

The Utter Simplicity of the Gospel

As evangelical Christians, we have not been true to our trust and responsibility for the spread of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have complicated it and made it into something Jesus (and Paul) never thought of. We have used the wrong metaphors; we have employed the wrong imagery; we have obscured God's gospel.

Let's start from our present position as children of God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; we know God as our Father. Thus we have a relationship with God which is pictured for us in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. We are sons and daughters, who have repented and returned from our waywardness, and are now reconciled to God as our Father. We have heard the gospel: "Come home; all is forgiven!" or Paul's "Be reconciled to God" and "Christ died for our sins." The family relationship we enjoy with God as children with their father is an exclusive relationship. That is, it excludes any other relationship with God.

This family relationship, this most intimate, most meaningful, most deeply personal relationship must take precedence over any other possible relationship. It follows that we do not stand before God as pardoned lawbreakers or criminals before a judge, that we are not in a political relation to him as subjects of a king, do not stand before him as former debtors who were unable to meet their financial obligations, nor as those with contractual obligations we were unable to meet, such as trying to work for our salvation and uncertain about giving satisfaction. The ONLY relationship we have ever had with God is that of the family, we his children, he our loving and forgiving Father.

Particularly and especially, this means we have never had any legal relationship with God. The 'justification' we have is in no sense a legal justification or acquittal in a court of law. We are not pardoned criminals, we are forgiven children. God has never been to us a judge, nor have we ever stood in any court of his. Nor have we ever been under any set of laws, such as Moses gave the Israelites, so we are not guilty of breaking any laws. Our whole relationship with God can be biblically described in family terms, the relationship of children with a father. Now that relationship may be either in a right or a wrong condition. Our son/daughter relationship had gotten wrong, so that we were estranged, alienated from our Father, and needed that alienation removed. We needed to be reconciled, which is to say, we needed our wrong relationship with God to be righted. It was righted when we came home. The process of righting began when the Holy Spirit's activity in our hearts moved us to admit, "I have sinned; I'll get up and go back to my Father and tell him I've sinned and am no longer worthy to be called his child." And what we found on returning was a welcoming and forgiving Father.

Why then the cross? Note what the prodigal's father twice said, "This my son was dead, and is alive again!" As estranged from his father, he was as dead. The relationship of father-son was ruptured and needed to be restored, revived. The gospel is that Jesus identified himself with us in our misery, in the whole of our plight, as estranged and alienated from God, though he himself maintained total fellowship and communion with God throughout his life. But he did experience our alienation; "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" was his anguished cry, so shortly before his death.

But God raised him from the dead, and in resurrection God now says of him, "This my son was dead and is alive again!" Exactly the same words as the prodigal's father said on his return and reconciliation. Jesus identified himself with us so that all that was true of us as alienated became true of him, and, reciprocally, all that is true of him as risen and overcomer of alienation is now true of us. He identified himself with us in our death; he identifies us with him in his resurrection. "He was put to death for our misdeeds and was raised for our being put right." In resurrection Jesus confirms the close family relationship: "Go and tell my brothers, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

At the beginning I said we have not been true to the Gospel. We have misrepresented God as a judge greatly concerned with his own dignity and with upholding the law, rather than as a loving Father deeply concerned for the return of his wayward children. We have told the prodigal that he is before a Judge as a guilty criminal, deserving death, whereas the true message of love is that he is a wayward child, alienated from a Father yearning for his return, yearning to forgive him, yearning to raise him up again to the life of a family member, to the joy and love of the Father's home

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