

# THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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## A Gospel Pointed Upward

*Joshua Riggins*

From the mid-1800s through the end of that century, the US experienced urbanization it wasn't prepared to handle. Men traded in dust-filled barns for grease-filled factories. Conditions in the cities and workplaces were grimy at best, and the folks living there found themselves poor and dirty. Men frequently worked seven days a week to have anything left over. It wasn't until 1914 that Henry Ford's second in command suggested that they pay \$5.00 a day. Very little good could be said of urban life at the turn of the 20th century.

The religious world saw these conditions and felt compelled to do something. Charles Sheldon wrote, "What would Jesus Do?" in 1890, and many answered with social change. William Stead followed this in 1894 with his book titled, "If Christ came to Chicago!" where he called all denominations to "redeem the nation from the sins of wealth and moral vice." He argued that if Jesus wouldn't tolerate the social conditions in Chicago, then neither should his followers.

At this same time, postmillennial ideas began dominating religious eschatology. Men taught Christ would return to earth at a Golden Age, and their listeners should help speed along his return by building this world into a Christianized form of itself. Social reform became the avenue for ushering in Christ's return, fulfilling his moral standard: love your neighbor as yourself. This movement became known as the Social Gospel, a popular teaching which continues to influence our religious world today.

The Social Gospel, at its core, taught Jesus as a social reformer. Its mission was to encourage Jesus's ethical teaching to remedy society's problems. Prominent religious leaders of their day taught that religion's chief purpose was to create the highest quality of life for all citizens. One such leader lamented that "the true mission of Christ – to create a 'cooperative commonwealth' – had been obscured by the Hellenistic tradition of St Paul, which had turned the church toward belief in the afterlife, at the expense of reforming society." The mind of this gospel was below, not on things above.

The tenants these leaders taught heavily influenced Martin

Luther King. He understood the gospel as more than a way to redemption. It was the avenue driving societal change for the betterment of humanity.

Many of these same ideas continue to influence the "religious right" leaders and the "progressive Christian." On one end, they seek to "Christianize America" for the betterment of society. On the other, they see it as more important, in the words of Rob Bell, to "live holistic lives in the present than get into heaven."

Ultimately, we're left with a question. What is the mission of the church? Are we to unite as agents of societal change through benevolence? Are we to stake our claim on an anti-abortion agenda? Are we to preach social justice strictly to better our lives here? Or is there something more to which God calls us?

**Ephesians 1:22** explains that Christ received the headship over the body from God. With that headship, he established a purpose for the body's existence. In **Ephesians 4:7-16**, Paul continues his conversation about the body by explaining that its main purpose is growth and maturity until the body fits the stature of Christ. He provided gifts for the church to facilitate this maturation process (**verses 7-11**). Those gifts laid the foundation for the kingdom (**Ephesians 2:20**), taught, led, and continued to teach and lead. From them came the kingdom's mission: to equip itself to serve and use its time building one another up (**verses 12-16**).

Therefore, the mission of the church is pointed upward, focused on each one unifying through the image of our Savior, reflecting his beauty and shouting his praise. We take preference for each other (**Romans 12:10**). We teach each other truth in a way that each can easily understand (**1 Corinthians 14:26**). We comfort each other and point toward the finish line (**1 Thessalonians 4:18**). We set the standard for truth and uphold that truth in a confused world (**Ephesians 4:14-15**, **1 Timothy 3:15**).

We also encourage one another to do good in this world (**Hebrews 11:24**). The Social Gospel rightly encourages these good works, but it is directionally challenged. Christ taught us to be the light of the world, allowing others to glorify God through our actions. If you want to join a group serving meals to the homeless, do it. If you want to fix up your widowed neighbor's home, get to it. If you want to give a child in need

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a home, marvelous! You are his "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works (**Ephesians 2:10**). Let's work.

However, let's not make social change the backbone of all the church's endeavors, as if the church were simply a philanthropic organization. The church corporate is not intended to be the agent of social change or the avenue through which good works receive organization. The work of the church is far more eternal. And we do our Lord a disservice when we focus our collective effort too much on the physical ills of our world.

The body of Christ doesn't exist to fix the physical problems of this world. Instead, Christ calls us to grow together in unity through the truth. So let's use our collective body to point one another and this world toward everlasting hope through Jesus Christ.

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## Who Am I?

*Wade Stanley*

I recently heard an insightful comment on a podcast I listen to regularly. During one segment, the participants discussed the issue of identity, a hot topic in our day and age. One of the participants observed, "Augustine (of Hippo, the esteemed theologian) would have never known how to answer questions of identity. The topic would have bewildered and confused him."

I suspect many of us feel the same way. Having grown up in a different time, we may have never considered how to answer the question, "Who am I?" But in a day and age when people define themselves according to their sexuality, or their gender identity, or their choice of pronouns, or any number of other possibilities, Christians must have an answer prepared.

### Postmodern Roots

The evolving views of personal identity are rooted in what's known as postmodern philosophy. In the 1950s, European philosophers (and some American philosophers) grappled with what the world experienced in World War 2. The philosophy we call postmodernism emerged, a critique of Western Civilization.

French philosophers impacted postmodern philosophy more than their contemporaries: Foucault, Derrida, and Leconte. But, for the most part, their writings are pretty challenging to read, and their philosophy was impossible to live by. Because

it was so inaccessible and tended toward nihilism, postmodern philosophy seemed to die away by the late 1970s and early '80s.

In the early 1990s, feminist and black intellectuals breathed new life into postmodernism. Women's studies and black studies programs in universities began adopting tenets of postmodern philosophy. It crept into other disciplines like sociology and psychology and education. Eventually, its growth led to creating additional "studies" in American universities such as queer studies, gender studies, etc. By the 2010s, postmodern philosophy was the prevailing ideology undergirding much of the university experience in America.

### Two Core Principles

These disciplines managed to adapt two principles of an unintelligible philosophy into simple but powerful and persuasive axioms. First of all, the truth cannot be known or attained. Therefore, in their estimation, absolute truth does not exist. Truth is left to the individual to define through such means as "lived experience. Since one cannot know the truth, power and hierarchies coalesced in societies to determine what can be understood and how it is known. Simply put, there is no absolute truth. Therefore, the powerful define the truth to serve their ends.

These two principles lead to four important themes retained from the philosophies of the postmodernists mentioned above.

#### Theme 1: All boundaries are blurred.

Categories like "male and female" are not real; they are inventions. Sometimes you will hear the phrase "social construct." The powerful invent these "social constructs" to marginalize and oppress women, gays, transgender, and other minority groups.

#### Theme 2: Language is a part of the power structure.

The powerful use language as a tool to acquire and maintain power. One shifts the balance of power in favor of the marginalized by changing the language. Therefore, either changing pronouns or inventing new pronouns takes power away from the oppressor and puts the power in the hands of the marginalized.

#### Theme 3: All cultures are equal.

No one culture is superior to another. Those in the Western world have not risen to prominence because of a superior culture. Instead, we have used the oppressor's tools better than our rivals. Superior ideals and values do not exist. All explanations for success in any realm reduce to power.

#### Theme 4: The concerns of the individual are of less value to society than the concerns of marginalized groups.

If I, out of conscience, object to the pronouns chosen by a person, I am in the wrong. Therefore, I must subordinate my rights as an individual, including the right to freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment, to the desires of

my neighbor. Why? Because he or she is a part of a marginalized group that Western culture has oppressed in its rise to the top.

Unlike the current manifestation of postmodernism, Christianity contends that identity is rooted in several objective truths.

### **We are all created in the image of God.**

*Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26-27).*

Our core identity as human beings is we are all created in the image of God. Because God created everyone in His image, every human being is a "child of God." So Paul says to the Athenians in **Acts 17:29**, "we are the offspring of God." And, as the Scripture plainly says, there is one identity, but two genders. This is because God created both males and females in His image.

Some folks might object to this by saying the Bible talks about biological sex and not gender. Some of us are born with male reproductive parts and others with female reproductive parts. Our "equipment" determines our biological sex. But we can feel like we are of a different gender than our biological sex. Thus, biological sex and gender identity are two separate matters in the minds of some.

To be clear, the Bible does not draw any distinction between biological sex and one's gender. The male and female genders reflect biological realities. Therefore, one may feel like he or she is of a different gender than his or her body. The feelings are real, but they are not reality from a Biblical point of view.

So God created human beings in His image with two genders, and because He created us in His image, we are all His children.

### **We are of inestimable value in God's eyes.**

When Jesus said, "For God so loved the world," He meant God loves every man, woman, and child of every skin color, sexual orientation, gender identity -- and any other category we come up with -- equally.

*In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).*

Peter tells Cornelius in **Acts 10:34-35**, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him." God does not play favorites. He values every human being. And He expects everyone to fear Him and work righteousness.

So, according to the Bible, "Who am I?" I am created in the image of God, of inestimable value to Him and His child by my humanity.

### **We are born innocent, but sin corrupts us.**

God made us in His image. But, unfortunately, we are corrupted because we live in a world ruled by sin and death. "Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, But they have sought out many schemes" (**Ecclesiastes 7:29**). Isaiah expresses it well, "But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away" (**Isaiah 64:6**). Peter begged Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (**Luke 5:8**). "God be merciful to me a sinner," the tax collector exclaimed in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (**Luke 18:13**).

Though we bear the image of God, because of our choices, our failures, and our shortcomings, we fall short of the glory of God. We are sinners in need of redemption.

### **Though we are sinners, in Jesus Christ, God makes us a part of His family.**

Christ eliminates all distinctions we use to segregate ourselves from one another.

*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28).*

Regardless of gender, race, nationality, or socio-economic class, all of us receive the same inheritance in Jesus Christ.

It is essential to note the emphasis on inheritance. Paul very specifically says we are all sons of God. Why sons? Because in Paul's world, sons were the ones who received an inheritance. Are you a woman? That doesn't matter. The blood of Jesus makes you a son of God. Are you black? Your skin color doesn't matter. God adopts you into His family and gives you the same inheritance He gives to every other color of skin. Are you poor? The amount of money in your bank account is irrelevant. God gives everyone the riches of heaven through Jesus. All of this happens when we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. God clothes me with Christ, I am made one with Him and His body, and I am brought into the family of God.

### **So how does the Bible define our identity? Who are we from a Biblical worldview?**

We are created in the image of God and His children by our humanity. We are of inestimable value to Him. We are sinners in need of redemption. And if we have been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, we have been born into His family, adopted as His sons, and made heirs to the riches of heaven.

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*Please check your expiration date!*

## *Glory to God!*

The church in Nixa, MO welcomed Jay and Suzanne Scott as members of the congregation.

## *Blessed Are the Dead*

V'Ann Baltzelle, 76, of Kirksville, MO passed away Saturday, October 23, 2021. V'Ann was born January 3, 1945 in Lewistown, MO. She discovered the church through a weekly radio broadcast hosted by members of the congregation. V'Ann was a faithful member of the church in Kirksville at the time of her death. She is remembered fondly for her many talents, her generous heart, her fervor for benevolence, and her desire to see the word of God preached in every corner of the world.

Connie (Moore) Harp, 59, of Nixa, MO passed away on November 5, 2021. She was born January 23, 1962, to Bob and Nancy (Owens) Moore. She was a life-long member of Nixa Church of Christ and was baptized in 1974. There she was a mentor and friend to many. Connie served the church in many ways, including teaching children's classes and organizing church fellowship activities. She loved the Lord and it showed through her love for others.

Alice A. Fox, 73, of Kirksville, MO was peacefully welcomed into the arms of our Lord, Jesus Christ on November 21. Born on June 1, 1948, Alice was a member of the church in Kirksville. She will always be remembered for her warm welcome to everyone and her positive personality in all circumstances. Her heartfelt love and concern for others was extraordinary and will be deeply missed by all. Alice never met a stranger and you could be most certain that if she saw you walking by her apartment or met her in the store she would be waving and asking how you were doing. Most importantly, her devotion to her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was her top priority; she always looked forward to the day He would call her home.

## *Special Meetings*

Please make plans to join the Section Church of Christ (Osage City, KS) for a Spring Meeting on March 19-20, 2022, Lord willing. The theme of the meeting will be "Leadership."

### **2022 Meetings**

March 19-20.....Section Church of Christ (Osage City, KS)

*Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts (Romans 13:11-14).*

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