



CLARITY *of the* GOSPEL

By Matt Knapp

The Problem

As believers in Jesus Christ, we have been blessed to have had the gospel shared with us! However, it is estimated that out of the 7.75 billion people living on the earth, over 3 billion people do not have access to the gospel (Joshua Project). Over 40% of the people on the earth have not heard about Jesus. And these numbers do not include our unbelieving neighbors, or places like much of Mexico, where there is less access to the gospel than most Americans have.

God states throughout the scriptures that his desire has always been that his name would be known among all nations (Psalm 96:3). He called Abraham for the purpose that he could have a people set aside to make his name known and this theme continues through the Old Testament. Then, at the end of the gospels before Jesus' ascension, he leaves the church with the responsibility to make God known to all nations through the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

The church is now responsible to bring the gospel to all nations. It seems like the answer should simply be "go" but it must be realized that there are multiple complexities to this. Those without the gospel often do not speak English, are from cultures vastly different from ours, may not have context for the gospel of Jesus Christ, or live in material poverty far beyond our comprehension. Furthermore, they may

be uninterested in someone coming in and telling them what they need or learning a new way of life.

Our Sacrifice

As the church, we must ask how we can take the gospel to the rest of the world. It will involve sacrifice. Let's look at the example of Jesus and Paul.

2 Corinthians 8:9 states that though Jesus was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor that we through his poverty might become rich. Jesus said in John 15:13 that greater love has no man than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends. The heart of the gospel is Jesus' willingness to become a human and give his life for us as humans.

Paul also left us an example. In 1 Corinthians 8-9 he is sharing his willingness to deny himself his rights in order that others might know Christ. He says he is willing to become a vegetarian and that he suppressed his right to be paid for his service to the church so that the gospel would not be hindered (verse 12). He sums up his heart in verse 19 where he says though I have freedoms I will choose to bring myself in bondage to others for the sake that I might gain more for Christ! He goes as far as to state that he is willing to become all things to all men so that he might by all means save some (verse 22).

Jesus and Paul left us examples of sacrifice. Will we be willing to follow?

Our Understanding

There is more than just a willingness to sacrifice. We must understand others to bring the gospel to them in a way that it is clearly seen. This involves knowing the culture in such a way that our presentation does not bring harm.

Paul demonstrated this multiple times in the book of Acts. One example is in Acts 17 where Paul waited for Silas and Timothy in Athens. He observed what was going on in this city and learned the culture to the extent that when given the opportunity to meet with their philosophers he was able to speak to the culture in his interaction. The way he brought the gospel to the Athenians was unique from how he brought it to Corinth, Thessalonica, or other churches. Another example is in Acts 16:4 where he circumcised Timothy so that the gospel could be more clearly heard by the Jews. His understanding of those he ministered to motivated his actions.

No Compromise

The question can be asked, what about truth? If we are seeking to be sensitive to the culture, are we compromising God's law? The scriptures are clear that we must not compromise God's word to reach the culture. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 9:21b that in becoming a Jew, or Gentile, or weak, or etc. that he was always under the law of God. In Galatians 2, Paul and Titus were unwilling for Titus to submit to circumcision so that the truth of the gospel would continue with them. We are NEVER called to compromise the truth of the gospel to understand or speak to the culture.

The Challenge

This is where it gets challenging! It takes a significant amount of sacrifice and self-awareness to be able to understand culture and not compromise truth for the sake of bringing the gospel clearly to all men. We need to recognize that this means sometimes we will "circumcise" for clarity of the gospel (Timothy in Acts 16:4) and sometimes we will refuse to "circumcise" for clarity of the gospel (Titus in Galatians 2:3-5).

We also must be willing to confess that even if we speak the right language about "clarity of the gospel" our lives may unknowingly demonstrate something different. A good example of this is Peter in Galatians 2. He had clearly confessed with the other Apostles that both Jews and Greeks were purified by faith and not through circumcision (Acts 15:9). However, when he came to Antioch, he lived in a way that demonstrated to others that circumcision was "better". Not only did he do this, but Barnabas followed him. It became an issue where Paul had to confront Peter because "they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14). We see from the example of Paul and Barnabas that living consistent with gospel clarity has been a tension since the beginning of the church, and this will be a struggle for us as well.

Practical Clarity

As an organization tasked with sharing the gospel, HarvestCall must have clarity about the gospel as we seek to share it in the US and abroad. There are multiple tensions with this topic that are not easily solved and can look different depending on the circumstance. Below are three summary points that should be considered by us a church denomination and specifically as a HarvestCall organization:

- We are to seek to know others well enough to understand their cultural norms and mindsets
- We are to suppress our cultural ideals and preferences for the sake of the gospel.
- We are to elevate truth when a cultural mindset is inconsistent with the gospel

These are difficult tensions to manage. However, they are essential to the preservation of a genuine gospel. We can look at this in many ways, but let's start with language. If we are seeking to have gospel clarity in an area where another language is spoken, we would have to master this language to do this successfully. We can also look at cultural norms. We must do the hard work of understanding the culture, know the

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background, and discern truth from error. If we do not balance this tension, we can quickly distort the gospel by adding our cultural preferences or by rejecting truth.

The next two areas can even be harder challenges. Material poverty is a real concern in many parts of the world and when there are significant urgent needs (lack of food, lack of clean water, etc.) we as God's people should be seeking to alleviate this pain and suffering. However, our goal cannot be to make people Middle Class Americans. In doing this, we may end up promoting a "prosperity gospel" and not realize we are doing this. Lastly, we could look at church practices. If we demand a cultural conversion because of an extrabiblical practice we hold dear but is not relevant in another culture, we distort the gospel.

Finally, let's look forward. If we as a church – and particularly as an outreach organization (HarvestCall) — are faithful in presenting the clear gospel to all people in a variety of countries, what could this look like in the future? Let's look at a few areas:

- In all areas where there is not a conflict with the Kingdom of God, indigenous cultures are appreciated, learned, and embraced for the sake of the gospel.
- Each new church is inviting for indigenous believers and seekers. Biblical principles shape church practices which are applied in the context of the local culture.
- Missionaries and visitors embrace local customs (that are biblically sound and that do not violate biblical principles) and fully participate

in local congregations.

- Local seekers and believers are seeing Christ, the gospel, and the Word clearly in their native language and are worshipping in a form sensitive to their culture.
- Moderation, godly living, strong relationships, high comfort in expressing unique spiritual gifts, and the embracing of diversity is understood and lived out by the local congregation.

How much do we desire the clarity of the gospel and to what extent will we go to bring this message to all men? May God continue to help us as we seek to learn together on how to be "all things to all men, that we might by all means save some" while being under the law of Christ!

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