

# COUNTERFEIT GOSPELS

Counterfeit money looks like genuine money; it has to, if it is going to fool anyone. Counterfeit gospels look like the real thing, and they fool many people.

Paul warns about false gospels in two of his letters to churches in Greece and Asia. In his second letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth, he condemns preachers and evangelists who “preach another Jesus whom we have not preached...or a different gospel which you have not accepted.” And in his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul wrote, “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from him who called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ.”

Paul became angry at what some men were preaching, and he warned the Galatians: “But even if we, or an angel from Heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”

That warning should make preachers think twice about the gospel they preach, but many continue to preach false gospels. Many religious leaders are confused about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They think that the Gospel is “You must be born again.”

It isn't. Nor is the Gospel, “You must be filled with (or baptized by) the Holy Spirit.”

And not, “You must be good.”

In fact, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not any of these things:

“You must be baptized.”

“You must speak in tongues.”

“You must confess your sins to a priest.”

“You can perform miracles.”

“Expect a miracle.”

“You must be saved.”

“Let Jesus into your heart.”

“You must have a personal relationship (or encounter, or experience) with Jesus Christ.”

“You must believe what the Church teaches.”

“Repent of your sins.”

“Make Jesus Lord of your life.”

“Put Jesus on the throne of your life.”

“Jesus was the best man who ever lived.”

“Jesus set an example for us so that we may follow him to Heaven.”

“Trust Jesus.”

“Let go and let God.”

“Draw near to God.”

“Christ died for every person and wants everyone to be saved.”

“Jesus wants you happy, healthy, and rich.”

“God wants you to be fulfilled.”

“Tough times don't last; tough people do.”

“You are a winner.”

“God is too loving to punish anyone in Hell.”

“Decide for Christ.”

“Christians should take dominion over the Earth.”

“Jesus is coming again.”

All these messages, which are heard on television and radio and in churches every week are not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A few of them are true because they are taken from the Bible, such as “Jesus is coming again,” but the Gospel is not about the second coming of Christ; it is about his first coming to Earth 2,000 years ago.

## What Is the Gospel?

The word “Gospel” means “good news.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about what you can do to get into Heaven, nor even about what God can do to change your life, and certainly not about success, prosperity, health, or money. The Gospel is not advice about improving your own experience, raising your self-esteem, or being good.

Jesus’ disciples made the mistake of confusing the Gospel with their personal religious experience, and he tells them about it in *Luke* 10:

“After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before his face into every city and place where he himself was about to go.... Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name.’

“And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven. Behold, I give you authority to trample serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in Heaven.’”

These seventy men were chosen and sent out by Jesus himself. The demons were subject to them. God was doing wonderful things in their lives. Their evangelism was a spectacular success. But Jesus solemnly commands them: “Do not rejoice in this.” Christ gave them a direct command not to rejoice in their own experience, not because their personal experiences were not cause for rejoicing, but because they were ignoring a far more important fact, a fact that was not a part of their experience at all: Their names were written in Heaven.

The disciples were focusing on their own experience rather than on what God had done for them from all eternity and what Christ was shortly going to do in carrying out God’s plan of salvation. Christ commanded them to rejoice in something that they had never experienced, something that God had done wholly outside of them before they were born.

Most so-called Christian books, essays, television programs, and sermons today are little more than stories about the wonderful experiences people are having. The football players, the movie stars, the prominent lawyers, politicians, preachers, and priests – all tell their personal experiences and rejoice in them. None of them tells the Gospel. They use words like “feelings,” “felt,” “impression,” “sensed,”

“excitement,” “leadings,” “emotions” – all centered on themselves and their experiences. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ has nothing of this self-centeredness and obsession with personal experience in it.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not tell us to be spiritual navel watchers; it does not tell us to seek emotional highs or to be guided by impressions or leadings. It does not tell us to boast, except in what Christ has done on Calvary.

The Apostle Paul tells us what the Gospel is in *1 Corinthians 15*:

“Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the Gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that Word which I preached to you (unless you believed in vain) – for I delivered to you first of all that which I also received that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures.”

That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Christians at Rome, Paul explained the Gospel further:

“By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his [God's] sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Christ Jesus to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation [something that appeases the wrath of God] by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his [God's] righteousness, because in forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time his righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

## **Truth and History**

In contrast to the false gospels being preached today, the Gospel is true, not legend or myth. Jesus Christ was an actual figure in human history, as much as George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. Some religious leaders say Christ was a

myth or a legend; he wasn't. He was born to a virgin, Mary, in the small town of Bethlehem, 2,000 years ago. He lived about 33 years, was put to death by the government, and rose from the dead three days later. When he was whipped and crucified, his blood ran on the ground. Christ is no myth.

Second, the Gospel concerns the past: It is history. The Gospel is the good news about what Christ did for his people 2,000 years ago. He died for the sins of his people, so that they would not have to die. Christ was buried, and on the third day he walked out of his tomb alive.

All these events are wholly outside of our experience. Just as all men are condemned by the disobedience of our first father Adam, a sin wholly outside of us, so are all of God's people saved by the obedience of the second and innocent Adam, Christ, an obedience that is wholly outside of us.

The Bible teaches that salvation has been achieved by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – by acts wholly outside of us. The Gospel is not a subjective experience but an objective truth.

The Gospel is truth, not fiction. The Gospel is history, not personal experience. The Gospel is what Christ did for his people, not what they must do for him. Sinners can do nothing to merit or earn their salvation. They cannot even prepare themselves for salvation, for they are dead in sin.

### **The Certainty of Salvation**

The Gospel is good news because it is the news that salvation is absolutely certain for God's people. It is not merely possible or probable.

Christ, in dying for his people, took the punishment they deserve for their sins and actually achieved their salvation. He did not merely open up a door to Heaven that they might enter when and if they please. He did not merely build a bridge across the gap between sinful men and a perfectly holy God so that people might come to God if they wished. He crossed the gap to take his people back to Heaven with him. When he said, "It is finished," he meant it. The death of Christ actually accomplished the complete salvation of his people. They can do nothing to deserve salvation, and they can contribute nothing toward their salvation.

The nineteenth-century hymn writer said it well:

Not what my hands have done, can save my guilty soul.

Not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole.  
Not what I feel or do can give me peace with God.  
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load.

Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin.  
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within.  
Thy love to me, O God, not mine, O Lord, to thee  
Can rid me of this dark unrest and set my spirit free.

I praise the God of grace; I trust his truth and might.  
He calls me his; I call him mine, my God, my joy, my light.  
'Tis he who saveth me, and freely pardon gives.  
I love because he first loved me; I live because he lives.

Nothing we can do – no prayers, no good works, no sorrow – can save us from the punishment we deserve for our sins. Nothing that happens *to* us or *in* us can save us. Our salvation from sin and everlasting punishment in Hell comes from Christ alone. It is not the Holy Spirit's work *in* us that saves us, but Christ's work *for* us, when he lived a perfect life and died an innocent death 2,000 years ago in Israel.

Of his people and their salvation Christ said: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand" (*John* 10:27, 28). Christ gives his people eternal life by giving them faith: "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (*Romans* 10:9). He makes them believe the Gospel: "Christ died for our sins." "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life" (*John* 3:16).

That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no other way to be saved. Believe the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ today.

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