

Challenge and Commitment or CALL AND COVENANT

Have we got the message right?

After 2000 years of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ Christians may feel that the content of the message is pretty straight forward, and that the main issues of evangelism have to do with the way we go about sharing the gospel. However, many Christians who would regard their understanding as biblical may be surprised to learn that two of their most frequently used words and concepts in proclaiming the Gospel of God are actually not used by Jesus or the apostles, and for very good reason. Those two words are ‘challenge’ and ‘commitment’.

Challenge and commitment

These words are so frequently and widely used in Christian proclamation that it seems incredible to suggest that not only are they not biblical concepts but they are alien to the gospel of God’s grace.

Let me explain. Supposing I were to say to Joe, the alcoholic,

“Joe I have been thinking about how your life and the life of your family have been so deeply affected by alcohol, and, in love, I feel compelled to challenge you to commit yourself to sobriety.”

How effective might I expect to be in helping Joe? Those with pastoral experience can confidently say “Not effective at all”. The reason being, of course, that Joe is a slave to alcohol. Over the years he has often been challenged, by himself and others, to commit to sobriety. And on many occasions he has risen to the challenge and committed himself to ‘go on the wagon’, only to fall back into his addiction after a further demonstration of the brokenness of his will and the slavery of his humanity. There is no good news at all for Joe in my challenge to commitment.

Likewise, Jesus said “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Therefore, to challenge the sinner to make a commitment to Christ is equally ineffective, because it greatly under estimates the power and depth of sin, and assumes that the sinner can do something about it of himself.

The fact is that God never challenges anyone. That is because a challenge is essentially something that is pitched at the ego. For example, someone once challenged the poet and horseman Adam Lindsay Gordon to jump his horse over the safety fence surrounding the Blue Lake at Mount Gambier (South Australia). The trick was to ride the horse fast enough to clear the high fence, and then to reign the horse in before both horse and rider plummeted over the cliff and into the lake. The challenger, in effect, said ‘Bet ya can’t!’, and Gordon replied ‘Bet ya I can!’. And he did!

When we challenge someone to make a commitment to Christ we stimulate the human ego to do a good thing in its own strength. There are only two possible responses to such a challenge, both of them unhelpful. Those who are older and wiser remain unmoved. Like Joe they know themselves, and duck the challenge by saying “I am not good enough to be a Christian”, or “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8)

Alternatively, those who are younger in their experience of themselves, and therefore more self confident, are likely to rise to the challenge to be ‘full on for Jesus’. With an enthusiastic commitment they seek justification by succeeding where others have failed.

Perhaps, with youthful zeal, they may have it in mind to outdo other stodgy, lukewarm Christians. If these folk ‘make their commitment’ on Sunday night they most likely will last until about Thursday, when they will succumb to discouragement. By then it will be abundantly clear to themselves, the members of their household, and their workmates that sin, with its bondage of guilt, fear, pride and unbelief, has a much stronger hold on their lives than can be broken by a valiant exertion of self-will.

Broadly speaking, ‘challenge and commitment’ proclamation was what Paul was referring to in Galatians 1:6,7 when he spoke of a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Indeed, ‘challenge and commitment’ was the religion of St Paul before his conversion. See Philippians 3:3-6.

The Gospel—the power of God unto salvation

Well, if challenge and commitment are not the gospel, what is?

Getting back to Joe, supposing I were to say to him,

“Joe, I have good news for you! The Bible says that God is calling you to be holy and blameless on the day when the Lord Jesus comes again (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Just think of it Joe – standing before the judgement seat of Christ and having no blame, no stain, no shame, no pain! Now Joe, you may think that impossible. You may think that your life has been wasted and your situation hopeless. But Joe, when God calls you to be holy and blameless He promises that He is faithful and that He will do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

Along with Joe we ask ‘How can God do it?’

While we will not find the words ‘challenge’ and ‘commitment’ in the Bible, in the sense that they are being used today, we *will* find some other important words and concepts appearing over and over again to describe the action of God’s grace in the lives of broken and sinful people. A survey of the Scriptures shows that

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|------------|------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| GOD | confronts | in order to | CALL |
| | convicts | in order to | COVENANT |
| and | converts | in order to | COMMAND |

We can see these elements of God’s grace at work in the encounter of Peter the fisherman with Jesus (Luke 5:1-11), and the encounter of Saul the Pharisee with the risen Lord (Acts 9:1-16). But let me continue my conversation with Joe,

*“Joe, through me coming to see you today God is **confronting** you. But He is doing that in order to **call** you to enter His wonderful kingdom of holy love and right living. He is **convicting** you of your sins, but at the same time is telling you that He has **covenanted** Himself to you in the life, death and resurrection of His beloved Son. Jesus has taken your condemnation upon the Cross, and given you his righteousness as the risen Lord. If you turn back to God and believe the good news of His forgiveness then His covenant love will be poured out into you heart through the Holy Spirit. Joe, in this way His love for you will **convert** or change your desires so that you will love Him and want to obey His **commands**. The way is open Joe, and God stands ready to welcome you and help you.*

As Paul put it:

For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:10)

Some may argue that the language I have used is too religious for someone like Joe, and they might be right. However, the truths and principles are those of the Gospel, and unlike ‘challenge’ and ‘commitment’ they *are* good news for lost sinners like Joe. These are the

gospel truths which, on occasions of redemption, have taken people from among the worst and made them to be among the best (Colossians 1:13).

As for the best way to express it, if we are alive in the truth and joy of God's grace we can rely on the Holy Spirit to give us appropriate words to share that grace. On the other hand if the essential content of our message is flawed then the Holy Spirit has to contradict what we are saying in order to bring the good news. Mercifully this is something he often does, but the important thing for us is to thoroughly understand the condition of the sinner and the true nature of the gospel.

Different Gospels

In summary, then, let us make a clear contrast between the Gospel of God and another gospel, which is really no gospel at all.

THE WORD OF LAW

(that kills)

'Challenge'
and
'Commitment'

Paul's gospel before
he was converted
(Philippians 3:3-6)

The religion that goes up
i.e. through human effort

THE WORD OF GRACE

(that gives life)

God
confronts to **CALL**
convicts to **COVENANT**
converts to **COMMAND**

Paul's gospel after
he was converted
(Philippians 3:7-9)

The religion that comes down
i.e. in divine grace

Rod James.

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