


A PRELUDE TO *BIBLICAL* EVANGELISM



A large, ancient tree with thick, gnarled roots growing over stone ruins. The tree's trunk is massive and textured, with roots spreading out across the ground and over the stone structures. The background shows more stone ruins and lush green foliage. The scene is set in a natural, outdoor environment.

THE FRUIT OF
THE RIGHTEOUS IS A
TREE OF LIFE,
AND HE WHO IS WISE
WINS SOULS.

PROVERBS 11:30 NASB

**PRINCIPLES
FOR
BIBLICAL
EVANGELISM
FOUND IN
JOHN 4, “THE
WOMAN AT
THE WELL.”**

TAKE

- TAKE THE INITIATIVE! JN. 4:6-9

OFFER

- OFFER GOD’S MERCY! JN. 4:10-14

IDENTIFY

- IDENTIFY SPIRITUAL NEEDS! JN. 4:9-10

CONFRONT

- CONFRONT SIN JN! 4:16-18

REJECT

- REJECT FALSE WORSHIP! JN. 4:19-24

REVEAL

- REVEAL CHRIST! JN. 4:25-26

TOGETHER AGAINST ECUMENISM

- What does it mean for believers to stand together for the gospel?
- In simple terms, it means that while they might have other theological differences, ***they are united in affirming the gospel's core tenets.*** Specifically, they agree that sinners are justified ***not*** by their own efforts, but by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
- It's that last element in particular that offends and annoys our pluralistic, inclusive society. But as ***F. F. BRUCE*** explains, the gospel's exclusivity flows directly out of Christ's nature in His incarnation.
- He is, in fact, ***THE ONLY WAY BY WHICH MEN AND WOMEN MAY COME TO THE FATHER, THERE IS NO OTHER WAY.*** If this seems offensively exclusive, let it be borne in mind that the one who makes this claim is the incarnate Word, the revealer of the Father.

- If God has no avenue of communication with mankind apart from his Word . . . mankind has no avenue of approach to God apart from that same Word, who became flesh and dwelt among us in order to supply such an avenue of approach.
- Standing together for the gospel, ***then, is standing in agreement with Christ's own assertions to His uniqueness: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6).*** It's echoing the words ***PETER*** boldly proclaimed to the Sanhedrin, that ***"there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved"*** (Acts 4:12).
- In spite of the innate exclusivity of the gospel, the world's religions attempt to position themselves as co-laborers with Christianity. They might highlight similar stances on social issues, or simply try to identify a common enemy—whatever it takes to present the ***ILLUSION OF UNITY.***

- Worse still, many Christians are all too happy to lend those false religions spiritual credibility by operating as ***cobelligerents***.
- Such ecumenical partnerships require a muddying of doctrinal waters. Theological distinctives are downplayed or set aside in the name of unity, as both sides come to a polemical cease-fire in pursuit of a common goal.
- ***THE 1994 ECUMENICAL TREATISE EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS TOGETHER: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium (ECT)*** is a prime example. In an effort to kick-start “***a springtime of world missions***,” influential leaders from both faiths attempted to identify and affirm theological common ground for the sake of furthering the reach of the gospel.
- **IN REALITY, *THEY IGNORED* CENTURIES OF CHURCH HISTORY AND ASSERTED VAGUE PLATITUDES ABOUT UNITY IN CHRIST.**

- All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have not chosen one another, just as we have not chosen Christ. He has chosen us, and he has chosen us to be his together (**John 15**). However imperfect our *communion* with one another, however deep our disagreements with one another, we recognize that there is but one church of Christ. There is one church because there is one Christ and the church is his body. However difficult the way, we recognize that we are called by God to a fuller realization of our unity in the body of Christ.
- ***BUT WHAT GOSPEL WERE THEY UNITING BEHIND?*** Let's not forget or ignore—as the signatories of ECT must have—***that Catholic dogma pronounces anathema on anyone who preaches justification by faith alone.*** Here is the stark condemnation, spelled out by the Council of Trent:

- If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema. (Canon IX)
- If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema. (Canon XXIV)
- How can evangelicals set aside such a clear repudiation of justification by faith in the name of unity? How can the two sides claim unity in Christ when their views of Christ's work are so thoroughly divergent? Moreover, what good is that unity once the doctrinal differences have been swept under the rug?

- But that wasn't even the worst aspect of ECT. In addition to propping up the frail façade of unity, the document also prohibited attempts to “win ‘converts’ from one another’s folds,” downplaying such efforts as “*sheep stealing*” that would “*undermine the Christian mission.*” It further argued that,
- in view of the large number of non-Christians in the world and the enormous challenge of our common evangelistic task, it is neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources for one Christian community to proselytize among active adherents of another Christian community.
- In one fell swoop, ECT declared the entire Catholic Church—which today claims more than a *1.25 billion* followers worldwide—off limits from the gospel, consigning them to Rome’s demonic heresies. Why would believers champion such feeble unity to the exclusion of so vast a mission field?
- **ECUMENISM** is not true unity. It’s a lie agreed upon—one that inoculates lost souls to the life-transforming truth of the gospel.

- And as the world becomes increasingly *pluralistic*, **BELIEVERS NEED TO BE COMMITTED TO PROTECTING THE PURITY OF THE GOSPEL, RESISTING THE WORLD'S URGING TO MIX IT WITH ERROR.** We need to keep clear in our minds the black and white distinction between truth and error, and not succumb to the influence of an increasingly gray world.
- Christians preach an **EXCLUSIVE CHRIST IN AN INCLUSIVE AGE.** Because of that, we are often accused of being narrow-minded, even intolerant. Many paths, it is said, lead to the top of the mountain of religious enlightenment. How dare we insist that ours is the only one? In reality, however, there are only **two** religious' paths: **THE BROAD WAY OF WORKS SALVATION LEADING TO DESTRUCTION, AND THE NARROW WAY OF FAITH IN THE ONLY SAVIOR LEADING TO ETERNAL LIFE (Matt. 7:13-14).** Religious people are on either one or the other.
- Put simply, standing together for the gospel means **standing together against ecumenical movements** that assault and betray the exclusivity of Christ.

TOGETHER *AGAINST EXPANDING* THE GOSPEL

- In October 2010, 4,200 evangelical leaders from 198 countries gathered in Cape Town, South Africa, for the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. Hundreds of thousands more participated in meetings around the world and online. It was a big deal—the congress has gathered only three times since its inception in 1974.
- **GOSPEL PURITY AND PRACTICE** were the foremost matters of discussion for ten days in Cape Town. It was hardly surprising that the *prosperity gospel*, a real juggernaut on the continent of Africa, came under heavy rebuke in the confession they drafted.

- The widespread preaching and teaching of “**prosperity gospel**” around the world raises significant concerns. We define prosperity gospel as the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the “**sowing of seeds**” through financial or material gifts. Prosperity teaching is a phenomenon that cuts across many denominations in all continents. . . .
- We believe that the teachings of many who vigorously promote the prosperity gospel seriously distort the Bible; that their practices and lifestyle are often unethical and un-Christlike; that they commonly replace genuine **evangelism** with **miracle-seeking** and replace the call to **repentance** with **the call to give money** to the preacher’s organization.
- We grieve that the impact of this teaching on many Churches **is pastorally damaging and spiritually unhealthy**. . . . The prosperity gospel offers no lasting solution to **poverty** and can **deflect people** from the true message and means of eternal salvation.

- For these reasons it can be soberly described as a *false gospel*. We therefore reject the excesses of prosperity teaching as incompatible with balanced biblical Christianity.
- That part of The ***Cape Town Commitment*** is a clear and necessary formal rejection of the prosperity gospel. They rightly point out that it is indeed a *“false gospel”*—a perversion where *health*, *wealth*, and *happiness* have usurped the glorious gospel truths of forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life.
- In light of such a strong repudiation, it was hardly surprising that the theological pendulum swung forcefully in the other direction. Large numbers of delegates at the Third Lausanne Congress pushed hard for matters of social justice to be enshrined in their doctrine statement. And that involved drafting an expanded definition of Christian mission that included a strong social dimension.

- We commit ourselves to the integral and dynamic exercise of all dimensions of mission to which God calls his Church:
- God commands us to make known to all nations the truth of God's revelation and the gospel of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ, calling all people to *repentance, faith, baptism* and *obedient discipleship*.
- God commands us to reflect his own character through compassionate care for the needy, and to demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God's creation.
- The second half of that definition sounds perfectly reasonable. As Christians, we should always conduct ourselves in a *caring* and *compassionate* way. But one enters dangerous theological territory when those good works become part of the gospel rather than *a result* of the gospel. And it certainly sounds that way when The Cape Town Commitment includes the alleviation of material poverty as a Great Commission responsibility.

- We embrace the witness of the whole Bible, as it shows us God's desire both for ***systemic economic justice and for personal compassion, respect and generosity towards the poor and needy***. We rejoice that this extensive biblical teaching has become more integrated into our mission strategy and practice, as it was for the early Church and the Apostle Paul.
- So, what's the problem with broadening the scope of the Great Commission? Isn't honoring God through personal sacrifice a repudiation of those who honor themselves for personal gain? Shouldn't evangelism go beyond eternal matters to the rectification of problems in the here and now—especially when the added focus is on good works that are commended by Scripture?
- **JOHN PIPER**, who was present at the Lausanne Congress, was hesitant to affirm those ideals. He was clearly troubled by the ***social gospel trajectory*** and expressed his concerns as to where it might lead:

- I want to point out one [biblical] phrase which is indispensable in this congress if we're to get the gospel right and evangelism right. . . . ***“We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind” [Eph. 2:3]. That’s terrifying. All human beings are children of wrath. . . . It’s their nature, my nature, your nature, is sinful and corrupt and rebellious.***
- Christ did not have to die merely because I’m a sinner. He had to die because God, in His infinite holiness and justice is angry at the world. We are children of anger. We are justly deserving of the wrath and the anger of God. This is the greatest problem for mankind in the universe. There isn’t anything that surpasses lostness and being bound for an everlasting suffering under the wrath of God. . . .

- When the gospel takes root in our souls it awakens us to the horrible reality of eternal suffering in hell under the wrath of a just and omnipotent God. And it impels us out to rescue the perishing. We cry, “Flee the wrath to come, flee the wrath to come.” That’s our message because Christ has died. He has absorbed the wrath of God. He has cancelled sin. Everyone who is united to Him by faith alone is forgiven of their sins and counted righteous in Christ and has eternal life. . . . It is the most important news in the universe. . . .
- ***What I want us to be able to say—could Lausanne say, could the global church say?—“For Christ’s sake we Christian’s care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering.”***
- The reaction by many at the conference to ***PIPER’S*** last sentence revealed that his corrective was called for and his concerns were real. ***Robertson McQuilkin***, a world-renowned missionary and former president of Columbia International University, wrote about the pushback he felt to Piper’s statement on the preeminent importance of eternal suffering:

- Such a simple statement—how could anyone object? Yet many at Lausanne III objected. In fact, from the dozens of sermons at the conference, this one sentence in John Piper's presentation proved a lightning rod. Many quoted it to me with delight; but from Italy to England, to Bangladesh to America, I received feedback from representatives who went home incensed by the statement.
- I wasn't surprised that the battle raged. Why? I had read a position paper prepared for the conference by high-level evangelical leaders. They rejected the church's historic position of giving priority to the evangelistic purpose of missions, so cogently expressed in Piper's simple statement. . . .
- So, I was apprehensive about the outcome of Lausanne III. Imagine my delight to find, in the consensus documents emerging from the Congress, a reaffirmation of the historic position of the church that gives priority to the evangelistic mandate. But a very large minority of attendees waged war against this position in favor of giving equal emphasis or even priority to the social or cultural responsibilities of the church.

- There are *two major lessons* in the Third Lausanne Congress when it comes to getting the gospel right. First, the right diagnosis of a problem doesn't guarantee the right corrective treatment of that problem. Second, any attempt to expand the gospel's range of meaning ultimately diminishes its true meaning.
- Unity over what the gospel is also demands unity over what the gospel isn't. The delegates in Cape Town recognized that fact by formalizing their opposition to the prosperity gospel. But many of them overcorrected, embracing the social gospel as an antidote. Moreover, they failed to recognize that the two seemingly antithetical views actually reflect the same theological deviation.
- The *prosperity gospel* and the *social gospel* may look very different to the casual observer, but they both fall into the same deadly error of *gospel expansion at the expense of the gospel*. One adds *temporal* riches to *eternal* riches. The other adds the alleviation of *temporal suffering* to the alleviation of *eternal suffering*.

- Good works should be commended, as they are in Scripture. But they are an extension of the gospel rather than a fundamental aspect of it (**Eph. 2:10**). The gospel is the good news concerning the forgiveness of sins through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (**1 Cor 15:1–5**). It is not subject to alteration (**Gal. 1:8–9**).
- ***TO EXPAND THE GOSPEL'S MEANING BEYOND ITS ETERNAL RAMIFICATIONS IS TO DILUTE, AND POSSIBLY JETTISON, THOSE ETERNAL RAMIFICATIONS. BEING TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL, BY IMPLICATION, DEMANDS THAT WE STAND TOGETHER AGAINST ALL ATTEMPTS TO EXPAND ITS MEANING BEYOND ITS BIBLICAL BOUNDARIES.***