



*A GROSS OVERSIGHT WITH
ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES*

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I recently attended a workshop composed of men who love the Lord and the church of Christ. They organized a “think tank” to study and discuss why we are seeing a decline in growth within today’s churches of Christ. It is, beyond a doubt, a very serious and much deserved study. It saddens my heart to write this article on the one hand, and yet on the other hand I think I would be remiss as a brother in Christ if I did not bring attention to what I believe is a gross oversight with eternal consequences for those of us who preach the gospel and to those who will hear and believe us.

The findings of the group were points I agree with and also see as problems related to the growth of the Lord’s church. I appreciate their work and pray that this article will not be taken as a negative shot at anyone or the effort and intent of the think tank. However, there is one factor I believe is a common, gross oversight when such studies on church growth are examined. I left the workshop baffled; totally mystified as to why the one thing I view as the problem with church growth was not mentioned. I am writing this article in the hopes that someone would enlighten me in some way as to where, or if, I am wrong with my view.

I believe the gross oversight that will have eternal consequences on men who are preachers of the gospel and those who have oversight of gospel preaching is the fact that the command given by Jesus in Mark 16:15-16—to preach the gospel—is not being done according to the scripture which includes the cross and details of Jesus’ suffering.

During the many years of my ministry—in particular, the last eight years—I have been successful in baptizing over one hundred lost souls per year at my local congregation. This does not include the numerous baptisms and restorations I have achieved in gospel meetings, funerals, and other evangelistic events where I am able to speak to non-members of the church of Christ. Regardless of the topic given or the event, I always use in my sermons the simple message of the cross which includes the details of Jesus’ suffering.

The Apostle Paul states in Romans 1:16 that the Gospel of Christ is the power of God to save. Paul says, “...[“IT”] is the power of God unto Salvation”. There is only one source of power to save a man or woman, and that is the Gospel of Christ. When we think or speak of how many churches the Lord built we refer to Jesus’ statement in Matthew 16:18: “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Here again is the word “IT” referring to *ONE* church. Those of us in churches of Christ believe the saved are in one church with no other options. However, when we discuss church growth without mentioning the possibility of us not preaching the one thing that God gave as the power to save (“IT”), then that would be like discussing how many churches people are saved in and not mentioning the one church God speaks of in His word.

So, with that in mind, what is the gospel? I maintain it is not “Hear, Believe, Repent, Confess and be Baptized”. When I ask the question today, “What is the gospel?” I get answers such as, “the Word of God”, “preaching the truth”, or “sound doctrine”. I believe one can preach the word of God and never preach the gospel, but no one can preach the gospel without preaching the word of God. This means that only preaching the word of God is not preaching the gospel.

Statements made at the workshop—as well as other discussions on the matter of declining growth within the churches of Christ—indicate the belief that one of the leading reasons for the decline is that preachers don’t “extend the invitation” or give the Plan of Salvation and therefore perform fewer baptisms. If these five steps—hear, believe, repent, confess and be baptized—are considered the gospel that saves, then I contend that that belief in itself is a gross oversight and misunderstanding of the scriptures.

The common reference when defining preaching the gospel of Christ is 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 where Paul tells us Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, He was buried and He rose again according to the scriptures. So then, the Gospel is the preaching of Christ dying for our sins according to the scriptures, and it means we are to preach him dying the way the scripture reads.

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 1:17-18 Paul says, “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” Notice, included in the preaching of the gospel is the preaching of the cross. So, if a preacher simply says that Jesus died for our sins and omits the preaching of his agonizing death on the cross, then that particular preaching of the gospel will not have the desired effect.

My point is the gospel preaching that will save must include the preaching of the cross. Jesus said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all *men* unto me” (John 12:32), and in Luke 24:46-47, “And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”.

Please note “cross preaching”, according to the scripture, is that Jesus suffered. Simply saying that Jesus loves you and that He died for you is not a sufficient description of His suffering. Describing to the lost the details of Jesus’ suffering according to the scriptures and describing the details of His life ending with the horrible and excruciating pains of crucifixion according to the scripture is God’s power to save because, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10)

When Jesus is lifted up on the cross, the details of his suffering are mentioned, and it produces godly sorrow in the heart of the listener who will repent as a result of it. Gospel preaching, which includes cross preaching with details of Christ's suffering, takes listeners to the house of mourning or puts them in the state of sorrow. God states through Solomon that this is better for man and the living will "lay it to heart" or give it thought (Ecclesiastes 7:1-4).

In the sermon Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he described to those listening, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it". (Acts 2:23-24) These Jews were very aware of the pains of crucifixion, scourging and the other cruel treatments that caused Jesus to suffer. Their understanding of Peter's preaching the cross and the results are recorded in Acts 2:37-38.

I believe the primary reason the church is not growing is because men don't preach the gospel which, according to the scripture, includes the cross and details of Jesus' suffering. When gospel preaching includes the cross and Jesus' suffering, men and women will be pricked in their hearts, bringing forth godly sorrow, which leads to repentance and the question, "What shall we do?". I have seen these results over and over again at the end of my sermons and in classes where I teach the gospel in its entirety.

I believe if all gospel preachers go back to the Great Commission and preach the gospel of Christ as the apostles did with all the details, the result will be an increase in baptisms and restorations of the lost. This simple, gross oversight will have eternal consequences on those of us who preach the gospel and those who hear us. As Paul told Timothy, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." (1 Timothy 4:16)