

How should the gospel function in the life of the local church?

By Mike Bullmore

A local church is healthy to the degree that: 1) its pastor-teachers are able--accurately, effectively and broadly--to bring the gospel to bear specifically into the real lives of the people; and 2) its people have a deep personal understanding of and deep personal appreciation for the gospel so as to be able to live in the good of the gospel daily. I call this the functional centrality of the gospel.

Critical to achieving this aim is *making clear* the connections between the gospel and its doctrinal implications and between the gospel and its behavioral implications. We could call these connections “gospel truths” and “gospel conduct” respectively.

Imagine three concentric circles. In the center is the gospel itself, perhaps best represented by the words of I Corinthians 15:3—“Christ died for our sins.” This simple phrase speaks of the reality of our sin, the necessity of divine punishment, and the wonderful provision of salvation from divine wrath by God in Christ. Paul speaks of this “good news” as the matter of “first importance” and we know well of the priority given to this message in his preaching and writing (cf. I Corinthians 2:1-4). Hence, its centrality. But in order for it to have a *functional* centrality it must be *connected* to areas where people live their lives.

Which introduces the second circle, Gospel Truths. These are specific, concrete doctrinal implications of the gospel, or, as Paul puts it, “doctrine that conforms to (i.e., takes its shape from) the glorious gospel” (I Timothy 1:10-11). These gospel truths bring the gospel to bear on areas of lived experience, particularly in the mind. They are useful in the renewing of the mind so that our thinking is more and more shaped by the truth of the gospel.

As we might expect, the book of Romans is particularly rich in these gospel truths. Let me give three examples. In Romans 5:1 Paul states, “*Therefore, since* we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Notice the logic of the verse. Something follows from the essential truth of the gospel. Our having peace with God is not the gospel itself but it is a powerful implication of the gospel—a “gospel truth”—and it will go a long way in renewing the thinking of a person who understands this truth so that their thinking conforms to the glorious gospel.

In Romans 8:1 we read, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Again, notice the argument. Paul is not here presenting the gospel itself but something that is true “now” (i.e., *because of* the gospel). But the implication is stunning and when fully comprehended by a believer it will revolutionize their mental world and the Gospel will *function* powerfully for them.

Romans 8:32 is a favorite. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not *also, along with him*, graciously give us all things.” Notice those words “also” and “along with him.” They speak of something that grows out of the

gospel. When people see the connection between the truth of the gospel itself (“He did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all”) and this gospel truth, this wonderful promise of God’s gracious provision of all that we need for our sanctification (cf. vv. 28-29) the gospel will *function* for the strengthening of their daily trust in God’s provision.

There is, beyond this shaping of our thinking by these doctrinal implications of the gospel, another level of connections that link the gospel to our conduct. In Galatians 2:14 Paul rebukes Peter for *conduct* that was “not in line with the truth of the Gospel” and in Philippians 1:27 he urges believers to “*conduct* yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.” In other words, one of the ways the gospel must function is by specifically informing behavior and we should read our Bibles with a special eye to detecting the connections it sets forth between the Gospel and our behavior. So, for example, when Paul appeals to the Corinthians to “flee from sexual immorality” he explicitly bases his appeal on the gospel—“you are not your own; you were bought at a price. *Therefore* honor God with your body” (I Corinthians 6:18-20). When he urges forgiveness he explicitly references the gospel as both motivation and model (Ephesians 4:32). When he tells husbands to love their wives he does so by linking his exhortation directly to the gospel (Ephesians 5:25). When he calls the Corinthians to an ongoing generosity he explicitly reminds them of God’s generosity in the gospel (II Corinthians 8:7,9; 9:12-13, 15). Many more examples could be given. Ultimately, all Christian behavior should flow out of the gospel so, while working hard to avoid triteness, connections should be made to *every* area of life.

One of the greatest challenges, yet, I’m convinced, one of the most important tasks of the Pastor-Teacher is to clearly *show* these connections so that people can specifically and intelligently bring the gospel to bear on both their thinking and their conduct. Thus does the gospel become *functionally* central to the individual Christian and to the local church.