

# Attempting to Improve the Gospel

by Mark Denver

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*The gospel is a uniquely Christian message that must be carefully defined and preserved, and evangelism is the church's special task and priority.*

**Duration:** 1:05:23

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 15:1

**Topics:** "Gospel", "Preserving the Gospel", "Evangelism"

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## Description

Mark Denver emphasizes the importance of preserving the integrity of the gospel, warning against attempts to improve or modify it through cultural relevance, personal interpretations, or societal engagement. He highlights that the gospel's core message--creation, fall, redemption, and restoration--must remain clear and unaltered, as any additions or changes can lead to a loss of its true meaning. Denver encourages pastors to focus on the gospel's sufficiency and to ensure that their congregations understand it as the central message of their faith. He calls for a commitment to evangelism and the local church as essential components of the Christian life, reminding listeners that the gospel is ultimately about God's glory rather than merely human benefit. The sermon concludes with a prayer for clarity and faithfulness in preaching the gospel.

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## Transcript

Lord God, we rejoice that we have the opportunity to meet together in this way, in this place, in the open, in a public facility like this, Lord, without worry of bodily harm for being at this meeting. Lord, you have been so kind to allow us all of these stewardships along with the stewardship of your gospel. We think of our brothers and sisters around the world who are persecuted today for naming your name even in private.

And yet, Lord, here we have rejoiced to be together in thousands and singing your praises. Oh God, we pray that you would make us faithful stewards of your gospel. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

People try to improve the gospel. But in improving the gospel, they end up losing it. John has just talked to us about this for an hour.

And brother, thank you for that address. That was exactly the kind of things that have been on my heart as I worked on this. When you go to the New Testament, you know, it's clear that some Corinthians wanted to add human wisdom and eloquence to the gospel.

No harm there, they thought. This is the way we're used to being addressed, the kind of communication we're used to. It's culturally appropriate.

Some teachers in Galatia were wanting to add observance of the ceremonial laws of Moses to the gospel. And no harm there, they thought. Effectively, they were saying you have to become a Jew before you can become a Christian.

Teachers in Colossae were adding everything from a worldly philosophy to the worship of angels. Pastors, let me give you a simple but possibly revolutionary suggestion. Do a study through the New Testament to find out what the gospel is.

Do a study through the New Testament to find out what the gospel is. Friends, that's not a rhetorical device in a sermon. This is encouragement with an assignment, some homework for you.

Do you want there to be some long-lasting fruit from this conference? You read through the New Testament the next month. You keep a notebook and you compile there, what is the gospel? What is the good news of Jesus Christ? According to the Bible, God is fundamental to the gospel. Our creation in His image is fundamental and our plight that we are lost in sin.

Obviously, God's solution in sending us the Lord Jesus Christ through His incarnation, His substitutionary death, resurrection, ascension and return is essential for the gospel. So Mark begins his book, the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And when you look at the way Paul summarizes the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 and in 2 Timothy 2.8, this is what Paul would say is of first importance, or is his gospel.

Creation by God, fall by man, and then in God's kindness, the redemption through Christ and the restoration of His creation. And the only other part we want to add to that creation, fall, redemption, restoration story is our participation in that. It's no good sharing somebody this wonderful metanarrative if you share it in such a way that seems to imply a kind of universalism, that you're going to be a part of it regardless of your response.

No, God will do it regardless of your response, but we are called to plead with sinners and to pray for them. According to Jesus, instruction in what our response should be to this message is not merely an application, but it is part of the gospel message itself. So if you look at the way the risen Christ teaches His disciples, Ligon mentioned this passage yesterday in Luke chapter 24 and verse 46, he says, this is what is written.

The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. So the response of repentance and the result of forgiveness is seen as part of the core preached news message, the good message, the gospel. This is what we find Paul saying in Galatians one, when he says that his message is about Jesus who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and father, Galatians one, four, we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, not at all in ourselves.

The spirit of God makes a radical change in us. So radical that Paul reaches for image, a new creation or Jesus in the discussion with Nicodemus, a new birth. So radical is the change that God makes in our lives.

And this is good news. Because this is the central message of the gospel. And we must keep this clear.

They had to during the time of the New Testament and we have to today as well. And yet new challenges to the clarity and the sufficiency of the gospel arise in each generation. And today, some even within evangelicalism are acting as if Jesus Christ alone is not fully sufficient, as if faith in him and his promises alone is a, and here I'm going to use their word, is a reduction of the gospel.

They are effectively modifying or expanding the gospel that we have received. I recently read a column in a leading evangelical magazine that would be the current issue of Christianity Today. In which the author was arguing for our accepting and using the many different presentations of the gospel that we find in scripture.

So for example, this column said, and I quote, that Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman received very different messages, end of quote. Now just a few sentences earlier, he said, quote, Jesus did not speak the same blanket message to all people, end of quote. Alright, reading this very charitably, I know what he means.

Different words were used from what we have reported. But today, that seems like it could well be confused and be taken to mean that different messages are different messages. Different gospels spoken.

I think it would be better to say there are different ways of telling the same message. You can use different illustrations to try to explain the incarnation and the atonement. But incarnation and atonement are not mere illustrations to be altered, replaced, or creatively reimagined.

They are the gospel itself. They're part of the message. And carefully defining the message is, in fact, essential for preserving our hold on it.

So this kind of defining the message may not be reductionistic, as the author of this article warned. In fact, carefully defining the message, I think, is part of our preserving it and passing it on faithfully. And gospel preacher, in terms of your proclamation, you have no more important task than understanding what the gospel is and making sure your people understand precisely what the good news is.

I just got a resignation letter this morning from a dear sister in our church who has moved to Australia. So she has to resign her membership. She's moved.

She's settling there now. And in this letter of resignation, she very kindly said that one of the things she was most encouraged about from her time in our congregation was she said how clearly she heard the gospel every Sunday in our gathering, in the sermons, in the prayers. She was again and again reminded of the gospel.

Well, praise God for however much that's true. Brothers, that is what we want to strive for in our congregational life together, the centrality and clarity of the gospel. Now leaving aside this particular article in Christianity Today, looking more broadly at the rising generation of Christian ministers who profess to believe the gospel, what supplements or additives or attempted improvements do we find? What mistaken notions do we have which are liable to end up carrying us away with them? In the remainder of our time, I want to consider some of the threats that we face.

And these are different threats in some ways than the Christians of the New Testament faced. But they're no less challenges to the full sufficiency of Jesus Christ. And they should be recognized as that.

Now, a little special parentheses for the unusually theologically attentive among you. Throughout our consideration, I think you'll find that a confusion of what the church's responsibility is. With what the individual Christian's responsibility is, can play havoc with our understanding of the gospel.

And can cause us to mix in implications of the gospel with the gospel itself. That seems indecipherable to you. Don't worry about it right now.

There are many such distortions we could consider, sadly, but everything from a this worldly prosperity gospel to a feel-good human potential gospel. But let me this morning briefly mention what I'll call five cries. Five cries that I think are particularly attractive and threatening to our hold on the gospel.

And there's definitely some overlapping among these five. But I think there's enough distinction to be helpful to consider them separately. Number one, make the gospel public.

Make the gospel public, we're told. The question here is really about what Jesus came to say. That is, what is the gospel about? This is all about our mission.

And these people take our mission to be to work, to save the structures of society. As opposed to working to see merely individuals saved. Put another way, the question is, how much of the kingdom of God will we see before Christ returns? Tom Wright in his new book, *Surprised by Hope*, says that, and I quote here, the church that takes seriously the fact that Jesus is Lord of all will not just seek to order its own life in an appropriate rhythm of worship and work.

Such a church will also seek to bring wisdom to the rhythms of work in offices and shops, in local government, in civic holidays, and in the shaping of public life, end of quote. Now, if what he means is that we want to educate our members to think biblically about all of life so that they become educated to act as wide stewards of their life in all of its aspects, then Wright is certainly right. But if what Wright means is that part of the gospel message that's been committed to us is the church directly shaping the laws of the land on such matters, well, I understand what he might mean as a bishop in a legally established Church of England, but I don't think there is any such example of that in the New Testament.

And certainly the apostle Paul provides no model for us in spending the church's time directly instructing the Roman emperor or directly shaping the pagan's view of culture. That may be the effect of our preaching of the gospel and teaching the Christian the word, but we will never, by our preaching or by any of our actions, bring in the culmination of the kingdom of God. That comes with the return of Christ.

He will, as Revelation 21 shows us so wonderfully, cause his bride to appear. A time will come when all tears are wiped away. But Revelation 21 for tells us that that is God's action.

If Wright thinks that something less cataclysmic than the return of Christ will establish God's rule completely in this world, then Wright is wrong. Indeed, to get the church to focus on repairing passing structures in a fallen world, a world under the curse of God. Would not only cause churches discouragement through the frustration that we would know of building sandcastles as it were at low tide, but it would even more horrendously distract us from the work of bringing God eternal glory by preaching the gospel and seeing people converted and eternally reconciled to God.

Theologically, the question is, how much do we identify the kingdom of God with what's going on in this world right now? Some Christians see a complete disjunction, a complete separation of the church from the world, leading them to a withdrawal from this world entirely, or at least attempted. Partially in response

to this error, other voices like Tom Wright's have been raised to champion a biblical witness for God's concern for societal issues like justice and poverty. But confusion enters when such concern is taken to be either the gospel itself.

Or the central mission of the local church. So many talk today of redeeming the culture and suggests that some of us American evangelicals have wrongly privatized the gospel. They suggest that the gospel has as at least one of its goals, the reform of politics and government.

In the name of seeking the peace and prosperity of the city from Jeremiah 29, seven, some pastors are leading churches to spend themselves in taking responsibility for nearby schools, housing developments, other matters of interest for the wider community. Some such good deeds are explained as simply living out Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount and Peter's words about living good lives among the pagans. Such ministries are often characterized as the church being salt and light in the community and thereby making the church's effect on those around influential and even irresistibly so.

Christians are presented as the vanguard of the new world that God is bringing about the kingdom in service of which goal we act in business, education, law, the sciences, the politics, the arts. But my brother shepherds, I I appeal to you. Realize that the gospel that has been committed to us is a uniquely Christian message and that has been uniquely entrusted to the church.

I have non-Christian family and friends who will agree with me about the desperate sadness of hunger or government oppression or malnourishment or sex trafficking, and they happily join me in work to oppose these, but they will not join me in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are not about that. They are sinners still in need of being reconciled to God is, again, we just heard about spiritually.

They are at war with this God. I was once asked by a U.S. senator if I had any advice for him on a certain matter that was before the Senate. I thought it was important, and as it happened, I had strong opinions on the matter.

But I couldn't say that scripture was clear on this. I could tell you how I reasoned it out morally, but it wouldn't be worth the time. It was not an issue like slavery or abortion, but it was an amendment to the United States Constitution, a kind of once in a lifetime vote.

The House had already passed it, and it looked like it was just about to pass the Senate. The majority in the Senate were already publicly committed to voting for it, including every other member of the senator's party. But the Constitution requires a supermajority of two thirds in the House and the Senate to amend it.

And guess how many votes short the Senate was from passing it on to the states for ratification? One vote. We were in private. He was a member of my church.

He was a member asking for his pastor's guidance. Now, any comments I would have made would probably have had no influence on him whatsoever. This man was a thoughtful Christian, an experienced public servant.

He was probably merely being kind to me as pastor by asking me. But I think spiritually I was being tempted. You see, before I became a Christian, I'd wanted to go into politics, law school and politics.

And here I was in God's strange humor, not only converted from agnostic to Christian, not only delivered from politics into the ministry, but sent to minister on Capitol Hill of all places with this guy as a member of

my church. We're in private. I have strong opinions on this matter politically.

And he's looking at me, asking me for advice. So what should I have done? Well, I'll tell you what I did, I simply told the senator that he had his responsibility before God and our political system, and I had mine. I assured him I would fully exercise mine and I encouraged him to fully exercise his own.

I declined to comment, saying that I had more important business to attend to with him. I told him I might be wrong politically on this amendment to the Constitution, but I was not wrong on the cross of Christ. And that was the far more important business I had to attend with him as his pastor.

Now, I'm not sure that even if we sit around on the panel, everybody would agree with me in saying that. But I say that to try to highlight, I do think we must make a distinction between the gospel and other things that we take to be true and that this distinction is faithful to the New Testament. So if you look at Acts chapter eight, for example, Acts chapter eight, Philip comes and he preaches.

And it's very interesting, the phrase that Luke uses to describe what Philip preaches. He says in Acts chapter eight, verse twelve, Luke says that Philip preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. Now, friends, if you have read any books for the last 10 years, this phrase, the kingdom of God, is the taking off point to all kinds of stuff.

OK, what was their immediate response to this preaching of the kingdom of God? Well, it's interesting if you look here in Acts eight, it wasn't to change the structure of the government of the city, but it was to be baptized. And then Luke reports in chapter eight, verse 14, that from this, the apostles heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God. It's clear that even using the expression, the good news of the kingdom doesn't mean that God's reign has now come in the fullness that we will know it at Christ's return, but that the king is willing to pardon rebels and that we personally should go and submit ourselves to his rule.

And yes, we will then begin to work out the implications of these of this message. But these implications aren't the gospel itself. And if you say that these implications are part of the gospel, confusion will result.

The message of God's fully sufficient work in Christ will be mixed with our own works. There is no entrance into the kingdom apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ. Do you think a non-Christian friend of yours is doing kingdom work? Oh, they're not.

They may be doing things that are relatively good, better than other things they could do in rebellion against God. But there is no part in the kingdom apart from personal faith in Christ. May the local church be involved in good works? Yes, but it should be as a reflection of.

Or as an attraction to this gospel of Jesus Christ. If alleviating material poverty is taken as a responsibility of the congregation because that's part of the gospel. Then this is where most of the younger Christians may choose to serve, not an evangelism.

This could well be the choice of less mature Christians. The more nominal Christians, the one who would rather do things the world around them will applaud and recognize in value than the evangelism that it rejects and scorns. Your congregation may well continue to do both for a season, but I fear those who follow them will not.

Such a public gospel will slowly but surely lose its supernatural, awkward corners and be smooth to be acceptable to sinners all around. It's the story of countless churches in our own land. Here, I think looking

at early 20th century liberalism is very instructive.

You have you have people like Washington Gladden who actually reject everything we know of as the gospel, but then you have people like Walter Rauschenbusch who would agree, I think, positively with what we want to say is the gospel. But then he would put an end on it. And the story of that end is that you always end up losing the gospel.

Look at Rauschenbusch and his early 20th century followers, it's instructive. Evangelism will never be appreciated by this world. It is our special task, pastors, to protect the priority of evangelism.

And I have to argue with other evangelicals about this all the time. And insofar as I have time and I remaining 24 hours together, I am happy to argue with you about this. So if you want to come find me, this would probably be the best use of my time trying to persuade you, if you are a pastor, that evangelism is, in fact, your God given priority, the spreading of this good news of Jesus Christ.

I don't mean by this to communicate any indifference about issues of this life are both evangelism and compassionate service to be part of my individual discipleship. Yes. In that sense, they both typify my life as a Christian.

Yes. Are they equally part of the gospel? No. Let me give you one practical example of this.

A foundation is established by evangelical Christians to fund Christian work. Over time, they come to accept the idea that you can't preach the gospel or they haven't changed the idea of the gospel, but that you can't preach the gospel without aiming at other larger cultural changes than just mere evangelism. A friend whose evangelistic ministry they had known for years and appreciated asked for funding to plant a church in a spiritually dark northeastern city.

The foundation declines to fund this person. Now, my friend is deeply concerned with the urban poor and has given himself very practically in caring for many in practical ways, but because he believes that preaching the gospel can be spoken of as the responsibility and priority of the local church in a way, social action cannot be that evangelism is the priority because of this, they decline to assist him. Evangelism unsupported because someone believes in the priority of evangelism.

Recent history provides example after example of such once evangelical groups falling away from the priority of the gospel and in ways that directly hinder its preaching. Brothers, never substitute good works for the preaching of the gospel. Don't try to improve the gospel by making it public like this.

You'll end up losing it. Preach the gospel we've received. Cry number two, another cry similar to the one we just considered, but even more from evangelicals.

And may I say at a meeting like this, especially from the reformed. Number two, make the gospel larger. The question raised here is, did Jesus come really only to save our souls? What's at stake here is the core of the gospel.

What is the gospel? These people in seeking to apply the gospel to all of life think through a Christian worldview, which is great. Thank you, Dr. Sproul and Moeller for helping us to think through a Christian worldview, for taking all of life in our minds captive to the implications of the gospel. But implications of the gospel are sometimes referred to as part of the gospel.

This is not great. I'm thinking of people who would affirm what we mean when we say the gospel. Unlike some of the people, maybe in the first point that you could think of.

But they would want to say more. Chuck Colson has done some great work. His autobiography helped to solidify my own sense of calling to the ministry.

He's a man to admire in many ways. But he has in this area been confusing and he is typical of what so many ministers today seem to be doing and thinking, for example, last summer at the Southern Baptist Pastors Conference, Colson charged the assembled pastors to, quote, understand what Christianity is, end of quote. Now, that's an excellent charge to a group of pastors.

I have no objection to pastors understanding what Christianity is. But then there's the question of, well, what is it? He continued, I quote, Christianity is a way of seeing all of life and all of reality, a way of understanding ultimate truth, the plan of creation. Christianity is a worldview.

When Jesus Christ came, he announced the kingdom, every aspect of life under the Lordship of Christ, end of quote. OK, so is someone who hasn't thought through the implications of the Lordship of Christ, not a Christian? I assume Chuck doesn't mean that. What does it mean to genuinely be a Christian without participating in what he here calls Christianity? I mean, where is the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian? Where does it where does it lie? Is it really here over how thought through we are about the implications of our faith? Or is it simply whether or not we have faith only in Christ to save us from God's wrath against us because of our sins? Friends, I think that we have a lot at stake in getting this right.

I have no doubt that to some of you, I sound like I'm splitting hairs right now, but I want you to know, at least in my own mind, I think I'm protecting the gospel. The fruit of the spirit, the transformation of our mind comes from our being a Christian. It does not affect our salvation.

I'm concerned that if we confuse this issue, we might begin going around sort of tacking on fruit on fruitless trees. We might think somehow we're we're making the tree fruitful because we take this fruit and simply staple it to it. But I want to ask the question, why is that tree not producing this fruit? Maybe it's not really a fruit tree.

Non-Christians can hold some of the same moral positions that Christians hold. Praise God. But they are not made Christians by holding those positions.

A lack of these moral positions and lack of these moral positions may indeed falsify our claim to be Christian, but I'm not made a Christian by holding these moral positions. It is the gospel that saves and transforms, and the gospel is no collection of our own moral positions or actions. So the righting of all wrongs, the blessings mentioned in Isaiah and Jesus' first reading in the synagogue, the releasing of the oppressed, the healing of the blind, the freeing of the prisoners are taken to be, as Colson has written, doing the gospel.

Friends, I'm in favor of thinking through the implications of a Christian worldview. Tonight, when I introduce Al, I'm going to plug his book Culture Matters, Culture Shift, Culture Matters, Culture Shift. I'm concerned in this process that we not misunderstand what a Christian is.

We must always be clear to distinguish between the core of the gospel and its results or its implications. Let me take a near implication of the gospel, all right, that the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. Now, this is good

news.

This is tremendous news. Could this be said to be the gospel? Well, in a strictly etymological sense, it's certainly a gospel. I mean, as I say, it's good news.

And yet it's very interesting in Ephesians chapter three, verse six. This is said to happen through or by the gospel. Now that this is the gospel.

And what's the problem with identifying an effect of the gospel, like being staunchly pro-life as part of the gospel itself? Those people who also want that effect, that end, that result, and are working very hard for that end, you then take to be working in some real sense for the gospel. When they may, in fact, have a very different idea of how this effect comes about. In essence, a very different gospel.

Our good deeds commend the gospel only if the gospel is already there to be commended. Only if the gospel has already been verbally communicated. Evangelism is the preaching of the gospel.

Or here's another one. Sharing our lives with somebody that we intend to serve, or maybe even evangelize, that's a good thing, right? Surely that's the gospel. But that's not what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians chapter two, verse eight.

We love you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well. Again, just like the previous example, we may wonder if this could be said to be sharing the gospel. It certainly is good news.

And yet here in 1 Thessalonians, we see that Paul's sharing his life with the Thessalonians was something that happened in addition to his sharing the gospel with himself. He could have shared the gospel with them without sharing his life. Again, we see the problem of confusing an action of ours with the gospel itself.

Even if that action could be said to well reflect the gospel, or to be consistent with the gospel, or perhaps even an implication of the gospel, people can share their lives with you without ever knowing or believing what Paul here means by the gospel. So when someone says that the gospel includes, let's say, opposition to abortion, or working to end unjust laws, that the gospel includes this. Okay, then I have a few questions.

Does it also include nationalized health care? Or the war in Iraq? What is lost when an implication of the gospel is bundled with the gospel, or taken to be a part of the gospel? I understand as a preacher, that is a rhetorically powerful way to make a point. Blank is the gospel. Well, then I've just woken everybody up and make them think, oh, I must agree with you on this.

I understand the allure to the preacher of putting it this way. But does it not jeopardize our perception, our grasp on the unique message about the reconciling death of Jesus Christ? Also, what do we say of others who agree with us about Christ, but not about these particular implications we point out? Can true Christians disagree about the best way to care for the poor? Someone else may be a supporter of monarchy, or of taking away religious liberties of Baptist preachers, and once again, putting us in jail. And I would disagree with them.

But can I say from these sad mistakes, that such people could not be my brothers and sisters in Christ? Couldn't someone want to jail me, or have my tongue cut out, as was done to Baptist preachers? And yet

they actually be my brother in Christ? That we could not share the same gospel, because we hadn't worked out the implications the same? Friend, if this is a new thought to you, what do you think many of our African American brothers and sisters have been doing for decades, as they have listened to us, quote, favorably from writers who believe that racial slavery was morally defensible? I know we don't agree with such defenses, but you understand, seminaries are still being named after people who took these terrible positions. And yet, can we say that such people understood and even appreciated the gospel? I think we can. We all live imperfectly and inconsistently with what we know to be true.

That's why we are saved by faith in Christ and Him alone. To require us to include what we take to be implications of the gospel in the gospel itself can too easily confuse our message and lose the radical and gracious sufficiency of faith in Christ alone for salvation. So we want a Christian worldview, and we don't want to confuse that with the gospel.

Don't try to improve the gospel by making it larger like this. You'll end up losing it. Preach the gospel we've received.

A third cry would be this. Number three, make the gospel relevant. Make the gospel relevant.

And the question here is more, how will people be saved? And what's at stake here is our outreach, really, what it should be like. And the buzzword here is, as John has already said this morning, contextualization. Many writers and pastors seem to want to begin today with the assumption that the gospel appears irrelevant to people today or people in their community.

Therefore, they conclude we should follow the example of Paul on Mars Hill or Paul going to Jerusalem and be Greek to the Greek or Jew to the Jews. As Paul said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 9, that he would become all things to all men so that by all possible means, I might save some. In what can be described as an incarnational ministry, we want to figure out what keeps non-Christians from coming to our churches, listening to our sermons, believing our gospel.

And so we stress our similarity to them, try to help them feel at home, understood, cared for when they're among us. We want them to belong so that they will believe. We want to highlight the way the gospel can help them succeed or have greater purpose or joy or some other desired benefit.

We act and plan as if the greater our similarity is to those people we're trying to reach, the more the gospel will appear relevant to them and the more successful we will be at reaching them. Beware here, a concern for evangelism unmoored from important theological truth in scripture has often been the pathway to theological liberalism. It has happened again, evangelism, aero-liberalism.

Not that evangelism is bad, evangelism is great, but unmoored from some important theological truth in scripture. That's what happened with Schleiermacher in the 18th century. Finney in the 19th century.

Pragmatism in the 20th century. In the middle of the last century, a missionary discovered what we've already had referred to, the homogeneous unit principle. That's the idea that like attracts like.

That is that if we will probably attract unchurched Harry and Mary or Saddleback Sam or Indian Brahmins by having people like them share the gospel with them, by having people that they can identify with, compose the congregation that we're inviting them to be a part of. One leading proponent of such ideas has written that, quote, studies have shown, studies have shown that people make a decision for Christ sooner when there is a group support. Oh, I would like to have that internal data.

Studies have shown, well, we don't even have time. Just take every one of those words apart. How do they know that it's sooner? How do they know that alternative reality? How do they know the human heart like that? All right, all right.

Studies have shown that people make a decision for Christ sooner when there is a group support. Or is that same bestselling book advocated, quote, this is what we want to do with the opening song. We use a bright, upbeat number that makes you want to tap your foot, clap or at least smile.

We want to loosen up the tense muscles of uptight visitors. When your body is relaxed, your attitude is less defensive. If you can reduce your visitors level of fear, they'll be far more receptive to the gospel.

End of quote. Of course, this kind of thinking will lead us to try to make the gospel relevant to very specific groups of people. So the same book says that the style of music you use in your service, quote, may be the most influential factor in determining who your church reaches for Christ and whether or not your church grows.

You must match your music to the kind of people God wants your church to reach. End of quote. But such evident relevance to non-Christians brings with it a host of questions.

So for one thing, shouldn't it be our lives more than simply our weekly meetings that provoke unbelievers interest? If we can gain people by lowering their defenses with music and lighting, then what happens when the atheists and the Mormons and the Muslims figure out that technique? Couldn't they do the same thing? Maybe they'll get even better at it than we are. Furthermore, wouldn't such methods really display the cleverness of the leaders of the church? It's more than the wisdom of God. I can understand some of this as an evangelistic strategy.

Let me explain. I mean, if I'm trying to reach a retirement community, I can understand retirees in that community being being useful, being helpful evangelists. I can understand using soccer players to reach soccer players.

But wouldn't we specifically not want to build a local congregation around a homogeneous unit for just the reasons that Beatty was telling us about so well last night? Wouldn't we specifically not want to do that? We read in Ephesians 2 that Paul seemed to have a very different idea. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away, Gentiles have been brought near through the blood of Christ. It seems that the overcoming of that ancient barrier drew attention to the profound power of the atoning death of Jesus Christ, that even our deepest separations could be overcome through Christ.

And while there were certainly unique things about the Jewish Gentile divide, it's not a perfect picture of just mere other earthly ethnicities that we're bringing up. But still, I think we see here that these worldly divisions that rend our churches, these divisions suggest that these divisions themselves are more powerful than the gospel of Jesus Christ. So if anything, what we want to espouse is not a homogeneous unit principle.

We want to espouse a heterogeneous unit principle. The heterogeneous unit principle is the principle of the church in the New Testament, because every earthly boundary overcome is a testimony of praise to the greatness of Jesus Christ and the gospel that he's accomplished. So while Paul certainly did tell the Corinthians that he became a Greek to the Greek or the Jew to the Jews in order to win people to Christ, it's interesting that earlier in this same letter, Paul explained to them how he refused to speak to them in a

manner that the Corinthians were accustomed to, in a manner that was culturally relevant.

Human eloquence and wisdom, because it seems that there were some methods which would themselves cause, well, as John was just saying to us, the message itself to be misunderstood. Perhaps they could even be said to contradict the message, the gospel that Paul would preach to them. Of course, we should contextualize the gospel and do only in the sense that, contextualize in the sense that we're preaching it here.

Okay, so I'm not preaching the gospel right now in Washington. I'm preaching the gospel in Louisville. If you want to call that contextualizing, well, here we are.

You know, you look at where we meet and how we sit at the language we speak, how we sing. We realize how different the externals are from some things we're doing to what they were doing in the book of Acts. And we should be always willing to follow Christ's example to lay aside our rights, our preferences in order to serve people with the gospel.

So we learn their language. We go to their country. We eat their food.

We wear their clothes insofar as we don't contradict God's revealed will in Scripture. But we do this all not for our own comforts, nor certainly for the comfort of the sinner in their sin. Any translation work we do should never soften the gospel.

Contextualization should never make the gospel more palatable to the sinner, more acceptable. In fact, one test that you can use very practical, my preacher friend, of whether or not a particular attempt at contextualization has been successful is to ask if it has made the offense of the gospel clearer. There's a test for appropriately reaching your audience.

The gospel is relevant to every sinner on earth. Our job is merely to present the gospel accurately, to work to make that already existing relevance obvious and clear. If merely human skill works to bring someone into our church, we can be sure that other greater human skill will be able to take them out of it.

We should reject any kind of relevance which actually sacrifices the very distinctness with which Scripture tells us we will give a life-saving witness to the gospel around those that we would reach. We would illustrate the gospel before them by our lives of Christlike love. Now, of course, we have stupid peculiarities, which may make us look like peculiar people that we don't have to have.

We shouldn't be encouraged in those. But we should have a distinction which bears witness to the very nature and truth of the gospel. As Jesus said in John 13, a new command I give you, love one another as I have loved you.

So you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. So Paul called Christians to shine in the midst of this very dark night.

The gospel's relevance appears precisely in our being distinct in this way. Don't try to improve the gospel by making it more relevant like this. You will end up losing it.

Preach the gospel we've received. A fourth appeal would be number four, make the gospel personal. Make the gospel personal.

The question here seems to be, are we saved alone? The issue is really one of our identity. Some people seem to understand the gospel only in reference to themselves as an individual with no idea of the local church. And that individualism that ignores the local church ends up distorting our discipleship and maybe even our gospel.

And this is true for everyone from Harold Camping to George Barna and beyond. After all, what is God about in Jesus Christ? Well, according to Ephesians 3, God's intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Friends, according to the Bible, our participation in a local congregation normally, speaking very carefully to pastors here, our participation in a local congregation normally validates or falsifies our claim to trust in Christ and his gospel.

What gospel allows you to think that you've accepted it if you don't in a committed and Christlike way love your brother? If you say you love God and you've not seen and don't love your brother whom you have seen, you lie. And the truth is not in you. Here's a question for you.

What does saving faith look like? Does the gospel save merely me and lead me to God? Or does it normally, again, the word normally, bring me to God through the fellowship of the local church? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, 13, that we were all baptized by one spirit into one body. God means us to serve him not only but fundamentally through the local church, where we are served by each other as God has designed, as Peter said, in the way that God has given gifts to be used in serving each other specifically. Friends, the reason you have your gifts is not for yourself or just for your friends.

It's for you to serve a local congregation. Read 1 Peter chapter 4. For many today, the Christian life is taken to be something that they get to choose to live out as they will with the people they want to love, just their family or just their golfing partners, maybe gathered around the radio or the Internet. I've no doubt that in some places around the world, such fellowship is the only kind of fellowship possible.

Given how oppressive and tyrannous some governments are, like the government of Burma right now, pray for change. But in many places around the world, we can do what New Testament Christians seem to do, which was to meet in as large a group as they could for encouragement like this. I think most Christians in America today only think of the gospel as saving them individually and completely neglect the functional congregation centeredness, which is supposed to mark our discipleship.

So many people today are presenting a gospel which tells us about Jesus, but then leaves us alone or only with a few friends. It's a personal gospel. It's something of a designer deity.

The idea is that the church is simply one of a number of means that Christian may choose to use in order to grow spiritually. I mean, if they find it helpful. You know, the choice of music or a Bible study to attend or a devotional book to read or or a retreat to go on or a conference to come to.

I mean, they go to this local church at nine for its its lively music. And then this one here at 1030 because there's a good young marriage ministry. They go to this one on Thursday evenings because of a mentoring relationship they have.

The idea that they should be fundamentally committed to one congregation and even submitted to the leadership there is as alien and foreign to them as eating locusts and how wild honey would be to most of

us. It's not even they so much oppose the idea. They've never simply heard it articulated.

It's never even crossed their minds. I mean, you pastors, you've met these people at the door after church on Sunday. You know, they they come out and and they tell you that their ministry is working with an AA group.

Or their ministry is campus crusade. Their friends ministry here is a Bible study in the jails. Your ministry is this local church here.

Many evangelicals today seem to assume that church is just the plural word for Christian. And therefore, they assume that the local church should do whatever the individual Christian should do. And from this lack of understanding of the church's unique responsibilities and privileges as the church confusion about the gospel comes.

A wrongly personalized gospel ends up with a wrongly personalized church. Everything the individual Christian should do is taken to be the task then of every church. But friend, that can't be true.

The church isn't supposed to be the husband, for example, of my wife. That's my job. The church teaches me about being a husband and they're in dereliction of duty if they don't teach me about that.

But I have to go and then apply these truths to the intricacies of my unique relationship with my wife and two different marriages can pursue that same biblical goal in differing ways. How I husband my wife should be guided by the Bible. At least the principles are and couldn't be said to be part of the gospel, though it is consistent with the gospels and reflects the gospel.

As Paul tells us in Ephesians five, we don't have to agree on everything about the Christian life in order to agree about the gospel. As this very conference shows. Being vague about the church can hurt our understanding of the gospel.

Do we know what God calls us together for in the local church? And one popular erroneous view, the church as the local church is understood to be a company of Christians, but with no unique responsibilities, whether it's a Bible study or a fellowship on a college campus or a regular gathering of Christian women in the neighborhood for prayer. Many today would consider any of these gatherings a church. But none of them are local churches.

Even two or three gathered in Jesus name are not necessarily a church. Such a group is not God's primary plan for displaying his church. God is displaying his church through local fellowships of Christians who give themselves to the preaching of the gospel, obedience to the statutes of Christ, including baptism in the Lord's supper, the recognition of elders, submission to them, defining the membership of the local church and thus, really the appearance of the gospel in the world.

Now, many groups of Christians do not intend to do any of those things. So they're not fulfilling the very purpose of the church. Such wrong ideas about the church often encourage wrong ideas of the gospel.

Antinomianism is encouraged where there are no people we have to love because we just love whoever we want to. And we already like even if we're in the flesh. And legalism is where there are unbiblical standards that are unchallenged by the regular preaching of God's word by recognized elders.

The audible gospel is intended to be displayed by the visible local church full of people who may have a little in common in worldly terms, except the gospel, they have that in common. The church is not supposed to do everything that's commanded of the individual Christian. Jesus founded the church and a local church is supposed to be a company of Christians joined together, meeting together for fellowship with Christ around his word and practicing his ordinances.

Such a church is intended to be integral part of the Christian's life and discipleship. It is not an optional extra. Our life is to be lived congregationally and not in a series of informal, but a formal relationships of commitment in which we are accountable to one another.

The local church is a glorious testimony to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is greater than the unity of its visible parts. A local church is not simply a collection of individual lights. It is a furnace that rages against the dark and that God uses to create more lights.

I love the way Jonathan Edwards presents the centrality of the church in God's plan in his sermon church's marriage to her son and to her God. Quote, the creation of the world seems to have been especially for this end that the eternal son of God might obtain a spouse towards whom he might fully exercise the infinite benevolence of his nature and to whom he might, as it were, open and pour forth all that immense fountain of condescension, love and grace that was in his heart and that in this way God might be glorified. Don't try to improve the gospel by decoupling it from the local church.

You'll end up losing it. Preach the gospel that we've received. Last try, we'll consider this morning's number five.

Make the gospel kinder. Make the gospel kinder. Here, the question is, why does God save us? And the issue is really God's purpose.

And many people have assumed that the ultimate purpose of the gospel is the greatest good for the greatest number of people. So it's long been a popular idea to assume that what God is about in the gospel is attempting to rescue the most people he can from hell. The idea is that God is a just and holy God and a loving and merciful God, and that his character is best expressed in providing salvation for sinners who will take it.

And the follow on from this is that we should do whatever we can to reach whomever we can. Of course, that part's true. We should do that.

But reaching is not seen as merely making sure they hear and understand the evangelistic gospel, but making sure that they accept the gospel. In light of this conclusion, all evangelistic efforts are subjected to evaluation according to how many people have heard and have made an immediate, visible, positive response. The ultimate purpose of God and the preaching of the gospel is the salvation of sinners, period.

This, it's thought, is a kinder gospel. But isn't this really a modification of what scripture teaches? I mean, could this formulation really owe more to 18th and 19th century philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill? Isn't this just a philosophy of utilitarianism in Christian garb? In some ways, this is the root problem of the other four that I've mentioned. We come up with such a man-centered edition of the gospel in order to make the gospel sound better to unbelieving non-Christian ears, in order to try to justify God before the bar of the unbelieving world.

And the results of such attempts litter the history of the church down into the present-day bookstores that are called Christian. Brothers, pragmatism is a greater danger for Bible-believing Christians than open theism will ever be. But there is a more God-centered gospel where God is chiefly understood not to be about the most sinners saved, but the most glory for himself.

Remember what Jesus said in John 3, 16? For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. What do you hear when you hear that very familiar verse? Do you hear about God? About how he has loved us? About what he has done? About who he has given? About his giving himself? About God himself being the object of our faith? The fruit of such a change of emphasis away from God toward us inevitably tends to distort creation as if it's all centered on human ability and human faithfulness. Here's what Paul said to the Thessalonian congregation that he had under God planted sometime earlier.

He got a good report of them and he wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1, What you running? No, wait. Paul never in any of his letters asked about their attendance numbers. You know, not once in the New Testament do we ever have that kind of question.

Here's what he said. He said, we always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers. We thank God.

We always thank God. We always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and father, your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Contrast this with what one pastor sent to his congregation three days after Easter last month. Quote, Dear church family, you did it again. By inviting your friends, we had a record Easter.

Most important of all, 1038 of your friends will be spending eternity in heaven because you cared enough to invite them to a service. And then at the end of that letter, what a church family we have. There wasn't much about God in the letter.

Friends, all that exists exists for God's pleasure. Scripture is clear. God is in all this for our salvation and even our glory.

As Paul says in first readings to seven, there's a sweet meditation, but also and more fundamentally to please himself, to demonstrate himself. He has a larger end in mind, the display of his character in his creation, the theater of his splendor. The fruit of God's spirit in us is meant to confirm us in our faith and to show us the truth and to show the truth to the non-Christians around us, even to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms.

Isn't this unimproved gospel, the gospel that we find in scripture rather than the gospel that we put there? In Romans nine, we read, What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath, prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory, even us whom he also called not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles? Our churches are all living demonstrations of God's character, of his justice and of his mercy. So Jesus said, all men will know you are my disciples if you love one another. We have his character stamped on us.

We're made in it. His spirit recreates us. That's why Paul said to the Philippians, Do everything without complaining or arguing so that you may become blameless and without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.

Have you ever noticed that this is why God does everything he does? So throughout the book of Ezekiel again and again, this is why the Lord says he does what he's done, so that we will know that he is the Lord. Or Exodus. Why did he have his people in slavery to Egypt? Because it was the great superpower of the time.

And God was going to make it clear that he was greater than even the greatest superpower of the time. That's why God does what he does to show the truth about who he is. So again, Ephesians 3, 10, God's intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Did you realize all this is going on in the gospel? God is about all of this. Friends, we should want to see people saved, definitely, and for their own good, but even more for God's glory. That the truth about our great creator and redeemer would be known the truth about our wonderful God.

Don't try to improve the gospel by making it appear kinder at first glance. If you do, you'll end up losing the gospel. Preach the gospel we've received.

So in all of this, am I being reductionistic? Well, it may seem so, but I mean to be zealous in recognizing the all sufficiency of Christ's work for us and our God given faith in that savior. And this gospel we've received is itself full and it lacks nothing. And to add to it is only to detract from it and from God's glory.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, I believe that God cares about issues of justice and so should we. But that's not the gospel. I think that we should think through the implications of scriptures teaching, but that's not the gospel.

I believe we must and will make culturally situated decisions about how we approach others with the message. But even those decisions are not the gospel. I believe that salvation fundamentally involves an individual decision, but a genuine response to the gospel will inevitably end up tying up our lives with others and normally in a local church.

I believe what the Holy Spirit said through Peter, that God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But that God in the gospel also has another concern to demonstrate his goodness and justice in both the cross of Christ and the damnation of sinners. So brothers guard the gospel again and again.

When Paul summarized the gospel, he talked of Christ's death and resurrection, sharing creation, fall, redemption, restoration is great as the cosmic flow of the Bible. It is good to know what God is about. But unless I'm a universalist, I may wonder what this means for me, particularly if I begin to know myself, as John was just telling us as a sinner against God, then what am I to do? If creation, fall, redemption, restoration were ever preached in the book of Acts, let's say without God, man, Christ response, how would anyone ever know that they were personally to repent and believe? Rising generation of ministers hear this call.

I don't know how much longer God is going to allow cause like this to be made. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not merely about temporary structures. It is about immortal beings made in God's image.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not merely about pressing issues of passing policy. It is about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross once for all time. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not merely about connecting with the questions the non-Christian has.

It is about communicating the answers God has made for us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not merely about me experiencing immediate joy with my friends. It is about my everlasting joy in God and what's more, God's pleasure and joy as he leads me even into the fellowship of a local church with people as sinful and as inconvenient to love as I am.

And the gospel of Jesus Christ is not merely about the number of saints saved. It is about the glory of God who would save anyone at all. Friends, my goal in all of this is extremely simple.

It is to encourage you to keep the gospel clear, free from distortions. Keep the gospel clear. Don't try to improve it.

Let's pray together. Lord, we pray that you would make your word clear to us. We pray that any errors that are in my speech or our minds would in your kind mercy be taken away and that you would truly help us to cherish that good news which you have brought to us at such great cost.

Lord, we thank you for the privilege of being under shepherds of the flock of Christ. Make us faithful and we will give you all the praise. In Jesus' name, amen.

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