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The Gospel and Ethics

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I Introduction

Why do evangelicals draw such a sharp distinction between faith as *cognition* and faith as *a way of life*? Given our Lord's teaching, example, and depictions of the final judgment, it is appropriate to begin with the reminder that the New Testament was written *by* disciples *for* disciples whose primary commission was to *make* disciples wherever they went in the world. This stands in marked contrast to modern evangelical stress on proselytizing and church planting, with expansion of a particular theological franchise as the goal.

1 What do we mean by the *Whole Gospel* as distinct from the Gospel?

The 'gospel' means that salvation *is always and has always been* a free gift, offered by our loving creator to all persons, regardless of the culture-specific social and religious conditioning that comes with all human survival beyond

birth—whose faith is '*credited to them as righteousness*' (Rom. 4; Heb. 11-12). That is very good news! But the qualifying adjective '*whole*' implies that there is such a thing as a '*partial*' gospel, a gospel that is somehow diminished, distorted, or compromised, and perhaps therefore fatally delusional.

Since the word *evangelion* or its derivatives (translated 'gospel' or 'good news' in the *NIV*) occurs at least 117 times in the New Testament; and since evangelism is at the very core of the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization, it is appropriate that our understanding of the term, as evidenced in our evangelical practices, be revisited against the standard of Scripture, and in particular our Lord's own teaching.

Jesus did not invite people to believe in the New Testament or to become Christians. Jesus himself was not a 'Christian'. He invited men and women to learn from him, to follow him, and to acknowledge him as Lord. There is no gospel apart from Jesus Christ. And our gospel is not only about *who Jesus was* and *what he did*, but about *what he says* and *where he leads*. Someone who does not follow Jesus cannot be said to be his disciple in any New Testament

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sense of that term. It is discipleship that we are called to live and proclaim.¹ Jesus proclaimed 'good news', but because appropriation of this good news was contingent upon *following* him, *learning* from him, *obeying* him, and *living and dying* with him, it was deemed by many of his contemporaries to be *bad* news.

2 What do we mean by *ethics*?

'Ethics' means, most simply, human behaviour in relation to persons, peoples, and all things, including creation. According to the online version of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, ethics is all about ultimate value and how human actions can be judged right or wrong.²

It is not the purpose of this paper to go into the theology of ethics. It is enough to point out that if ethical content were to be stripped from our scriptures, there would be almost nothing left. We live out our lives in a *moral* universe, created by God. In Christ, God showed and taught his people how to live in his universe. The history of God's chosen people, both Abrahamic and New Covenant, is an epic saga that begins with creation and culminates in the final judgment. Biblical ethics involves both restraint from personal evil and active pursuit of the neighbour's good, even if that neighbour is an enemy.

II What is the relationship between the *gospel* and *ethics*?

In answering this question, Scripture is best left to speak for itself. If one were to remove the ethical content from the New Testament, whatever remained would be undecipherable or meaningless. As Jesus himself said, '*Whoever serves me must follow me; and wherever I am, my servant also will be*' (Jn. 12:26). '*He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him....*' (Heb. 5:9); '*...the Holy Spirit... God has given to those who obey him*' (Acts 5:32). '*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come*' (2 Cor. 5:17).

1 Gospel and ethics—Jesus

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew

1 See Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), especially ch. 1, 'Discipleship: For Super Christians Only?' (3-17), and ch. 2, 'Who Is Your Teacher?' (18-31).

2 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9106054>> accessed on 22 January 2008.

you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Mt. 7:15-23).

In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), Jesus explains what was intended by the Law (5:17-7:6), concluding his exposition by cautioning listeners to distinguish between *two roads, two kinds of trees, and two kinds of builders*. In the case of the roads, not comfort along the way, but destination, is everything; in the case of the two trees, the one that produces fruit is the good tree; in the case of the two builders, it is the one who goes down to bedrock whose house stands. In each of these examples, Jesus references obedience to what he has taught—ethical behaviour in one's relationship to people, things, and circumstances—as the way, the fruit, and the foundation. As his cousin so tactlessly reminded the esteemed religious leaders of the time—calling them a '*brood of vipers*'—escape from the coming wrath necessarily requires '*fruit in keeping with repentance*' (Mt. 3:7-8). Far from being inimical to the gospel, genuine repentance, evidenced by ethical behaviour, is at its very core.

Jesus frequently warned religious insiders whose flawless social standing and impeccable religious credentials were thought to give them the inside track with God that if these were the primary basis of their presumed good standing before God, they were profoundly deluded. He would go on to comment with strong approval on the faith of persons whose sole qualification was behaviour (Mt. 8:10-12).

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel

with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mt. 8:10-12).

Only those who did God's will could actually be said to have appropriated the good news of peace with God. It was the doing of his will that constituted irrefutable proof of family-of-God affinity.

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you'. He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Mt. 12:46-50).

In the story of Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10), it was not until the tax collector had actually repented—giving half of his possessions to the poor and repaying fourfold those whom he had cheated—that Jesus said, '*Today salvation has come to this house...*'. Welcoming Jesus as his guest was only the first step of the genuine repentance that ensued, and it was his repentance that elicited from Jesus his reassuring words about salvation.

In the sobering account of the final judgment (Mt. 25:31-46), the Son of

Man reminds his listeners that for a thirsty person the good news is a cup of water; for a prisoner it is social communion; for a stranger it is a warm welcome into the bosom of one's own family. The gospel is not merely a speech about Jesus, but a practical personal response, however inconvenient, to concrete need.

While words may well come later, they are not an adequate response when it is within one's power to do more than talk. Jesus clearly demonstrated this pattern by stopping to pay attention to the socially utterly insignificant men and women who constantly 'interrupted' his ministry—the lepers, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the sick, and the social outcasts. 'What do you want me to do for you?' (eg, Mk. 10:51; Lk. 18:35ff), he would ask. If there were those who could not speak for themselves, Jesus would respond to requests on their behalf.³ In all of these and other instances, perhaps never more poignantly than in his story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25ff), Jesus showed what it means to do good to another person simply because one has the power to do it (Jas. 4:17). This is a profoundly ethical dimension of the true gospel.

2 Gospel and ethics—Paul

Paul's teaching is consistent with that of Jesus. He begins Romans by speaking of *'the obedience that comes from faith'* (Rom. 1:5) and concludes by

insisting that his gospel *'and the proclamation of Jesus Christ... [is] now revealed... so that all nations might believe and obey him...'* (Rom. 16:26).

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Tit. 2:11-14).

Paul—so often misused to support the notion that there can be spiritual regeneration without any evidence of new life in Christ—leaves no doubt about what he means by the gospel. Conversion is to Jesus, and discipleship is a lifelong, essential part of what it means to follow him. *Pressing on* is an indispensable element of Paul's understanding of discipleship, and anyone who is not a disciple of Jesus may not in any gospel sense of the word be said to be a follower of Jesus. The good news is that *'ours is a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith"'* (Rom. 1:17). It is this that unites those who are his from the beginning to the end of the human story. Righteous men and women *live* by faith. They don't simply talk about it, or use it as a kind of magical key to heaven or as a handy fire escape from hell. Faith is a way of living. Paul's passionately reasoned argument in Romans 8 reinforces the point that those who belong to Christ

³ eg, Mk. 1:29ff; 2:1ff; 5:22ff; 7:24ff; 8:22; 9:17ff; 10:13ff; Lk. 4:31ff; 4:38ff; 5:12ff; 5:17ff; 6:6ff; 7:11ff; 8:26ff; 8:40ff; 9:37ff; 13:10ff.

live as followers of Christ:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom. 8:5-14).

In Romans 2:1-16, Paul returns to the argument that he raised earlier in his discourse on God's righteous judgment. He makes it clear that God cannot be fooled by a religious or racial pedigree. It is behaviour based on

knowledge—obedience to what has been revealed—that marks his true children, whatever their religious label.

Righteousness never comes apart from God, Paul continues in the next chapter:

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law (Rom. 3:22-31).

The freedom that is found in Christ Jesus is the freedom to follow him, to be on intimate terms with God, to escape the tiny, dark dungeons of our sinful egos, and to be transformed by

the renewing of our minds so that we can *'test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will'* (Rom. 12:2). In Romans 12, following his outpouring of praise for the breadth and width and depth of God's mercy and grace to those outside the Abrahamic bloodline, Paul goes on to press the logic of what he has just said, urging his readers to worship God through the offering up of their bodies as living sacrifices. This sacrifice, it is clear, is not merely some kind of mental assent to correct doctrinal formulations! Paul says that the life-sacrifice he is talking about entails giving up one's precious conformity to 'the world'; that is, to the social, moral, and political conventions and expectations peculiar to the society that creates, defines, recognizes and legitimates who we are.

Christ's followers become strangers in their own cultures, not because they forget the language and complex social syntax that provide the unique meaning, cohesion and sense of place for every human being, but because their behaviour as followers of Jesus increasingly mirrors their Lord's will. As 'dearly loved children', they 'imitate God' in living lives of love (Eph. 5:1-2). Paul makes by clear practical implications for everyday life what he intends his readers to understand by this:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people

who are in need. Practise hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head'. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:9-21).

Paul returns to these ethical themes repeatedly in his other letters. Whether it be their treatment of spouse, children, slaves, the weak, the poor, the sick, the ordinary, or the enemy, those who have welcomed the gospel with open hearts and minds have turned around and embarked on a lifelong ultimate metamorphosis into Christ-likeness. Being *'alive in Christ'* has direct ethical consequences, as far as Paul is concerned, including living as children of light (Eph. 4), and imitating God in the most practical, everyday ways imaginable (Eph. 5-6). In his letter to the Philippians, similarly, Paul stresses the ethical outcome of imitating the humility of Christ (Phil. 2-4).

Believers in Colossae, too, were

reminded of the ethical import of the gospel. After a stirring call to freedom from the self-justifying but stultifying rules and regulations to which all religions, including Christianity, are so naturally inclined, Paul goes on to insist in Colossians 3:5-17 that because we are free in Christ, we, as the chosen people of God, should set our hearts on things above and put to death the earthly nature, all in the name of the Lord Jesus.

As Paul personally demonstrated and tirelessly taught, the good news that is in Christ Jesus is by no means incompatible with *'press[ing] on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [us]'* (Phil. 3:14).

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their

god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:12-21).

The freedom that we have in Christ is not simply an invitation to 'invite Jesus into our hearts', and then get on with our lives as though what he says is either irrelevant or too impractical to bother with. It is through the training of our minds that we become like Christ, and enter into the freedom of our Lord. Like anything else that is worthwhile—mastering an instrument, an academic discipline, a new language, a technical science, or an artistic skill—the transformation that takes place when we follow Jesus is not sudden, but gradual, requiring a lifetime of joyful effort to master and sustain. Paul could press on with all his might (Phil. 3 above), and yet be supremely free.

3 Gospel and ethics—other NT writers

The apostle John insists, *'If you know that he is righteous, [then] you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him'* (1 Jn. 2:29). He goes on to warn, in ways strikingly reminiscent of Jesus, that there would be leaders who would attempt to lead us astray on this very point:

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you

know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him (1 Jn. 2:28-3:24).

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother (1 Jn. 3:4-10).

As shocking as these words might seem to the soothing advocates of cheap grace, John is still not finished. He goes on to suggest that any biblical doctrine of eternal security is inseparable from following Jesus and doing what he says:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at

rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 Jn. 3:16-24).

The author of Hebrews, likewise, insists that God's people are those who do what God tells them to do. '*So do not throw away your confidence*', the author says; '*it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.... My righteous one*', the writer continues, '*will live by faith* [emphasis mine]. *And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved*' (Heb. 10:35-39).

What follows in chapter 11 illustrates the author's argument: 'By faith Abel offered.... Noah... built an ark.... Abraham... obeyed and went.... Abraham... offered Isaac as a sacrifice.... Isaac blessed Jacob.... Jacob... blessed each of Joseph's sons.... Moses' parent hid him.... Moses... refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter [and] chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He

regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.... By faith he left Egypt... persevered... [and] kept the Passover.... By faith the people passed through the Red Sea.... Rahab...welcomed the spies....' And so on.

It is significant that not a single one of these had ever heard of Jesus, and yet Moses is described as '*regarding disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward....*' (Heb. 11:26). In all instances, the stress is not on any refined theological system that provided believers with the correct names, relative proportions and properties of the Godhead, but obedience in everyday life.

It is not farfetched to conjecture that James was, of all of the New Testament authors, among those most intimately and deeply influenced by Jesus; after all, he was his elder brother. It is little wonder that his teaching is so reminiscent of Jesus' words in the Gospels. Not surprisingly, when it comes to the relationship between the gospel and ethics, he is as adamant as was Jesus himself. '*Faith without deeds is dead*', he famously concluded, at the end of a blistering expose of false faith that included the tart reminder that in the depth, breadth and orthodoxy of their theology, the demons are unparalleled (Jas. 2:26, 19).

III Gospel-Ethics dichotomy

How can it be that in churches around the world the Nicene Creed or its equivalent is recited regularly and repeatedly, while no recurring allusion is

made to the Sermon on the Mount, the core of our Lord's teaching? How could men and women be sent into exile, thrown into prison, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake or otherwise subjected to agonizing deaths simply for holding doctrinal opinions at variance with those preferred in the centres of power?

Similarly, how could 'Christians' be characterized chiefly by insatiable greed for the gold and silver of others, by murder, genocide, and the theft of entire continents in the name of Christ in pursuit of that idolatrous obsession? And how could it be that all this was carried out at the behest and with the hearty blessing of 'Christian' leaders? How did it come about that those who identified themselves as Christians could devote such prodigious thought to who Jesus *was* in the Godhead, reverencing him in the Eucharist, and yet give such scarce heed to what he actually *said* they should do? How has it become customary for evangelicals to say 'Lord, Lord' and ignore the Lord's will for the everyday lives of his followers (Mt. 7:21)?

Finding answers to such questions requires revisiting the prolonged debates characterizing the first five centuries of the Christian faith.⁴ As

4 I addressed this in my earlier article, 'Following Jesus in Contexts of Power and Violence' in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Oct. 2007), 342-357. For an overview of this critical period in the history of Christianity, two of Ramsay MacMullen's books are helpful: *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), and *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Peter Brown points out in his admirable biography of Augustine of Hippo, fierce debates characterized Christianity in the eras preceding and following the sack of Rome. These debates were won, not by argument alone but by legal compulsion and force of arms. Each of the protagonists—Augustine, Donatus, Pelagius and Julian—was able to muster strong biblical arguments in support of their particular views. But in the end, military power rather than theology assured an outcome favourable to Augustine.

The church's collaboration with political and military power necessitated a hermeneutic that gave central place to sacraments, canon, and doctrine. While there continued to be a strong emphasis on the salvific work of Jesus, his distinctive ethical teaching was ignored, marginalized or contradicted. Much of his teaching was relegated to the realm of the sweet by and by, or else selectively applied to personal ethics, permissible only insofar as their practice did not contravene or undermine the state. Since what Jesus advocated and modelled for his followers was rightly regarded as impractical for the maintenance, protection and expansion of civil society through violence, the category 'Christian' came to serve primarily as an indicator of assent to correct doctrinal formulations.

It is lamentable that in the prolonged and often unseemly process, much—including ethical integrity—was lost to the church. Swept away were biblical emphases on the fruit of the Spirit, on the purity of Christ's bride (the church), and on the idea of a sojourning community of pilgrims and strangers following the Lord through alien territory. Eliminated was the idea

that Christians, including non-clergy, should make growth in Christ-likeness the primary goal in life.

The idea that Christian life entailed more than compliance with sacramental requirements largely disappeared until the Reformation and Radical Reformation a full millennium later. Personal, voluntary faith in God through Jesus Christ was displaced by a coercive system that obliged everyone to be a member of the church. Admission standards were minimal. Ethics meant little more than compliance with the laws of the dominant state, however unjust. With Charlemagne's ascent to power several centuries later, Christendom emerged full-blown, infusing the West's self-perception in its violent rise to global economic and military hegemony.

It is within the cocoon of Christendom orthodoxies that the theological assumptions and formulations of the missionary movement from the West were gestated. Much of what we now associate with the category 'Christian' derives from well-intentioned, highly ingenious use of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures to legitimate, facilitate and sustain political and military power, on the one hand, and from the privileges concomitant with their accommodation to secular power. The result was a deeply compromised Christianity that has sadly born closer resemblance to the powers of this dark world than to the one in whose name wars, genocides, robberies, pillage, torture, and the evangelization of all of the world's continents by European peoples has been blessed.

Our evangelical doctrines explaining the processes that trigger God's salvific grace and mercy rely far more

on Christendom thought than on what Jesus himself taught. Today, as a result, evangelical thought and behaviour are often jarringly inconsistent with what Jesus himself lived and taught. That is why it is possible for evangelical believers to speak of 'the gospel' and 'ethics' as though they were separable. Dallas Willard is right when he observes that many professed Christians practise '*vampire Christianity*'. A vampire Christian says to Jesus, in effect: 'I'd like a little of your blood, but I don't care to be your student.... In fact, won't you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I'll see you in heaven'.⁵

IV Implications for evangelism

Since the Lausanne Movement is about evangelization, I will suggest the most fundamental implication that occurs to me. Christ's followers are not called to plant churches, and they are not commissioned to win converts. Christ's followers have been commissioned to *make disciples* wherever they are in the world, according to what is commonly referred to as the 'Great Commission' found in Matthew 28:19-20.⁶

Discipleship is not simply an option for Jesus' followers. The word '*disciple*' occurs 269 times in the New Testament, while the word 'Christian' occurs only three times—as a designation for the disciples of Jesus who could no longer be regarded as simply another Jewish sect (Acts 11:26). One is either a follower of Jesus, or one is not a follower of Jesus. In the words of Dallas Willard:

[T]he kind of life that we see in the earliest church is that of a special type of person. All of the assurances and benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian—especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. He or she stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God.⁷

Discipleship is an integral part of what it means to be a Christian. And discipleship means ethics. There can be no Christian conversion without ethical repentance and a life of steady transformation, until we are like him when we see him face to face. There is nothing in the teaching of Jesus that suggests the option of enjoying forgiveness at Jesus' expense, and then having nothing more to do with him. There is nothing in our scriptures to suggest that the *belief* of faith and the *life* of faith are two different things—the first compulsory and the second optional.

5 Willard, *The Great Omission*, 14.

6 In reference to the Greek text, Christopher J. H. Wright points out that 'go' is not an imperative but 'a participle of attendant circumstances' whereas the imperative is to 'make disciples'. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 35. What would the evangelical missionary movement and its ecclesiastical offspring have been like if the King James Version had properly translated this text?

7 Willard, *The Great Omission*, 3.

V Biblical understanding of the gospel and ethics

1 For nominal Christians

Given that both Christendom and neo-Christendom have been marked by anything but the good fruit described by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, we might legitimately conclude that Christendom is a rotten tree, a false prophet, a house built upon the sand. If the behavioural standards outlined in St. Paul's famous fruit of the Spirit passage (Gal. 5:16-26) are, as he insists, normative for followers of Jesus, and if our Lord's own frequently reiterated teaching is to be taken seriously, then many religious derivatives of Christendom can scarcely be identified as 'Christian'. A tree is known by its fruit.

Our Lord's criteria for identifying his own have often been neglected. It is of no little significance that in his sobering pronouncements on the final judgment, touched upon at the beginning of this paper, doctrinal correctness seems to play little pivotal role in the fate of the person standing before him. Instead, verdicts are rendered on the basis of personal qualities and relational behaviour, as summarised by the righteous judge in his own Sermon on the Mount. God's people are those who *do* the will of the Father.

2 For those who behave 'Christianly' but do not claim Christ

Since it is here that I am most likely to be misunderstood, I begin by affirming that by 'gospel' we mean the good news that we can have peace with God through the atoning work of our Lord

Jesus Christ. But in light of the extent to which our doctrinal formulations have been influenced and even subverted by Christendom, we do well to remind ourselves that our relatively recent evangelical faith is part of a much longer story of God's active reconciling love for his creation.

For the greater part of human history, according to our own scriptures, those whose faith has been credited to them as righteousness have had no knowledge of Jesus Christ. As Jesus told his disciples, '*[M]any prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it*' (Mt. 13:17). Jesus in no way diminishes the secure standing of these prophets and righteous men and women before God, but simply points out that those who see and hear Christ are more privileged.

There is nothing in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures to suggest that this mercy is triggered solely by mental appropriation of insider information about mysterious doctrines. Whether the beneficiary of God's mercy is a follower of Jesus or simply a righteous person who longed or longs to see what the followers of Jesus now see, mercy is a result of God's action, not ours. The lives of '*prophets and righteous men*' are seen through the cross of Christ—the spotless lamb of God who was '*slain before the foundation of the world*' (Rev. 13:8), taking away the sins of the world.

3 For our evangelical theology and evangelism

What if the church synods had been as concerned about Christ-like behaviour as with coherent, internally consistent

doctrine? What if post-Constantinian Christianity had been as preoccupied with what Jesus taught as with what people should be permitted to think about him? What if instead of, or in addition to, a creed that distilled the doctrinal essence of Christianity, the council of Nicea had formulated a manifesto or charter of kingdom citizenship—the identifying behaviour of a follower of Jesus, based on what Jesus himself said?

What if those charged with administering, defending, and expanding Christian territory had been as concerned about Christ-like behaviour as they appeared to be about doctrinal beliefs and sacraments? What if the church fathers had wrestled as long and hard with the implications of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount as they did in puzzling out normative theories about the nature and work of the triune God?

Our answers to such questions profoundly influence our understanding of a sinner's standing before God, and the way that we proclaim the good news of reconciliation with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. These answers also directly affect those of us who—because we are professionally religious people who make a living from maintaining and promoting our several versions of orthodoxy—easily slip into the error of the Pharisees, reifying our self-justifying pieties to such an extent that sometimes there is no room for God himself. When he comes among us, we get rid of him, because he is too unlike the god over whom we imagine ourselves to have achieved a theological monopoly.

It was the acute awareness of this discrepancy between words and deeds

that gave rise to the several Reformations to which we modern evangelicals trace our roots. It is not surprising that it was evangelicalism—with its traditional awareness that genuine faith will always express itself in both words and life—that produced the great social movements of the nineteenth century, including the abolition of slavery, prison reform, the war against vice, the emancipation of women, public schools for poor children, child labour laws, orphanages for the parentless, homes for abandoned women, and philanthropic missions to the world.⁸

The title of a book by the most prominent evangelical of his day is testimony to an acute awareness that the ostensibly 'Christian' nations and their comfortably established churches were far from 'Christian'.⁹ The gulf between official belief and actual practice could be bridged only by genuine conversion. This was the message of the Moravians, the Pietists, the Anabaptists, the revivalists, and their heirs, we contemporary evangelicals.

⁸ For an account of evangelical social action in North America, see Norris Magnuson, *Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Work 1865-1920* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); for an examination of evangelical social action in Great Britain, see Kathleen J. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action: An Appraisal of their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962).

⁹ The best known evangelical reformer of all time is probably William Wilberforce, whose book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes, Contrasted with Real Christianity*, was published in 1797. Revealingly, on the face page of the book appear the words 'Search the Scriptures!' from John 5:39.

What is the relationship between the gospel and ethics? To push this question to the limit, can the behaviour of someone from another religion be credited to them as righteousness? Is it possible for someone who has never heard of Jesus—or who has heard such garbled, conflicted, and ethically compromised nonsense as to make ‘Christianity’ either totally incomprehensible or morally reprehensible—to be *saved*? Is it possible for such a person to be on a life trajectory that aims at Christ the centre without even being aware of it?

Both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures—*Constantine’s Bible*—provide abundant evidence in support of this argument. Our scriptures remind us that for most of human history, those who have been ‘saved’ have had no knowledge of Jesus the Christ. As Jesus told his disciples, ‘I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it’ (Mt. 13:17). This suggests to me that it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that persons today, similarly, who have no actual knowledge of Jesus, or whose encounter with ‘Christianity’ is such as to make refusal to join our ranks an issue of maintaining integrity, can be and are being saved. There are those who have too much integrity to identify themselves with the category ‘Christian’.

If we can get beneath or behind Christendom orthodoxies as being the final arbiter of who *is* and who *is not* a follower of Jesus, and begin to think instead of a family identity based upon doing what our Lord says, then these ‘insiders’ are true followers of Jesus, even though they worship in mosques.

My conviction is that some of the most significant movements to Christ in the Muslim world and across the continent of Africa are successful precisely because they have eschewed the religion of Christendom so that they can follow Christ as Lord.

Anyone familiar with powerfully hegemonic western cultural forces and with the history of western migrations, sometimes brutal global expansion and morally flawed cultures can appreciate how difficult it would be for a morally upright person in a Muslim culture to associate himself or herself with the category ‘Christian’. The term is at times so closely associated with behaviour that is anti-Christ in its impulses, practices and objectives as to make refusal to convert to ‘Christianity’ a matter of basic integrity. What person, with any integrity, would want to identify himself or herself with a movement chiefly associated with violence, imperialism, slavery, economic and military hegemony, unjust treaties, pornographic arts, dysfunctional families, and greed?

The so-called ‘insider movement’ may one day prove to have been God’s way of preserving the true church beyond the life expectancy of Christendom and its deeply compromised churches. One does not have to be a ‘Christian’ in the formulaic understanding of that word in order to live in poverty, sorrow, meekness, and thirst for justice; those who call themselves Christians have no monopoly on mercy, purity of heart, or peacemaking.

Of course, those of us who call ourselves Christians should be at once recognizable by these identity tests of our Lord, but we have no exclusive monopoly on them. And when we see these

qualities in persons whose geographical and social circumstances have not provided them with the luxury or opportunity to meet Jesus personally, we should nevertheless recognize them as brothers and sisters, bearing a distinct family resemblance to Jesus our Lord and Saviour, whose advent, death, and resurrection they, like Abraham, would rejoice to see! And we should introduce them to Jesus, and invite them to be his disciples.

Missiologically, such an understanding would take us back to the original commission, not to make con-

verts or save people, but to make disciples who—with us—learn of and from Jesus, and who follow him in communities of faith that are significantly, redemptively countercultural, a palpable expression of their genuine *'longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them'* (Heb. 11:16). In short, such an understanding would once again result in a whole gospel, alive with the life-transforming good news of what Jesus did and what he promised to those who follow him as the way, the truth, and the life.

The Wondrous Cross

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