

What is the Gospel about? (Or, How big is the Gospel?)

The Gospel is *not* just about you and me. It does not *only* concern personal salvation. It is *much* broader and deeper than that. Why do we often, therefore, present such a "simple" Gospel that is so truncated?

One reason is because we fail to understand how our culture influences our theology, especially our anthropology or psychology. We assume that we read the Bible impartially, untainted by the assumptions and worldview of the culture that surrounds us. We assume that we simply understand the objective and obvious assertions that it makes. But, it is not that simple. In reality we all read the scriptures through our biases: personal, gender, family, race, cultural, intellectual, and religious idols.

In the modern-postmodern age, even before we read the Bible or hear its truth, we put on a pair of tinted glasses called expressive individualism or hearing aids called personal authenticity. For most of us today the primary task of spirituality is the cultivation of our interior life and the construction of a positive self-image. Personal fulfillment and self-definition become our goal. In the name of individualism, authenticity, and autonomy the chief idol of our age is the self (self-deification). This means that we try to achieve our aspirations as if we, ourselves, were the Author of our story. We all try to "play God" and write (or rewrite) the script of our life drama as we see fit. God becomes our servant, a prop or supporting cast for our life drama. So, the meaning of life is: "It's all about me: *my* self-definition, *my* autonomy, and *my* personal fulfillment." Or, "It's all about *my* family, race, clan, gang, team, social class, or nation." Or, "It's all about *my* religion, myth, utopia, worldview or ideology."

In our secular age there are at least two, anti-biblical views of the self and spirituality. I will summarize them here.

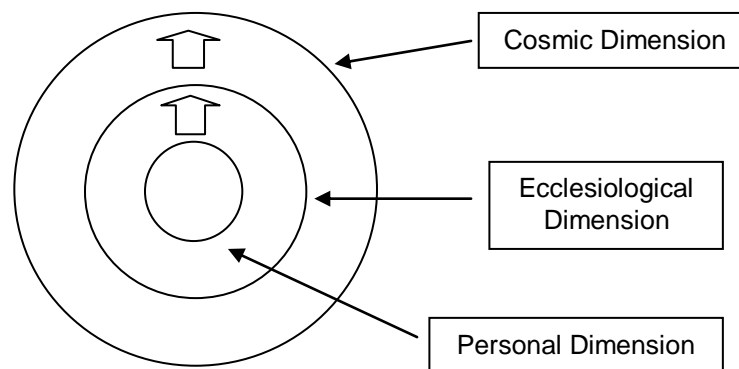
The sovereign self: The modern age is committed to personal autonomy. The individual is self-directing, self-initiating, self-commanding, and self-defining. The self is absolute and the master of oneself. Modern people pursue self-exploration and personal development as their primary value. "How to" books regarding self development have dominated the publishing industry. And, new technologies create possibilities to care for and observe the self. But, when identity breaks down, the self is repaired, restored, renewed by well-trained experts in the field of self-development, such as psychologists, self-help gurus, and social workers. So, in the modern age, therapy is much more important than theology. And, the institutional church functions as a *vender* of spiritual goods and services for religious consumers shopping for the self. Large congregations offer a wide variety of goods and services. Smaller congregations function more as boutiques and "specialty shops."

The sacred self: The modern question, "How can I feel good about myself?" emerges as far more important than, "How can I be saved?" To put it another way, the former philosophic question, What is man?, has been re-expressed in psychological terms, Who am I? A spirituality of seeking emphasizes that individuals undertake this quest alone. The terms, "journey" and "growth," describe a process-oriented, seeker, conception of spirituality. The quest is for something more than doctrine, creed or institution, however. What is sought after has more to do with feelings, with awareness of inner reality, and encounters with a vague sacred realm. And so nowadays, spiritual people are "believers but not believers." They are "spiritual, but not religious." In fact, there is a widespread belief that the church has come *between* the believer and the belief, between the Christian and Christ by creating the institutional obstacles of

doctrine, structure and vested interest due to a lust for power. And so, into this void stepped at least four would-be saviors and pseudo-clergy: the therapeutic profession, religious gurus, secular self-help advisors, and the advertizing industry (or consumerism).

Now, if we think that these cultural and worldview dynamics do not affect non-believers here in Buenos Aires, we deceive ourselves and we are very naive. And, if we think that the idolatry of self does not impact the church, we are especially naive. Just listen carefully to our worship songs. for example. They are often about how we *feel* and what we *experience*, rather than about truth that glorifies God. Our choruses often merely celebrate our emotional state, rather than theological truth. Compare our modern music with the great hymns of the church and you will see a big difference: there was once much more depth and wisdom. Even in our evangelical churches we often present the Gospel in individualistic terms only. The Gospel becomes a message focused *only* about personal salvation and as a means to *personal* wholeness or *personal* prosperity. It becomes man-centered rather than God-centered. But, when we do this, we miss the other two thirds of the Good News.

I believe that the Gospel is three dimensional. There is a personal and individual aspect, a corporate and ecclesiological aspect, and cosmic and eternal aspect. These ideas can be demonstrated pictorially:



First, our personal and individual salvation is crucial, basic, and glorious. This is the version we hear the most about. But, the gospel is not *just* about us. Our personal redemption from sin and Satan is necessary and magnificent. And, our individual reconciliation with God and others is restorative and precious. But, these blessings are not the end of the story, for we are not redeemed for our sake alone. In fact, our individual stories are defined by the church, the redeemed *community* of God. We do not serve and worship God in isolation or autonomy. Our identities and destinies are determined by God's mission in the world through the Body of Christ. And, most importantly, our redemptive stories and the story of the church's mission are ultimately defined by the eternal and cosmic, Trinitarian mission of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let me say it again and a little differently: even though our personal salvation is glorious, the Gospel is not just about us individually. Our Gospel is not man-centered, for we are not redeemed for our sake alone. In fact, our individual stories are defined by the church and our destinies are determined by God's mission in the world through the Body of Christ. And, the church's mission is ultimately defined by the eternal mission of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Christian gospel *is* simple, but it is *not* simplistic. It is more than a remedy for personal sin and broken relationships. It is not simply a formula for personal contentment, positive self-image, a happy family, or success -- or even a free ticket to heavenly bliss.

The gospel is, rather, a worldview, a manifesto for a new, eternal civilization that will come about through Jesus Christ, the Lord. If we read the whole story of the Bible, we will discover that the Good News is about a new Eden, paradise restored, and the everlasting tabernacle of God recreated on earth. To use biblical terms the Gospel concerns the emergence of a "new creation," the "kingdom of God," and the "new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells."

How big is the Gospel? What is it about? It is *very* big! It is about the restoration of *everything* God created that has fallen into sin -- human beings, society and culture, and nature -- to its Edenic potential to the glory of God and the benefit of all.

So, what can we do now? We really need a process to identify our personal, cultural, intellectual, and religious idols. When we discern them and how they affect us, we should renounce them and commit ourselves to learn and live more biblically for the sake of the church and the city.