

4. The Ministration of Hope

Witness to the “gospel of resurrection” is grounded in an accurate, truly biblical understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The mere fact that Paul’s assertion (Acts 23:6) baffles – or is lost upon – so many is but one more proof that relatively few Christians know Christ through the scriptural revelation of Him that begins in the first chapter of Genesis and fills the salvation history culminating with His incarnation. One man has aptly quipped that the average Christian cares only that Jesus was born sinless and lived a sinless life in order to die a substitutionary death for the sake of their forgiveness; other than that, He might just as well have lived in a cave. But to know Christ in that limited way is to have, at best, a seriously compromised perception of Him; left without a more complete picture, it’s quite possible to miss the true Jesus altogether.

Discerning Jesus’ person and work means recognizing the cosmic and comprehensive scope of God’s purpose and accomplishment in Him. The salvation of the individual can only be rightly understood within the larger work of creational renewal and restoration; indeed, that framework radically alters the common notion of what *salvation* entails. For multitudes who profess faith in Christ, being “saved” means little (if anything) more than being set free from condemnation by the “divine exchange” of their sin and guilt for Jesus’ righteousness (merit). For some, this transaction amounts to a “fire insurance policy” by which they’re freed to live their lives as they see fit while having the full assurance of heaven when they die. In contrast to this “easy-believism,” others stress that Christ’s atonement enables, and so heightens the Christian’s obligation toward, obedience to God’s law. This obedience is said to have no effect on the believer’s righteousness (“justification”), but is essential to his progress in personal holiness (“sanctification”) and critical to his assurance of salvation. Still others give little thought to what it means to be saved beyond the conviction that the believer should embrace a Christian lifestyle in the present while awaiting either Jesus’ return or his own entrance into heaven at death.

These considerations are critically important in view of the fact that – whether he knows it or not – the Christian’s life is the essence of his testimony to the gospel. At the one extreme, Christians testify that the “good news” of the Christian religion is that, by believing in Jesus, a person can be forgiven of his sins and know that he will go to heaven when he dies; at the other, they testify that the “good news” isn’t really so good after all. True, the gospel holds out the promise of heaven for the faithful, but the path between here and there is paved with the hard work of “self-denial” and the rigors of striving to conform to God’s lawful demands. Whether labeled the “moral law” or the “law of Christ,” the testimony is typically the same: Being a Christian consists in rolling up one’s sleeves and getting about the business of living a “godly” life.

Flawed understanding always results in flawed witness in life and word. The *form* of godliness in pristine doctrine and practice may be present, but the gospel is left stripped of its essential power, and therefore of its power to save (cf. Romans 1:16 with 2 Timothy 3:1ff; also Colossians 2:20-23 with 1 Timothy 4:1-6). And when the gospel is compromised, forfeited or lost, so is its priceless jewel: The “good news” – the gospel of resurrection – is no longer a message of *hope*. Paul recognized this, both *positively* (Acts 23:6, 24:14-15, 26:6-7, 28:16-20; cf. also Romans 5:1-2, 8:20-25, 15:1-13; Ephesians 4:1-6; Colossians 1:24-27; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; 1 Timothy 1:1, 4:7-10; Titus 2:11-13) and *negatively* (Colossians 1:19-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Hope is elicited and secured in the Christian's heart when he understands, owns and orders his life by the gospel of resurrection – the good news of *life out of death* in Jesus Christ. But that which floods his soul will also fill his testimony (unspoken as well as spoken) to those around him; gospel witness bears the fragrance of hope. But the opposite is true: Where the Christian's hope is absent or emasculated his testimony to Christ will be something other than His gospel.

- a. Discerning the inseparable and reciprocal relationship between the gospel and hope depends upon a right understanding of both. With respect to the latter, hope is perhaps most succinctly described as the *disposition of faith*: That is to say, hope is what characterizes those who have faith in God in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reason is that faith is directed not toward God as such (the mere fact that He exists), but toward what Father, Son and Spirit have accomplished and what that accomplishment means for the present and the future. The life of faith is living into the truth of the inaugurated new creation – God's reconciliation of all things to Himself in Christ – with the recognition that it is the surety of the consummation to come. Hope is the disposition and unfaltering response of men to the already/not yet of the kingdom of God.

This is why Paul insisted that he was on trial for the hope bound up in the truth of resurrection. The reality of life out of death isn't confined to the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection; it is the defining property of the new creational order that is grounded in Him. *The fact that resurrection is preeminently a christological reality means that it has become a creational reality – and not simply for time, but for eternity.*

Resurrection has its origin and substance in Christ, but it has its effect and fruition in the entire created order. Creational resurrection is inherent in the man Jesus as “resurrection and life,” but in accordance with the all-encompassing divine design: It is the scheme God devised for realizing His purpose for His entire creation.

- This comprehensive scheme is the eternal “counsel of His will” (ref. Ephesians 1:7-11), and God was pleased to reveal it in an intricate and marvelous unfolding on the stage of salvation history.
- Israel, the Abrahamic seed, was at the center of this revelation and preparation, so that the hope of renewal and restoration held out in the enduring divine promise was their property first and foremost.

That is why Paul could insist that the hope he embraced in Jesus Christ was exactly the same one embraced by his Israelite brethren and ancestors (Acts 24:14-15; 26:6-7).

The promise that the patriarchs and their descendents saw by faith and clung so tightly to (Hebrews 11:8-16; John 8:56) has now been fulfilled in the “fullness of the times” (ref. Hebrews 11:39-40 with 1 Peter 1:3-12; cf. also 1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 1:1-2). But that fulfillment pledges to take everything into its grasp, such that Paul proclaimed a gospel of *hope* – hope for those who've already come to the New Jerusalem as much as for those who yet remain outside it (cf. Hebrews 12:18-24 and Galatians 4:21-31 with Revelation 21:1-6; also Romans 8:14-25; Colossians 1:25-27; Titus 2:11-14).

b. The gospel is the good news of life out of death, and therefore it is supremely a message of hope. But this implies that the Christian life – which has its basis, substance, power and assurance in the gospel – is *itself* an existence characterized by hope (cf. Romans 1:1-17 with 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Colossians 1:19-26). Where the Christian lacks hope, he either doesn't understand the gospel or is failing to live into its truth. Three considerations – reflecting the three realms of Christian living – test the believer's hope (as personally held and conveyed) and, by implication, the vitality of his gospel:

1) The first consideration involves the Christian's relationship with the **world of men** – specifically, whether or not his testimony to them communicates the fragrance of Christ, and so also the hope bound up in His gospel of the new creation. To communicate Christ's fragrance the Christian must first bear it in himself, which depends entirely on how he understands Jesus' person and work and appropriates and lives into His gospel. That, in turn, will affect how he perceives the world outside the Church, and so also what he communicates to it:

Does he regard and treat the world as effectively “under the ban”? That is, does he regard it as existing under God's condemnation and awaiting a looming destruction, and therefore to be despised and forsaken? Among other evidences, a Christian indicates that he has this perspective when his life is marked by retraction from the unbelieving world rather than engagement with it.

Related to this, *does the believer hold unsaved men with contempt rather than compassion?* Those who possess the hope of the gospel understand the tragedy and cruel bondage of alienation from God and have personally experienced His liberating forgiveness and renewing power in Christ. They know what it is to be delivered by sheer grace from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of His beloved Son, and they long to see others join them (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; 1 Timothy 1:12-2:7)

Does he regard men as being in need of reformation rather than renewal and reconciliation? Again, this inner conviction may not be consciously perceived, but it will express itself in the way the Christian communicates the human problem and need, what it is that God has accomplished and provided in Christ, the universal obligation of repentance and faith, and the essence and meaning of the Christian life. A “gospel” that emphasizes personal reform – whether as the critical evidence of being saved or the prerequisite for it – is not the gospel of Jesus Christ, and therefore not the message of hope Paul proclaimed.

In summary, the gospel of resurrection holds out hope to the dark and desperate world because it is the proclamation that life has conquered death (along with all that truth encompasses and implies). So Christian witness is authentic when it is conveys that hope as the message of life in Jesus Christ. True, a faithful witness warns of condemnation for those who spurn life and “love darkness rather than the light,” but only as the tragic *consequence* of refusing the gospel, not as itself being in any way or to any extent a component of the gospel – the *good news*.

- 2) The second test of the Christian's gospel and the hope attached to it is his relationship with and ministry to his **fellow believers**. Paul's work and teaching emphasized the crucial role the ministry of the gospel plays in the life, well-being and progress of the Church (ref. again Romans 1:1-17; 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Colossians 1:19-23), and this present test brings that dynamic to the forefront.

The first concern is whether the Christian's interaction with the saints focuses on – or even involves – the ministration of the gospel. For many believers and church communities, Christian "fellowship" occurs whenever two or more Christians are together. But this implies that it's the individuals' status as believers in Jesus Christ – not the nature, orientation or goal of their interaction – that determines whether a gathering constitutes Christian fellowship.

But the Scripture understands fellowship as *common-union* (koinonia) – a fellowship of *participation*: That is, Christian fellowship is grounded in and proceeds upon the fact that believers are members of one another because they are members of Christ Himself (Romans 12:1-5; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:1-27).

- Jesus' Spirit is the common-union of the members of His body, so that the life of the body – the dynamics of the interrelations of its members – reflects, expresses and serves the progress of that common-union.
- Whether eating, recreating or just being together, the focus and goal of Christian interaction should be the mutual ministration of the gospel – the *edification* that results from laboring, in the Spirit's gifts and graces, to see one another grow up in all things into Christ the Head.

With that in mind, the Christian must consider the nature and effect of his ministry to the saints (unspoken as well as spoken). *Does it uplift and strengthen them or does it afflict and oppress them?* One needn't brow-beat his fellow Christian in order to oppress him and afflict his soul; he needs only to weigh him down with any of a myriad of burdens – spiritual, emotional, psychological – and not lift a finger to ease them (Matthew 23:1-4; cf. Luke 11:46). Jesus, on the other hand, insisted that His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30); He came to set men free, not strengthen their shackles (Isaiah 9:1-4; 61:1-3).

In related fashion, *does the Christian's ministry to his fellows nurture a greater sense of triumph, joy and freedom or greater bondage and misery?* Because so many Christians associate their salvation with what they deem "holy living," they find their assurance driven by their behavior. A corollary to this type of thinking is the conviction (conscious or otherwise) that the believer's pursuit of holiness amounts to striving to "mortify" sin. This obviously colors the way Christians conceive their ministry responsibility to one another. Such thinking and mutual "ministry" may not go so far as the Catholic "counsels of perfection," but it reflects the same self-focused, self-determined view of the Christian life. A Christian can do no greater hurt to his brother than to turn him back upon himself.

Accordingly, *does the believer's ministry to the saints enlarge and sharpen their focus and dependence on Christ or on themselves?* Often the Scripture itself is taken captive to this error as Christians pervert it into a "user's manual" of instructions for addressing every sort of malady and failure. The premise behind this is the "sufficiency of Scripture," but that sufficiency is conceived in terms of the Bible providing a comprehensive prescription for everything that ails men rather than the revelation of the Great Physician Himself. Thus the well-known device for explaining the meaning and purpose of the Scripture: When one thinks of the Bible, he should think of *Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth*.

So also, *does the Christian's ministry focus on things surrounding Christ (ideas, doctrines, practice, etc.) rather than on Christ Himself.* Paul repeatedly warned against the propensity to be distracted from the simplicity of devotion to Christ by preoccupation with matters related to Him. Christians can easily nurture in one another devotion to religious practices or doctrinal constructs – even devotion to the biblical text as such or to themselves as its "gatekeepers" – rather than to Christ by His Spirit (Colossians 2:18-23; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 2 Timothy 2:14).

Finally, does the Christian's ministry to the saints emphasize and nurture the holiness of "faith working through love" and the life of the new creation in Christ or merely conformity to norms? Holiness is consecration to God, and therefore is found, not in conformity to things, people, practices or formulations, but to God through union with Christ by His indwelling Spirit (Romans 14:1-19; Galatians 5:1-9, 6:14-16; Ephesians 1:13-2:7; Colossians 2:16-23; 1 Timothy 1:5-7; etc.).

- 3) Third and lastly, the test of the Christian's gospel and hope involves his relationship with and ministry to **himself** – specifically, how he views and responds to personal "successes" and "failures"; how he pursues "the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (ref. Philippians 3:1-16).

Does the abiding presence of weakness and failure strip him of joy and hope, perhaps even causing him to despair of his salvation? Conversely, does he find peace of mind and a sense of security with God when he perceives himself to be doing well in his Christian disciplines and exercises?

So, also, *how does the Christian respond to his infirmity and failure?* Does he redouble his efforts at self-discipline or seek a Bible "fix" for what ails him? On the other hand, does his growth in Christ bolster his self-confidence and assurance or does it only heighten his humility, gratitude, dependence and devotion?

If the Christian is to live into and thrive in the gospel, he must come to grips with the paradoxical truth that weakness, inadequacy, flaw and failure are the path to authentic Christ-likeness (2 Corinthians 12:1-10; cf. 4:1-18). He must recognize, believe and hold fast to the truth that where sin abounds grace abounds all the more and that Christ and His life in him – *and nothing in, of, or about himself* – are his full and sure confidence and hope of glory (Colossians 1:1-29).