

1. The message of the church: What is the gospel?

Andy Prime

Gracemount Community Church, Edinburgh

Imagine arriving at the scene of a multi-car accident, with smoke billowing, cars upturned and mangled, debris strewn across the road, multiple people injured or dead, screams piercing the air and sirens blaring. What do we do? How do we prioritise who we should help first? This is where triage comes in.

Triage is assessing *need* and prioritising the *neediest*. Triage means that we attend to the young child with a huge gash in their forehead before we deal with the man who has injured his arm. Or, even if we're dealing with one person, we would apply pressure to a bleeding wound before we give our attention to their broken finger.

Let's change the image slightly. We arrive at the scene of the Titanic moments after it struck the iceberg. We're met with a harrowing image of hundreds of people floating in the water – some alive, others dead. How do we assess priority of care? Who requires our immediate attention and who can wait? This is how triage works.

Let's think a bit more deeply about those hundreds of souls in the water. Let's think about some of their personal problems. Some of them are probably unemployed. It would be safe to assume that some of them would be battling one mental illness or another. Maybe a few of them have cancer. Some of them may be divorced, others having illicit affairs. Some of them may be very nice people, and others terrible human beings. Yet, none of these things would matter at that moment in that cold, deadly water.

We wouldn't care about those things as we rushed to people's aid. We wouldn't begin a marriage counselling session with a warring couple trying to stay afloat on a piece of debris. That would be ridiculous. They have more pressing issues than their marital problems. They need to get out of that water before they die of exposure.

In the same way, we wouldn't pull a drunk passenger onto our lifeboat and then begin an AA meeting with him or her. The pressing issue isn't saving them from their alcoholism, it's saving their life.

We wouldn't start by handing out food parcels to people floating in the icy water. They may well need a hot meal, but their bigger need is to get out of the water and

into a safe place.

As Christians we live and work in communities with thousands of people. Between them, they will have hundreds of thousands of personal issues. Some will be more serious than others. How do we begin to help them? How do we prioritise the greatest need? How do we do 'spiritual triage' in the chaos of our broken communities?

The spiritual priority of the gospel

Before we do anything, we must ask ourselves a question, and it's this: 'What is the gospel?' The number one rule of spiritual triage is that the greatest need of every soul in our care, whether they recognise it or not, is an appreciation of, and a trust in, the gospel of Jesus Christ. We're fully aware that our churches are full of people with pastoral issues to deal with and there are many ministries requiring our attention. People will be in various states of distress, some more pressing and chaotic than others. But the greatest need of every soul in our care is trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Maybe our family situation feels like a battleground. There are tensions in our marriage. Maybe we have a toddler with behavioural issues. Maybe we have a stroppy teen. Maybe we have fallen out with some of our wider family members. Maybe we feel hopeless and helpless in the middle of it all. Regardless, our primary ministry is to live, witness to, and proclaim the gospel in the middle of all this carnage.

Maybe we feel like our church is too small and underequipped to meet the huge and diverse needs of our scheme, or our town, or our village, or our city, or our nation. Still, it doesn't matter whether it is a professor from the academy, or an MP from parliament, or a homeless person under a bridge, or a child in the most privileged school in the country, or an orphan in the hamster-wheel of the fostering system, or a single-mum addicted to Valium. We all have the same greatest and most urgent need.

We need to hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we take time to do a biblically-informed spiritual triage of our communities, the greatest need is not social reform, or more foodbanks, or more homeless shelters, or improved education, or fresh expressions of church, or whatever. Doubtless,

some of these things are required, but the situation requires a much deeper solution.

The need is for Christians, who in being discipled to apply the gospel to themselves, are equipped to apply the gospel to the world.

The danger of a wrong gospel

A lot of well-meaning Christians think that helping the needy requires some other approach. But the urgent priority is ensuring that we have a crystal-clear understanding of the gospel, and on how it applies to *all of us*. Some of us may talk a lot about ‘the gospel,’ yet what we articulate is *not*, in fact, the *true gospel*.

Maybe we go for something like, ‘*God loves you and wants you to live a better life.*’ Or ‘*God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.*’ Or ‘*God’s kingdom has come in Jesus, and now he calls us to work with him to transform every aspect of society.*’ These soundbites may well contain some nuggets of truth, but they are *not* the *true gospel*.

A false or even an incomplete gospel is like a placebo. It might fool the patient into thinking they will get better, but it doesn’t have the power to cure them. There can be no gospel ministry and, ultimately, no hope for sin-sick sufferers if we don’t get the gospel right.

Others of us, however, can preach and explain the intricate doctrines of the Christian faith, yet we have no idea about what to do with the practical realities of ministry to needy people. Indeed, we often struggle to apply the gospel to ourselves!

I’ve known professors of biblical theology whose lives were consumed by bitterness and rage towards fellow Christians. I’ve known pastors who will preach week by week, and whose private lives are enslaved to porn. I’ve known elders, tasked to keep watch over the household of God, whose home lives have been characterised by abuse and wild, exasperated children. I’ve known youth leaders who teach the Scriptures to children the morning after a drinking binge and a night in bed with a non-Christian boyfriend.

True theology must always be applied. Dead orthodoxy isn’t theology. I was once told, ‘You have never truly understood something until you can explain it simply.’ Let me adjust that slightly, ‘We have never truly believed something, until we have obeyed and applied it.’ Any true knowledge of God will result in application – praise, worship, confession, etc.

There can be no gospel ministry and, ultimately, no hope for sin-sick sufferers if we don't believe and apply the gospel to ourselves. We cannot offer what we do not possess. We cannot offer a life-transforming gospel if that gospel hasn't transformed our own life. The gospel is never simply something *explained*, it is *experienced*. It is never simply something *accomplished*, it is something *applied*.

So, what then, is the gospel?

The message is infinitely deep and wide, but we can summarise it under four headings: God, Man, Christ, and Response.

God

The gospel begins and ends with God. It begins with his unchanging character and sovereign choices in eternity. It ends with saved sinners enjoying him forever. If God hadn't chosen to save sinners, we would still be dead in sin, rather than enjoying his salvation.

God is the infinite, eternal, holy creator of all things. He alone is worthy of all praise, honour, and glory. As the *Holy, Holy, Holy God*, his eyes are too pure to look upon evil (Hab. 1:13), and so he will not leave sin unpunished (Ex. 34:7).

Our experience in the schemes of Scotland is that there is an innate supernaturalistic worldview among most people. They have no problem believing that some form of supernatural entity or 'god' exists. You won't find many intellectually convinced atheists on a housing scheme.

Take Maddie for example. Maddie's partner died from an overdose. He was sometimes abusive and often absent, but – as the father of her three children – she loved him deeply. Every year, on the anniversary of his death, she grieves. One day, she announces that she was going to the local spiritualist church – a church, by the way, where you have to pay at the door to enter. Why? Because there's a long-ingrained concept of life-beyond-death, and there's a deep hurt that yearns for an answer; coupled with a desire to keep living the party-girl lifestyle.

Or take Coleen. A single mum, battling addiction and trying to keep a sense of control through her chronic eating disorder. One day she mentions that she regularly goes to see a psychic. Why? Because, rolling with the punches as she flies from crisis to crisis, struggling with the mundane and lonely nature of her day-to-day, she *longs* for good news. And if she can't see it in her present reality, she looks for it in a future fantasy.

The issue is not that people *don't* believe in God. The problem lies with *the kind of god that they believe in*. They view God as irrelevant; disinterested; and lenient.

Therefore, it is essential that we proclaim *the character of God* among the poor. We must present a God who is holy and who will hold them accountable. This is a direct attack on their amoral approach to life. We must present a God who can be known and who, in Christ, has revealed himself perfectly to sinful people. Essentially, this is what Maddie and Coleen and all the thousands who live in the schemes need to know:

- God is God – and you are not
- You are created by him – and so you are accountable to him
- God is not naturally knowable – but he has made himself known
- You are designed by him – and so you are defined by him
- You are purposed by him – and so your purpose is to live for him.

Anything else you live for is not only dead, nothing, worthless and ignorant, but it is disobedient, rebellious, self-loving and idolatrous. This is what Maddie and Coleen need to hear.

Maddie, the answer to the reality of death will *not* be found in the spiritualist church. The answer to the pain of death will be found in the Author of Life. But the answer is not one that you can pick and choose depending on your fancy, or to fit around your lifestyle. It comes from the Sovereign King who won't pander to your imagination, but before whom you must bow the knee.

Coleen, proper, true good news in the face of the tough everyday will not come from the meanderings of a psychic's mind. It will come first as you acknowledge that you are accountable for the poor decisions you have made in the past and acknowledge that God is the source of all good decisions in the future. God is good, and he has demonstrated that in so many concrete ways.

Us

Created in the image of God, all humanity has a humble dignity – we are created to relate to God, to rule under him and to find our rest in him. However, Genesis 1–3 and Romans 1 teach us that:

- Instead of *relating to him*, we want to be him. We are created in God's image to be like him – but, instead, we want the knowledge of good and evil for ourselves, in order to be God
- Instead of *ruling under him*, we want to rule *instead of him*
- Instead of *finding rest in him*, we rebelliously try and find rest in his creation with no reference to him.

As a result, we run a relentless, restless race towards hell. According to Ephesians 2, we're dead in our sin, following the prince of the power of the air, living in disobedience, satisfying the passions of our flesh, and living according to our nature as children of wrath.

Most of us have a sliding scale when it comes to sin. As long as we feel that we are not harming people or not at the bad end of the spectrum, then we feel sure we are going to be alright.

I once visited a man in prison who's there because of a lifetime of alcohol- and drug-fuelled abuse of his wife and children, culminating in him being arrested drunk in charge of a car for which he had no licence or insurance. Searched by police at the scene, they discovered a knife and a series of texts on his phone threatening to stab his wife. I sat in that prison visiting hall and listened as he self-righteously acquitted himself and condemned the others in the prison as 'monsters' who were there for 'serious' crimes.

There is always something in all of us that will find someone else who's worse than we are, in order to make ourselves feel better.

We all make excuses – and none more so than those who live in our schemes. Victim mentality runs deep in our communities. '*It's not my fault*' could be the motto for a lot of the people in the schemes. Add to that the fact that most counselling from therapists and social workers fills our heads with the idea that we are good people who have been put in bad circumstances, and it all adds up to us being victims. There's nothing to say sorry for, but plenty to grumble about. Inside of all of us is the crafty weasel that instinctively offloads blame on to anyone but ourselves – even God.

The Bible confronts this entitled, victim mentality. James writes, 'each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death' (Jas. 1:14–15).

Here's the point: my sin, and my death, come from *my evil desires*. I sin because I *want to sin*. I sin because I *choose to sin*. I sin because I *desire to sin*.

The Bible teaches us that *desires* give birth to sin, and sin gives birth to *death*. Death is not just something that happens to us, it is something that is *deserved by us*. My death will be a result of *my evil desires*. James is clear: your death is a result of your sin, and your sin is a result of your desires. Every person in hell will be able to trace back how they got there to *their own evil desires*. That's what Paul means in Romans 1 when he tells us that we are, 'without excuse' (Rom. 1:20).

Of course, we are all victims of sin to one degree or another – whether it's abuse at the hands of another, or neglect and an absence of love. There is a place for compassion and mercy and sympathy. But the Bible never allows us to use the actions of others as an excuse for our own sins.

Those of us seeking to help people in needy areas must encourage them to see themselves, not primarily as victims, but as sinners and wilful rebels. Putting our arm around their shoulder and just telling them that Jesus loves them, and that it is going to be all right, is not doing them any favours.

The most loving thing we can do for people in the schemes is *not* to help them with their electricity bill, or to help them find work, or to clean them up, or to give them a bed, or help with their drug habit. The most loving thing we can do for our fellow human beings is to proclaim to them the reality and seriousness of hell.

Unless we help those who are poor to see themselves as the Bible does, we ultimately leave them trapped and helpless like a hamster in a wheel. They will be destined to see themselves at the centre of a world that is all about them and their problems. But when we help the poor to understand themselves as God sees them, then we open up the door to real, deep, gospel transformation.

Getting this right is crucial, because if we misdiagnose the problem, then we will prescribe the incorrect solution.

Christ

The answer to sin, our problem, is Jesus Christ. In Mark 5, we meet three people: Legion the demon possessed man, Jairus whose daughter dies, and an unnamed bleeding woman. What unites them all is their *utter hopelessness*. They, or the people around them, are resigned to the inevitability and inescapability of their problems.

Of Legion, we read that ‘no one could bind him anymore’ and ‘no one was strong enough to subdue him’ (verses 3 and 4). The woman ‘had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse’ (verse 26). And Jairus is told that, ‘Your daughter is dead ... Why bother the teacher anymore?’ (verse 35). No-one’s strong enough. Nothing’s worked. Don’t bother.

It’s tempting to develop that same mind-set and worldview when dealing with people from the schemes. The problems are so deep-rooted; the cycles have been unbroken for generations; the scenarios are so complicated.

However, the three individuals in Mark 5 are not only united by their despair. See their responses on meeting Jesus: in verse 6, ‘When [Legion] saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him’; in verse 22, ‘When [Jairus] saw Jesus, he fell at his feet’; in verse 33, ‘Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet’.

When we’re at the end of ourselves, and we’ve exhausted every other option, all that is left is to fall at the feet of Jesus. That’s why we need to be careful of using language such as, ‘*no-one’s strong enough*’ or ‘*why bother*’ when Jesus is in the room. It doesn’t matter if we’re mentally unhinged and living naked in a cave, or a powerful leader brought to our knees in bereavement, or a woman who’s exhausted all medical help, all *can* and *must* fall on their face at the feet of Jesus.

The answer to our sin problem is Jesus Christ. In his life, Jesus Christ modelled the perfect standard of holiness and righteousness that God requires. In his miracles, Jesus Christ gives glimpses and demonstrations of what his future kingdom is going to be like. On the cross, Jesus Christ died as a substitute in our place – bearing our sin, our guilt, our shame, our curse. When he rose, Jesus Christ swallowed the oppressive reign of death, obliterating the enslaving reign of sin, as the first fruits and foretaste of the eternal reign of grace.

We don’t find that anywhere else. Many in our scheme are like the woman in Mark 5: they’ve tried everything – legal and illegal, doctors and dealers, mediums and faith healers, spending all they have. But, instead of getting better, they get worse. The point is, we don’t find this anywhere else. It is found only in Christ.

If that is true, people *must* believe the true gospel in order to be saved and brought into a right relationship with God. There is salvation in *no one else*. There is no back-up plan. People in our housing schemes will only be saved if they hear the

gospel word proclaimed to them in a clear and comprehensible manner. There is no other way.

This is the Jesus that the poor need: a sin-bearing, atonement-making, guilt-cleansing, living Redeemer. A Christ who will call us what we are – sinners. But a Christ who will then speak with sinners, associate with sinners, eat with sinners, and then *die for sinners*.

Response

When we are confronted with the reality of our problem before a holy God, our instinctive response is often wrong. That applies both to unbelievers from a completely un-churched background, as well as well-meaning Christians trying to help.

Steven is one of my neighbours, born and raised in the scheme. He has the exterior of a pit-bull and a temper of a loose cannon. Yet, deep down, he is as soft as a teddy bear. He's recently started reading the Bible with me, and given his run-ins with the police, constant fighting with neighbours over parking and volatile relationship with his partner, he is very conscious of his sin. In his mind there is *no doubt* that he has fallen short of God's standard.

However, because of an ingrained and instinctive cultural Catholicism, the solution for him is to visit a local priest for confession. It's a quick-fix, easy, costless remedy. We managed to talk him out of that and encouraged him to come to one of our Sunday services. So far so good. However, we need to be careful that in our excitement at his appearance, we don't miss the fact that we could merely be compounding an incorrect response to his own sin. Mere church attendance is not an adequate response to his sin any more than confessing to a priest is.

Nicola is a girl on the scheme. She's got restraining orders on just about everybody, and she could start a fight with her own reflection! She's floated in and out of the local Church of Scotland congregation for a few years. She recently got pregnant because of a brief relationship with a drug-user who wants nothing to do with her or the baby. Outwardly she's happy; inwardly she's petrified and isolated.

When she announced this to a woman from the Church of Scotland, the response she got was, '*You know you should really get married to the father of the baby.*' The problem is, although Nicola's floating in and out of church, she's not claiming to be a Christian. Therefore, by imposing Christian behaviour on her, she is being asked to

produce the fruit of the Spirit before she's even responded to the gospel. It's unreasonable to expect Christian behaviour from someone who's not a Christian. We are asking them to do something they are completely incapable of. It is setting them up for failure. It is feeding them food we know will make them sick. This sort of moral advice is not going to help her.

The biblical response to her problem is repentance from sin, and faith in Christ.

Biblical repentance looks like this:

- (1) It begins in a *heart transformed by the gospel*. They don't just see their sin, they own it, and soon, they hate it.
- (2) This is then *verbalised* in a confession of faith in the gospel, repenting of sin and believing the promises of God.
- (3) This then results in a *transformed life* that bears the fruit of repentance.

We do not help them if we merely teach them part (2). We must earnestly pray for (1), as well as present the necessity and certain cost of (3).

Conclusion

People from broken, chaotic and messy lives are all different and, therefore, repentance does not always look the same for everyone. Mental issues and sexual abuse complicate things further. For people in messy situations, repentance is going to involve making hard decisions and dealing with the consequences of a selfish and sinful lifestyle.

How about the man who has three children by two different women, who wants to turn from his sinful, abusive past, come to Christ and be a proper father to his children? What does repentance look like for him? It's not going to be simple and clean. In his book, *Church in Hard Places*, Mez McConnell tells the following story:

Take Innocencia, a 13-year-old street girl from northern Brazil. She had lived on the streets for most of her short life. Her parents abandoned her at 5 years old and from the age of 6 onwards she had sold her body for sex to pay for food and to feed her glue habit. When we found her, she was in a mess. One of her arms had been crippled from a beating she took on the streets from a punter, all her teeth were missing, and she had been raped countless times. One day, when she heard the life transforming truth about God, her sinful position before him, and the good news of what Jesus had done, she wanted to repent on the spot. We prayed with her and trusted that she had made a genuine profession of faith. Several days later we found Innocencia barely

conscious in the streets, a bag of industrial strength glue at her feet ... My Brazilian team were devastated and angry; her repentance had seemed so genuine! We got her to her feet, cleaned her up at our centre, and spoke to her about the commitment she had made to Christ. 'Oh, Pastor Mez,' she said, 'I do love Jesus. I have turned from my sin. Last night I turned a client down and I am now only doing 6 bags a day instead of 10.' She beamed at me with pride, and I felt chastened. Was I really expecting that she'd be a finished product on day 1 of conversion?¹

Response is more than just a confession of Christ, but because it involves a *lifetime* of repentance, our strategy must involve a *lifetime* of discipleship. We are called not to get conversions, but to make obedient disciples. The response required from them is the whole of themselves, for the rest of their life. Therefore, the ministry needed by us must be to give the whole of our lives, to model discipleship that perseveres until the very end.

¹ Mez McConnell, *Church in Hard Places*, Crossway, 2016.