

The Salt-Free Gospel

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You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, it will become tasteless and no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. (Mt.5:13 PAR)

We are witnessing today one of the most tragic events of the last few centuries – a precipitous decline of Christian faith and practice in the Western world. And while a great deal has been written regarding this issue, both the cause and the cure for this demise seems to have eluded many of those who have tried to make sense of what is happening to us.

We must of course acknowledge the influence of our culture and its rejection of any Christian view of reality, such that the university has now replaced the church as our primary hope for the future, and science has supposedly removed any need for God in our understanding of the universe. And while this is a serious matter, we must also acknowledge that the Church began its history in a similarly hostile environment of Greek and Roman culture. Hedonism had taken over the empire, and the Christian teachings were viewed by the Roman elite as destabilizing and dangerous. Yet the young Church thrived and grew by leaps and bounds. So we need to be careful about blaming culture for the decline in our influence and standing in the world.

Perhaps the problem is not so much with society as it is with Christianity itself. What if we have lost something vital and as a result are no longer salt and light to the world? Could it be that the reason we are losing our young people and fast becoming a minority is that we are no longer offering the world what it most needs? And what if the greatest barrier to recovering our life-giving qualities is our own unwillingness to take a hard look at where we are and what we have done to the very message we were supposed to bring to a dying world?

A Salt-Free Gospel

The first place we need to look is at the kind of Gospel we offer. What is it that we really invite people to? Unfortunately, when we look closely at the gospel message the way it is most often presented, it seems to bear little resemblance to the Gospel of Jesus and Paul.

On the Left, we see a gospel of social reform. According to this message, the basic problem we face in the world is injustice and oppression. Jesus came as a revolutionary to free us from the evils of society so we

could live in peace and safety, as well as in relative comfort from poverty and sickness. The gospel calls us to change the world and make it a better place.

On the Right, we see a gospel that pays lip service to the problems of society, but it has a radically different solution. Here the gospel becomes very personal, where people are offered a pardon for their sin and a place in heaven after they die. And once they have secured their afterlife, they should – by virtue of the gift they have received – try to be more kind to those around them.

But neither one has much to say about transforming the hearts and minds of individual believers. Where is the invitation of Christ to “Follow Me”? Where do we hear the Great Commission taken seriously, to “make disciples” rather than make converts?

Almost everywhere today in Christian circles it is simply taken for granted that you can be a Christian and have absolutely no interest in becoming a disciple or surrendering your life to God for Him to mold and shape. We can accept Jesus as our Savior so we can go to heaven when we die without ever considering whether or not we want Him to interfere with our life or call us to change.

But no church leader in the first century would have thought such a thing possible. It would never cross their mind that accepting Jesus as Lord could be any different from accepting Him as Savior. For the early Christians, those were just two ways of saying the same thing. Coming to Christ was a life-changing experience that began a process of continuous transformation for the rest their lives. That was the Gospel. That is what they were called to.

What we have today are salt-free versions of the gospel that leave out any real connection to a renewal of the heart and mind. Those are treated as secondary issues which can be taken up later, if at all. The result has been a religion full of nominal believers who feel secure about their own afterlife, but have no confidence in Jesus as Lord or Mentor for their life. Small wonder that the world finds this to be a dry and “tasteless” message.

A Salt-Free Sanctification

As distressing as a salt-free gospel might be, it is only the tip of the iceberg. In the few places where people try to take the Christian life seriously, the methods employed are almost universally devoid of the transforming power we see in the New Testament. What passes for a call to holy living today is usually a dressed up salt-free version of behavior modification.

“If you try really hard to do the right things and to live up to God's standards, God will give you the strength to do it.” Seriously? Didn't Paul say that if you try really hard to do the right things you will actually come to the end of yourself (Rom.7)? Haven't you experienced burnout from trying too hard to

do the right things? Yet this is what many of our leading theologians call the path to spiritual growth. And this is what we hear preached every week across the Christian world.

We even have salt-free theologies in place to explain why Christians are not yet free of sin. One approach is to say that we are “just forgiven” but still basically sinners. Nothing has really changed in regard to our identity. Seems to me it is really hard to reconcile that with New Testament teaching on becoming a new creation in Christ. Not to mention it is entirely missing salt of any kind.

Perhaps the most common explanation for sin in the life of a believer is to say that our old nature is still alive and well, and the best we can do is to use our willpower to repress our old nature and encourage the new one. Which would be why we continue to struggle between what is right and wrong for us, and why we should ignore our feelings and “do the right thing” regardless of how we feel. But that is like saying we should put all our efforts into cleaning the outside of the cup and forget about trying to renew our core being. How is that in any way compatible with Jesus' teachings about becoming a “good tree” that produces good fruit by nature?

The other main approach to salt-free sanctification is to emphasize training for ministry. What many places call discipleship is really a program of training on how to run small groups or engage in evangelism (i.e. promoting our salt-free gospel). The basic assumption is that the more you are involved in ministry, the more spiritual you are, or will be. Growth is then fairly synonymous with developing skills for ministry and doing *more* ministry. Again, there is little to no training on how to participate with God to change our inner life to become more and more like Jesus – more loving, more forgiving, more generous.

And if growing up in Christ is primarily a matter of applying lessons to our life by means of sheer willpower, then where is the salt? Where is the power of God to change lives? How can we offer life to a dying world when we have almost no evidence in our own lives that God is fundamentally relational in nature and knows how to work in us to transform our heart and mind? All the world sees is a subculture that runs by another set of rules than the one they have. Nothing salty there.

A Salt-Free Relationship to God

As a result of our salt-free gospel and salt-free sanctification, what most Christians refer to as their *relationship* with God is a dramatically reduced-sodium version, at best. Generally this kind of relationship bears a very strong resemblance to an affinity someone might have for their favorite author. They have a good collection of his writings, they can quote nice passages from his books, and they like to meet with others who are like-minded in order to discuss the fascinating thoughts that are raised by the author's insight into human nature. This may be nice, but it is not a relationship.

Another common way in which “relationship with God” is expressed might be better reframed as an *arrangement* with God. I have accepted God's version of the story which says I am a sinner need Jesus to save me, and in response to my confession God has written my name down in a Book of Life so that I will be admitted into heaven when I die. And for that I am grateful enough to go to church and listen to the pastor and try my best to do good until I die. But once again we need to ask, Where is the salt?

What if we can actually have an interactive relationship with God that awakens our soul and changes us from the inside out? What if we can discern His voice and His promptings toward holiness? What if He can heal the wounds we have carried for decades? What if He can open our eyes to realities that will impact our heart and mind in ways we cannot imagine? What if God can literally change how our mind works and how we respond to the world around us? And what if this relationship is something we can actually experience, and not just think about? Now that would be salty!

Salt-Free Efforts to Restore the Church

To be fair, many people over the years have taken notice of the impotence which permeates the church. Accordingly, many theories have been put forward to explain this disappointing state of affairs and to offer some kind of solution to the problems we face.

One such approach that we hear every now and then is a call for *revival*. If only God's people would earnestly pray for revival, and if only God would respond with a mighty wind, we could all be changed in an instant and become the people we were supposed to be all along.

But this is to say that God has not given us something we need for life, contrary to Peter's declaration that “He has already given us all things pertaining to life and godliness.” This also assumes that God will zap us into spiritual maturity, if only we would want it bad enough. Nothing like this is remotely promised in the New Testament. And while transformation is a real thing, and while we can experience tremendous changes in a short period of time, this image of God rescuing our sanctification is sorely misplaced. He has already made that possible. The real problem is that we no longer know how to engage with Him and build the kind of interactive relationship that results in an abundant life.

Another fairly seriously mistaken approach has been the wide-spread effort to offer a consumer-oriented religious experience. Sometimes referred to as a “Seeker-Friendly” gospel, this was truly a “gospel lite” rather than a Gospel Light. The basic idea is that God does not want to make you uncomfortable or ask anything of you other than whatever you “feel like” you want from Him. We hope you enjoy the service and that you want to come back for more. And if you eventually do decide you want to participate, we have another service that will tell you how you can become a more active part of our seeker-friendly group. And of course, that second group is securely rooted in the same problems we have outlined above. So one salt-free option leads to another.

Another attempt to recover what we have lost relies heavily on various religious experiences to assure us that God is close and loves us. Now in some cases this might actually be a step in the right direction, because this approach at least acknowledges that God is alive and active and wants to interact with us. That is all well and good. And in some people it may even foster a kind of compassion for others. But we are still left with a real void in terms of how this relationship can grow into something beyond feelings, or how we can become free of old wounds or bondage to sinful habits. It still lacks the substance and depth we see in the New Testament that salts our very soul.

Perhaps most distressing of all attempts to rescue the modern church is the rise of prosperity theology which basically tells us God wants to make you rich and prosperous in everything you do. It has gained such traction that one might wonder what Jesus meant when He said that He had no where to lay His head. Or what might be gained by Christians indulging themselves with a disproportionate share of the world's goods. Of course, deconstructing this myth is way beyond what we are trying to do here. But it must be said that this is mostly the American Dream dressed up in Christian terminology. And it does not preach very well in the Sudan or in Ethiopia where basic survival is a major problem. But more than that, this is a glaring example of a gospel that does nothing at all for a person's soul. It is salt-free in every sense of the word.

Restoring Salt to the Christian Life

So what is this salt that we keep missing? How do we find it? How do we restore it?

For starters, we need to go back to the beginning and restate the gospel as it was given to us by Jesus and Paul – that *the kingdom of God (God's reign) is now available to all who want to be reconciled to God (through cleansing and forgiveness) and become His apprentices, to be transformed as they learn from Him how to live a live with God in the midst of a broken world.*

With this as our gospel, we are led very naturally then into a well-salted relationship with God that is both tangible and life-changing, as well as a new identity in Christ which is prepared to engage with Him for the kinds of changes we need – changes in us that we are unable to do on our own.

This relationship then brings us necessarily into a life of ongoing sanctification and renewal, where every aspect of our being is gradually transformed more and more into the image of Jesus. As we learn from Him how to participate with the work He wants to do in us, we experience freedom from sin, healing of our old wounds, and an ever-increasing capacity to love others as Jesus loves us.

Of course, we need a lot of help with this process, because nearly all of our practices have been seriously infected beyond recognition by the performance-driven, try-hard approaches which now dominate the Christian world. To that end, I would refer the reader to the various resources available from those who

teach *Christian Spiritual Formation* (see KingdomFormation.org). My hope here is to simply awaken those who are hungry for more, to tell them they are not alone, and that our anemic Christian experience is a problem that has an answer.

The Christian church is dying in the West. But not for lack of trying, and not because the culture turned against us. The church is dying because by and large we have lost our saltiness – despite all of our busyness and Christian ministry.

My prayer is for Christians everywhere to refuse the salt-free version of Christianity and instead desire more of what God has for us – to refuse to settle for a religion of self-effort, or a gospel that omits any invitation to a new way of life, or any teaching on the Christian life that leaves out the means by which we can be transformed by engaging with God. Rather, that we would seek God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and body. And that we would begin to relearn what it means to be an apprentice of Jesus and to receive from Him all that we need for life.

Then one day we may again discover that we have become light and salt to the earth.