

DA Carson: The Gospel

AN INTERVIEW WITH CARSON, WHO HEADS UP THE GOSPEL COALITION

In your session at the 2007 Gospel Coalition conference, you offered eight words that help define the gospel. Before we discuss them together, let me ask how these eight features should affect preachers as they approach their task.

D. A. Carson: We need to keep in mind that the word gospel means different things to different parts of our constituency. For some it's a bare gospel, that which gets you into the kingdom. For others the gospel is a hugely comprehensive category that embraces almost everything. That's probably the strength—and the weakness—of Scot McKnight's essay in a recent CT ("The 8 Marks of a Robust Gospel," Christianity Today [March 2008]). I like a lot of things about what he says. What's interesting about what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, however, is he stresses what he calls the matters "of first importance."

In other words, if you make the gospel too narrow, then you don't see its comprehensive power. If you make it so it sweeps up almost everything you find in the Bible, which it seems to me is what Scot is heading toward, then you cannot determine the matters of first importance. And thus, anything you do falls under the gospel rubric, and you cannot see where distortions are coming because you're losing track of what is of fundamental importance. God stands against us both in wrath and in love.

One of my reasons for choosing the 1 Corinthians 15 passage is that Paul clearly says what he is teaching is the gospel. He says it several different times, but he also keeps rearticulating that these are the matters of most importance. That becomes a guideline for organizing things in our minds, thinking through what we're trying to do when we're preaching, what themes we've got to come back to again and again.

These eight words were not plucked out of a systematic theology. They are words that come out of the passage where Paul himself claims to be dealing with the matters of greatest importance.

First, the gospel is Christological. The passage says, "Christ died for our sins." If we retreat to mere theism, that is, belief in God or a generalized spiritual experience, we're a long way from the gospel.

There are some articulations of Christian faith today that barely mention Christ, or Christ becomes just a cipher. Some are so far outside the camp that they're not faithfully Christian at all—the Joel Osteen sort of material. Although there is a standard invitation to come to Christ at the end, the whole sermon has not articulated who Christ is or what he's done. It has all been in terms of the power of positive thinking and health, wealth, and

prosperity goals. The concluding invitation to come to Christ—cliché driven as it is—seduces some people to think the gospel has been preached, but it hasn't been. The Bible's emphases about who Christ is and what he's done simply are not found.

The best preaching over the long haul will keep thinking through how best to preach Christ. It will try to do so within the framework of biblically faithful exegesis. If one is preaching through, let's say, the Psalms or Jeremiah, it's possible to preach in a way that narrowly represents the text but that somehow doesn't bring Christ in, or brings him in accidentally at the end—"And isn't that just like Jesus ... ?"—a connection by flying leap. By contrast, one thing clear to Paul—articulated without being explained in 1 Corinthians 15—is that a right reading of the antecedent Scriptures drives you to Christological conclusions. There is a lot of preaching today that is generic; it is not profoundly Christian. It is merely generic theism with a few Christ-words thrown in.

How can we fix our preaching if it's generic?

Christological preaching depends on strong biblical theology, on being someone who has read and reread the whole Bible and is thinking through the canonical connections, the tendons that hold all of Scripture together. How does kingdom track out? How does priesthood track out? How does temple or sacrifice track out? There are about twenty of these huge themes that, if understood, enable the preacher to move from a particular text along the line of these canonical themes to Christ. You still preach the text, but you handle these biblical-theological tendons that tie the whole Bible together, so people can see you're not making a wild leap to get to Christ.

I don't think a lot of biblical preaching today in evangelical circles is actually worldview-forming. Many preach the Bible in too "bitty" a fashion with an instantaneous, individualistic application that does not show how the Bible hangs together. If one aims to do Christological preaching, a lot of those problems are solved.

Second, the gospel preaching is also theological. It's not less God-centered than Christ-centered. But it's also theological in the sense that it is bound up with what was historically done by Christ on the cross. "Christ died for our sins" (v. 3).

We need to understand how the Cross relates to God, which means we have to understand something about the atonement and the nature of sin.

Nowadays we hear a picture of the gospel that looks like this: 'We human beings in the Fall made a terrible mess of ourselves, our relationships, our world. But God in his mercy has consistently intervened to change things and bring about reconciliation and forgiveness—in the call of Abraham, the giving of the Law, the sacrificial system, and ultimately in the person of his Son. By his death Christ defeated the powers of darkness and instituted a kingdom which will ultimately be consummated at the end. He invites us to

participate in this kingdom through lives transformed by his power so that in works of peace and reconciliation we are participating in the work of Christ as God in his mercy reconciles the world to himself.'

Now, there's a sense in which I can affirm all that. There's another sense in which it is missing dominant themes in Scripture—so much so that the picture as a whole is seriously distorted. The dominant theme that is missing is how sin is portrayed as first and foremost defiance of God, such that God is angry. The summary I gave above makes it sound as if God is sort of a compassionate onlooker but not a participant in the drama of unfolding sin and rebellion. By contrast, the notion of the wrath of God, which is so strongly articulated in both Testaments, is bound up with the fact that he is offended. In any sin we commit, God is always the most offended party: recall David's "Against you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight." Whatever else salvation means in the Old Testament or the New, it means being reconciled to him. And that is bound up with the fact that punishment is to be meted out, whether in a symbol-laden way in the Yom Kippur or ultimately in the final sacrifice of his own dear Son.

God stands against us both in wrath and in love. He stands against us in wrath because he is a holy God, and he is transcendently offended at us for our willful, shameful, horrific rebellion. But he also stands against us in love and even in entreaty because he is that kind of God. Until you get both of those things firmly entrenched in your understanding of the Bible storyline, you will always come out with a diluted cross. You will always come out with a misunderstanding of what Christ actually achieves on the cross—always without fail!

I would argue that nowadays how expressions like "Christ died for our sins" fit in the Bible storyline is lost on people. It has to be unpacked. We need more detailed expositions of passages like 2 Corinthians 5, Romans 3, Hebrews 9 and 10, and similar passages.

The gospel is regularly presented today along lines that leave out the wrath of God and the need for reconciliation. In Acts, when Paul is preaching to Felix, he's preaching what he says is the gospel, and the result is Felix fears the judgment to come. Whereas we preach the gospel in a way that nobody fears anything.

To talk about forgiveness of sins doesn't have a lot of edge if our hearers don't understand God's wrath.

That's right, and so they don't understand the cross or what's at stake, or they don't think in terms of eternity. There's so much focus today on the gospel making us nice people and giving us a better world and our being a little more "green"—all of which are important subjects; I'm not mocking any of them—but if you sacrifice the most important things on the altar of the merely important you're losing something. It seems to me that there's a great deal of American and worldwide evangelicalism that is right on that edge now, and that concerns me.

Third, the gospel is biblical. "Christ died according to the Scriptures" (vv. 3-4).

It's important that our hearers see that we preach the gospel from the Bible. An expository sermon demonstrably explains what the Bible says. Demonstrably—that's the crucial word. So at the end of the day people say, In truth that is what the Bible says. If someone wants to disagree with what I've said, they have to disagree with my understanding of the Bible, which they have every right to challenge me on, but the authority finally is the Bible and not me.

There is something wonderfully freeing about being a biblical expositor. The preacher of the gospel stands under the authority of God's Word, and everybody sees that the preacher stands under the authority of that Word.

When Paul says that Christ died and was raised from the dead "according to the Scriptures," I don't think he is simply saying that there's a typological connection between the Old Testament and Christ, so that the Resurrection is biblical in that sense. He is saying that, but he's saying something more than that. He has a theology of the Word of God in his mind, and that needs to come across in the way we do our preaching as well. In other words, the apostle does not think he is merely saying true things that happen to be in alignment with Scripture; rather, he wants to teach what Scripture teaches, and he wants his readers to see for themselves that this is what Scripture teaches. Biblical preaching of this sort will always be pointing back to the text; it will always be driving the attention of believers back to the text so that people can see for themselves what God is saying in his Word.

How does the state of our culture affect our work of showing the biblical rooting of the gospel?

On the one hand we're dealing with massive biblical illiteracy, so that people don't know what the Bible says. Choose a person at random on the streets of any of our big cities and ask them what the Bible says, and you will probably get some allusion to the Ten Commandments or "judge not that ye be not judged," which they wouldn't really understand, contextually-speaking, at all.

Secondly, because of the pervasiveness of some forms of post-foundational epistemology, a standard comeback when you start handling the Bible is, "That's just your interpretation." The presupposition is that meaning finally resides only in the interpreter. It's important to keep fighting that endless subjectivism. You have to keep going back and saying: No, look at it again. What does this text mean? We must help people wrestle with what Scripture says by putting their finger on the text and working it through. The best preaching does that.

That means it's not enough just to summarize accurately what the Bible says. That's a good and important thing to do, but it's not enough. Preaching

the gospel has to be done in such a way that everything of significance that is said is demonstrably tied to the text. The preacher must constantly say, "The Bible says," or words to that effect. Look at the text itself. Cite it again. Show that the connection is to be made. In other words, there is some preaching that is biblically faithful but does not make the truth demonstrably biblical. In a biblically illiterate age, one of the things that must be done is to show that what is being said is demonstrably the Word of God.

When we preach the gospel, in addition to showing what the Bible says, do we need to defend the reliability of the Bible?

Undoubtedly if you're next door to a major university that has a religion department undermining the Word of God, then something apologetic has to be done about the nature of Scripture. But I think of Spurgeon's one-liner: "Defend the Bible? I would rather defend a lion." That is not to say that there's no place for a robust defense of the Bible in some contexts, but defending the Bible is not the first responsibility of the preacher; preaching it is.

Fourth, the gospel is apostolic. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul stresses again and again the mediating role of the apostolic witnesses. When we speak of the apostolic gospel, we don't mean what is commonly meant in Catholicism, where there is alleged to be an authenticity to the apostolic gospel through a putative apostolic descent all the way down to bishops today. Rather, the gospel is apostolic precisely if it is faithful to the gospel preached by the apostles, the message Paul has in mind in Galatians 1 when he says, "If we apostles or an angel from heaven preach anything other than that which we have preached to you, let them be anathema."

We have access to the apostolic gospel through the apostolic writings. That brings us back to the authority of the Bible itself, which was mediated by certain Christ-ordained people. Apostolicity is bound up with faithfulness to the apostolic gospel rather than to a particular ecclesiastical structure.

So when I stand up and preach the gospel this Sunday, how does it help me to appeal to the apostles? How does that have particular traction with postmoderns?

Fifth, the gospel is historical. Let me answer that by linking the apostolic character of the gospel with the fifth feature of the gospel: its historical nature. Not only is Christ a figure in history, but certainly the events in 1 Corinthians 15, such as the Resurrection, take place in real-time history, such that, Paul says, if the events had not occurred, then the gospel is not the gospel, and your faith is futile.

As long as young, relativistic postmoderns think they are perfectly free to choose which spiritual heritage they want, that the choice is merely a comparison of abstract systems as they understand them, then the choice becomes a merely subjective one, and faith itself becomes defined in

subjective fashion. Faith becomes a personal, subjective, religious choice. On that understanding a preacher can only say, I'd like to commend this gospel to you. This is what we've discovered, and perhaps you'd like to join us if you've discovered the same thing, too. That's as much authority as you can have.

By contrast, the early Christians—who themselves were preaching in highly pluralistic cultures in the Gentile world (for the first three centuries the dominant charge against Christians was they weren't pluralistic enough)—the early Christians kept preaching on the facticity of the historical Resurrection. This is something that happened in history, and it's bound up with apostolic witness. It was attested not only by the apostles themselves but by five hundred others. You have to come to grips with that! If Christ has risen from the dead, it transforms what we think about him in every domain.

It's not a comparison of an abstract system called Christianity with an abstract system called Buddhism. You have this brute fact that God has disclosed himself in history, witnessed by people as part of the broader theological truth that this is God's means for reconciling a God-damned world to himself. Though many people don't like to hear truth spoken so boldly and are even turned off by it, it's something we cannot afford to lose. Otherwise we're merely recommending another sort of spirituality.

Not for a moment should thoughtful Christians align themselves unreservedly with modernism; by the same token, we should not align ourselves unreservedly with postmodernism. In its milder forms, postmodernism rightly reminds us that because we are finite, our grasp of truth can never be the kind of grasp that belongs to omniscience alone. There are two kinds of perspectivalist: those who confess to being one, and those who don't. The only non-perspectivalist is God: one must be omniscient to belong to that camp. Nevertheless there is something in the more radical forms of postmodern epistemology that has to be challenged right down to its socks. It's wrong. It's too narrow. You have to come to grips with the fact that God disclosed himself in history in the God-Man, in what was achieved on the cross, in the Resurrection. It's important to understand how we need to be sensitive to some of the cultural drifts in our day, but we also must understand where such cultural drifts need to be confronted. This is one of the places.

When Paul is preaching to the intellectuals of Athens, he knows full well that by bringing up the Resurrection, he's going to turn some of them off. But he also knows if he doesn't bring it up, he's not faithful to the gospel. He knows what's nonnegotiable. So he brings it up and loses some of his hearers. That's the price you pay.

The truth of the historical Resurrection, of the apostolic gospel taught in Scripture—these things are tied together; we cannot duck them. We try to make them as winsomely attractive as we can. That's what we can all learn

from Tim Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian in New York. At the same time some things are nonnegotiable; you don't trim your gospel to fit the culture.

Sixth, the gospel is personal. At the end of the day, you have to believe it. Paul makes it personal even in the way he addresses the Corinthians: This is what we preached; this is what you believed (vv. 2-3).

There's considerable emphasis today in evangelical circles about the dangers of American individualism, and by way of response some stress communitarianism. There's huge truth to this response. The danger is we forget there is a personal element to faith. The individual must trust. One of the dangers of people movements, people conversions, is that sometimes you get whole tribes nominally converting, but you're not really sure how much actual regeneration has taken place.

Sometimes you can get a lot of people who have been through the process of conversion but are remarkably hateful or are morally not differentiable from the broader culture. One wonders how much conversion in a biblical sense has occurred. You can be in a church that is formally orthodox but with surprisingly few converted people in it. You have to keep saying that biblical Christianity is personal; it demands personal faith and obedience, even if the result is a glorious communal life.

A biblical understanding of conversion is bound up in God's activity within us to renew us, to bring about conviction of sin, faith in Christ, regeneration by the Holy Spirit. It is a comprehensive thing and is bound up with personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Would you say that showing the personal nature of the gospel is an area where American preachers do well?

It depends on what segment of the church the preacher is in. For those who come from a more fundamentalist camp or a more Arminian heritage or an altar-call kind of background, then there's still a lot of emphasis on the individual. What is often missing is a wholesome stress on the church as church. Perhaps the loudest voices in the Southern Baptist heritage would be an example. But some preaching, almost in reaction to the manipulation that can accompany personal appeals, declares the gospel without laying it on the conscience at all, without insisting that people lift their voices heavenward and cry, God, be merciful to me a sinner! The preacher needs to appeal to the individual conscience for repentance and faith. The preacher has an obligation to do more than speak in generalities.

Seventh, the gospel is universal. Paul ties the gospel to an Adam Christology (vv. 22, 45), thereby drawing in men and women from across the human race.

In an age when Christianity is often seen as exclusive—whereas Buddhism, Hinduism, and secularism are often seen as inclusive—it's important to say two things. Number one: Every claim is in some sense exclusive. In a finite

world, that's unavoidable. If you hold to the kind of inclusivism that teaches all views about God are equally valid, then this already presupposes a certain view of God that necessarily excludes the view of God that Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons hold. In other words, it is already an exclusive view. If you are a finite human being, and you hold strongly to any view, even the so-called inclusive view, you are necessarily exclusive in some sense.

Christians admit their exclusivity much more than the inclusivists admit their exclusivity. But in admitting and glorying in it, we say this is not an exclusivity built on our intrinsic superiority, because we're the first to acknowledge we're never more than poor beggars telling other poor beggars where there's bread.

Secondly, we insist that in the exclusivity of Christ's claims he is drawing to himself men and women from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. Around the throne on the last day will be people from everywhere. In that sense, biblical Christianity is wonderfully universal. That constantly needs to be said not only to address questions of racism, narrowness, and cultural confinement, but also because today we are more conscious than ever of the global church and different cultures and multi-ethnicities. Far from running from those things, we should be glorying in them.

In that sense I tell my students that in some ways, L.A. is more like heaven than Lincoln, Nebraska. There might be other ways in which Lincoln is more like heaven, but on that front we have to keep delighting in the diversity that will characterize the new heaven and the new earth. That has a huge appeal today to people under the age of thirty in our big cities, because they understand it's the nature of the culture. We don't want to be at the tail end of that; we want to be at the front end.

Eighth, the gospel is eschatological. In the gospel one finds not only God's pronouncement of acquittal and vindication for Christ's people now, but also the anticipation of the consummated glory still to come.

Today there is a rising number of people often connected with the emerging movement or with Stanley Hauerwas who use kingdom almost exclusively as an adjective—kingdom ethics and kingdom living, and so on. Again, there's something to what they are saying—not only would I not deny it, but I'd insist on it—but the gospel suffers as soon as kingdom becomes only an adjective; there's no undergirding theology of what the kingdom is. What is striking is the diversity of ways in which the biblical writers use the word kingdom. For instance: You cannot enter the kingdom without being born again. In that sense, one is either in the kingdom or not, and the determining factor is the new birth. But again: The kingdom is like a field containing wheat and weeds, both saved and non-saved in this eschatological age until the consummation. In this sense, everyone is in the kingdom, whether they recognize it or not. Or again: we read that all authority belongs to Christ already, that Christ is already reigning over the whole, even if that reign is currently contested. The separation comes only

later. But in other passages, the word kingdom refers only to what will come in the consummation. Many contemporary uses of kingdom are so restrictive that they begin to leave out the sweep of biblical usage. We must build a theology of the kingdom that is faithful to all that Scripture says in this regard. In that case, we will not only be concerned for "kingdom ethics," but we will be teaching people to cry with Christians from every generation, "Even so, yes, come, Lord Jesus!"

By and large I don't think we're good in North America at preparing people for death, preparing people to think in terms of the glory still to come. We think in terms of preparing people for retirement more than we think about preparing people for the new heaven and the new earth and resurrected life. That is bound up with eschatology, with thinking through what our ultimate end will be, of resurrection existence still to come. In many of our circles, death is the last taboo. We used to be unable to talk about sex or homosexuality. We can talk about such subjects nowadays; we still can't talk about death.

That's partly because we're so comfortable here. But that is far removed from the New Testament vision that insists that we lay up treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not corrode, where thieves do not dig through and steal. It is critical to think eschatologically about our salvation to where it makes sense to have deferred gratification. I don't think you can long have strong confessionalism, strong spirituality, and strong moral vision, without also having strong eschatology.

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