

A Lazy Gospel

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The season of *Alpha* is with us again. Thank God for the opportunity to share the good news. I'm a fan of *Alpha* because it gets us sharing gospel in a way nothing else has, since the demise of the Billy Graham approach.

But my delight is more in its method than its message. The practice of hospitality in table-fellowship demonstrating gospel as Jesus did, the open-ended group discussions providing a platform for people to name their questions, doubts and experiences, and the offering of spirituality and experience of God beyond the endless cerebral approach of previous generations; these are a demonstration of gospel.

However, along with much else called gospel preaching, our message feels tired. So often it sounds anaemic, marketed effectively amongst the plethora of self-help 'gospels' on offer today, but hardly subverting their basic appeal or our general culture. Our gospel leaves the person intact in a fundamental individualism, leaving virtually undescribed the believer's horizon, as she's ushered into a Kingdom that should subvert or re-shape every key value of Western life. It leaves gospel as a bolt-on for a decent, moral person in modern liberal society, providing a sense of worth and meaning; personally life-changing but hardly world-transforming. I can hear readers already jumping to *Alpha's* defence. No need! I've no anti-*Alpha* campaign running.

But I do have a campaign running. It's not 'anti' anything. I hope I'm always glad when Christ is preached. After all 'better the way you do it, than the way I don't do it.' The campaign is that as evangelicals we have become lazy with our gospel. We think, 'Of all parts of the Church, us evangelicals both know and understand the gospel, after all aren't we the ones who are always talking about the need to witness and evangelise.' I'm unconvinced by this. But I've become more convinced that what's needed more than anything, is an on-going re-formation of our gospel, amongst the children of The Reformation! The sad thing is that there's so much work being done out there that could help us with the task of appropriating and articulating a gospel afresh, but somehow there is a disconnect between that work and what people in the proverbial pew think, or think they ought to be thinking.

As I have read more about Jesus and his ministry to reform Israel as a counter-Temple movement called to step out of its ghetto mentality through its crucified-risen Saviour, to become carriers of God's mercy to a world of violence, elitism and discrimination, I've become more excited by a gospel that *The Four Spiritual Laws* had reduced to boring banalities. And as I've read about Paul raiding the dictionary of Emperor Augustus's imperial propaganda machine, with its use of words like 'gospel', 'lord', 'righteousness', 'peace', 'security', 'son of god', 'faith/fulness', 'power', 'coming' etc. etc., to communicate his own counter-imperial gospel, I've come to see that the way I've been brought up to believe, that we have 'personal faith over here and public politics over there, and ne'er the twain shall meet', is nothing less than the emasculation of a full-blooded gospel. If Paul deliberately articulated his gospel in such clear counter-imperial terms, and if he attended to the minutiae of how Romano-Greek culture pressed itself locally upon the tiny burgeoning communities he wrote to, striving to fashion them as genuine, embodied alternatives with a distinct story, set of values and habits, then this carries a whole load of implications. It requires a new understanding of gospel as we live as exile and strangers within the

imperial and violent system of Western hegemony. It requires we learn the habits of what it means to be counter-imperial whilst not anti-imperial.

Our greatest resource is our gospel. This gospel locates us in time, something *Alpha* totally neglects, providing resources to awaken the disciple to the new age that dawned in Christ and dawns each day in the Spirit making all things new: spirituality, identity, relationships, gender, morality, politics, aesthetics etc. In fact a church is only as good as the gospel that forms it and carries it hence. We neglect it at our peril. And urgency often dictates its neglect as we rush for the next wave, method, restructuring exercise or makeover in our management obsessed culture, shaped by the corporate world. The tyranny of the urgent effaces the important. But the Church's calling is apostolic, 'set apart for the gospel of God' (Romans 1:1). Attention to our gospel is the first and final apostolic task. How we need leadership with this one.