

The HEART of the Gospel

— by Peter Hammond



What is Wrong with our World?

Almost on a daily basis each of us is confronted by the reality of a world that is in rebellion to its Creator. The desecration of the Lord's Day, the proliferation of pornography, the escalation of crime and violence, the breakdown of moral standards, the legalisation of abortion, the break up of families and the explosion of child abuse all remind us that we live in a sinful society which has forgotten God.

What is wrong with our world? **Sin.** Mankind is in rebellion against God.

What is Wrong with the Church?

Almost as often we wonder what is wrong with the Church. Why has the Church become so ineffective? How can it be that so many Christians in so many churches

have such a diminishing effect on the moral climate of society? Can we honestly say that we have been praying and working against evil when we see evil increasing? Matt 18:18-20; Ps 94:16. *"Has the salt of the earth lost its saltiness? Is the light of the world being hidden under a bowl?"* Matt 5:13-16

During the last 25 years of travelling extensively and ministering in 27 countries, I have had the privilege of witnessing several churches operating as God intended them to - in Revival.

From the perspective of the persecuted churches, and in the light of the Revivals, it becomes crystal clear what is wrong with the average church in the West. Our churches are devoid of the fear of the Lord. The reverential awe and worship of God is missing. Most congregations lack true spiritual leadership and never practise Biblical standards of church discipline. Many church-goers feel like Christians, but think like humanists. They believe they have Christian hearts, but it's quite clear that most have humanist minds, reading

more of the newspapers than they ever do of the Bible, and watching TV more than they worship Christ. Like the church of Laodicea it could be said of many church-goers: *"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of My mouth... you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked, so be earnest and repent."* Rev 3:15-19

The church is like a rescue boat. The rescue boat must be in the sea rescuing the perishing, but the sea must not be in the boat. In the same way the Church must be in the world rescuing the perishing, but the world must not be in the Church.

The tragedy of the modern churches is that by lowering its standards to allow the unconverted easy access, the church has become flooded and swamped by the world. It is now becoming increasingly difficult to discern any substantial differences between the opinions, moral standards and even conduct of Christians and the pagans.



Painted by Lené Plenaar

The published statistics of church growth and the vast numbers coming forward at mass crusades are impressive. Yet those of us who deal with the individual in the pews and on the streets are deeply disturbed. The church generally seems to be growing only in quantity. The quality of devotional and spiritual life and moral standards seems to be deteriorating even more rapidly than the church is expanding in numbers. It is as though the churches have become like huge combine harvesters, yet lacking cutting blades: impressive machinery, much noise and activity—but often ineffective in dealing with the harvest.

If the Gospel is the cutting blade of the church, then we need to ask: what could have blunted our Gospel preaching?

What is Wrong With the Gospel Preached?

Listening to the average Gospel message proclaimed from all too many pulpits, and on

radio and TV, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that most evangelistic messages today are man-centred, emotion-based, weak and shallow. The ‘just believe’ gospel is cheap. Judas sold Christ for 30 pieces of silver. We just give Him away free. The ‘just pray this prayer’ message is superficial and it produces superficial converts. The ‘easy believism’ so often proclaimed is synthetic. It’s like white bread. All the natural goodness has been refined out and artificial ingredients have been added.

The Missing Parts of the Gospel Message

Seldom does one hear the nature of God taught on, expounded and explained. To assume that our hearers truly understand and appreciate the majesty, the Holiness and the Glory of our all-powerful, all-knowing, infinite and eternal Creator is presumptuous.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom” Prov. 9:10. *“The Lord’s mercy extends to those who fear Him”* Acts 10:35. *“The Lord*

instructs those who fear Him” Ps 25:12. *“The foundation for effective service is the fear of the Lord”* Josh 24:14. *“The Lord’s great blessing is upon those who fear Him”* Ps 31:19. Yet, how often do we hear these great truths proclaimed?

“The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul” Ps 19:7 and *“...through the Law we become conscious of sin”* Rom 3:20. Yet how often do we proclaim the Law of God?

Martin Luther declared: **“The first duty of the Gospel preacher is to declare God’s Law and show the nature of sin.”**

John Bunyan said: **“The man who does not know the nature of the Law cannot know the nature of sin.”**

John Wesley suggested that evangelists should preach 90% Law and 10% grace.

Charles Finney wrote: **“Failure to use the Law is almost certain to result in false hope, the introduction of a false standard of Christian experience, and to fill the church with false converts.”**

Charles Spurgeon declared: **“They will never accept grace until they tremble »**

before a just and Holy Law.” As our Lord taught: *“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law... Anyone who breaks one of the least of*

these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” Matt 5:17-19

Similarly the wrath of God, the doctrine of eternal judgment and the reality of Hell receive scant attention in most modern sermons. *“For they would not follow His ways; they did not obey His Law. So He poured out on them His burning anger...”* Is 42:24,25

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you fear God.”

Luke 12:5

“Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” John 3:36

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Rom 1:18

Even the heart of the Gospel message - the Redemption achieved by the Blood of Christ’s atonement on the cross, receives surprisingly little emphasis from most modern evangelists.

“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” Heb 9:22

“God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood.” Rom 3:25

The Scriptures declare that: *“the blood of Jesus, His Son purifies us from all sin.”* 1 Jn 1:7

Yet how often do we proclaim that message?

Also conspicuous by its absence is a Biblical emphasis and understanding of repentance. I have heard prominent evangelists say: “Repentance is just saying you’re sorry”!

By way of contrast the Bible emphasises three aspects of repentance:

Conviction — a change of mind

Contrition — a change of heart

Conversion — a change of life.

“Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him...” Is 55:7

It is not enough to confess our sin, we also need to reject sin mentally, to loathe it and forsake it. Repentance involves a change of habits, a change of belief and a change of behaviour.

Un-Biblical Additions to the Gospel

In place of the Biblical message of the Holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the Law of God, the wrath of God and eternal judgment, the need for repentance from sin and faith in the atonement through Christ’s blood, many have substituted a series of un-Biblical innovations:

Nowhere in the Bible will you find any example of an evangelist, apostle or disciple using any of the following popular phrases or techniques:

“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Instead Scripture makes it clear that God is angry with those who refuse to obey and eternity in hell is His plan for the unrepentant.

“Accept Jesus as your personal Saviour”. “Accept” is the weakest word possible and it is never used in any evangelistic context. Why don’t we use the powerful words used in the Bible? e.g. *“God ... now commands all people everywhere to repent”* Acts 17:30. A call to submit to Christ, or to surrender our lives to Him as Lord and Saviour, would be more Biblical than a weak appeal to “accept Jesus”.

“Only you can open the door of your heart. Jesus is standing at the door of your heart knocking. He is a gentleman and will only come in if invited. The handle is only on the inside. Only you can let Him in.” This imaginative emotional appeal ignores the Sovereignty of God. In the case of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus it would appear that our Lord kicked the door in without any “permission” from Saul (Acts 9).

Nowhere in the Bible do we find a single incident of an evangelist or disciple using such imagery to describe conversion. Throughout the Gospels and the book of Acts we are challenged to come to Christ



and seek entry into His house. Now we are expected to believe that the situation has so reversed that Christ now comes to us and asks us to allow Him entry!

Perhaps this concept is derived from Revelation 3:20. However, that verse is part of Christ's letter to the church at Laodicea. Far from being an evangelistic message it is a severe rebuke to a lukewarm church: *"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm —neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of My mouth.... Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Behold I stand at the door and knock..."* Rev 3:15-20

It is tragic that part of this letter, written to warn the church against the danger of half-heartedness, worldliness and compromise, could have been so abused as to produce lukewarm, semi-saved converts. If only the full context of this passage was used as often as verse 20. Or have strong Biblical words like 'rebuke', 'discipline', 'earnest' and 'repent' become unacceptable to today's congregations?

Similarly the insipid phrases 'just believe' and 'just pray this prayer' are un-Biblical. We certainly must believe—but it is the entire Bible which we must study, believe, obey, proclaim and apply. We must pray, but we need to do

much more than 'just pray'. The Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ commands us to *"Make disciples... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* To place a 'just' in front of any of the commands of Scripture is to devalue all the other important requirements.

Along with these phrases we have accepted several inadequate slogans to convey apparently Christian messages such as: "Christians aren't perfect - just forgiven". While it is true to say that we are forgiven, yet are imperfect, the insertion of the overused "just" turns this slogan into a dangerous half truth. Are we only forgiven? Are we not regenerated as well as redeemed? And what about sanctification? If we have not evidenced a dramatic transformation in our beliefs, moral standards, way of life, behaviour and conduct then it is doubtful if we are even forgiven. (Gal 5:19-25)

The Gospel According to Our Lord Jesus Christ

The recorded examples of how our Lord counselled individuals for salvation stand in sharp contrast to our modern message and methods.

The rich young ruler was earnest. He did not merely raise his hand while every head was bowed and every eye was closed. He did not merely walk down the aisle in

response to an impassioned appeal. No, while every eye was opened and every head raised, he ran to Christ. Rather than merely bow his head and repeat a set prayer, he fell on his knees before Christ and pleaded *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Mark 10:17

What was our Lord's response? Did He say 'just believe' or 'just pray this prayer'? Did He tell him that God loved him and had a wonderful plan for his life? No. Jesus rebuked him: *"Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone."* Our Lord began with the nature of God and the nature of man. Only God is Holy. All men are sinners.

You may ask why Christ rebuked him. Surely our Lord Jesus is God? Yes, but did the young man realise that? Was he merely seeking to flatter man or did he realise with Whom he was talking?

Next our Lord reminded him of the Ten Commandments: *"You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother."*

Many would ask what the Law has to do with eternal life. The Scriptures state that: *"The Law was our tutor, to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."* Gal 3:24 Telling people that "Jesus is the answer" before they are even asking the question is not helpful. No teacher hands out answer



sheets to the students before an exam. Declaring that ‘Jesus saves’ to people who are not yet conscious of a need to be saved is ineffective. Until people know the ‘bad news’ of hell they are not ready to know the ‘good news’ of heaven. Until our hearers appreciate the eternal implications of the Holiness of God and the depravity of man, the Holy Law of God and eternal judgment — they are not ready to receive the glorious message of Redemption through the sacrifice of Christ.

To put it more bluntly: until we understand that we are wicked sinners, lost and justly doomed to an eternity in hell we are not ready to truly appreciate the message of *“repentance and forgiveness of sins...”* Luke 24:47.

Incredibly the young man declared that he had obeyed all those commandments since he was young. No doubt he was an extraordinary individual —morally upright and devoutly religious —yet he lacked an awareness of his sinfulness. The greatest fault is to be aware of none.

So our Lord tells him: *“One thing you lack... Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come and follow Me”* Mark 10:21. Some may say that the Lord was demanding several things of him, but it actually amounted to one thing: **repentance.**

Our Lord had singled out the first commandment *“You shall have no other gods before me”*, and the last *“You shall not covet.”* The rich young ruler had apparently made an idol of his wealth. His riches had become more important to him than obedience to God. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.

The Ten Commandments deal with our relationships with God, our parents and other people. They deal with God, worship, speech, time, authority, life, love, property, truth and conscience. They forbid polytheism, idolatry, profanity, desecration of the Sabbath, dishonouring of parents, murder, adultery, theft, perjury and coveting. By studying the Law of God we come to realise how far short we fall.

The message to those who recognise their transgressions is one of repentance and faith. And as repentance without faith is not true repentance, so faith without repentance is not true faith.

When he heard what our Lord required, *“the man’s face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth”* Mark 10:22. Instead of chasing after him and lowering the standard, *“Jesus said to His*



disciples, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!’ The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus said again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God!’” Mark 10:23-24

How often don’t we claim that it is easy to be saved. Yet our Lord didn’t lower the standard. In fact He taught that it would be hard to enter the Kingdom of God. Not only hard for the rich but hard for anyone!

“The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible’...” Mark 10:26-27

Do we realise the implications of this? All mankind is lost and no one can save himself. Neither can any pastor, evangelist or denomination save anybody. No amount of sacraments, praying, singing or preaching can save anyone. Eloquence

cannot do it, neither can emotional techniques or a charged atmosphere.

“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” Mark 10:27.

A Biblical illustration of conversion is found in John 11 when our Lord stood before the tomb and called out: *“Lazarus, come out!”* Now Lazarus had been dead for 4 days. Is it reasonable to call upon a decaying corpse to respond? Nevertheless that is what evangelism is. Outside of Christ we are dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1). Faith is a gift from God (Eph 2:8) and faith comes from hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17). *“The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”* Rom 1:16.

Only the Word of God can save, so why do we subtract from this powerful life-giving Word? And why do we think we can add anything of value to it?

Jesus then emphasised the need for sacrifice and for endurance of persecutions. Finally He promised blessings, rewards and eternal life to those who obey His message (Mark 10:28-31).

This then is the bold and balanced Gospel of Christ: **God is a Holy God and His righteous standards are seen in His Law. Man is sinful and needs to repent from his wickedness and trust in Christ. This repentance and faith is to be evident in obedience to Christ, a willingness to sacrifice and to suffer persecution. To those who do so He promises great blessings, rewards and eternal life.**

Instead of offering a weak, diluted, man-centred message of ‘believe and receive’, we need faithfully to proclaim a Christ-centred, Bible-based and Holy Spirit led message of ‘repentance and obedience.’ Rather than making converts we need to: *“make disciples ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* Matt 28:19-20.

It is this message which deals with the heart of the matter. Anything else would be as inadequate as placing a band-aid plaster on a cancer. However, the Gospel of Christ faithfully proclaimed would result in a purged, purified, prayerful and powerful Church prepared to honour and obey Christ in all areas of life. ■

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