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DISCIPLESHIP

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The Gospel of Discipleship

Recently, the relationship of the gracious work of God in Jesus Christ on the cross, which we know as the gospel, has been sharply distinguished from the thorough result that the gospel exercises within the Christian believer's life, which we know as discipleship. Calvinist theologian Donald A. Carson has called for evangelicals to "underscore this distinction" between gospel and discipleship. Although Carson allows that one might claim that discipleship is a necessary conclusion of the gospel, he treats such a conclusion as a concession at best: "We may even argue . . ." Furthermore, driven by concern to maintain the gospel over against what he calls "moralism," Carson flatly denies that the commands of Christ constitute "any part of [the gospel]," and that more than once.¹

While we concur with Carson that the gospel must not be confused with works righteousness, this centennial issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* underscores, by implication, that the grace of discipleship is necessarily and, without room for dissimulation, integrally connected with the gospel. The commands of the Lord and the human response in discipleship may not be treated as mere theological concession. Those who have been regenerated through the gospel should be wary of cutting the gospel off from its necessary results in the name of preserving it. Charles Haddon Spurgeon argued vigorously against the Hyper-Calvinists of his day that the widespread evangelistic offering of grace through universal preaching of the gospel, as well as the transformative results of that gospel, must not be downplayed.²

Steven W. Smith, professor of expository preaching at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, headlines this issue with an excellent essay for preachers of the gospel. He encourages them to consider Jesus Christ as the focal point and thus hermeneutical guide for their proclamation of Scripture, demonstrating this by walking the expositor through four major Christological passages (John 1:1–5; Col 1:15–20; Phil 2:5–11; Heb 1:1–5). Smith illuminates the glorious privilege and humbling responsibility of the Christian proclamation of Scripture when he concludes, "Therefore, expository preaching is faithful to the text for the very reason

¹D.A. Carson, "Editorial," *Themelios* 34.1 (2009): 1–2.

²Iain H. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995).

that the text speaks of Christ. In explaining the words of the Word, one is explaining the Son of God Himself Who is revealing God Himself.”

Edward L. Smither, a guest essayist from the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, moves the discussion from Scripture into the early church. Using the lesser known *Life of Augustine*, written by the great Western theologian's friend, Possidius, Smither considers the hortatory function of early Christian biography. While recognizing the similarities between hagiography and biography, Smither differentiates between the various types of the biographical genre. With regard to *Life of Augustine*, which he informatively introduces to the initiate, Smither argues that the early Christian *vitae* (lives) must be read as the early church would have read them. *Imitatio* (imitation) was “more than a mere literary device in hagiography but a continuation of Augustine's convictions for discipleship, particularly for church leaders.” The reintroduction of this ancient genre may have positive spiritual results within the contemporary churches.

Benjamin B. Phillips, resident systematic theologian at the Harvard School for Theological Studies in Houston, Texas, explores the relationship between discipleship and evangelism. Drawing upon Scripture, Christian history, and contemporary cultural discourse, Phillips considers discipleship and its relationship to evangelism systematically according to the Edwardsean themes of sin's ugliness and Christ's beauty. Treating the Great Commission as foundational, Phillips argues that discipleship includes the proclamation of the gospel. Evangelism, the preaching of the gospel that saves by grace through faith in Christ, is a function of Christian discipleship. Furthermore, “the disciple-making that starts with evangelism does not end there.” The Christian life is to be characterized by a continual transformation from the ugliness of sin into the beauty of Christ through “constructive discipling.”

Next, Timothy K. Christian, professor of theology at the Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, evaluates the biographical aspects of Augustus Hopkins Strong's theological shifts. Professor Christian summarizes some of the findings of his doctoral research for this journal through a careful comparison of Strong's personal discipleship with his theological conclusions. The distressing aspect of this research is that the famous theologian, whose works are still influential, allowed for the furtherance of liberalism. Carl F.H. Henry and Grant Wacker, among others, have examined Strong's “ethical monism,” but Christian details the impact of Strong's personal life upon his formal theology, utilizing extensively Strong's own autobiographical musings. The author's ruminations as to why Strong shifted so radically in his late age are careful and thought provoking. Those with a high regard for Strong will be challenged to re-evaluate this northern evangelical and his legacy.

Finally, Chris Shirley, professor of Christian education at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues that discipleship is a task the Lord gave to the local church, an institution too often held in low regard, especially in these days of effervescent evangelical parachurches. After a cursory biblical and confessional consideration of discipleship, Shirley proposes an integrative model for the local churches as they pursue discipleship in obedience to Christ and according to the practices of the apostles. "Raising up successive generations of committed disciples is the responsibility of the local church. While this maxim may be obvious, the reality is that far too many churches have abandoned intentional discipleship. Instead, the church must reclaim her role as disciple-maker." Shirley not only makes this large claim, he also demonstrates how the recovery of church discipleship might begin.

Discipleship and the gospel are integrally related. The gospel is the good news of God's gracious work on behalf of man; discipleship is the human response to His grace and, as a rather comprehensive term within soteriology, is itself a grace. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news from God for mankind and, being His work, it is sufficient on its own. The good news does not need to be protected and hedged with extrabiblical "orthodoxy" in order to preserve it or even "recover" it. The gospel and its necessary results, as defined within Scripture, including discipleship, simply need to be preached.

Spurgeon understood the confluence between gospel and discipleship very well and refused to let anyone build a hedge around the gospel. He was concerned that such hedging might hinder the gospel and its necessary effects. When preaching about the thief who repented on the cross, Spurgeon dwelt upon the self-sufficient nature of the gospel: "You may pick a jewel from a dunghill, and find its radiance undiminished; and you may gather the gospel from a blasphemous mouth, and it shall be none the less the gospel of salvation."³ He explained the vigorous nature of true faith in the gospel and the many results of such faith as empowered by the Word of the Lord. A relevant quotation from the Prince of Preachers provides the final word about the sufficient and transformative power of the good news for disciples of Jesus Christ:

Many good people think that they ought to guard the gospel; but it is never so safe as when it stands in its own naked majesty. It wants no covering from us. When we protect it with provisos, and guard it with exceptions, and qualify it with

³Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Dying Thief in a New Light," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised*, vol. 32 (1886; reprint, Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1974), 53.

observations, it is like David in Saul's armour: it is hampered and hindered, and you may even hear it cry, "I cannot go with these." Let the gospel alone, and it will save; qualify it, and the salt has lost its savour.⁴

⁴Ibid., 50. Cf. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism*, 99.