



A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact *you*

God's Vessels of Salvation Trusting the "Foolishness" of God

by Ryan Habbena

Through the world's eyes, surely Noah looked to be quite the fool. For 100 years he constructed a gigantic ark on dry land. While he did this he called people to repentance, for the Scriptures proclaim he was a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). I imagine Noah was subjected to a plethora of insults, scorn, and ridicule. However, he remained steadfast in his obedience to God; faithfully carrying out all God commanded him. God's "vessel of salvation" was seen by the world as complete foolishness in the days of Noah. It is no different today.

The ark saved Noah and his family from God's wrath upon sin. Noah's ark is a type of the ultimate "vessel of salvation" - the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is God's "vessel of salvation" to all who will place themselves under its shelter. Just as the ark was ridiculed by the world as foolishness, the Gospel is also. 1 Corinthians 1:18 proclaims: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Sadly, many in Evangelicalism are now accommodating the world's response.

The New "Practical" Gospel

The word "gospel" literally means good news. The good news preached in the Scriptures is that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). However, today a subtle, new gospel is taking its place. Instead of preaching "Jesus can save you from your sins," the new message is: "Jesus can save you from your problems." Sin, the wrath of God, hell, and other truths of Scripture are by very nature offensive to the unregenerate, and thus drive many people away from the church. Since the "church growth theory" has replaced obedience to God's word as the driving force behind many Evangelical churches, preaching the pure Gospel has been found to be a hindrance to perceived success. Thus, in order to be inoffensive to the unbelieving "seekers" who visit, practical principles are extracted from the Scriptures.¹ This provides a comfortable environment for the unbelieving "seeker," and thus the numbers within the church grow.

It is certainly true that Jesus is "wisest of the wise" and gives wonderful practical advice. Scripture indeed holds a wealth of wisdom. When the whole counsel of God is preached, the believer will become equipped with all that is necessary for Christian living. However, the glaring problem with only preaching the practical wisdom of Scripture is it neglects the true Gospel, which is the foundation of all these things. Everything is for

naught if the primary reason for the coming of Christ, "to seek and to save that which was lost," (Luke 19:10) is never preached, and therefore never accepted. Replacing the Gospel (which cuts to heart of mankind's most serious problem) with preaching strictly superficial practical advice is equivalent to driving a heart attack victim to the Dairy Queen instead of the hospital. Sure the ice cream may taste good, but there is a much more pressing issue at hand.

In this disturbing downward trend, the hard truths that are essential to the very nature of the Gospel, such as the wrath of God, sin, and the atonement are not preached, or at best given in small doses over a long period of time. Therefore, the heart of the Christian faith has been all but removed in order to appeal to a modern worldly culture. For instance, one proponent of this trend notes the central focus of their weekend services. He states: "On the weekends we focus on a three-part grid. We ask ourselves: Is this real? Is this relevant? Is this rockin?"² He continues to note that the service is made "real" by watching movie or television clips, and made "relevant" by playing secular music. This well illustrates how the focus has been gravely misplaced in many modern Evangelical churches. The most essential question is being ignored: "Does it produce repentance?"

The Power of the Pure Gospel

1 Corinthians 15 gives, in my estimation, the most succinct presentation of the pure Gospel. Paul declares: "For I delivered unto you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3,4). Notice that Paul did not appeal to their superficial problems in trying to present the Gospel to them. Rather, he declared the Gospel to them "of first importance!" He also admonished the Corinthians that if they did not hold fast these truths that they "have believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2).

Why was Paul so insistent on preserving the pure Gospel? It was because, as a minister of the Gospel, he knew that it was the only message able to save souls. It was the only message that produced true repentance. He was so aware of this when he preached the Gospel to the Corinthians, he proclaimed:

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

Paul knew the Gospel was the power of God unto salvation. He was so aware of this that he preached the Gospel plainly, in much fear and trembling, so that he would not interfere with its pure, God-ordained message. In his book, *Ashamed of the Gospel*,³ John MacArthur comments: "Inherent in the Gospel message is the power of an omnipotent

God. That power alone is sufficient to save the vilest sinner and transform the hardest heart - apart from any human arguments, illustrations, or ingenuity.”⁴ Paul knew it was the message that was of utmost importance - not the medium. Few today tremble at the responsibility of conveying the pure message of the Gospel.

Trusting the "Foolishness" of God

Noah trusted and obeyed God's means of salvation, even though it was ridiculed as foolishness. We do well if we learn from Noah's example. For "by faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

In God's word, success is not judged in numbers. Noah preached to the world's inhabitants and didn't produce a single convert, save his family. In many contemporary Evangelical circles Noah would be told give it up, or find a different method, because whatever he was doing was just not working. On the contrary, however, true success lies in trusting and obeying God and His commands, no matter what the cost.

Preaching the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ may indeed bring about ridicule, insults, and accusations of being "out of touch." Yet, those who are redeemed can indeed see the power and wisdom in the "foolishness" of God. Just as the ark was the only "vessel of salvation" in the days of Noah, so will be the Gospel on the Day of Judgment. Therefore, let all of God's servants not shrink back from preaching the pure message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21b).

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End Notes

1. This is often how many churches rationalize their methods. As long as they strictly preach the non-offensive, "practical" portions of Scripture, they still may call themselves "Biblical."
2. Tim Celek, "A Look at a Seeker-Centered Church" in, *Make Room For the Boom . . . or Bust*, Gary L. McIntosh, ed., (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997), 76.

3. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993) This book critiques the current "user-friendly" movement and addresses many of the biblical and practical problems that arise from this trend. It is highly recommended.
 4. *Ibid.*, 129.
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