

8-20-1967

The Provocative Gospel

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Recommended Citation

Chalk, John Allen, "The Provocative Gospel" (1967). *Herald of Truth Audio*. Paper 177.
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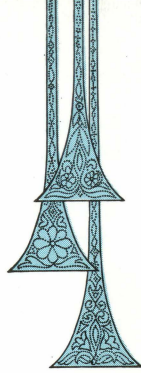
The Provocative Gospel



Number 812
TRANSCRIPT OF THE

Herald of Truth

..... *radio programs*



HIGHLAND CHURCH OF CHRIST
radio program

P. O. Box 2439 Abilene, Texas 79604

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

The Provocative Gospel

This man Jesus pulled no punches! From the beginning of His ministry He spoke clearly about His aims and intentions. His initial announcement in the hometown synagogue of Nazareth startled those who had watched Him grow to adulthood. After reading Isaiah's prophecy regarding the work of God's Messianic servant, that is, "to preach good tidings to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to bring recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord;" He said to His fellow worshipers, "Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:17-21). Later in His ministry He explained, "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). He also stated: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). As opposition mounted and prejudice toward Him increased, our Lord made even plainer explanation of His purposes for coming into the world of lost men. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

The "Gospel of Christ" is that message, preached by God's messengers and accepted by obedient men, of what Jesus did in His life and death, and what He does for all of us today who surrender to Him. Listen to Paul's sum-

mary of this message of God's salvation: "Now I make known unto you, brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye received, wherein also ye stand, by which also ye are saved, if ye hold fast the word which I preached unto you, except ye believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:1-4).

If the people of Jesus' day thought His purposes weird and unnecessary, what more can we expect in our own day? Some of you probably are wondering right now, "Why is this man attempting to present Jesus Christ and His Gospel to me?" The "Gospel" was a strange message to the first century world. It struck ancient ears like it often strikes modern ears. "The Cross of Christ," "the word of the cross" "Jesus Christ and him crucified," these are Paul's summaries of the Gospel's message (I Corinthians 1:17, 18, 21). Paul also frankly admits that this message is not one delivered "in wisdom of words" (I Corinthians 1:17). In fact, he says, "the word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness" (I Corinthians 1:18). But, never forget this, Paul also states, "As God in his wisdom ordained, the world failed to find him by its wisdom, and he chose to save those who have faith by the folly of the Gospel" (I Corinthians 1:21 NEB). To unbelieving Jews, this "Gospel" was a stumblingblock; they couldn't accept the fact that Israel's destiny was fulfilled in Christ's ministry and message. To arrogant Gentiles, the "Gospel" was sheer idiocy; human might and wisdom, not surrender to crucifixion, was the way to whatever "salvation" man could know (I Corinthians 1:23). But to obedient believers, followers of Christ, the "Gospel" revealed and offered them "the power of God, and the wisdom of God," yea, God's "righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (I Corinthians 1:24, 30).

Now these sharp reactions, these different attitudes and responses to the "Gospel" of Christ should not surprise us. The "Gospel" is that kind of message that causes reaction and response. One recent writer has said, "It is quite possible that we never hear the gospel until we have been made uneasy by it: until we have ferreted out in every case not so much what it is that pleases us as what it is that offends us" (p. 75, Paul Scherer, *The Word God Sent*). How clearly and emphatically Paul demonstrates this in the thoughts just discussed from *I Corinthians*, chapter one. For some a "stumblingblock," for others "foolishness," and for all who saw Jesus as God sent Him among men. "the power and salvation of God" (I Corinthians 1:17-31).

Our subject today, "The Provocative Gospel," suggests that the "Gospel" as faith-producing testimony demonstrates what I have just said. The "Gospel," in simple terms, is the story of Jesus Christ, who He was, what He did, and what He does for men today. That "story," by God's plan and at His direction, must be told, preached, taught. When men hear the "Gospel," they consider its claims, they examine its authenticity, they weigh its effectiveness in bringing clarity to their confused lives. Response to such a "word" as this is either faith in Christ as Savior and Lord or rejection of the testimony about Him.

We call the first four books of the New Testament "the Gospels" because they offer eye-witness testimony of Jesus' life, identity, and teachings. John, in the twentieth chapter of the *Gospel* he wrote, states the purpose of these four inspired accounts of the life of Christ. "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name" (John 2:30, 31). John says, "We have recorded these events and sayings from Jesus' life to create your faith in and acceptance of Him." No greater purpose ever possessed a writer than that which governed the writers of the New Testament Gospels — the creation of faith in "Jesus as the Christ," the faith that brings us God's life! The New Testament "Gospels" were written to provoke response from you and me — the response of saving faith in Christ.

We also say that the "Gospel" is a response-producing message because of Paul's remarks about this message of Jesus Christ. In his *Epistle to the Romans*, the apostle asks this question of those who would believe in Jesus, "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14). He concludes, later in the same chapter, "So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word (or "Gospel") of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

The "Gospel" creates response in our hearts and lives because, in the second place, it is God's call for our repentance. When Jesus commissioned His apostles to preach the "Gospel" throughout the world, He said, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46, 47). Notice those basic and recurring elements of the "Gospel" message—Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Observe our Lord's summary of the "Gospel" to be preached "unto all the nations" by the apostles — "repentance and remission of sins." This explains why Peter could speak so emphatically

and directly ten days following his commission by Christ. At the conclusion of the "Gospel's" first presentation after Christ's instructions to the apostles, the listeners were moved to ask, "What shall we do?" Whereupon Peter and the other apostles replied quickly, "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

The "Gospel" is a response-producing message because, in the third place, it is God's complete self-disclosure. Jesus explains what I mean when He says, "All things have been delivered unto me of my Father: and no one knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). Christ's "Gospel" reveals God to all who obediently respond to it.

This was the very aim of our Lord's life and work — the disclosure of God and the opportunity for man's personal relationship with God, Jesus made this clear in the following statement: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Later, in the same conversation with His apostle Philip, Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Christ is the heart of and reason for the "Gospel." The goals for which He lived and died in realization of God's plan for man's redemption constitute the "Gospel" message. It is a response-producing proclamation because here in the "Gospel," and in the "Gospel" alone, man sees God and personally knows Him.

The "Gospel" elicits response because it is a challenging, dividing word. Pictures of a sad, ineffectual, brittle, sentimental Jesus do not properly portray the Christ of eye-witness testimony. The *Gospels* reveal a convicted, purposeful, resourceful, penetrating, courageous, obedient Servant of God in Jesus of Nazareth. If you want a picture of compassionate strength and unswerving principle, forget the modern attempts to describe Him. Honestly examine and study the inspired testimony of those who lived with Him, heard Him teach, watched Him die, and saw Him live again!

I've said all that to say that many people get the impression from somewhere that Jesus' teachings, the "Gospel," is a mild, bedtime story of human goodness. But Jesus Himself said, "Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I came to set man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law; and a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matthew 10:34-36). Following

these stern words, Jesus explained that no human relationship receives priority over the disciple's relationship with Him (Matthew 10:37). The one who follows Him, Jesus says, must "take his cross" on this life-long journey (Matthew 10:38). Christ's disciple must learn the paradox that true, lasting life is found only in the surrender of life for the fulfillment of God's plan in one's life (Matthew 10:39). Christ's word drives us to sincere self-examination. Christ's word demands complete honesty regarding our purposes and aims in life. Christ's word allows for no half-way measures. Total, all-consuming, and continual surrender to Him is the message of the "Gospel." It is a challenging message that separates reality from unreality in the lives of those who accept it.

There is a fifth reason why the "Gospel" is a response-producing message. The "Gospel" actually constitutes God's invitation to all men in spiritual and moral need. Jesus warmly encourages us today, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Any invitation, whether from man or God, has to be answered — in one way or another. The "Gospel" is God's invitation to us to come and know Him, to come and live with Him, to secure the greatest possible happiness in realization of His purposes for our lives.

Jesus describes our response to the "Gospel." Mark's account of Christ's commission of the apostles to take the "Gospel" to all the world reads like this: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). The next verse, as Jesus continues His instructions to these first preachers of the "Gospel," says, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16). This is all that Mark gives of Christ's words during that final day of instruction before He returned to heaven. The significance of Jesus' description of our response to the "Gospel," is seen when both verses fifteen and sixteen of *Mark* are read together. "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:15, 16). The "Gospel" is a response-producing message, even as Jesus Himself suggests in this description.

The ministry of Christ, His work of redemption announced in the "Gospel," changed God's attitude toward wayward mankind. In the *Letter to the Romans*, Paul explains that God "passed over," that is, did not deal fully at

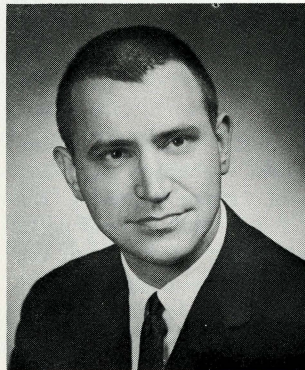
the time with the sins of the world prior to Christ's life. Now, however, the apostle explains, "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Earlier in the same chapter, Paul says, "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (Romans 3:9).

With the appearance of Christ and His sacrificial death, God's forbearance regarding man's sin was at an end. Now all men, regardless of situation in life, could receive God's forgiveness and life in Christ and were therefore held accountable before God (Romans 3:21-25).

Paul preached essentially the same message at Athens during one of his missionary tours. Listen! "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given the assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:30, 31). The resurrection of Christ is God's promise of universal judgment. But the death and resurrection of Christ is God's offer of pardon from all sin and the gift of eternal life. When we preach Christ, we speak of that "day when God shall judge the secrets of men, according to (the) gospel, by Jesus Christ" (Romans 2:16).

As testimony that creates faith in Christ; as God's call for our repentance; as the full disclosure of God to man; as the word of challenge; as Christ's personal invitation; and as the assurance that a day of judgment is certain; the "Gospel" of Jesus Christ provokes, demands, produces, creates response in the hearts of all who hear!

My friend, you can't listen to the "Gospel" and just walk away or turn to another station! His provocative call is God's loving offer of new life, new purpose, new power, and new hope. Believe in Jesus Christ! Repent of all sin in your life! Respond to Jesus in baptism! Receive the life of God! And thus prepare for the judgment of God!



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.