

14 August 2016

Pioneer Training 2

Introduction

In the story of King David, there is an interesting episode about two messengers (2 Samuel 18:19-30). David's son, Absalom, had rebelled against David, taken Jerusalem, and divided the country. But now Absalom had been killed, and a messenger was to deliver the news to David. One man was appointed to go and immediately runs off for David. But a second messenger insists on going too, so he takes off as well. This second runner goes the way of the plains, which must be faster, because he overtakes the first runner, right as they near their destination. In fact, it is a very cinematic scene.

David is sitting in the gate of the city (Mahanaim) and a watchmen goes up to the top of the wall by the gate and sees at a great distance a runner coming into view. David says he must have news. But as he drew nearer and nearer, another runner appears suddenly and overtakes the first. This second runner arrives first and declares, "All is well." David asks about his son Absalom, but the messenger has no news. Just then the first runner arrives second. He says there has been victory, and David again asks about his son. This time the messenger states strongly, "May all the enemies of the King be like that young man." In other words, "He's dead and good riddance!" David is shattered to the core and weeps bitterly for his lost son.

We have in this story the two errors of messengers: understatement and overstatement. And both are grave errors. The first messenger exclaims all is well, but all is *not* well. David may have for a moment gotten his hopes up when he should not have. Then the second messenger overstates the news in a way that makes it overly harsh and insensitive.

Today we are not talking about David or even this story in particular, but we are talking about messengers and messages. For *we* are messengers and *we* carry the message of the Gospel. We want to be so careful with this message, and we would do well to remember these two errors and avoid them. We want to be faithful stewards of the message of the Gospel. However, in years past, God's people have not always done this well. They have often erred on one side or the other, understatement or overstatement.

Understatement has tended to be the error of the liberal. The liberal Christian says all is well. In the prophecy of Jeremiah, the Lord criticizes the leaders of Israel for understating the problem. He says, "**They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace**" (Jeremiah 8:11, ESV). In the New Testament, Paul confronts people who interpret the Gospel as license to do whatever they wish. In this case, the liberal Christian understates the destruction of sin *and* the power of the Gospel. They say "Grace, grace" and pooh-pooh sin when that's not what grace does.

Overstatement has tended to be the error of the legalist. The legalist Christian says more, more, more! Jesus criticized the religious leaders of his day because they were always binding up burdens (in the form of traditions and rules) on the backs of the people without a thought towards helping them. Paul confronted overstatement when he harshly criticized the Galatian believers for adding traditions to the Gospel. In fact, he said they went right past the Gospel and now had a different gospel.

And what happens when we veer one way or the other with the Gospel? Disaster. I read a story the other day of a man who was learning to fly. He was a missionary, and the official pilot for the mission agency would occasionally let him take the controls once in flight. This man so enjoyed the opportunity. It was great fun. But he kept inadvertently steering the plane a degree or two off. The pilot had to keep correcting, and until finally the pilot said, "Look buddy, you've got to understand that one degree off and we fly into the wrong country." It is the same way with the Gospel. We want to get it right. One degree off and the next generation is way off. One degree off and we find ourselves somewhere we weren't meant to be.

So, in the next few minutes, I am going to be extremely tedious about the Gospel, but this is why. Because it is a big deal and we want to make sure we are all starting off in the right direction together.

So what is the Gospel?

The Gospel

The Gospel is the good news about Jesus. In a moment, I will talk more about what that good news actually is, but for now, be sure to notice the word "news" here. It is not good advice. It is not good instructions. It is not good philosophy. It is good news, good news about Jesus. It is good news about what Jesus has done. This is a critical point. News is word about something that has been done.

Consider the difference. Let's say we are in another global war. Good advice about the army: You should join the army. How do you receive that? "Uh, ok. Maybe I will." Good instructions about the army: To join the army, visit the recruiters office and sign up. Response? "Uh, ok." Good philosophy about the army: War is an extension of policy and the army is an extension of the state. Response? "Why are you telling me this?" Good news about the army: *They broke through! They're storming the headquarters now. It's over!* Response? "Hallelujah! I'm gonna live! I'm getting married! We're gonna have a family!" And the confetti flies and shouts go up and dancing commences. Do you see the difference? The Gospel is good news, and we must be careful to share it first and foremost as that: good news. Not good advice. Not good instructions. Not good philosophy.

I know this seems like an obvious point, but surprisingly, we often miss this. We say, "Welcome to church! You should read your Bible." That's true but that's not the good news. Or, we say, "Welcome to church! To have a better marriage...communicate, don't stop dating each other..."

That's true but that's not the good news. Or, we say, "Welcome to church! Infralapsarianism is the doctrine that God, in the logic of his mind, decreed the plan redemption after the fall." Hear me. All of these examples are important aspects of church life, but to broken and dying people in need of a savior, a rescue, none of these messages are good news! And none are of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). We *will* philosophize and advise and instruct, but we must never do so at the expense of the Gospel. The New Testament writers all instruct and advise and theologize and command and exhort, but always from the starting point of the Gospel. And if we get it backwards, the Gospel gets buried, and people won't hear the good news (and neither will they hear our advice and instructions as good news). So, the Gospel is good news about Jesus, what *He* has done.

So, what is this good news about Jesus exactly? The answer is actually quite big. In fact, Paul speaks of the "[unsearchable riches of Christ](#)" (Ephesians 3:8).

The Atomic Gospel

At this point, it might be helpful to compare the Gospel to an atom. In some ways, an atom is very small and basic. But, of course, in other ways, atoms are amazingly complex, mysterious, wonderful, and powerful. The Gospel is similar. The Gospel is simple to understand. (We can present it in a minute or two.) But in other ways, the Gospel is endlessly vast and awesome.

So how do we capture both its simplicity and grandeur? To capture this tension, I believe it is helpful to think along a few different lines when we think about the Gospel. (I will explain why this approach is so important in a minute.) Let me suggest six facets to consider: Gospel History, Gospel Impact, Gospel Response, Gospel Theology, Gospel Testimonies, and Gospel Presentations. These are not exactly discreet categories, but these are major beachheads.

- **Gospel History** is the story about the Messiah, and this story can be big or small. How big? Mark calls his book the "Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). How big? Jesus walks with some disciples on the road to Emmaus and takes them through the whole Old Testament (Luke 24:27). How big? When Steven preaches the Gospel, he starts in Mesopotamia and the calling of Abraham and works his way up through Moses and then up through the time of the Kings (Acts 7). But Gospel history can also be small. Paul says, "[\[3\] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, \[4\] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, \[5\] and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. \[6\] Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep](#)" (1 Corinthians 15:3-6, ESV). By the way, I would say this is the best summary of the Gospel. It includes the story of God. It includes the idea of substitution. It includes the death *and* resurrection work of Jesus.
- **Gospel Impact** refers to the results of the Gospel story both now and in the future. So, we can talk about here-and-now realities like forgiveness, restored fellowship with God,

receiving of the Holy Spirit, personal transformation, and the coming of the Kingdom through good works and the formation of the church. This is all good news! We can also talk about future impact, things like resurrection, sinlessness, eternal life, and a new heavens and a new earth. This too is all good news!

- **Gospel Response.** When we talk about sharing the Gospel we are not all the way there if we do not communicate the proper response. It is not enough to know the Gospel; one must, in some sense, activate it for themselves. So when we speak of Gospel Response, we are speaking of the need for repentance and belief (and baptism...which is church membership and public declaration). Paul said, “[20]...I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, [21] testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20-21, ESV). The category of Gospel response also underscores the reality of sin and judgment, that we don’t just witness the Gospel but must, in view of God’s judgment, submit to the conquering hero of the good news.
- **Gospel Theology** is a look at the Gospel in all its various working parts. This is what Paul is doing in Romans. He’s explaining *how* the Gospel worked. So he explains how it could be that all are guilty. He explains that Jesus was the second Adam, a second Israel. He talks about how God’s sovereignty could jibe with the guilt of man. He discusses justification, how it is that man could be declared righteous by faith.
- **Gospel Testimonies** are where we see the gospel intersect everyday lives. And we often see these testimonies interwoven with the Gospel generally in the New Testament. Peter says he is just speaking what he’s seen and heard (Acts 4); he’s telling the story, but it’s also just a part of his life. Paul’s ministry and gospel explanation is very much anchored in his testimony. Notice, that even the short summary of the Gospel from 1 Corinthians 15 we see a word of testimony when Paul lists himself among the witnesses and exclaims, “**But by the grace of God I am what I am...**” (1 Corinthians 15:10).
- **Gospel Presentations** are simple expressions of endless riches. The Gospel contains unsearchable riches, but we must start our search somewhere. Gospel presentations provide that somewhere. They are very helpful to give context and the basics in a short amount of time. They are typically situational and therefore vary widely. Gospel presentations can vary based on culture, relationship, intellectual capacity, timing, and so forth. So, we have the four spiritual laws, the way of the master, and two ways to live. We have Peter and Steven giving extensive histories to Israelites and defending that the Messiah should suffer. We have Paul in Athens starting with creator God and moving towards judgment and the need for Jesus. We have Peter saying that the good conduct of wives may have an evangelistic effect. We are told marriage images the Gospel. We are told baptism does. We are told the Lord’s supper has a piece to it. Many times the presentations differ in what point of need they start with and what corresponding Gospel Impact they present.

Now, at this point, you may be frustrated. You're perhaps thinking, "Why does this matter? Why did you have to take something so simple and make it so complicated?"

Why it matters

Because if we fail to see the whole picture, if we're just a degree off, we will end up in the wrong country.

- **No Gospel History?** You'll fail to accurately chart its trajectory. You'll end up with a salvation in the clouds. You'll end up with an individualized Christianity that only cares about personal salvation. You'll make Jesus a disembodied idea, detached from time and place. (And believe me, this has happened; see the liberal theologians of the 19th and 20th Centuries.)
- **No Gospel Impact?** You'll end up with small joy because forgiveness isn't the end game; it's only the beginning. You'll end up with people with fire insurance but no transformed lives. You'll end up with people who know to ask forgiveness and get saved again, but don't know how to live new lives, filled with hope and power and holiness.
- **No Gospel Response?** You get a movement and a kingdom but no one move towards conversion, the very thing Jesus tells us in John three that we need. And eventually, you get a church of unbelievers, led by unconverted pastors. (It happens!)
- **No Gospel Theology?** You miss the unsearchable riches that are in Christ. You miss glory. You fail to unpack the brilliance of the Gospel. You also make room for other mistakes to develop. For example, if you don't understand what Paul is saying about justification by faith, our proper Gospel Response becomes unmoored and before you know it, we've muddied the waters with works.
- **No Gospel Testimonies?** You get an impersonal Gospel. You get an otherworldly Gospel. You get charges of hypocrisy. You undermine the Gospel by contradicting the Gospel with your life.
- **No Gospel Presentations?** You fail to translate the Gospel into new cultures and time periods. You get people who love to theologize and meditate on the mystery but neglect to share the plain message of salvation that is for all the people.

Conclusion

As we wrap up this morning, I hope you see that the Gospel is amazingly big and amazingly good news. I hope you better understand why we pursue the **Gospel in Everything**. We do this because the Gospel is endless in its power and application. The amazing good news is that since the Garden of Eden God has been working to rescue this world, and he won the battle in Jesus, and now everything is different for those who believe.

But I don't want to leave you there (as good as that may be). This is supposed to be training, and I do want to get practical. So, I would like to give you some homework relating to the last couple of points: Gospel Testimonies and Gospel Presentations.

First, **Gospel presentations**. We have several resources to share with you. I will post these on our website Monday. There are several Gospel presentations you can watch and begin to internalize them. There are also a couple of smartphone apps that help you walk through presentations right on your smartphone. Take some time in the next week or two to consider these presentations. I think they all have some merit and can be very helpful depending on the circumstance.

Second, **Gospel testimonies**. I want you to think about your story. What is it? Where and when did it start? Who were the key players? How many chapters are in it? What is the latest chapter? How were you saved? What was the moment? And how are you *being* saved? What are the current significant moments? You have a story. Are you ready to share it? Take some time this week to write your story (either in your mind or on paper).

And may we be ready, at all times, with the Gospel for the good of a lost and dying world so desperately in need of it.