



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

What is the Gospel? Participation Not Consumption

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Gather a dozen Christians into a room and ask them the question, "What is the gospel?" The likelihood is that you will receive a dozen different answers. Evangelicals will speak about forgiveness of sins, entering into a personal relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ, and the gift of eternal life. Evangelicals who have an ecclesiology will add to this the incorporation of the believer into the body of Christ—the new humanity begun in Christ. Other Christians will speak of liberation from oppression and injustice, of reconciliation, or of the restoration of creation.

"It involves the basic change from viewing salvation as something we consume to viewing salvation as something in which we participate."

Still others will speak of the power of the Holy Spirit, healing, miracles, freedom from demonic powers, and of a joy so intense that words simply cannot express it. Still other Christians will speak of strength in the midst of weakness, courage in the face of suffering, comfort, peace, and the capacity to face death unafraid.

When we turn to the Bible, however, we discover a different perspective.

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The articles in this issue are part of the conversation going on in the "Hearing the Gospel Today" team of the GOCN's current research project. Those by Jim Brownson, Inagrace Dieterich and Barry Harvey are excerpts from their presentations at the October 1998 GOCN Consultation. The articles by Team Leader Charles West and GOCN Coordinator-George Hunsberger make additional contributions to the discussion. Wayne Holst's review of Jonathan Wilson's book rounds out the issue.

—Editor

The Bible doesn't speak about the gospel primarily in terms of its impact upon human life. Now this is a tricky distinction, and I want to be precise here. Certainly, the New Testament proclaims the gospel as something that has profound significance for human life. Yet it does not speak about the gospel primarily in those terms. If you survey the data in the New Testament, a very clear pattern emerges. The focus falls not so much on what we experience, but on what God has done and is doing in the world.

When Jesus speaks about the gospel, he uses the term primarily to refer to the kingdom of God or the reign of God. When the rest of the New Testament writers speak about the gospel, they use the term primarily to refer to what God has done in Jesus. There are times, of course, when the New Testament speaks about the gospel in terms of its saving impact upon this world, but that is not the primary accent in the biblical materials. The primary emphasis in the use of the term "gospel" is on a narrative that announces what God has done in Christ.

The gospel is first of all about God's faithfulness, about God's triumph over death, and about God's new purposes for the world that are revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. These biblical patterns distinguish themselves in subtle but important ways from our North American ways of speaking about the gospel. Whereas we tend to speak about the gospel in terms of its impact upon our lives, the Bible tends to speak of the gospel as a revelation of who God is and what God is doing and has done in the world.

The difference envisioned here is substantial. It involves the basic change from viewing salvation as something we receive (or, to use the dominant North American metaphor, something we consume), to viewing salvation as something in which we participate. When the Bible speaks about the gospel, it speaks primarily about who God is and what God is

doing, because salvation in the full biblical sense means participating in God's saving purpose for the whole world. First Peter 2:9 expresses this reality succinctly: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." The people of God are a chosen race, so that they may proclaim God's mighty acts, so that they may join the celebration, rejoicing in and announcing to others what God has done in Christ. As the GOCN has affirmed for some time, the Bible does not regard the church as a vendor of religious services to be received by religious consumers, but as a body of people sent on God's mission to the world.

In the final analysis, the biblical understanding of salvation is not merely that our lives and our world finally will be set right again. The biblical understanding of salvation is that our lives become swept up into something larger and greater than ourselves, into God's purposes for the world. In other words, the receiving of salvation and the call to mission are not to be conceived sequentially, as if

one followed the other (first salvation, then grateful obedience). They are instead to be understood as two sides of the same coin. To receive salvation is to be called into something larger and greater than us, to be invited to participate in God's saving purpose and plan for the world. That is why the gospel, in biblical parlance, is primarily about God, and only secondarily about us.

But our culture is pernicious in its capacity to twist the biblical, missional understanding of the gospel into a consumerist one. The tragic result has been the proliferation in America of passively oriented churches, preoccupied with their own survival and the care of their own members, and struggling to discover a sense of transcendence and the presence of God. By contrast, the gospel calls into existence churches whose fundamental identity is that of a people called to participate in God's mission, caught up into a reality greater than themselves, invited to bear witness to the world of a new way of being human in God's presence. There is much that the North American church has to discover and learn from the biblical understanding of the gospel. ■

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