

# The Three Gospels

by Frank Viola

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*Frank Viola explores the distinctions between libertinism, legalism, and the transformative nature of Paul's gospel in the Christian life.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 1:4, Galatians 5:1, Ephesians 1:3, Ephesians 2:8, Colossians 3:12

**Topics:** "Gospel Of Grace", "Christian Identity"

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## Description

Frank Viola preaches about the two common tribes among believers: the libertines who have a shallow relationship with God and the legalists who add man-made rules to Scripture. He contrasts these with Paul's gospel, which focuses on the believer's identity in Christ and the spiritual reality of being a new creation. Paul's gospel emphasizes that the Christian life is about becoming who you are in Christ, not about striving to meet moral standards. Viola highlights the importance of understanding and embracing the gospel of grace that sets believers free from the bondage of legalism and libertinism.

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## Transcript

During the thirty years that I have been a Christian, I have observed that most believers can be divided up into two tribes. The libertines and the legalists.

The libertines are those who go to church, own a Bible, and profess to believe in Jesus Christ. However, they have no vital relationship or walk with the Lord. And they hold to the same values as do non-Christians.

In fact, if you were to examine their lifestyle, you would discover that libertines live no differently from those who are lost. Their attitude is that God only wants us to be nice to others and try our best to be good. Beyond that, God does not care how we live. So long as a person mentally assents that God exists and that Jesus is Savior, they are worthy to bear the name "Christian."

The libertine is a product of a certain kind of gospel. Note that I am using the word "gospel" in a very specific sense to describe one's message about Jesus Christ and the Christian life (Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8). I am not using it in the more common sense to describe the gospel story as it is presented in the New Testament (Mark 1:1).

The gospel of libertinism can be described as follows: Believing in Jesus is mere mental assent. God has little interest in the way people live their lives. God simply expects us to do the best we can. Believing in

Jesus has little impact on a person's lifestyle or values.

Here is the language of the libertine:

"We are all sinners, and we all sin. God understands my sin."

"The Bible is not completely relevant for us today. We can't expect to hold to the same values as the people did in Bible times. We live in a different world with different values."

"I live the way I want. God loves me, and I am saved, so I can do anything I please."

"Yes, I'm a Christian. But regarding my sin, that is just the way I am. I don't want to change, I can't change, and I won't change."

The gospel of libertinism is aimed directly at the flesh. Its message gives the fallen nature free reign to do as it pleases. At the same time, this gospel suppresses the voice of one's conscience.

#### ANOTHER GOSPEL

Standing contrary to the libertine is the legalist. Like the libertines, legalists are the products of a certain kind of gospel.

Legalists are those who have a heart of love for the Lord. Their conversion to Christ has produced a change of values and lifestyle. They take God seriously, they take His Word seriously, and they try to please Him in their conduct.

However, they have added a bundle of man-made rules to the Scriptures and are judgmental toward those who fail to keep those rules. They also believe that they can fulfill the Christian standard, and they do their best in trying to keep it.

The gospel of legalism can be described as follows: God is holy, and He has made clear demands on men and women. We must warn, exhort, rebuke, and admonish ourselves and others to fulfill those demands.

Here is the language of the legalist. (This gospel dominates the pages of most Christian books and the content of most sermons today):

"We must . . ."

"We need to . . ."

"We have to . . ."

"You had better . . ."

"If you do . . . then God will be happy with you."

"If you don't do . . . then God will be angry with you."

The implication of such vocabulary is that if we fail to obey God's laws, then He will be angry with us. Embedded in the gospel of legalism is the tacit threat that the Lord's love and acceptance of His children is tied to their conduct.

The gospel of legalism is aimed directly at the will. It gives the human will the illusion that it can keep the standards of God. At the same time, it weakens the conscience, causing it to believe that certain practices are sinful when they are not (1 Corinthians 8; 1 Corinthians 10; Romans 14-15.)

There are degrees of legalism, from mild to extreme. And there are degrees of libertinism as well. But the fact is that the overwhelming majority of Christians today can be put into one of these two camps.

## PAUL'S GOSPEL

Thankfully, there is a third gospel. But it is rarely preached today. This gospel is the one we find dominating the letters of Paul. It is neither libertine nor legalistic.

Instead of focusing on the demands of God, Paul's gospel focuses on the spiritual reality of what actually happened to us when Jesus Christ died and rose again. It takes its view, not from the earth, but from the heavenlies--behind the very eyes of God.

Paul's gospel proclaims and declares who God has made us in Christ and who Christ is in us.

In Paul's gospel, the standards of God are neither ignored nor rationalized into irrelevant oblivion (as in the gospel of the libertine). On the other hand, the standards of God are never presented as demands by which our acceptance by God is tied (as in the gospel of the legalist).

Instead, Paul's gospel is always rooted in the unconditional acceptance, security, and wealth that the believer has in Christ. For this reason, whenever Paul presents a standard of God, he always presents it from this vantage point: It is the conduct that those who are in Christ naturally exhibit.

Paul never taught the standards of God as universal rules or laws to be obeyed by human effort. Rather, he only mentioned the Christian standard when he was addressing a highly specific problem wherein God's people were not living according to who they were in Christ. Paul's intention in doing so was to remind God's people of who they really were in God's eyes.

Paul's gospel is aimed directly at the renewed spirit of man. Its message strengthens the spirit to take charge of the mind, will, and emotions. At the same time, it strengthens the conscience, causing it to be responsive to the Holy Spirit.

A crucial, but little known fact is that the New Testament is not a book of rules for us to follow. Instead, the New Testament is a spiritual narrative that is made up of the following: History books about the life of Jesus and the life of His church (the Gospels and Acts), letters to churches and individuals that are in crises (the Epistles), and a breathtaking vision of Jesus Christ's triumphant victory over the world (Revelation).

Virtually all of Paul's letters were written in response to a particular crisis that God's people were experiencing. Paul's custom was to address the crisis in this order:

1. He would first remind Christians of their true identity in Christ. He would also remind them of the all-sufficiency of Christ who had come to dwell inside of them.
2. He would describe the behavior of those who are new creatures in Christ.

3. When a church was not acting according to its true identity, he would exhort the believers to live according to their true identity rather than according to their false identity. That is, he would exhort them to walk in line with who they are rather than who they used to be.

Let us look at some of Paul's letters to trace this pattern. Paul takes this approach in virtually all of his epistles. It is his custom for addressing problems in Christian communities.

Consider how this approach differs from both the libertine and the legalistic approaches.

## THE PATTERN IN GALATIANS

The facts . . .

He has rescued you from this present evil age (1:4).

You have been justified by faith apart from the works of the Law (2:16).

You have died to the Law so that you may live to God. You have been crucified with Christ. You no longer live, but Christ lives in you. He loved you and gave Himself for you (2:19-20).

You received the Holy Spirit by believing (3:2).

You are children of Abraham (3:7).

Christ redeemed you from the curse of the Law (3:13).

Since faith has come, you are no longer under the supervision of the Law (3:25).

You are sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. You were baptized in Christ and you are clothed with Christ. You belong to Christ and you are heirs to God's promise (3:26-29).

You are sons of God, and you have the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God has given you His Spirit. And that Spirit testifies that God is your Father. You are not slaves, but sons and heirs of God (4:4-7).

The heavenly Jerusalem is your mother (4:26).

You are children of promise (4:28)

You are called to be free (5:13).

You belong to Jesus Christ and you have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires (5:24).

What counts is a new creation, of which you are a part (6:15).

Because of these facts . . .

Stand fast in the liberty that Christ has given you and don't be burdened by the yoke of slavery to the Law (5:1).

Do not use your freedom to indulge in the sinful nature, but rather, serve one another in love (5:13).

Live by the Spirit and you will not fulfill the desires of the sinful nature (5:16).

Since you live by the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit. Do not be conceited, provoking and envying one another (5:25-26).

Carry one another's burdens (6:2).

Do not become weary in well doing. Do good to all people, especially your fellow brethren in Christ (6:9-10).

## THE PATTERN IN 1 CORINTHIANS

The facts . . .

You are holy in Christ and you are called holy ones (1:2)

God's grace has been given to you in Christ. In Him, you have been enriched in every way. You do not lack any spiritual gift. He will keep you strong until the end so that you will be blameless on the day of Jesus Christ (1:4-8).

Because of God, you are in Christ Jesus who has become your wisdom, your righteousness, your holiness, and your redemption (1:30).

You have received the Spirit of God, not the spirit of the world, that you might know what God has freely given you (2:12).

You are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you (3:16).

Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you. You are not your own. You were bought with a price (6:19-20).

Because of these facts . . .

Be of the same mind and have no divisions among you (1:10).

Since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like "natural men," contrary to who you really are? (3:3-4).

Do not deceive yourselves (3:18).

Judge nothing before the appointed time (4:5).

I urge you to imitate me (4:16).

Get rid of the old yeast among you . . . expel the wicked man from among you (5:7, 12).

Flee from sexual immorality . . . honor God with your body (6:18, 20).

## THE PATTERN IN COLOSSIANS

The facts . . .

You are holy and faithful in Christ (1:2).

The Father has qualified you to share in His inheritance. He has rescued you from the dominion of darkness. He has transferred you into the Kingdom of Christ. In Christ, you have redemption and the forgiveness of sins (1:12-14).

He is the Head of His Body, the church, of which you are a part (1:18).

Once you were enemies alienated from God. Now He has reconciled you by Christ's death to present you holy and blameless in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation (1:21-22).

Christ is in you, the hope of glory (1:27).

You have received Christ Jesus as your Lord (2:6).

You have been given fullness in Christ. In Him, you were spiritually circumcised and have put off the sinful nature. You were buried with Christ by baptism and have been raised with Him through faith in the power of God who raised Him from the dead (2:10-12).

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave you of your sins. He canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against you and opposed you. He nailed that code to His cross (2:13-14).

You have died with Christ to the basic elements of this world (2:20).

You have been raised with Christ (3:1).

You died and your life is hid with Christ in God. Christ is your life. When He appears, you will appear with Him (3:3-4).

You used to walk in the sinful nature. You have taken off the old self with its practices and put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of your Creator (3:7-10).

You are God's chosen people, holy, and dearly loved (3:12).

You are members of one Body and are called to peace (3:15).

Because of these facts . . .

Continue to walk in Christ, just as you received Him (2:6).

See to it that no one takes you captive by deceptive philosophy that is not according to Christ (2:8).

Do not let anyone judge you in what you eat or drink, or in regard to keeping a religious festival, a new moon celebration, or a Sabbath day (2:16).

Set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (3:1-2).

Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature (3:5).

Rid yourselves of such things as anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. Do not lie to each other (3:8-9).

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Put on love. Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart. Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Whatever you do, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God (3:12-17).

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful (4:2).

Let your conversation be always full of grace (4:6).

## THE PATTERN IN EPHESIANS

The facts . . .

God has blessed you with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. He chose you in Christ before the creation of the world so that you would be holy and blameless in His sight. In love, He predestined you to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ. He has freely given you His grace and you are accepted in His Beloved Son. In Him you have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He has lavished the riches of His grace upon you with all wisdom and understanding (1:3-8).

In Christ, you were chosen and predestined according to His eternal plan. You have been given an inheritance in Him (1:11).

You were included in Christ. You were marked in Him with a seal of the promised Holy Spirit. The Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing your inheritance. You are God's possession (1:13-14).

You used to be dead in your trespasses and sins. You used to follow the way of the world and the ruler of the kingdom of darkness (2:1-2).

God who has a great love for you and who is rich in mercy, made you alive in Christ, even when you were dead in transgressions. You have been saved by grace. God raised you up with Christ and seated you with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to you in Christ Jesus. You have been saved by grace, through faith. It is not of yourselves, but it is the gift of God. Not by works, lest any person should boast. You are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for you to do (2:4-10).

You are now in Christ Jesus. You were once far away, but you have been brought near by the blood of Christ (2:13).

He Himself is your peace (2:14).

Through Christ you have access to the Father by one Spirit (2:18).

You are fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household (2:19).

You are being built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives by His Spirit (2:20).

You are members of one Body (4:25).

You are dearly loved children (5:1).

Christ loved you and gave Himself up for you as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (5:2).

You are God's holy people (5:3).

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord (5:8).

Because of these facts . . .

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle: be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (4:1-3).

You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking . . . you didn't come to learn Christ that way. You were taught to put away your old self . . . to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor. In your anger do not sin. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work. Do not let any unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for the building up of others according to their needs. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ has forgiven you (4:17, 20-32).

Be imitators of God and live a life of love (5:1-2).

There must not be sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse jesting among you which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving (5:3-4).

Do not be partners with those who practice these things (5:7).

Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them (5:11).

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord. Always giving thanks to God. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (5:17-21).

### THREE VARIED APPROACHES

The gospel of libertinism, the gospel of legalism, and Paul's gospel represent three very different positions when it comes to matters of sin and morality. For the sake of illustration, let us take the issue of slander, which the New Testament condemns. (Feel free to insert any other sin that the Scriptures clearly address.)

Concerning the practice of slandering, the libertine gospel says, "This issue is irrelevant. We live in a different world than the people of the Bible did. Our values are different and more advanced. God loves us all and understands our needs. We all sin. God loves everyone so you are judging a person if you expect them to stop this behavior."

The legalistic gospel says, "God will judge those who violate His commandments. Christians need to stop sinning in this way. They must get right with God or else they will be judged. They must do their dead-level best to stop slandering others."

In contrast, Paul's gospel exhorts, "Let me remind you that you are part of a new species. Jesus Christ lives in you, and you are in Christ. As such, your old fallen nature is dead in Christ. Therefore, put off the old lifestyle of slandering others. For that is the conduct of a fallen species. It is not your conduct. Live according to who you really are and by the higher life that dwells within you."

## REFINING OUR GOSPEL

Paul's gospel was built on the understanding that the key to spiritual transformation was not found in trying to improve oneself. Nor was it found in trying to do better or in trying to overcome sin.

Rather, it was found in a revelation of who the believer is in Christ and who Christ is in the believer. To put it in a sentence: The Christian life is becoming what you are.

Paul's tendency was to remind God's people who they have become as new creatures in Christ. And upon this revelation, he gave exhortations to their renewed spirits when they had forgotten who they were.

The testimony of the church, therefore, is one of embracing and proclaiming the gospel that Paul preached. Paul's gospel was one of liberty and of setting God's people free. It provided freedom from the fruitless attempt to keep a moral standard or an ethical code. Yet it also provided freedom from the power of the fallen nature.

The testimony of the church is one of liberty . . . the liberty that is in Christ Jesus. A liberty that sets us free from trying to be both good and bad, and brings us to a living knowledge of the One who indwells us.

So the next time you hear someone preach, ask yourself, "What gospel am I hearing?" Am I being exhorted to feel comfortable in my sin and justify it (libertinism)? Am I being exhorted to try harder and be a better Christian (legalism)? Or am I being presented with Jesus Christ . . . and am I being reminded of the high place that he has caused me to stand?

Embracing the gospel of libertinism or the gospel of legalism will put you in the flesh. The fruit of the gospel of libertinism is the defiling acts of the flesh. The fruit of the gospel of legalism is the self-righteousness of the flesh. Both gospels produce fleshly activity and thus produce death rather than life.

Only Paul's gospel . . . the gospel of grace . . . will bring you into the liberty that is yours in Christ Jesus.

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