

A Gospel-Focused Church

This Is Us, Part 3

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September 29, 2019

A few weeks ago, we talked about the value of having people in our lives who are willing to confront or correct us. One person for whom I am grateful is Nancy Bartman. For many years, she was a fifth grade teacher in Poplar, Wisconsin and attended Lakeside Baptist Church near there.

One day, she approached the pastor of that congregation, who happened to be me, and said, "Pastor Dan, I have a question for you. **Is the correct pronunciation 'gos-pel' or 'gos-ful'?** I think it is gospel, with a 'p,' but I hear you saying gos-ful, with an 'f.'"

Well, Nancy was correct. For some reason, for the first thirty-one years of my life, I thought I was hearing "gos-ful" when people used the word. The "gos-ful" of Jesus Christ. Oh, I knew there was a "p" in the word, but I guess I thought this was a unique word in the English language where the "p" was supposed to be pronounced as an "f."

The crazy thing is that I had graduated from college, had earned two Master's degrees in seminary, had already preached over a hundred sermons, had taught countless Sunday School classes and Bible studies, and no one else ever said, "Dan, it is not 'gos-ful.' It is gospel!"

I am grateful my friend Nancy was willing to correct me, and you folks should be, too, because I would think it would be a little embarrassing to go to a church where the pastor doesn't even know how to pronounce "gospel" correctly.

About 13-14 years ago, I received another correction about the gospel. This was a little more indirect, but I read an article where Pastor Tim Keller said:

"The gospel is not the ABC's of Christianity. It is the A-Z of Christianity. The gospel is what the Christian church is all about."

Friends, reading and reflecting on that statement has helped me sharpen my focus, as a pastor, on the gospel; and as a result, it has helped CBC be a more gospel focused church.

Now, this is certainly not anything new or revolutionary for this congregation. For 113 years, this church has been about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, with the increasingly secular environment which we as Christians find ourselves, it is more important than ever that we keep our focus on the gospel.

This morning, we will explore more of what that means for us as individuals and as a church. Let's pause and pray the Lord would use His Word and Spirit to encourage and challenge us today.

The word "gospel" literally means "good news." Since I am convinced it is the best news ever, I like to refer to it as "The Great News." It comes from the Greek word "eu-en-gel-ion" from which we also get words like evangel, evangelism and evangelical. So, "evangelical" should mean a gospel focused church or Christian, but I know some folks use it other ways.

A simple way to define the gospel is "The Great News of Jesus' death and resurrection." Or, I often say, **"The Great News that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead to guarantee our salvation."** This definition flows from what the Bible teaches. Let's look at what the Apostle Paul says:

1 Corinthians 15:1-4 – Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, (It is news, a message proclaimed) which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you – unless you believed in vain (more about this in a bit). For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: (This is the heart of the message, and it is not a message Paul made up himself, but one he received from the Lord...Here it is...) that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

That is it! That is the Great News! Jesus died on the cross and rose again! The buried phrase, I think, points to the fact Jesus was very much dead

when they put him in the tomb and very much alive when he came out of the tomb.

If you ask me, “Pastor Dan, which is more important – Jesus’ death or his resurrection?” I will say, “Both.” They are really two sides of the same coin. In fact, when the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 1:18) describes his message as “the preaching of the cross” or of “Christ crucified,” he is referring to both Jesus’ death and resurrection – which is the gospel.

The “according to the Scriptures” refers to, yes, the biblical account of what happened, but also to the meaning of the events which the Bible explains. It involves the fact that Jesus’ death and resurrection fulfilled Old Testament prophecies made many centuries earlier.

Yet, most imply it includes the fact our salvation is accomplished through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The gospel is not just the message that Jesus died and rose again; but that through his death and resurrection, all those trusting in Jesus, experience God’s salvation. That is why Paul says:

Romans 1:16 – For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, also to the Gentile.

That, folks, is the gospel, the Great News of how Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead to guarantee our salvation. This is the message on which our individual lives and our life together as a church should be focused. This is the message we are to believe, proclaim and to which we are to respond.

And, indeed, there is no other message worthy of our focus because there is no other gospel. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul is disturbed that some in that church have abandoned the gospel for another gospel, which is really not a gospel at all. It is not really good news because it is not the truth. Thus, Paul says:

Galatians 1:8 – But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!

Okay, all this brings us to our first point today:

#1 As a gospel focused church, we strive to avoid distorting that message in both our belief and proclamation.

This means avoiding distortions of the gospel that may seem popular in our culture. When we say The Great News involves Jesus’ death on the cross, we are referring to what theologians call, “Penal Substitutionary Atonement.” That means **Jesus died on the cross for our sins, experiencing God’s wrath in our place.**

A few years ago, a new hymnal was published by the Presbyterian Church, USA. They were interested in including the recent hymn, “In Christ Alone.” However, they would only do so if they were allowed to change the words of the song:

Instead of:

*On the cross where Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied*

They wanted:

*On the cross where Jesus died
The love of God was glorified*

Now, there is nothing wrong with the new words. God’s love was, indeed, glorified on the cross. But a big part of how God’s love was glorified was that his wrath was satisfied through Jesus’ death in our place.

Yes, some people are “uncomfortable” with the thought that God would direct wrath toward anyone, much less his own Son; but that is what the Bible teaches and it is what the gospel proclaims. Any teaching that denies or ignores Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross and his bodily resurrection from the dead is another gospel, and really not good news at all.

Folks, everyone has their own perspectives and opinions. At CBC, we can handle diverse views on a lot of issues. But on this, we need to be in agreement! We believe Jesus died on the cross for our sins – my sins and your sins – and rose from the dead to guarantee our salvation. It is that message on which we desire to focus.

Another distortion of the gospel is to confuse the Great News with responses to the gospel.

I was looking at a “gospel tract” the other day entitled, “ABC’s of Salvation.” It reads:

To know God and be ready for heaven:

- A) Admit you are a sinner. Ask God’s forgiveness.
- B) Believe in Jesus as your only hope of salvation. Become a child of God by receiving Christ.
- C) Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

Now, those are all good things, things we need to do. However, it is important to realize that when we tell folks this is what they need to do, we are not really sharing the gospel with them. We are not telling them the good news of what God has done for them. We are simply telling them what they should do in response to the Great News. With this tract, we have not even told people what that is, and we have certainly not explained the significance.

Friends, don’t misunderstand. God’s marvelous salvation involves both what God has done for us through Jesus Christ and also receiving that gift through faith, through trusting in the Lord Jesus. **Yet, the Great News, the heart of the message and the focus of our ministry, is what God has done for us through Jesus.**

Yes, friends, we need to urge others to turn to the Lord Jesus. But we also need to help people understand what Jesus has done for us, why he had to do this, and what this means for our lives.

Another type of confusion occurs when someone says, “I share the gospel through how I live, not by what I say.”

This is kind of a take-off of a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, though he likely never said it:

*“Preach the gospel at all times.
If necessary, use words.”*

Now, of course, our lives should be characterized by love and good deeds. Our experience of God’s grace in our lives should enable us to be gracious to others. How we live each day should, I like to say, “adorn the gospel.” It should make it more attractive to others.

But, the Great News is not about what nice people we are. It is not even about how God has improved or transformed our lives. It is about Jesus, about what he has done and what that means for each and every human being. **I don’t think there is any way to communicate that without words.** Neither did the Apostle Paul:

Romans 10:14 NLT – But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?

Now friend, you may be thinking, “I don’t know, Pastor Dan. I am not sure I get your point. What is the big deal? I am not a theologian, but if we are telling people they should accept Jesus and are trying to do good things, isn’t that good enough?”

Let me try one more time. This is not Rocket Science. Or even Calculus.

The gospel, the Great News, is a specific message about Jesus Christ and about what he has accomplished by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead to guarantee our salvation.

This is the message we as a church and individuals need to share and which we call people to respond to in faith, by trusting in the Lord Jesus. We need to get the message right because there is only one gospel, and this gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. That is why we strive to be a gospel focused church! Which brings me to:

#2 – As a gospel focused church, we want the gospel to impact every aspect of our ministry.

That means we cherish opportunities we have to share the Great News of Jesus Christ with people and help them understand what that means for their lives.

Sermons I preach, Sunday School lessons, and Bible studies should all connect to the gospel in some way. That’s why, when I was preaching from 2 Samuel this summer, talking about King David, I often mentioned he was the messianic king (with a small case “m”) pointing us to Jesus, the capital “M” Messiah.

When a second grade Sunday School teacher gives a lesson about the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” yes, she/he is encouraging the students to be kind to each other. However, an important part of the lesson should be “no one has ever followed the Golden Rule perfectly except Jesus.” That is why he is able to provide the perfect sacrifice that makes up for all our failures in treating each other as we should.

The gospel has a big impact on our church’s understanding of missions and what it means to fulfill the Great Commission – going to make disciples all over the world, among all peoples.

It is great that some folks are going to places in Central Africa and helping people drill wells so they can have clean water for their village. This is not, however, what we consider missions. Missions is about telling people about Jesus, about what he has done for them and about what it means to trust and follow him.

We are convinced that people need Jesus, even more than they need clean water. Now, if a missionary is helping folks drill wells and telling them about Jesus, that is great! That may be an effective strategy in reaching people who have never heard of Jesus. But unless the gospel plays a central role in a missionary’s ministry, it is probably not the type of ministry we are interested in supporting.

The gospel also informs our worship – joining together with other believers to express our praise, thanksgiving and love for God is an important part of what we do as a church. The gospel, the Great News of what God has done for us through Jesus, is one of the primary ways our grateful adoration of the Lord is fueled. That is why so many of the songs we sing, both the older and newer songs, focus on the gospel, on Jesus and what he has done for us. It is God’s love for us, a love demonstrated most clearly by Jesus’ death on the cross, which creates love for God in our hearts.

1 John 4:19 – We love because he first loved us.

Folks, nothing helps people worship in spirit and in truth more than a gospel-fueled love for God. That is really the key to God-honoring worship!

Preaching, teaching, missions and worship are the most obvious ways the gospel affects our ministry, but really every aspect of what we do as a church should be impacted by this Great News. The gospel provides an experience of God’s grace in our lives which enables us to show love, patience and forgiveness toward fellow believers in Christ. These things make a huge difference in the day to day, week to week life of CBC.

For example, an individual was wronged and hurt by another person in this congregation...but they have forgiven each other. They love each other. They are now good friends. That is what the gospel does in our lives. The wonderful fellowship and caring for each other that happens in this church is not because we are naturally wonderful people, but because we have found, or rather have been found, by a wonderful Savior.

The gospel also impacts some of the more “mundane things” we do as a church.

Working in the kitchen, shoveling snow, folding bulletins – those tasks are being performed by people who have been impacted by the Great News of Jesus. I am convinced they do those jobs differently – do them better – because of that impact. They also want to adorn the gospel, making it more attractive to others by doing those tasks diligently and joyfully.

We had a great example of that this summer. Two men in our church put a beautiful rock exterior on that wonderful sign out front. There were a few others who helped, but Jim Halberg and Jon Sjogren put in many hours, without any financial compensation, without much recognition from anyone else, doing that job diligently and joyfully. Why? Why did they do that?

I think because the gospel has impacted their lives. Their experience of God’s grace is producing an attitude of generosity in each of them. And I think a realization that their efforts might point someone else, even in a tiny way, to the Lord Jesus, helped them work diligently and joyfully. The rest of us can be grateful.

#3 As a gospel focused church, we want to focus on the gospel.

This is what we want to be about. Oh, all sorts of things are done and need to be done in a church.

For example, shoveling snow this winter has little to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it is important that we do that as a church. We probably would not be able to gather at this building for months each year if no one ever shoveled the snow.

As a church, however, we are not about snow shoveling, about the parking lot or even about this building. The Lord has blessed our congregation with a tremendous facility. Yet, this building is only a tool. Its purpose is to help us proclaim, celebrate and live out the Great News of Jesus and what he has done for us. And folks, if we start thinking of this building as more than a tool, when maintenance or improving this building becomes our focus instead of the gospel, we are goofed up, and we need to realign our thinking.

Friends, we want each of you and the folks out there to know that CBC is about the gospel – about the Lord Jesus. I recall a statement I made about 26 years ago, soon after becoming the pastor of this congregation:

“I want us to be known, not as the church where people don’t drink alcohol, but as the church where people love Jesus.”

That should still be our desire. If other people identify us by lifestyle choices we are making, if we identify ourselves by those choices, I don’t think we are really focused on the gospel.

Likewise, I don’t want people to think of CBC as the church where people are against abortion. We should be against abortion, but I want people to think of us as the place where people love Jesus. The gospel, not our politics, needs to be our focus.

If people identify our church by its pastor, we have a problem. Friends, if anyone ever says to you, “Oh, you go to CBC? That’s Pastor Dan’s church, right?” – you need to say, “No, it is not! Our church belongs to Jesus Christ. He is the one we strive to follow, not Pastor Dan.”

Now, if you want to add, “But Pastor Dan is a really great guy!” that is fine. That is up to you. But, try to make sure people understand that CBC is not about me or about you, but about Jesus and the Great News of what he has done for us. That is what needs to be our focus!

And friends, one more thing. Because we are a gospel focused church, we want everyone who ever sets foot in this room to experience the salvation the gospel brings to all who turn to the Lord Jesus and trust in him.

We want you to know you will never experience God’s wrath. We want you to know that your sins are fully forgiven. We want you to know that you are deeply loved by God, belong to him and are part of his family.

We want you to know that your identity in Christ gives your life meaning and value in every circumstance. We want you to know that you don’t have to spend your time and energy trying to convince yourself and everyone else that you are okay because God has made and declared you okay in Jesus.

We want you to know that whatever wrongs you have suffered in the past, you can forgive and move on because of who you are in Christ. We want you to know that you don’t have to be afraid of death because the end of life on this earth means the beginning of a far better life in the presence of God.

We want you to know that whenever you think there is no hope, you are wrong because there is always hope in the Lord.

All these are benefits that flow from the gospel, things we can experience because Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead to guarantee our salvation.

May the Lord help us to believe, share and celebrate the gospel today!