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THE GOSPEL COALITION

EDITORIAL

— D. A. Carson —

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In blogs, journal essays, and books, there has been quite a lot written recently about what “the gospel” is. In the hands of some, the question of what “the gospel” is may be tied to the question of what “evangelicalism” is, since “gospel” = εὐαγγέλιον = evangel, which lies at the heart of evangelicalism. People talk variously of the “simple” gospel or the “robust” gospel or the “pure” gospel—and doubtless a rich array of other adjectives. Some make a distinction between the gospel of the cross and the gospel of the kingdom. Technical New Testament studies in recent years have addressed the question of when “The Gospel According to Matthew [or Mark or Luke or John]” became “The Gospel of Matthew [or Mark or Luke or John],” for the former presupposes that there was one gospel with assorted witnesses, while the latter opens the possibility of having a distinct gospel for each community labeled by one of the four canonical gospels—though this latter view, still dominant, has come under severe criticism, not least in the light of Richard Bauckham’s edited volume *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Ironically, while Bauckham’s title nicely captures something true and important—viz., that our four canonical Gospels were not written for hermetically sealed off communities but for the widest circulation among Christians—it uses the plural form of the noun, “Gospels,” in a way which, as far as I know, is frankly anachronistic, for it does not seem to be duplicated anywhere else in the first century. A handful of other essays have noted the instance where the gospel is not “good news” for certain people, but a promise of terrifying judgment. The writers of these essays argue that εὐαγγέλιον may not mean “good news” but something like “great and important news”: whether it is good or bad depends on those who hear it.

A couple of these questions I hope to address shortly elsewhere. For the moment, however, I’d like to underscore another distinction that is still worth making. It was understood better in the past than it is today. It is this: one must distinguish between, on the one hand, the gospel as what God has done and what is the message to be announced and, on the other, what is demanded by God or effected by the gospel in assorted human responses. If the gospel is the (good) news about what God has done in Christ Jesus, there is ample place for including under “the gospel” the ways in which the kingdom has dawned and is coming, for tying this kingdom to Jesus’ death and resurrection, for demonstrating that the purpose of what God has done is to reconcile sinners to himself and finally to bring under one head a renovated and transformed new heaven and new earth, for talking about God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, consequent upon Christ’s resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Majesty on high, and above all for focusing attention on what Paul (and others—though the language I’m using here reflects Paul) sees as the matter “of first importance”: Christ crucified. All of this is what God has done; it is what we proclaim; it is the news, the great news, the good news.

By contrast, the first two greatest commands—to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves—do not constitute the gospel, or any part of it. We may well

argue that when the gospel is faithfully declared and rightly received, it will result in human beings more closely aligned to these two commands. But they are not the gospel. Similarly, the gospel is not receiving Christ or believing in him, or being converted, or joining a church; it is not the practice of discipleship. Once again, the gospel faithfully declared and rightly received will result in people receiving Christ, believing in Christ, being converted, and joining a local church; but such steps are not the gospel. The Bible can exhort those who trust the living God to be concerned with issues of social justice (Isa 2; Amos); it can tell new covenant believers to do good to all human beings, especially to those of the household of faith (Gal 6); it exhorts us to remember the poor and to ask, not “Who is my neighbor?” but “Whom am I serving as neighbor?” We may even argue that some such list of moral commitments is a *necessary* consequence of the gospel. But it is not the gospel. We may preach through the list, reminding people that the Bible is concerned to tell us not only what to believe but how to live. But we may not preach through that list and claim it encapsulates the gospel. The gospel is what *God* has done, supremely in Christ, and especially focused on his cross and resurrection.

Failure to distinguish between the gospel and all the effects of the gospel tends, on the long haul, to replace the good news as to what God has done with a moralism that is finally without the power and the glory of Christ crucified, resurrected, ascended, and reigning.