin, and everlasting destruction. Even before the creation of the world God decided that Jesus should fulfil the function of a Saviour for sinful human beings.⁵⁰ When the first human beings, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God by doubting His word and eating from the tree they brought sin into the world.⁵¹ But even at this early stage God promised a Saviour who would crush Satan and His power.⁵² As a matter of fact the whole of the Old Testament points us to this Saviour. The prophet Isaiah, for example, wrote about Him: ‘But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.’⁵³ The same Saviour is mentioned by the prophet Jeremiah:

The days are coming declares the LORD, when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.⁵⁴

And when the time was right God sent this Saviour whom He had promised and to whom the whole of the Old Testament is pointing. Jesus Christ, the Son of God came into our world as a human being. He was born to a virgin called Mary and He grew up in a 1st-century Jewish family. He was a

⁴⁸ Revelation 2:11.

⁴⁹ Cf. Matthew 22:13; Luke 16:23.

⁵⁰ Cf. 1 Peter 1:20.

⁵¹ Cf. Genesis 3:1-5.

⁵² Cf. Genesis 3:15.

⁵³ Isaiah 53:5.

⁵⁴ Jeremiah 23:5-6.

human being like you and me. However, He was also the Son of God who lived a perfect life and never committed a single sin.⁵⁵ He was God's Son who had been sent on a mission – a mission to save sinners like you and me. The whole Bible testifies about this, but it is in the New Testament that Jesus' mission is described most clearly. When at the beginning of His earthly ministry Jesus came to be baptised by John the Baptist, he said about Jesus: 'Look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'⁵⁶ Later Jesus said about Himself: 'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.'⁵⁷ And after His death and resurrection the apostles whom Jesus had appointed to be His messengers also testified about Jesus' mission of salvation. The Apostle Paul wrote that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst'⁵⁸, while the Apostle Peter assured his Christian readers that through Jesus Christ they were receiving the goal of their faith, the salvation of their souls⁵⁹.

But how did Jesus achieve His mission of salvation? Well, since death is the punishment for sin Jesus had to die. He died on the cross in order to save sinners like you and me. The cross of Calvary is the climax of the divine mission of salvation. On the cross Jesus died as a sacrifice for us. He died in our place, paying the penalty of death which we deserved because of our sins.⁶⁰ On the cross Jesus died to remove us from the wrath of God which we deserved as sinners. He died to satisfy the justice of God.⁶¹ On the cross Jesus died to reconcile sinful human beings with God and bring us back into fellowship with Him.⁶² On the cross Jesus died to redeem us from our bondage to sin and to Satan.⁶³ Only Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God, could do that. Only God Himself could deal with the horror of human sin. Only Jesus could die our death, suffer the punishment for our sins, satisfy the justice of God, reconcile us with God, and free us from the slavery of sin and the power of Satan. Only He could take our sins and give us His righteousness.

However, this is only part of the good news. God did more than giving His Son to die for us. On the third day God raised Jesus to life again. The Apostle Paul writes about the importance of Jesus' bodily resurrection: '...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins'⁶⁴. If Jesus had not been raised from the dead then His death would have no value to us at all. However, Paul continues:

⁵⁵ Cf. Hebrews 4:15.

⁵⁶ John 1:29.

⁵⁷ Luke 19:10.

⁵⁸ 1 Timothy 1:15.

⁵⁹ 1 Peter 1:9.

⁶⁰ Cf. Hebrews 9:36.

⁶¹ Cf. Romans 3:25.

⁶² Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.

⁶³ Cf. Ephesians 1:7.

⁶⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.⁶⁵

Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee that all people will be raised from the dead. When Jesus Christ returns He will raise the dead and judge the world in righteousness. All unbelievers who have lived their lives without Him will be handed over to eternal punishment.⁶⁶ But all those who through faith belong to Christ, who have trusted in God's forgiveness offered in Jesus' name, who have trusted Him as their Lord and Saviour during their earthly life, will enjoy eternal life. The evangelist John writes: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'⁶⁷ To summarise one can say that the gospel is the good news about what God has done in His Son, Jesus Christ. It is the good news about Jesus' death and resurrection, or as John Calvin puts it:

Finally, God took pity upon this unfortunate and thoroughly unhappy man. Although the sentence which he passed upon him was correct, he nevertheless gave his only and much-loved Son as a sacrificial victim for such sins. By reason of this amazing and unexpected mercy..., God commended his love towards us more greatly than if he had rescinded this sentence. Therefore Christ, the Son of God, was both conceived through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin. He was finally raised up on the cross, and through his own death delivered the human race from eternal death.⁶⁸

Only One Gospel of Salvation

Greg Gilbert points out that the New Testament uses the word gospel in two ways: a broader way and a narrower way. He writes:

Broadly, ..., it refers to all the promises made to us through the work of Jesus – not only forgiveness of sins, but also resurrection, reconciliation with both God and others, sanctification, glorification, coming kingdom, new heavens and new earth and so forth. You might say that in those cases, “gospel” refers to the whole complex of God's promises secured through the life and work of Christ. We might call this broader sense the “gospel of the kingdom”. In the narrow sense,...,“gospel” refers specifically to the

⁶⁵ 2 Corinthians 15:20-22.

⁶⁶ Cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9.

⁶⁷ John 3:16.

⁶⁸ J. Calvin, 'Letter of Advice', quoted in A.E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 187.

atonement death and resurrection of Jesus and the call to all people to repent and believe in him. We might call this narrower sense the “gospel of the cross”.⁶⁹

Gilbert’s observation is certainly true. When we look at the use of the word gospel in the Bible, we can see that the New Testament actually speaks about the ‘gospel of Jesus Christ’⁷⁰ and the ‘gospel of the kingdom’⁷¹. However, it would be wrong to conclude that there are two kinds of gospels. The New Testament writers leave us with no doubt that the gospel of the Kingdom is centred on Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God finds its expression in Jesus’ deeds⁷², in Jesus’ teaching⁷³, and ultimately in the person of Jesus^{74,75}. Gilbert recognises this when he writes that the broad use of the term gospel includes the narrow use.⁷⁶ He goes on to explain how the two relate to each other:

[T]he gospel of the cross is the gateway, the fountainhead, even the seed, so to speak, of the gospel of the kingdom. Read the whole New Testament, and you quickly realize that its univocal message is that a person cannot get to those broad blessings of the kingdom except by being forgiven of sin through the death of Christ. That is the fountain from which all the rest springs.⁷⁷

In other words, to receive or enter the Kingdom of God requires faith in the gospel of Jesus.⁷⁸ That the person of Jesus is actually the gospel is also at the centre of the Apostle Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Paul defines the essence of the gospel message by listing five gospel truths. First, Jesus is the Christ (verse 3). Secondly, He died for our sins, was buried and was raised to life again (verses 3-4). Thirdly, we can know this through the Scriptures (verses 4-8), i.e. the Old Testament, and the reports of many witnesses, including the apostles. In other words: we can find the gospel in the whole Bible. Fourthly, we need to respond to the gospel message by ‘holding firm

⁶⁹ G. Gilbert, ‘Addendum: What is the Gospel?’, in M. Dever, J.L. Duncan, R.A. Mohler & CJ Mahaney, *Proclaiming a Cross-centered Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 126.

⁷⁰ E.g. Mark 1:1.

⁷¹ E.g. Matthew 4:23.

⁷² Cf. Luke 1:20.

⁷³ Cf. Matthew 18:3-4.

⁷⁴ Cf. Luke 17:20-21.

⁷⁵ See also M. Tinker, *Evangelical Concerns: Rediscovering the Christian Mind on Issues Facing the Church Today* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2001), 68-70.

⁷⁶ Gilbert, ‘Addendum: What is the Gospel?’, 126.

⁷⁷ Gilbert, ‘Addendum: What is the Gospel?’, 127-128.

⁷⁸ Cf. Mark 10:17-31.

to it', i.e. by faith (verse 2). Fifthly, if we do so, we will receive salvation (verse 2).

Receiving the Gospel of Salvation

Here we have it: the gospel, the good news! What wonderful news, indeed! The one, true, eternal, all-gracious, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God, the creator of the universe, came into our world to live, suffer, die and rise to life again for sinful people like us. We, who are rebellious, unclean and unholy, can receive the forgiveness of all our sins, the perfect righteousness of Christ our Saviour, and the promise of eternal life as a free gift. We are declared saved and right with God by God Himself. We do not deserve our salvation and we cannot contribute anything to it. It is entirely God's work, or as the Apostle Paul puts it: 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast.'⁷⁹

We can only receive this good news. We can only embrace this good news of reconciliation to a gracious God through Christ. Christians are saved by God's grace alone, through faith in Christ alone. This faith which saves is more than simply knowledge about Jesus or intellectual agreement with what the Bible teaches. Saving faith is simple trust in Jesus. It is simply dependence on Jesus' sacrifice He made on the cross.⁸⁰ We can find an example of this simple trust in Jesus in the words of Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, who wrote almost 500 years ago:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.⁸¹

It is such simple faith through which we personally receive the forgiveness Jesus Christ won on the cross almost 2,000 years ago. But how do we get such faith? Well, it is a gift of our gracious God. It is given to us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel.⁸² God's Holy Spirit works through the

⁷⁹ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁸⁰ E. Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 26.

⁸¹ M. Luther, 'The Small Catechism', in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Lutheran Church*, <http://bookofconcord.org/smallcatechism.php>, access: 15.03.2014.

⁸² Cf. Ephesians 3:16-17.

message of the gospel to create and sustain faith in our hearts.⁸³ Jesus Christ is not only the Saviour of the world, but also our Saviour too. There is, however, as Veith points out, a prelude to the gospel: the law of God. One function of God's law is 'to cut through our layers of self-deception so that we realize how lost we really are'⁸⁴ or as the apostle puts it: 'Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.'⁸⁵ Veith writes:

Those broken by the Law are convinced of their need and of their inability to save themselves. Then the message that God does it all comes as an astounding relief, as good news. Those who despair of achieving perfection by themselves can hear the message of the cross – that they can find totally free forgiveness through the work of Jesus Christ – and cling to it, desperately with every fibre of their being. Then they become open to God's life-changing gifts. When they do so they are justified by faith. Christ's righteousness is counted as their own. The Law's demands for moral perfection are thus satisfied, vicariously but effectively. Christ's death counts for any punishment they deserve. They are utterly forgiven, released from fear, filled with gratitude for the sheer grace of God.⁸⁶

The Bible, the word of God, is filled with both God's law and the good news of Jesus Christ. Through this Spirit-filled word God is calling us back to Him and calling us to lead a life in communion with Him. And when the day comes that we are confronted with our own death, we know that no one can give us certainty of eternal life except Jesus Christ. Only Jesus has truly defeated death, our final enemy. The Apostle Paul writes: 'The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'⁸⁷ He gives us that gift so that we can trust Him alone as our Lord and Saviour.

If you feel that God's Holy Spirit is calling you today through the good news of Jesus Christ, do not hesitate. If you want to be forgiven by God, enjoy His presence in your life, and receive the gift of eternal life, do not wait with your response. Turn to the One who said: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'⁸⁸

⁸³ Barry, 'What about the Gospel?', 1.

⁸⁴ Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals*, 25.

⁸⁵ Romans 3:20.

⁸⁶ Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals*, 25-26.

⁸⁷ Romans 3:23.

⁸⁸ Matthew 11:28-30.

Sharing the Gospel of Salvation

It is essential for every Christian to know the gospel and to trust in it. However, it is also essential that we proclaim it to others. Michael Horton comments: ‘Since the gospel is a report to be believed rather than a task for us to fulfil, it needs heralds, ambassadors and witnesses.’⁸⁹ To proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is to share it with others, is not only the responsibility of evangelists and pastors. In his first letter, the Apostle Peter reminds us that every Christian must be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have.⁹⁰ Peter also tells us what attitude we should have: ‘But do this with gentleness and respect.’⁹¹ John Stott speaks of a responsibility that Christians have towards the world: evangelism.⁹² He continues:

To “evangelize” means literally to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. There are still millions of people who are ignorant of him and his salvation, in every part of the world. For centuries the church seems to have been half asleep. The challenge is for us to be Christians who are wide awake and active in seeking to win the world for Christ. It may be that he has a special task for you to do as an ordained minister of the gospel or a missionary... Although not every Christian is called to be a minister or a missionary, God does intend each of us as Christians to be a witness to Jesus Christ. In our own homes, among our friends and with our colleagues, we carry the solemn responsibility to live a consistent, loving, humble, honest, Christ-like life, and to seek to win other people for him.⁹³

When we share the gospel with others it is important to remember that it is not our power that moves people to believe in Jesus, but the gospel which we find in the inspired word of God. The Apostle Paul defines the gospel as ‘the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes’⁹⁴. This knowledge prevents us from becoming proud when people respond by putting their trust in Jesus. It also takes away any guilt that one might feel if people reject the gospel. Finally, we must remember that the gospel is good news for all nations.⁹⁵ Consequently, we must not hide the gospel from people because they belong to another ethnic group or social class. Instead, we must share it whenever we have the opportunity to do so.

⁸⁹ M. Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 195.

⁹⁰ 1 Peter 3:15.

⁹¹ 1 Peter 3:15.

⁹² J. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 166.

⁹³ Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 166-167.

⁹⁴ Romans 1:16.

⁹⁵ Cf. Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8; Luke 24:47.

Living According to the Truth of the Gospel of Salvation

The gospel is the good news about what God has done for us in Jesus. However, the gospel also demands something of us. It demands repentance, obedience, and faith from us. We are called to live a life in line with the gospel and its truth. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul puts it this way: ‘Whatever happens conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.’⁹⁶ As Christians who believe in the good news of Jesus we are not only called to share the gospel of salvation with others but also to share in Christ’s sufferings. Again it is the Apostle Paul who writes: ‘So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel.’⁹⁷ It also means that God’s good news needs to shape our lives, not only on Sundays but every day of the week. It calls us to love God and our neighbours as we love ourselves. It calls us to bear good fruit. It calls us to serve God, our fellow believers, and others. It calls us to make sacrifices. If we do not live according to the truth of the gospel we become hypocrites.⁹⁸ However, if we do we will see that it has the power to transform our lives and the lives of others into the likeness of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: ‘For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.’⁹⁹

Yes, the Christian faith is a personal faith but it is certainly not a private faith. For followers of Christ involvement in a local congregation is not optional. Mark Dever comments:

According to the Bible, our participation in the local congregation normally validates or falsifies our claim that we are savingly trusting in Christ and his gospel. What gospel allows you to think you have accepted it, if you don’t, in a committed and Christlike way, love your brother? What does saving faith look like? Does the gospel merely save me and lead me to God? Or does it normally bring me to God through the fellowship of the local church? Paul says “we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). God means us to serve him not only, of course, but fundamentally through the local church, where we are served by each other as we administer God’s grace to each other by using the gifts God has given us in serving each other (1 Pet. 4:10).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Philippians 1:27.

⁹⁷ 2 Timothy 1:8.

⁹⁸ Cf. Galatians 2:14.

⁹⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:18.

¹⁰⁰ M. Dever, ‘Improving the Gospel: Exercises in Unbiblical Theology (or)

Conclusion

What is the true gospel? Well, it is certainly not the gospel of liberation or feminism. The advocates of these gospels seem to ignore the fact that '[w]hile New Testament Christianity respects human dignity and calls for justice, liberation in terms of what Christ came to do must be understood as meaning liberation primarily from man's fundamental dilemma, which is sin'¹⁰¹.

The same can be said of the prosperity gospel. The core problem of the prosperity gospel is its view of the relationship between human beings and their Creator: 'Simply put, if the prosperity gospel is correct, grace becomes obsolete, God becomes irrelevant, and "man is the measure of all things".'¹⁰²

The problem of the gospel of holism and transformation is that it makes the gospel larger than it really is. As Dever has pointed out it requires us 'to include what we take to be implications of the gospel as part of the gospel itself'¹⁰³. This however 'can too easily confuse our message and cause us to lose the radical and gracious sufficiency of faith in Christ alone'¹⁰⁴. Of course the Bible speaks about transformation, but as Carson writes it is 'God who gathers and transforms his people'¹⁰⁵. People who are reconciled to God can no 'longer live as the Gentiles do'¹⁰⁶, they must be changed. A change of heart and life needs to take place. Carson comments:

The change of heart has come about such that we want to please the Lord, and we are eager to find out what pleases him. Biblical transformational Christianity gathers men and women together in the church, these people who have been called out – Jew or Gentile, it doesn't matter – and under the lordship of Christ they look back to the cross and look forward to what is still ahead. By the power of the Spirit and because of the change in their lives, they want to find out what pleases the Lord.¹⁰⁷

Questioning Five Common Deceits', in M. Dever, J.L. Duncan, R.A. Mohler & C.J. Mahaney, *Proclaiming a Cross-centered Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 113.

¹⁰¹ B.H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1985), 51.

¹⁰² D.W. Jones & R.S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?*, 102.

¹⁰³ M. Dever, 'Improving the Gospel: Exercises in Unbiblical Theology (or) Questioning Five Common Deceits', 109.

¹⁰⁴ M. Dever, 'Improving the Gospel: Exercises in Unbiblical Theology (or) Questioning Five Common Deceits', 109.

¹⁰⁵ D.A. Carson, *The God Who is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 200.

¹⁰⁶ Ephesians 4:17.

¹⁰⁷ D.A. Carson, *The God Who is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story*, 196.

Neither are the postmodern gospel, the syncretised gospel, nor the gospel of universalism true expressions of the biblical gospel, as they all deny the uniqueness of Christ and His work, as well as the absolute necessity of personal faith in Him who said 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me'¹⁰⁸. It is the claim to uniqueness which lies at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁹ The postmodern gospel, the syncretised gospel, and the gospel of universalism are an attempt to make the gospel of Jesus look more attractive or more relevant and thus more acceptable. However, instead of trying to improve the gospel '[w]e must', as Dever¹¹⁰ writes 'preach the gospel we have received'.

What then is the gospel we have received? *In A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* Martin Luther gives the following answer:

For at its briefest, the gospel is a discourse about Christ, that he is the Son of God and became man for us, that he died and was raised, and that he has been established as Lord over all things. This much St. Paul takes in hand and spins out in his epistles. He bypasses all the miracles and incidents (in Christ's ministry) which are set forth in the four Gospels, yet he includes the whole gospel adequately and abundantly. This may be seen clearly and well in his greeting to the Romans, where he says what the gospel is, and then declares: "Paul a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord," etc. There you have it. The gospel is a story about Christ, God's and David's Son, who died and was raised, and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ John 14:6.

¹⁰⁹ P.G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2000), 221.

¹¹⁰ M. Dever, 'Improving the Gospel: Exercises in Unbiblical Theology (or) Questioning Five Common Deceits', 119.

¹¹¹ M. Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, edited by J. Pelikan & H.T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 118.