

The Goal of the Gospel

Jesus left very clear instructions with the eleven: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.*" (**Matthew 28:19-20**) He was certainly very definite. The result of declaring the good news of Jesus is intended to be that men and women become disciples, baptised and obedient, who follow him and learn from him.

Recently, I heard a very strange interpretation of these verses. The suggestion was that Jesus was telling the eleven to teach *all the nations* to observe all that he commanded! Was he telling the apostles to baptise all the nations as well? . . . !

This may be an extreme example, but it betrays an approach that is surprisingly common among Christians - that we expect the rest of the world around us to conform to the teachings of Jesus! It shows itself when we bemoan 'the lack of Christian standards in society' and regret the disappearance of Christianity from the school curriculum.

We often judge the success of the gospel by the transformation of society or the degree to which Christians are listened to in this nation or any other. We see very little and get discouraged.

True, Jesus spoke about believers being the 'salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world' (**Matthew 5:13-16**), but not as we often think about it. 'Salt', he said, was either salty or not and, if not, it was not really salt. Similarly, light either shone or it didn't. Light under a basket is not being light at all. He was not talking about subtly Christianising society but about showing it up!

His message was uncomfortable then, and it still is. He spoke of the gospel bringing discord in families, some for him, others against (**Matthew 10:34-36, Luke 12:51-53**). Where is our comfortable theory that all the children of believers will be saved?

But, if God doesn't plan to Christianise the world, what is his purpose?

In **1 Peter 2:4-12**, Peter gives a clear picture of what God is doing. (It runs all through Paul's letters, too.) He is calling and selecting special people to be his own nation, to serve him like priests, to be joined together like stones in a building, to be his very own. Those who are disobedient to the truth miss out on all this. But if they see believers' lives

are consistent, they may even have to acknowledge and glorify God when Jesus returns, even though they themselves miss God's purpose.

Judgement is like that. It is as if a strong light shows up everything for what it already is, and everyone as they already are. That is what it will be like when Jesus returns in 'the day of visitation'.

The New Testament makes it clear that there is only one sort of person who will be able to stand in that light - those who have *already* passed through the judgement process, transferred out of death into life (**John 5:24**).

Paul says the same in **Romans 8:1-4**. The only way that we can escape the condemnation we deserve is by the fact that it has been put on Jesus. Because he took the physical penalty for my sin, and I am joined to him, effectively I have passed through that judgement process and am free to serve God acceptably in the Spirit. Also, every time I need to receive God's forgiveness again, I have to acknowledge that I have been freed because Jesus took the condemnation - judgement is past!

See what Jesus had to say about light and judgement in **John 3:16-21**.

So, what is God doing? He is selecting and dealing with people who can stand before him without fear (only by his grace!) and building them together to share the glory of his Son. Those who are joined to Jesus have this new life, those who are separate from him do not (**1 John 5:11-12**). All of his plan has always had this one goal, to bring 'many sons to glory' (**Hebrews 2:10**).

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Just as there are only relatively few *people* who come through judgement, so it is with *things*. This time the judgement is not by light, but by fire!

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 is so often misunderstood as if it were dealing with the judgement of our lives. This is not about the good or evil that we have done, it is about the things we have built, the things we have poured our efforts into - will they survive God's judgement?

Sadly, much is not even built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. 'Churches' and other 'Christian work' are often started with no foundation of a real work of God's grace in lives. But it is also possible to build on a very solid foundation but build with materials which do not pass God's test.

What is the difference between 'gold, silver and precious stones' and 'wood, hay and stubble', apart from the obvious fact that the last three are

easy to burn? You cannot manufacture minerals, you have to find them. They were formed in the fierce heat of creation and, if you want them, you need to search for them. The fact that they are hard to find increases their value. All right, you cannot 'manufacture' wood, hay or stubble, but you can certainly produce them with a little work and time spent.

Wood takes many years to grow, hay takes a summer season and stubble is just the leftovers when another task is finished. They are all 'renewable resources', produced by natural life processes which man can influence or control.

Can we see the parallels? We may labour for years or just for a season, or maybe even try to serve God with leftovers, but the result is the same if the resources are from our own control. Paul was writing in the context of men starting their own groups, attaching man's names to 'churches', trying to get people to belong to one group or another. Does any of that sound familiar?

None of our own schemes will survive the judgement of fire. Only what the Lord has created can come through it - formed by fire, so untouched by its heat. These things, too, have already passed through his testing judgement and are fit to be used.

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So, what stands on the other side of the judgement of fire? What are the 'gold, silver and precious stones' that we can use to build on the foundation of new life in the Lord Jesus Christ?

The clear answer is 'spiritual growth'. Although the writers of the New Testament have much to say about practical life in the world and the implications of following Jesus, they are unashamed to say that the source is always the growing new life of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer and in the corporate life of the church. And that is the church by *the Lord's* definition, not *ours*!

So, what are we building? Have we seen that, however well we may appear to do, if we are not building with God-made materials then we are wasting our efforts? *"Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labours; for he gives to his beloved even in his sleep"* (**Psalm 127:1-2**).

Perhaps we have accepted a formula to define 'spiritual growth' and reckon that, if someone is reading their Bible, praying daily and coming along to a good number of meetings, they *must* be growing in the Lord!

As one who has done all that, I know that is not necessarily so. Paul knew it too. He knew that the Lord Jesus had taken hold of him for a purpose, and was determined to explore every detail of that purpose, and the provision that the Lord gave him for it (***Philippians 3*** - whole chapter).

The first thing we need to make sure of is that we are in right relationship with the Lord and our fellow-believers. It is no use seeking to build with God if we are carrying unconfessed sin and resentment. **1 John 1:5-10** needs to be working out in practice in our lives.

Have we seen what the Lord has already done and wants to achieve in the church? Prayerful reading of ***Ephesians*** is a recommended starting point. As well as using the pictures of the human body and a building (***Ephesians 4:4-16, 2:19-22***, compare **1 Peter 2:4,5,9,10**), Paul says that the church is the bride for the Lord Jesus Christ (***Ephesians 5:25-27***).

This is what God is doing, this is his master plan, to prepare the church to be the bride. **He is only doing one thing - building the Church.** Jesus had the same focus as he spoke with his Father in ***John 17***. (See **v.9** especially.)

We don't need to be 'someone special' to contribute to the preparation of the bride for Jesus. As we learn to function properly in the 'body' of the church, we too are part of the building process - see ***Ephesians 4:14-16***.

And the ultimate result? A world transformed, not by the ingenuity of man but by the power of God working with very ordinary people. A world set free from its ancient slavery to sin. Creation released to share in the 'freedom of the glory of the children of God' (***Romans 8:18-25***).

(See also ***Revelation 11:15*** and ***21:1-4***, and ***Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, 18, 21-22, 27***)

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Truth demands action. If we have begun to see something fresh from the Lord about how we fit into his plan, there will certainly be some positive action that we need to take. It may involve talking with others or taking some clear step in our personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. Let's make sure we respond to his voice!

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