

“Unintentionally Distorting the Gospel”

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It's not often a person gets a chance to speak to a group as focused, as intelligent, as spiritually mature and also as diverse as this group that is comprised of Regent students, faculty, administrators, staff, and friends. I count this a rare privilege, so as much as I want to joke about funny things that are going on in my family (I have three boys ages 8, 6 and 3) or in the School of Undergraduate Studies (technically, also just turning 3)- as much as I want to keep this light, I also want to be a good steward of this opportunity and make good use of your time here.

So this afternoon I want to raise a small set of questions that have been brewing in my heart throughout my adult years first as a pastor, and now as a professor. These questions I intend to raise challenge me, and, honestly, frighten me a little bit, and I hope they will stimulate some conversations that will go on beyond this chapel service. I think these are critical questions that Christian leaders must address if their leadership is to be truly Christian. Part of our mission—alongside training Christian leaders to change the world—is to be a leading center of Christian thought and action. I offer this as an exercise in Christian thought.

In the last few years, here is the question that has been forming in my heart: to what extent does my understanding and practice of Christianity align with the central message of the gospel? To put it negatively, to what extent does my living out of the gospel diverge from the essence of the gospel? In other words, how well does the way I understand, internalize and live out my faith in Christ give an accurate reflection of the good news that God wanted to communicate to the world in and through his son Jesus?

As an undergraduate student at Wheaton College I majored in Christian Education with an emphasis in cross-cultural ministry. In seminary I had a number of missions related courses in cultural anthropology and ways of looking at the church as a social and cultural institution. With this course of study came many case studies where we would read about missionaries attempting to communicate the good news about Jesus across the lines of cultural, ethnic, religious, and social boundaries. Since these were case studies, we were often looking at situations where things did not go so well and the “good news of the gospel” was poorly communicated. Often the difficulty related to the fact that the missionaries were bringing more than just the good news. They were bringing the good news fleshed out in particular cultural forms—forms that had great meaning and significance to the missionary but had no meaning, or rather, very different meanings, for the people who were the focus of their missionary activity. The old movie *The African Queen* opens with scene of a church service run by missionaries in a tribal setting in Africa. From the organ, to the English hymns, to the clerical robes, to the pews neatly lined up it

was clear that the missionaries had brought not just the message of Jesus but the culture of their ecclesial tradition as well. That is not in and of itself a bad thing, and in many ways it cannot be helped. But the problem was that as the gospel was communicated to this particular tribal village the Africans would receive the impression that the message of Jesus and the western culture of the missionaries were synonymous. In the development of national church leadership there is often conflict in second and third generation believers as they seek an authentic expression of the gospel that makes sense within their own cultural heritage and that is distinct from the culture of the parent denomination or agency. And this is where the case studies get really interesting.

The point of all this is that effective and skillful missionaries learn to navigate these complexities of culture. They work hard instinctively to give expression to the gospel in ways that will make sense to their hearers. They work hard to distinguish the message of the gospel from the cultural forms in which they themselves first encountered it.

So this is the issue. At whatever age or stage of life we as individuals turn to Christ in faith, we experience the gospel message expressed in a particular form, embodied in a particular tradition, lived out in a particular culture. That style, form, tradition, makes sense to us and we naturally have high regard for that heritage. We grow in our faith in that tradition and, often, unconsciously begin to equate the living out of the gospel with the living out of the gospel in that particular tradition. The problem is that the cultural form in which we express our Christian faith is not synonymous with the Christian faith. Forms and expressions are culturally relative and socially conditioned, suited to a particular time and place. The message of the gospel, God's love for humanity and the opportunity of living our lives in relationship with Him, is timeless.

Recognizing that to be true, I ask myself to what extent does my understanding and practice of Christianity align with the basic thrust of the gospel? In what ways does my practice of Christian faith distort the gospel?

And this is a question I would ask of you as well. Not with a critical spirit or with a "of course you know what I'm hinting at" approach. I mean this as a question to reflect on. To what extent does your practice of Christianity distort the Gospel? Not does it, but to what extent does it? I am convinced that the message of the Gospel is so simple a child can grasp it. But it is also so complex as it works its way in our lives and in our social structures, that we are constantly at the risk of distorting it or at least missing the boat on key parts of it even as we try to articulate it, grasp it, and live it out ourselves.

For a while, I had a kind of "anything goes" approach to Christian belief and practice. Sure some Christians are more strict than I am, really emphasizing holy living—that's ok. I don't need to be critical of them for being what I consider too strict on some issues. And sure some Christians are much less restrictive than I am, really emphasizing freedom in Christ. That's fine too—I don't need to get all worked up about that. As long as we all accept the same essential

doctrinal beliefs, the core ones, the ones in Regent's doctrinal statement, then that is fine. It is ok to disagree. And hey, I'm a Gen-Xer so I am comfortable with competing meta-narratives that can't be easily reconciled into a neat and tidy modernist framework.

But actually, I have come to realize that this approach is not fine. Yes, the gospel does need to be expressed in different ways and forms by each generation and each culture; in that sense the diversity of Christian expression and Christian living is a very good thing. And the mysteries of God are such that no one theological perspective can claim to be without need of ongoing development or refinement in conversation with other Christian views. Diverse perspectives and expressions are needed and should be expected. But, some ways of living out "Christianity" have more to do with cultural traditions than with the message of the gospel—the good news about Jesus. In some cases Christian cultural traditions whether consciously or unconsciously are equated with the gospel. When that happens—when a cultural form of Christianity becomes of equal importance to the gospel message it is intended to convey—the gospel is no longer the gospel. It is the gospel plus the cultural baggage. And that, I am coming to believe, is not fine.

Of course, it is much easier to see this in others than it is to see it in oneself. I have to be honest that at this point I struggled to come up with an example that would not take the focus off my main point here and distract us with its own complexity. So please bear with me on this example and look past it to see the broader point I am making.

An Example of Cultural Expectations Added to the Gospel: Church Involvement

Within some streams of protestant Christianity with which I am familiar a strong emphasis is placed on involvement in and support of the ministries of the local congregation. After all, scripture says not to give up the habit of meeting together, and in the Book of Acts we see the believers meeting daily together. The church is now the focal point of God's work in the world, so if you want to align yourself with the purposes of God, you need to be in church and involved in the activities of the church. A problem arises however when one's involvement in the church and church ministries becomes the measure of your Christian walk. In some congregations there can be an unspoken standard, an expectation that, if you are serious about your Christian faith, you will be involved in Sunday morning service, definitely part of Sunday school, and, as God convicts you, Sunday evening services. If you are really serious you will come to a mid-week service or Wed prayer meeting, maybe visitation or outreach ministries, Men's bible study, small group, work days, etc., Someone who is fully engaged in all of these church activities is often held up as an ideal Christian who is worthy of praise and admiration.

Now, we all know that external measures like these are not true indicators of what is going on in a person's heart. Yet when standards like these are held forth, either explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, a cultural expectation is being added to the substance of the

gospel—and that distorts the gospel. Someone who is involved in 3 or 4 ministries in their church, as beneficial as they may be, may not have the time to devote to other pursuits that are just as important in living out the gospel of Christ—spending time with family, being a friend to someone who is hurting, being a good parent, being a good neighbor, spending unhurried time alone with the Lord, getting involved in your child’s school, or some other organization outside of the church, caring for the poor, expressing the love of Christ to someone in need, devoting time to the study of scripture, and so on. The issue is not that one set of activities is better than another, and I certainly don’t mean to imply that the two lists are incompatible. My point is not to advocate pulling out of church involvement by any means. But as Christian leaders it is imperative that we be watchful and sensitive to when our own cultural expectations, Christian activities, or emphases—our preferred areas of focus—become wedded to the gospel in a way that then distorts the gospel.

What does your practice of Christian faith emphasize? What does it de-emphasize? To what extent is that emphasis congruent with the message of the Gospel? When does our enculturated, enfolded “living out” of the Gospel become a distortion of the very message we claim to embrace?

It can happen. It has happened. Many of the letters of Paul attest to this danger of distorting the basic, central message of the gospel. I wish we had time to move through Paul’s letters and look at some case studies from the New Testament. Due to our time limits I would like to look briefly with you at just one situation in which Paul saw that the fundamental truth of the gospel was in danger of being distorted to the point where it was no longer the gospel. This particular instance is found in his letter to the Philippians.

An Example from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

Philippians is an encouraging, friendly letter to a group of believers who had supported Paul and encouraged him while he was in prison. He encourages them to persevere with joy in suffering just as he is doing. In Philippians 3, however, Paul points out that it is possible for good, right, and wholesome things to be emphasized in such a way that they distort the gospel. When things such as religious practices, religious heritage, past accomplishments, or even our own successes find too prominent a place in our lives, we are in danger of losing a Christian perspective. Paul puts it this:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:7-8 NIV)

The context of this famous passage is very important. Paul had just given the Philippians a stern warning. In 3:1-2 he wrote,

It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. (Philippians 3:1b-2 NIV)

As best we can tell, Paul was warning the Philippians to be on their guard against a particular group, perhaps the Judaizers who had been so successful in Galatia. This was a group that promoted faith in Christ along with the continuation of the practices and customs of the Jewish faith. Now surely Paul had no complaints against the practice of circumcision—this was a God-ordained action of covenant obedience on the part of the children of Abraham. In fact, when needed, it seems that Paul could draw readily on his Jewish heritage to help augment his credibility in the eyes of his audience. My contention is that Paul was not concerned here with the practices or traditions of his Jewish heritage. He was concerned about these practices being considered as of equal importance with the good news about Jesus.

And so in Philippians Paul offers his own perspective on his religious heritage as an example for the Philippians of a proper focus.

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:3-8 NIV)

After Paul's conversion and call on the road to Damascus, Paul's life was re-oriented around one priority: knowing Christ, his Lord, his savior, his redeemer. The "dogs" Paul referred to at the beginning of this chapter are those who would remove the focus off of knowing Christ and place it on lesser things. I am not claiming that Paul here is making the same point I am trying to make. But I do think that the principle he is laying out leads to the kinds of questions I am asking today.

We have had some interesting discussions in some of our undergrad faculty/staff prayer meetings about who or what the "dogs" are today. Unless I am missing something we don't face the threat of Judaizers today. But twenty-first century Christians do face a host of forces, influences, and ideas, both from within the Christian world and from without that could cause us to lose focus of this most important thing: the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

Note that it is not the surpassing greatness of our ecclesial heritage. It is not the surpassing greatness of being immersed in a Christian sub-culture. It is not the surpassing greatness of throwing ourselves fully into Church activities. It is not even the surpassing greatness of understanding the Bible. Paul says, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

As you sit here today perhaps you can think of some inherently good things (beliefs, institutions, Christian practices) that run the risk of falling into Paul’s category of “the dogs”—things that subtly add to the basic message of the gospel and thereby distort it. I am suggesting that to the extent which we allow other things to take the place of our devotion to Christ himself, we run the risk of, well, taking one of these dogs into our home. We run the risk of accepting and living out a distorted gospel—the gospel plus something else. Which is really no longer the gospel.

If we had time today we could explore similar dynamics at work in the churches in Galatia or in Corinth. In each of these cases, we would see that Paul aims to preserve the heart of the gospel by prioritizing a vital, life-giving, transforming relationship with Christ over against anything else that would remove that focus.

And this is not just a Pauline emphasis. If we take the gospels seriously, we find that Jesus promoted the same thing:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:5-8 NIV)

The life of God is available in Christ and through Christ as the Holy Spirit indwells us and empowers us. Let’s be diligent in arranging our lives, our Christian lives, so that the emphasis is where it should be: on knowing Christ, and not on human constructs, practices, or traditions.

Closing challenge

Students, in your time here you are all developing and growing as Christian leaders who will indeed change the world. You have responded to the call of God in your life, have stepped out in faith, and made yourselves available. Many of you are already leaders influencing others in whatever field of human endeavor you find yourselves. My challenge to you, in your leadership here at Regent and beyond, is to consider just how congruent your leading, your working, your living is with the central message of the gospel. Keep a watch out for ways that your own practice of the Christian faith may actually distort the message of Christ that you are seeking to

live out. This calls for discernment, this calls for regular reflection, this calls for prayerful study of the Scripture, this calls for openness with others and an openness to being corrected by others. This is a high calling. May we be able to say with Paul that we regard everything as loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. May this be the testimony of our lives as well as our lips. Amen.