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The Gospel of Jesus Christ and its Counterfeits.

What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the LORD (Jeremiah 23:28). Just as the chaff was to be sifted, separated and rejected so false gospels are to be discerned and refused as worthless. This leaflet is a brief examination of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is revealed to us in Scripture and how the chaff of a counterfeit message may be known.

Whatever is of value is at risk of being counterfeited. The greater the value, the greater the likelihood that an inferior copy will be substituted for the genuine valuable. There is nothing more precious than the revelation to a sinful world of a message of salvation and restoration to favour with God. That message, stated clearly and authoritatively in the Word of God has been the subject of innumerable attempts at forgery and counterfeit. In every age there have been attempts to substitute an inferior gospel of human manufacture in the place of the message that God Himself has revealed. It is a marked feature of the last days that the counterfeits of God's truth will become more numerous and more subtle. What is presented as being "the gospel" may not necessarily be so. Just as we are warned from time to time to examine the paper money we receive lest we are the unwitting victim of a forger, so we are called upon by the Lord Himself to examine every message that claims to be "the gospel" and every messenger who claims to be the servant of God. Such testing is Scriptural — *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world* (1 John 4:1). It is striking to see the Apostle use the word *Beloved* here — it is a mark of his love and care for them that he urges them to such action. To some it may appear judgmental and critical, but it is in fact the loving counsel of the Spirit of God to His people.

The question will arise, **By what standard should we examine those who claim to be of God and to preach His Word?** The answer is simple for there is ONE authoritative standard — what God Himself has said and preserved in written form in His Word, the Bible. *To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them* (Isaiah 8:20). It is recorded as a commendation of those in Berea that *they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so* (Acts 17:11). If Paul did not object to such critical analysis of his preaching and comparison of it to the standard of Scripture no true servant of God should object either — rather he should encourage it. A claim to be a servant of God and to be preaching the truth of God will only stand up when, on careful evaluation that claim measures up with the consistent teaching of Scripture. It takes more than a few Scriptural phrases wrenched out of their context and twisted to mean what God never meant, to make a man or a message Scriptural and worthy of acceptance as from God.

What is the Gospel?

In order to be consistent with what has already been said above we must let the Bible



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speaks for itself. What does the Bible say about the Gospel? Paul the Apostle gives one Scriptural definition of the gospel in I Corinthians 15:1-4.

*Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you **the gospel** which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;*

By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures...

1. The Gospel is a revealed message.

2.

It is not a message of human manufacture, either by an individual or by the Church. It is the product of God and He has revealed it to men in His Word. Note carefully how Paul uses the words here, *according to the Scriptures* v3-4. The gospel which Paul preached was a message which he had received, v3. See also Galatians 1:11-12. The gospel therefore is a message that can only be understood with the help of the Spirit of God. It is a message that will be despised as foolish by the natural mind. Paul states this in I Corinthians 2:14, *the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*. Man in his natural sinful state cannot understand the gospel — it is a heavenly message with a Divine origin, it is *the gospel of God* (Romans 1:1).

2. The Gospel message exposes and condemns sin.

Paul speaks here of *our sins*, v3. Sin is defined in Scripture as *the transgression of the law* (I John 3:4). Sin is a breaking of God's holy Law by either doing what it prohibits or coming short of what it requires. Paul also refers to our sin as deserving death — *Christ died for our sins; the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23). *All have sinned* (Romans 3:23) and therefore all men deserve the penal consequence of sin — death. **Sin brings a death that is three-fold —**

- it is **spiritual** — The sinner has no spiritual life but is as a corpse as far as any relationship with God is concerned — *dead in trespasses and sins* (Eph 2:1).
- it is **physical** — Death entered the world because of sin, *death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned* (Romans 5:12).
- it is **eternal** — There are eternal consequences to sin. There is eternal death. This is not annihilation but is eternal existence in a state of dying because of sin. Eternal death is just one of the ways of describing the horrors of a lost sinner's Hell. Because all mankind are sinners by nature and by daily practice, all by nature are spiritually dead, will die physically and are destined to eternal death.

3. The gospel reveals the hopelessness of the sinner.

The word of God does not promote self-esteem, it destroys it. The very first lesson



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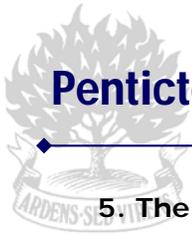
mankind must learn is that each is a sinner, guilty and condemned before God with no hope in ourselves or in any other apart from the free grace of God. The gospel reveals the doom of the sinner. It is a message that first makes a man hopeless because it reveals the curse of God's Law on sin and consequently upon the sinner. Consider Paul's words in Ephesians 2:12, speaking of the state of those believers before their conversion — *That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.*

4. The Gospel reveals God's Plan of redemption.

Hopeless sinners are given hope by the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is their only hope. God in mercy has devised a means of salvation whereby He is *just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus* (Romans 3:26). In other words, He has devised a way to satisfy the demands of His inflexible Holy justice and yet also extend mercy to the guilty hell-deserving sinner. That plan revealed in the gospel is the provision of Christ the Son of God as the sinner's substitute. This is what Paul refers to here in I Cor 15:3, *Christ died for our sins*, He had died in the place of those he is referring to! This is the ONE way to God — *Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me* (John 14:6); *Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

The death of Christ is the cornerstone of the gospel. Death is the penalty of sin but for sinners to escape the penalty they deserve that sin has to be punished in a substitute. God cannot just ignore sin! It must be punished — if not in the sinner then in someone else. Yet only a sinless substitute could satisfy the wrath of God. Since no man is sinless, no man could pay the price of sin either for himself or for any other. Christ was the sinless Lamb of God Who came to bear away the sin of a world of guilty sinners (John 1:29). On Calvary's cross Christ *died the just for* [i.e. in the place of] *the unjust that He might bring us to God* (I Peter 3:18). **Christ became sin in the place of sinners** — in other words He stepped in as the substitute and God dealt with Him as the sinners He was representing deserved. Because of His sinless life and substitutionary death sinners can be just or righteous in the sight of God. When the righteousness of Christ's life and the pardoning effect of His blood are counted as belonging to the believing sinner they secure for him a justified standing before God. In effect, through the work of Christ, sinners who trust in Him stand before God as if they had never sinned! *For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him* (II Corinthians 5:21). This is the great doctrine of Justification.

The Gospel reveals that this work of Christ was a **finished and completed work**. Paul states this very clearly here — *He rose again the third day* v4. The resurrection of Christ proves the veracity of His dying words on Calvary — *It is finished* (John 19:30). His work provides a full and final salvation that secures peace with God forever on the behalf of the believing sinner. The resurrection also proves that those who benefit from the death of Christ will have new life. Though formerly dead in sin, by Him they have spiritual and eternal life.



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5. The Gospel reveals how the perfect provision of Christ for sinners may be obtained.

Again Paul deals with this in I Corinthians 15:1-4. He is writing to those who were once in sin but are no longer guilty before God. They are those who *are saved*, those who have a standing before God and are no longer regarded by Him as fallen sinners. But what has brought this change?

- a) The fact that they **heard** the gospel preached to them, v1, 3.
- b) The fact that they **received** what was preached, v1. They welcomed the gospel message and received it into their minds.
- c) They **believed** what was preached to them — *ye have believed* (v3). The benefits of Christ's death for sinners is only made personal to the individual sinner as he trusts Christ, as he believes in Him. This is an important matter and we must be sure what faith is. It has to be noted that Paul speaks here of the possibility of believing in vain. There is such a thing as an empty faith, a kind of faith that does not save! Even the devil has faith of a kind — he believes there is one God and trembles (James 2:19) but the devil is not saved. **It is not enough to say I have faith, the question is, Is it saving faith?**

Saving faith is a wholehearted agreement with the truth of the Gospel as it is revealed in Scripture — that I am a sinner guilty and without hope unless God has mercy on me for Jesus' sake.

Faith produces **repentance** — a change of mind regarding sin. It is sorrow over sin, shame at sin, hatred of what God condemns as sinful; it involves a **confession** of sin to God. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (I John 1:9). Here, to *confess* sin is 'to speak the same language' as God about sin, to agree with His view of sin.

Faith **comes to Christ** to accept and embrace Him as He is freely offered in the gospel. Faith accepts Christ on His own terms — as Saviour and Lord. Faith does not try to make bargains with God, it rather recognizes the hopeless position the sinner is in and that Christ's finished work as Redeemer is all the guilty sinner needs.

Salvation is by faith alone. The exhortation of Paul and Silas to the Philippian jailer who asked *Sirs, what must I do to be saved?* was simply *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved* (Acts 16:30-31). The salvation which he and these Corinthians had experienced was as a result of genuine **faith alone in Christ alone.**

The Gospel has been the subject of many counterfeits.

Consider the words of Paul in Galatians 1:6-9.

*I marvel that ye are so soon **removed from him** that called you into the grace of Christ unto **another gospel**:*

Which is not another**; but there be some that trouble you, and would **pervert the



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gospel of Christ.

*But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach **any other gospel** unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be **accursed**.*

*As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach **any other gospel** unto you than that ye have received, let him be **accursed**.*

Paul speaks here of *another gospel* (v6). Paul uses two different Greek words here both translated as *another*. The literal force of what Paul says here is — *ye are so soon removed...unto another gospel* [of a different kind]:*Which is not another*[of the same kind]. While this new message claimed to be the gospel and called itself by that name it was different, it was not the same. It was in fact the product of those who *pervert the gospel of Christ*. This perversion is the deceptive work of the Devil. Consider carefully the words of II Corinthians 11:3-4 — *But I fear, lest by any means, **as the serpent beguiled Eve** through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.*

*For if he that cometh preacheth **another Jesus**, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive **another spirit**, which ye have not received, or **another gospel**, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.*

How may the Gospel of Jesus Christ be perverted or counterfeited?

This can be done quite easily by taking any, some or all of the essential points of the gospel and modifying them. Usually the motive in such modification is to make the gospel message more appealing and attractive to the sinner who by nature hates God and His ways. Often to validate a perverted gospel other sources of authority are cited. Church authority or tradition, human writings, dreams and visions are often elevated to a position of equality or even superior to, the Bible. Such action is always the mark of a counterfeit gospel!

A counterfeit Gospel will modify the Scriptural concept of God. A human concept of God — what men think about God, feel about God, what they would like God to be, tailoring His Person and attributes to fit in with their own philosophy of God, is substituted in the place of what Word of God says. All this is folly. To do so is to have another god! The god of human concept may well be spoken of as God, referred to in Scriptural terminology but a message that departs from the truth that God has revealed about Himself that message is a fraud, it does not promote worship but idolatry.

A counterfeit message will bring in an unscriptural idea of sin. Sin is no longer spoken of as God defines it. The condemnatory language of the Bible is replaced with a modified definition of sin and guilt. Poverty, low self-esteem, emptiness of heart, social failure etc. are all popular counterfeits of God's view of sin. The concept of guilt is set aside as being unpalatable, the Biblical doctrine of human responsibility is replaced with the idea that the sinner is really a victim of circumstances and that somehow it is not his fault that he is the way he is. The idea that there is some good in all men and it just needs to be nurtured is a common perversion of the gospel. Consequently there is **a modification of what Scripture has to say about repentance and confession of sin.** The need for



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repentance is often completely missing from the counterfeit gospel even though God *now commandeth all men everywhere to repent* (Acts 17:30). The counterfeit message will often be, God takes you the way you are. Just make a commitment and every thing will be fine.

The gospel doctrine of **Redemption through Christ's death alone has also been frequently modified**. Some teach salvation is by works, by baptism, by partaking in the sacraments, a charismatic experience, or a mixture of these with faith. The absolute necessity of the death of Christ alone as the basis of acceptance with God is denied or changed and other ways to God are accepted as legitimate.

The faith that the gospel requires for salvation also comes in for change. It is reduced to a decision, often just a whim of the individual to decide to be a Christian. This is not saving faith. In most cases such a decision is made when there has been no real presentation of the gospel, no real dealing with sin to produce a conviction of guilt and no presentation of Christ as the only Saviour. These things are the basis of saving faith and where they are absent faith cannot be at work. Whatever prompts that decision it is not Biblical saving faith! It may well be emotion, or a desire to conform to peer pressure — but it is not saving faith.

The concept of what a Christian is to be is also modified. The gospel makes it clear that a Christian is one has been given a new nature — *partakers of the Divine nature* (II Peter 1:4) — they have been born again and *if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new* (II Corinthians 5:17). Many counterfeit gospels remove the Scriptural teachings of distinction from the world, likeness to Christ, separation from sin in all its forms and public identification with Christ and promote the idea that a Christian can live as he pleases.

There is absolutely no doubt that many of the counterfeits of the gospel are cleverly done. Paul's words to the Galatians and to the Corinthians cited above make it clear that even though they were truly saved by embracing the truth they had later been deceived by a counterfeit message. Paul is writing to get them back to the truth of God. Some false gospels involve more change than others, but any message that is not identical to the message of the gospel as it is taught in Scripture is a perverted, counterfeit message and is to be rejected as such.

The tragedy of a counterfeit gospel.

The promotion and acceptance of a modified gospel is a great tragedy for all involved. Just as a man is a loser by accepting counterfeit money so the man who accepts a fake gospel is the poorer for it. The one who passes off a fraudulent message as the truth of God has committed a monumental crime and will be held accountable by God.

A perverted gospel carries the curse of God. *But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be*



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accursed (Galatians 1:8). Note carefully that Paul instantly repeats this fact in v9. The anathema of God is upon those who promote a gospel that is different to His truth. The Scripture is full of denunciations of those who are termed false prophets (Cp Jeremiah 23:30-32). God hates the promotion of a lie as His truth and curses those who do so!

Those who receive and believe a counterfeit gospel place their trust in something God has cursed. It is a message that cannot bless their souls, a message that cannot save no matter how sincerely they accept it. There is no salvation in a counterfeit gospel — just a curse. Note very carefully that Paul says in Galatians 1:6 that another gospel removes its adherents from Christ. Consequently the false message that is presented as the gospel can only bring eternal misery and ruin. It will bring eternal disappointment to those who in trusting to it fully expected to enter Heaven but will be refused admission. Those who doubt that God could close Heaven against those who are sincere followers of a counterfeit gospel should carefully consider Matt 7:22-23 *Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.* Here are preachers and others who claim a legitimate right to Heaven — yet they are strangers to Christ and closed out of Heaven into Hell.

The awful consequences of being deceived about the well-being of our soul should prompt obedience of the command of the Apostle to *Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves,* (II Corinthians 13:5). This is a serious matter. We must be sure that we have Christ and have received the truth of God and have not been the victims of a religious fraud. Make sure your hope of Heaven rests on what God has said! In a parable (Matthew 7:24-27) the Lord Jesus commended the wisdom of the man who dug down to the rock and made that his foundation. This man was like those who heard and obeyed Christ's word. It is striking to see in the context that Christ had warned of those who were *false prophets* (v15). Be sure you are on the rock of Christ's word for then you will never fall.

For those who are truly saved and trusting Christ as He is revealed in Scripture nothing should be so hateful and abhorrent as to see the promotion of a forged Gospel. Society rightly reacts against forgers and scam artists as they practice their deceitful business of ripping off the unsuspecting. **How much more should the Church of Jesus Christ react in holy and righteous indignation against those religious scam artists who are defrauding sinners of Heaven and damning them in Hell with their perverted gospel.** The abundance of counterfeit gospels of today should make us all the more anxious to spread the truth of God's Word and snatch men as brands from the burning.