

Introduction

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope and help for life, light and liberty in a world enslaved to darkness, death and despair. All that plagues us is a result of human rebellion called sin. Sin is only overcome by a Savior, and only the Son saves. Any message or ministry which detracts from the centrality of Christ offers empty promises and leaves behind a wake of destruction.

Many programs, ministries, organizations, movements and even local churches do not share the biblical emphasis on the sufficiency and necessity of the gospel. Instead, they exalt self-help solutions and emotional experiences as the key to lasting change. But, as Paul says in Galatians 1:6-9, a false gospel is really no gospel at all.

How are we to assess whether a program, ministry, organization, movement or even another local church has compromised the gospel in favor of something more palatable?¹ And how are we to respond to those which have?

Areas of Concern

The hope of the world is the gospel of Jesus Christ.² Any teaching which adds to or subtracts from the biblical gospel is false and therefore inherently hazardous. Such teaching promises liberty, but provides slavery and condemnation.³ The concern of The Village Church in assessing various ministries is the degree to which that individual ministry is faithful to the gospel. Though possible perversions of the gospel are countless, a few common threads arise. Within most, if not all, ministries which distort the gospel of Jesus Christ, one or both of the following characteristics exists:

1. Unbiblical anthropology
2. Vague pluralistic spirituality

¹ This paper will henceforth use the term "ministry" to represent any organization, movement, program, church, parachurch ministry or other such expression which seeks to present spiritual realities and aims at some form of personal transformation. It is acknowledged that many of the ministries themselves might not agree with the term "ministry" as a label, but it is necessary for ease of communication to have one simple term.

² For explanations of the gospel, see "[What is the Gospel?](#)" and "[The Gospel of Jesus Christ](#)" in our online resource library.

³ The relationship between the gospel and freedom is abundantly expressed in the Scriptures. See in particular John 8:31-36. Supposed liberty, which is not founded upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is neither lasting nor ultimate. Only in Christ can man find spiritual freedom.

Unbiblical Anthropology

At the heart of all ministry is an underlying anthropology. That is, "what does this ministry believe to be true about humanity?" Most deficient ministries function from an unbiblical assessment of the human condition. Rather than being God-centered in approach, the work is inherently humanistic.⁴

One expression of this humanism is the exaltation of self-worth, self-esteem and self-love. In effect, this is simply an exaltation of self. To be sure, the Scriptures do teach that man has inherent value (Matt. 10:31, Luke 12:7). Man was created by God to be His image bearer to the creative order. While man has fallen through sin, and thus this image is obscured and corrupted, he still retains a great deal of dignity, honor and worth.

However, the Bible also teaches that man is vapor and grass when compared to the glory of our Creator (Dan. 4:35, Ps. 40:6). Rather than commending self-exaltation, the Bible teaches that the exaltation of self is at the root of our sinful condition (Rom. 1:18-25). Far from curing our condition, the acclaim of self is instead a very clear demonstration of the sickness from which we suffer. Sin is by its very nature oriented inward to the praise of the self.

A second expression of this humanism is the declaration of the initial innocence of each person. Men and women, it is claimed, are essentially good (or at least morally neutral) and primarily corrupt only through environment or experience. This view is contrary to the biblical portrait of a humanity, which is mired in sin from birth and is by nature (not merely nurture) opposed to the person, purpose and plans of our King (Eph. 2:1-3, Col. 1:21, Ps. 51:5). Given this deficient and destructive depiction of human nature, such teachings focus principally upon what others have done to the participants and only secondarily (if at all) on the rebellion and transgression of the participants themselves.

Biblically, mankind is neither morally neutral nor worthy of worship. We are desperately and utterly ruined, wretched and in need of redemption.

⁴ *Humanism* is a secular philosophy which tends to downplay if not outright deny God and His glory by centering life upon *human* experience, reason and feeling.

Vague Pluralistic Spirituality

If the only hope of the world is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the exaltation of the person and work of Jesus Christ must be central for the purpose of transformation.

However, many ministries contently exalt a “higher power” or principle rather than the one and only crucified and risen Lord. Such undefined spirituality, though purporting to be liberating, actually leads only to greater slavery (See Col. 2 in particular). The gospel of Jesus Christ is the sole solution to the broken human condition.⁵

While numerous leaders and participants in various ministries may personally claim submission to Christ, often He is not officially exalted as the singular solution to our slavery to self, sin and Satan. We see such vague spirituality in ministries with stated philosophies such as, “To meet people where they are, no matter what, and help them discover answers within themselves.”⁶

By focusing participants on themselves, these teachings lead people away from their true hope and freedom and further into the labyrinth of pride and attempted self-helps which plague our souls and plunge us deeper into despair and arrogance. The Bible speaks not of finding answers within self, but rather of the need of an external and alien righteousness, that of Jesus Christ, which must be imputed to those who trust in Him. Our hope does not come from within; it comes from Him who was incarnate, crucified, risen and exalted for us and our salvation.

This vague spirituality is further expressed in ministries which ascribe belief in “a Power greater than ourselves” and “God as we understood him.”⁷ However, the Bible does not whisper of a veiled, vague and undefined God of our own understanding but, instead, loudly and clearly reveals a triune God accomplishing and applying redemption to a broken people through the distinct yet unified work of Father, Son and Spirit. To compromise on His exclusivity is to concede the gospel itself. Such compromises offer no everlasting hope or help.

Conclusion

In assessing any ministry’s spiritual benefit, it is helpful to ask the following diagnostic questions:

1. What sickness does this ministry diagnose?
2. What cure does this ministry prescribe?

The Bible is utterly clear that the fundamental problem with the world is the proud rebellion of wicked creatures against a just and loving Creator. Furthermore, the only solution is the provision He has made in the person and work of Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that many ministries which we deem dangerous have brought about powerful and seemingly

transformative experiences in the life of many participants. However, measurable statistics and profound experiences are not the ultimate criteria by which ministries are to be assessed. Rather, it is imperative that various programs, experiences, events, ministries and teachings that hold out the hope of spiritual transformation be evaluated by the authoritative and sufficient Word of God.⁸ When weighed according to the Scriptures, many are found wanting.

Such ministries present grave danger to participants by extending something other than the gospel as a means of salvation, sanctification or spirituality. As Paul states in Galatians, the gospel is not only for justification but is the solitary means by which God accomplishes the entire process of redemption in the lives of His people (Gal. 3:3).

Responding to False Teaching in Various Ministries

For those members and attendees who are currently involved in ministries which do not uphold this truth, we plead for you to reconsider your participation in light of these expressed concerns. Misdiagnosing a disorder leads to mistreatment with disastrous effects. Only the gospel can both diagnose and cure what ails us. In light of these theological compromises, The Village strongly discourages participation, promotion or endorsement of any such ministries. Those who promote such ministries in the context of The Village will be lovingly engaged by the leadership of the church for their own good and that of the church.

The one exception to this general discouragement would be for the person who enters those ministries simply for the sake of missional engagement. From this perspective, seasoned and mature believers intentionally enter into ministries specifically for the work of leading participants to Christ and subsequently into the local church. This is a good and necessary work, but it must not be entered into lightly. Due to the dangers of the false teaching to which you would be exposed, we encourage a great deal of prior caution, discernment and counsel.

For those being encouraged to participate in such a ministry or with friends or family involved, we encourage grace, love and humility in your response. Bear in mind that not everyone who participates in a ministry necessarily espouses the underlying theological precepts of that ministry. Encourage those who have participated or are considering participation to read and carefully consider the concerns expressed in this document.

⁵ For more on the exclusivity of Christ, see the following articles from our online resource library: “[Is Jesus the Only Way?](#)”, “[What Must I do to be Saved?](#)” and “[What If I believe in God, but Not in Jesus?](#)”

⁶ <http://www.discovery-training.com/about.php>

⁷ From the traditional 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

⁸ As 1 Thessalonians 5:21 states, we are to “test everything; hold fast what is good.”

Getting Involved in the Local Church

The local church is the primary instrument through which God saves and sanctifies His people. It is the principal and indispensable instrument through which the gospel is transmitted and lives are transformed for the glory of God and in it His abundant wisdom is displayed and celebrated (Eph. 3:10).

For those who are uninvolved in a local church or only wading in the shallows, we encourage you to more deeply dive into the life of a congregation. There will be struggles and challenges to be sure, but those difficulties can lead to great freedom, joy and hope (Rom. 5:3-5).

At The Village, the primary vehicles in which we facilitate discipleship are Home Groups and Recovery Groups. Members or attendees who want to get plugged in to the life of The Village are encouraged to stop by Connection Central before or after a service to ask about GroupConnect, Steps, Support and service opportunities. They are also encouraged to be active on The City. We would love to see you join us in our desire to glorify God by making disciples through gospel-centered worship, gospel-centered community, gospel-centered service and gospel-centered multiplication.

If you have comments or need clarification regarding this document, please contact a member of the elder body or pastoral staff of The Village, and we would be glad to help shepherd you through your concerns.

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