

Relevant Gospel Message

Herb Hoefler

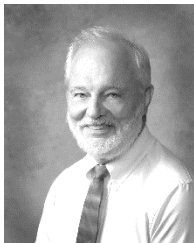
In my theological training, I was told that the two great messages of the Gospel were the assurance of forgiveness of sin and the assurance of heaven. Those were the burning issues of the church where Lutheranism was born. Central to these messages was the substitutionary atonement achieved by the crucifixion. However, both in my missionary service and in my congregational ministry, these were not the most important messages of the Gospel. In some contexts, in fact, I found these messages to be irrelevant and even counterproductive.

The first example I'll offer is based on my fifteen years of missionary service in India. I served in two contexts: basically half in rural India and half in urban India, half among Dalits (a.k.a. outcastes) and half among caste Hindus and Muslims.

What was the Gospel message that proved relevant to Dalits?: *my value as a beloved child of God*. For millennia, Dalits had received the message in Hinduism that they were unclean and despicable. Because of their unworthy previous lives, they were condemned to be born in this caste. They were to perform only the filthiest tasks of society, befitting their uncleanness.

The good news of the Gospel was that the message of Hinduism was untrue. Instead, they were beloved and valued children of God. They did not deserve cruel treatment and suppression. They deserved respect and opportunity and hope. This uplifting Gospel message gave them new self-respect, and the Church and mission gave them opportunity.

This Gospel message was more ontological than salvific. The crucifixion had a contributory Gospel message: that "God so loved" me that He sent His Son, and the



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Son so valued me that He went to the cross for me. But the forgiveness of sin through the substitutionary atonement was not the great liberating message.

What was the Gospel message that proved relevant to caste Hindus and Muslims?: *God is love*. So much of classical Hinduism and Islam is fear-based. In Hinduism, the gods are whimsical, and karma is heartless. In Islam, God is the fearsome lawgiver and judge. If Jesus is the Presence of God on earth, then God is not heartless and fearsome. He is like Jesus, reliably loving and caring.

The message of substitutionary atonement through the cross is irrelevant and often counter-productive. For Muslims, of course, the Quran teaches that Jesus was not crucified. Thus, we don't begin our presentation of the Gospel with that topic. We begin with the person and ministry of Jesus and what that says about the character of God. For Hindus, the message that God the Father needed the shedding of blood and the gruesome sacrifice of His Son to be forgiving is offensive to their non-violent sensitivities. It undercuts and contradicts the attractive message of His loving character. For both Hindus and Muslims, the thought is that a totally loving God, in His freedom and grace, could—and should—simply forgive. We don't begin with the cross of Jesus; we begin with His life.

For spiritist societies, the law situation is fear of spirits: *They can really hurt me. How do I control them? How do I please them?* The good news is the message of the ascended Lord, Jesus. All things are “under His feet,” including the spirit worlds. At the name of Jesus, “every knee must bow,” including all of the spirit world. You need not fear when the Holy Spirit has brought you to faith and the enthroned Jesus has become the Lord of your life.

The second example I'll offer is based on my pastoral ministry in the States. When I was teaching in Northeast India a few years back, a pastor asked me about the demise of the church in America. He was distraught that the denomination that had brought the Gospel to his region was now in decline. Christianity in that region is very strong and energized by vibrant youth leadership. He asked, “What should we do so that we don't end up like our mother church?” I was a bit taken aback but replied, “Don't just talk about heaven.”

Christianity should be an adventure. It should be an exciting life. Our youth should be energized and directed into a dynamic pilgrimage with Christ as the ascended Lord of their lives. Our teaching should be a training of the heart and spirit. But so much of our catechetics is teaching of correct doctrine. It is listening and learning, not *doing*. We do not harness and utilize the energy of our youth. We cater our programs and our preaching to the elderly, who run and finance the church.

Elsewhere in the world, where the church is dynamic and growing, it is youth-led. It is addressing the issues of the society. It is love in action. It is a worthwhile life. Worship services are driven by youthful energy. Adults are coaches and cheerleaders. The Gospel message is the ascended Lord and the vitalizing Spirit. The focus is not on

271 Relevant Gospel Message

the forgiveness of sin, but on the overcoming of sin. The good news is God leading and inspiring us to a worthwhile, meaningful life.

We must recognize that the Gospel is multifaceted. It is good news in different ways for different situations. It is the answer to all of life's needs and hopes, at every stage of life, and in every culture. The burning issues of sixteenth century Europe are not the issues of every culture in the twenty-first century. We are not relevantly proclaiming the Gospel by simply saying Jesus died on the cross and rose again. In every context the governing question must be, What is the good news from God relevant to this situation?