

Article of the Month – October 2008

The ‘other gospel’

By Steef van 't Slot (Ph.D.)



In his letter to the Galatians Paul accuses the readers that they ‘are so quickly deserting the One Who called them’ and ‘to turn to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all’. He states that some people are ‘throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ’.¹ He referred to the replacement of his gospel of grace by a counterfeit one that demanded that the Law of Moses be kept as well as circumcision applied. He condemns such practices with a double curse.²

Unfortunately the 20th century shows us many more versions of ‘another gospel’ which are perversions of the true gospel of Christ. In last month’s article I announced to look into some of these that are still alive in the 21st century, because if missionaries forget what the ‘true gospel’ looks like, the world is in big trouble. I would like to highlight six forms of ‘another gospel’ that present a direct danger to the correct execution of Christ’s Great Commission.

A *first* form of ‘other gospel’ can develop when certain Gospel truths are so over-emphasized that a caricature gospel appears in which other truths are being suppressed. For example: the goodness of God can be so accentuated that His judgments – or any sufferings for that matter (especially of believers) – are being interpreted as the devil’s doing.

A *second* version of ‘other gospel’ shows the opposite: some gospel truths are hardly mentioned – if at all – to the detriment of preaching a full Gospel. For instance, the functioning of a deliverance ministry where demons are cast out is not often seen, under influence of an ‘enlightened’ theology that preaches a rationalized gospel.

Another very popular gospel deformation is based on the statement that certain biblical teachings are no longer true or applicable for today, e.g. the functioning of the gifts of the Holy Spirit³ or the fivefold ministry⁴. Many other examples could be given and it goes without saying that such statements rob the church of invaluable spiritual jewels.

Similar false theologies deny the literal occurrence and spiritual functionality of biblical miracles, including the resurrection (first of Christ and later of all who believe in Him). Unnecessary to say that by such ‘demythologization’ attempts the gospel is stripped of its very core and what is left over is no more than an empty shell.⁵

¹ Gal. 1:6,7

² Gal. 1:8,9

³ 1 Cor. 12:8-10; Rom. 12:6-8

⁴ Eph. 4:11

⁵ 1 Cor. 15:13,14

A *fifth* version of ‘other gospel’ is seen in any form of syncretism, where true Christian faith is mixed with something distinctly anti-Christian, e.g. when it is said that God cannot be approached directly⁶ but that mediators are needed⁷, e.g. in the form of ancestral spirits or of deceased people of any kind. Such syncretism is nothing but idolatry.

Finally, a very dangerous form for any mission endeavor is the nowadays so popular ‘health-and-wealth-gospel’ that preaches material prosperity as God’s will for all of His people. By preaching such a distorted ‘gospel’ the necessity of suffering in the believer’s life is denied.⁸ Subsequently people are being blamed that they lack faith when God doesn’t grant them physical healing or material abundance. They try to twist His arm by ‘investing a little to gain a lot’. Piously the label of spiritual sowing and reaping is glued to this fake teaching. This ‘prosperity-gospel’ may have done more damage to the cause of world missions since the end of World War II than any of the other distortions I mentioned.

Once I stayed for a week in the house of an African pastor who had invited me to teach a seminar on mission awareness for other pastors in that city, during the same week. Every evening he watched American TV programs that had been recorded at some set of glitter-and-glamour evangelicalism: beautiful cathedrals, sophisticated sound systems, large orchestras accompanying long-robed choirs, expensive suits and dresses, bold ‘name-it-and-claim-it’ language and other show-offs that would be no misfit in the world of professional entertainment. These programs went on for hours, night after night.

The outcome is predictable: ‘If that is what Christianity really is, we want it too’. Is it strange? Which poor man will say ‘no’ to riches he thinks he can get by following a certain faith or way of believing? Who can blame him that contents become less important than the shiny wrappings it is presented in?

Yet, have we not been warned a long time ago ‘Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, *the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does* – comes not from the Father but from the world’?⁹

That’s why I have spent the last two articles on the issue of Christian suffering. The carnal cravings of a material-wealth gospel are diametrically opposed to the spiritual attitude of self-denial and cross-carrying that Jesus expects from His disciples. Therefore I consider the so-called prosperity-gospel as one of the most dangerous and soul-crippling ‘other gospels’ of our time because it appeals strongly to the carnal appetites of poor people and devastates their missionary usefulness, drowning their evangelistic zeal in covetousness. May the ones who have ‘seduced these little ones’ repent and change their ways, before the ‘millstone of judgment will be hung around their necks’!¹⁰ Apparently very drastic decisions are needed to deal with the problem effectively.¹¹

May the Lord be gracious to all of us who have the responsibility to preach His gospel far and near, so that we may present it in all its pureness without any distortion.

Next month we continue these mission topics by looking at the issue of ‘double conversion’.

⁶ As opposed to Heb. 4:14-16 & 10:19-22

⁷ As opposed to 1 Tim. 2:5

⁸ As opposed to 2 Tim. 3:12

⁹ 1 John 2:15,16 (italics mine)

¹⁰ Matt. 18:6,7

¹¹ Matt. 18:8,9