



Understanding the Root of the Gospel

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In this session we explore the fact that God has created us as beings; the gospel is not simply on the level of thinking, feeling or doing. In salvation, God takes our very being and changes us.

At the end of the Gospel of John, we read that Jesus announced “*It is finished.*” How should we understand this, and what relevance does it have for the world?

Struggles with finality

Our culture struggles with the idea of finality. In an age of tolerance, everyone is expected to have a non-committal attitude when it comes to religion. I would like to suggest five reasons why we struggle with this idea today, drawing the first three from Leslie Newbiggin.

§ (1) Science has created the overwhelming impression of the vastness of space and time. The world is no longer regarded as being at the centre of the universe. Instead it is now seen as an insignificantly small planet amongst billions of others. How can finality be claimed for an event that took place only a few centuries ago in an obscure corner of this remote planet?

§ (2) Our commitment to the very method of science makes the notion of finality alien to us. In science, all conclusions are tentative. They are simply the starting blocks for further scientific research.

§ (3) We are very aware of the religious pluralism that surrounds us. Do not all of these systems also claim finality as well? How can we single out one system and ascribe finality to it?

§ (4) The word final has come to mean very

different things in our society. To speak of the final version of something is to speak of its obsolescence. We do not want the final version of a product, we want the latest version.

§ (5) The critical studies movement means that we are always expecting new interpretations of ancient documents. How can we think that we can have any understanding of anything that could be regarded as final?

Things to bear in mind

§ 1. *The Gospel spread in a pluralistic context.* Jews, Greeks and Romans inhabited Jerusalem. You could find all kinds of different pagan religions. The problem of religious pluralism is not a new one.

§ 2. *Jesus Christ was continually involved in a battle of understanding about his person.* In Luke 24, Jesus had to explain the resurrection to the two disciples. All through his ministry, and after his death, this crucial question of who Jesus is has always been one that needs careful thought.

§ 3. *The problem of relativism is not a new one.* Socrates had to debate the issue with Protagoras. Is truth absolute or relative? Is it accessible to us? All these issues were alive at the time as well.

The root of other worldviews

As we analyse other worldviews and systems of thought, we see that they are rooted in one of three ways. They are either rooted epistemologically in thinking, existentially in feeling, or pragmatically in doing.

§ Systems rooted in **thinking** state that we must come to grips with certain ideas, and then as we become conversant with them, learn to manipulate them and interpret them, we will find that we have the keys to unlock the mysteries of the universe and of life itself.

§ In world-views rooted in **feeling**, we are invited to open up our hearts, stretch out with our emotions, and engage in the mystical. Ultimately we will find what we are looking for, we are told, in this way.

§ Pragmatic systems urge us to implement various principles, live in a certain way and do certain things. They are rooted in **doing**.

The root of the Christian worldview

The Christian Gospel is not rooted in any of these three. The Gospel is not just a system of thought,

a type of mystical experience or way of life.

§ Christ did not simply come to give us a new system of thinking, even though there can be nothing more profound than knowing Him.

§ Christ did not come to give us a new feeling of God, even though there is nothing more life changing than meeting Him.

§ Christ did not come to simply tell us how to live, even though we are told we should be known for the things we do.

Christianity is ultimately rooted *ontologically*, in being.

Where we see this

§ Words are the tools of thought. Through words we express our thoughts to others. Philosophical knowledge comes to us through words. Yet in the beginning of the Gospel of John we read that the *Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us*.

§ Feelings and our emotions are part of the dynamism in life. Many are seeking for that moment in life that will help them reference everything else from then on. Christ defined life in terms of knowing Him. *To know him is to have life*. Not to know Him is not to see life at all. This is not a moment in life, it is the moment of life itself.

§ In John 6, the disciples ask what they must do to do the works God requires. Jesus replies that they must believe in the one God has sent. They then ask him to justify his claim by doing something. Did not their forefathers eat manna in the desert? What will Jesus do? To which he replies *I am the bread of life.*"

In asking Jesus how to live, they were searching for a way to live. In asking him to justify Himself, they were searching for the road to truth. At one point Jesus asked his disciples if they wished to leave Him. They replied, 'Where will we go? You have the words of life.'

A way to live, the road to truth and the words of life; Jesus said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life."*

§ Christianity is unique in all systems of thought and world religions. It is not primarily a set of ideas, experiences or instructions on how to live. Nor is its ultimate authority found in any of those three. **The Gospel is rooted in the person of Christ.** That is why in 2 Timothy we do not read, "I know what I have believed," we read *"I know whom I have believed..."*

Christianity's ontological root

§ *Christianity is rooted in being in its method of revelation.* To have seen Christ is to have seen the Father. Jesus did not come to tell us about God. He came as God. It is in His very nature. He is not God because of the things he said or did. These things did not make him the Son of God. Rather He is the Son of God by nature, in His very being. Everything he said and did flowed from that.

§ *Christianity is rooted in being in salvation.* It is through Christ's physical death and bodily resurrection that we are saved. It is because of what he took on in his being that we are saved. All the wrong thoughts, all the harmful experiences, all the wrong things done he took on, in his body, so that we might be saved. That is why we read that he became sin for us.

§ *Christianity is rooted in being in transformation.* Jesus said that anyone wanting to enter heaven must be born again. The fundamental problem facing humanity is not one of knowledge, or feeling or even how to live. The fundamental problem is that we are fallen beings. It is only as our very beings are restored that we can truly begin to learn how to think, how to relate to the world around us and how to live.

§ Every other system, maybe by combining the three different pursuits of thinking, feeling and doing, ultimately want to change us as beings. Yet they are powerless to do so. It is only through Christ that we find our starting point is a transformation of our being, (born again), and that everything else follows on from that.

We often think of being as separate from thinking, feeling and doing. However, this is neither Biblical nor accurate. When God revealed himself as 'I am who I am', the words carry a very concrete idea with them. It is not delivered as an abstraction, but as reality. We ourselves are primarily beings. It is because of our being that we can think, feel and do things.

Conclusion

Looking again at the issue of finality, what does the Christian claim for himself? He does not claim that he know knows everything - that he has finality of knowledge. Nor does he claim that he has experienced everything. And it is certainly not a claim to have achieved something ourselves. A

Christian is someone who has been changed by God, made a new creation in Christ. So when we say, Christ is the answer, it is literally meant. When Christ said it is finished, it meant that everything was now possible for humankind to return to God. In Genesis One, God spoke and the world was created. After creation came the fall, and all of a sudden we became sinful by nature. Then through God's incarnate Word, we are recreated so that we may be transformed into his likeness.

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