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Christ's Incredible Cross

By David Servant

SEVEN **The Cross Proclaimed**

The apostles proclaimed a message radically different from the so-called gospel message prevalent in many Evangelical¹ churches today. Too often, the biblical gospel has been replaced by a modern gospel that is void of practically every essential biblical element.

This modern gospel proclaims, “Accept Jesus and get a better life.” The listeners are reminded of their temporal problems and then offered peace of mind and a relationship with God. They are promised that God will begin to do things for them if they will only “invite Jesus into their hearts.”

No mention is made of sin or of the necessity and accomplishment of the cross; whereas the authentic gospel is, as Paul stated, “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18).

No invitation to be baptized is made because it would make no sense. Baptism is something for Christians to consider only when the annual baptismal service takes place.

No one is told to repent of sin simply because it doesn't fit into the message. “God is love—invite Him into your life and things will start getting better.”

Whatever Happened to Repentance?

I well remember the first time I did a word study, using a concordance, of *repentance* in the New Testament. How surprised I was to discover that repentance is essential for salvation and part of the gospel message. It was then that I began to realize how defective my own gospel really was.

When the true gospel is proclaimed, repentance naturally makes sense to the hearers. If Jesus suffered incomprehensible agony on the cross, being punished in my place for my sins, then it stands to reason that if I'm going to begin a relationship with God, I cannot continue sinning as I always have. Sin is abhorrent to God.

The concept of repentance is foreign to the “accept Jesus and get a better life” gospel. The listener is told that God wants to bless him and fulfill his every desire. God will make him wealthy and give him joy and peace in the midst of a troubled world. He

¹By “Evangelical” I'm referring to any church where people claim to be “born again.”

doesn't need to repent of greed, which the Bible says is idolatry,² because God wants to give him more success and bigger cars and homes. God will make him happy and give him greater self-esteem.

That, however, is not the gospel of the New Testament. Although God certainly does want to supply the needs of and even prosper His children, a person can only become one of God's children if he repents and believes in the Lord Jesus who died for his sins. That is what the Bible teaches.

Did the apostles preach the gospel by telling the unsaved that God wanted to bless them? Peter once did, at the end of his second sermon recorded in the third chapter of Acts. But listen to how he said it:

“For you, first, God raised up His Servant, and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.” (Acts 3:26).

God wants to bless everyone, but His blessings begin with each individual's repentance. God wants people to “turn from their wicked ways.”

What has ever happened to repentance being essential to salvation? I remember an evangelist who once visited our city and brought with him the vice president of a major midwestern beer brewery. He introduced his guest as a “Spirit-filled Christian who was a missionary to his beer company.”

Here was a man who made his living producing a product responsible for thousands of broken marriages and homes, thousands of innocent deaths, birth defects and permanent disabilities, untold suffering and disease, sins of all kinds, from murder to child abuse, and higher insurance rates for everyone, yet he claims to be a believer in Jesus Christ! All under the guise of being a missionary to the other hell-bound people who worked for the same company!

Should a man who runs a house of prostitution keep his place open for business-as-usual once he believes in Jesus so he can be a missionary to prostitutes and those who pay for their services?

Should a drug lord, once he believes in Jesus, continue to smuggle drugs, extort politicians, and “rub-out” his competitors in order to be a missionary to the drug pushers?

If the vice president of that brewery was truly saved and wanted to reach his employees for Christ, he should have sent them all a memo saying, “I've decided to follow Jesus who died for me, a wicked sinner. My job at this brewery is not compatible with what is right, as we all know, and so I resign, effective immediately.”

The Church's First Sermon

The book of Acts contains material crucial to our study of the cross. By examining the content of the gospel messages proclaimed by the early church, we can compare the gospel we read with the gospel we have heard (or preached). For the most part, we will only study incidents where actual portions of gospel sermons are recorded for us. There are other cases in the book of Acts where we are simply told that so-and-so “preached the gospel,” but the actual content of the message is not recorded.

The apostle Peter preached the first gospel sermon of the church on the day of Pentecost. Did he tell his listeners that God would begin to solve their temporal problems if they would only invite Jesus into their hearts? No, Peter had listened well to Jesus' post-resurrection instructions because he preached that all people are sinners (2:38,40), that Jesus died on the cross (2:23, 36), that Jesus' death was predetermined by God (2:23), and that Jesus had been resurrected according to the Scripture (2:24-32). Also

²Col. 3:5

included in his message was the necessity of repentance (2:38), the need to be baptized (2:38), and that the primary benefit of salvation was the forgiveness of sins (2:38).

Peter quoted from Psalm 16:8-11 to prove that the resurrection of the Messiah had been prophetically predicted. Undoubtedly, this was one of the scriptures Jesus had identified to the Emmaus Road disciples (and probably to the other disciples as well).

Peter argued that David (the author of Psalm 16) could not be referring to himself as the “holy one” whom God did not allow to “undergo decay,” because David had died and was buried, and his tomb was with them “until this day” (Acts 2:27-29). David must have been prophesying concerning the resurrection of Christ.

Peter also quoted a portion of Psalm 110 (also authored by David) as referring to Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of God the Father.

It is notable that Peter’s listeners were “pierced to the heart” when they heard his sermon. This should be normal when the gospel is preached. The Holy Spirit, Jesus promised, would “convict the world concerning sin” (John 16:8). If our gospel has no convicting power, then it isn’t the authentic gospel.

The Essential Elements

We must question whether Luke recorded every word of the sermons he reported in the book of Acts. More than likely, he did not and instead only recorded the main points. If, then, we find an essential element of the gospel missing in one of the sermons, there is no need to conclude it was not part of the original message.

Peter’s second sermon, after the healing of the cripple at the Beautiful Gate, included the elements of humanity’s guilt (3:13-15, 19, 26), God’s wrath (3:23), the death of Christ (3:15), the prediction of His sufferings by the prophets (3:18, 24), His resurrection (3:15, 26), the necessity of repentance for salvation (3:19), and the fact that the forgiveness of sins was now being offered through Christ (3:19). Of the seven essential elements contained in Peter’s first sermon, only baptism is not included in his second sermon (or more likely, not recorded by Luke).

Peter also quoted two Old Testament passages as being fulfilled by Jesus: Moses’ prediction that God would raise up a prophet like himself (Deut. 18:15), and God’s promise to Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through his seed (Gen. 22:18).

Jesus must have mentioned these two scriptures during His discourse with the Emmaus Road disciples and probably with the others later. Naturally, the Old Testament scripture quotations were the most effective when the gospel was being proclaimed to Jews rather than Gentiles.

Peter’s sermon obviously had an impact on his listeners because “many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand” (Acts 4:4). Imagine that!

How to Preach the Gospel

Unlike Peter, some preachers today consider it inappropriate to mention humanity’s sinfulness, God’s wrath, or the necessity of repentance when they proclaim the gospel. I remember once speaking to a group of pastors in a foreign country who had swallowed this kind of unbiblical thinking. They had been told by their “apostle” never to mention sin or God’s wrath when preaching the gospel because it would “turn people off” to Christianity. (These were full-gospel, charismatic, evangelical pastors!)

If humanity is not sinful, however, Christ’s death is meaningless, seeing that He died for our sins. The true gospel cannot be preached without mention of humanity’s guilt.

If you will take the time to study great revivals of the past, you will soon see that the preachers of the gospel during those awakenings expounded a message that first convicted people of their sins.

The successful Methodist evangelist and circuit rider of the “Second Great Awakening,” Francis Asbury, along with Bishop Coke, in the 1798 *Methodist Discipline*, encouraged their fellow-preachers to:

Convince the sinner of his dangerous condition....He must set forth the depth of original sin, and shew the sinner how far he is gone from original righteousness; he must describe the vices of the world in their just and most striking colors, and enter into all the sinner’s pleas and excuses for sin, and drive him from all his subterfuges and strongholds.³

In his landmark book, *Revivals of Religion*, in a chapter entitled *How to Preach the Gospel*, anointed revivalist Charles Finney wrote:

It is of great importance that the sinner should be made to *feel his guilt*....Sinners ought to be made to feel that they have *something to do*, and that is, *to repent*....Sinners should be made to feel that if they *now* grieve away the Spirit of God, it is very probable that they will be *lost forever*.⁴

Legendary Baptist preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, told those preparing for ministry:

The preaching of the cross is to them that are saved the wisdom of God and the power of God. The Christian minister should preach all the truths which cluster around the person and work of the Lord Jesus, and hence he must declare very earnestly and pointedly *the evil of sin*, which created the need of a Savior. Let him show that sin is a breach of the law, that it necessitates punishment, and that the wrath of God is revealed against it....Open up the spirituality of the law as our Lord did, and show how it is broken by evil thoughts, intents, and imaginations. By this means sinners will be pricked in their hearts.

Old Robbie Flockhart used to say, “It is of no use trying to sew with the silken thread of the gospel unless we pierce a way for it with the sharp needle of the law.” The law goes first, like the needle, and draws the gospel thread after it; therefore preach concerning sin, righteousness, and the judgment to come....Aim at the heart. Probe the wound and touch the very quick of the soul. Spare not the sterner themes, for men must be wounded before they can be healed, and slain before they can be made alive. No man will ever put on the robe of Christ’s righteousness till he is stripped of his fig leaves, nor will he wash in the fount of mercy till he perceives his filthiness....We must also set before our hearers the justice of God and *the certainty that every transgression will be punished*.⁵

As Spurgeon declared, not only must we preach humanity’s guilt, but also God’s wrath against sin. If God is not wrathful, then, again, Christ’s death is meaningless on two counts.

First, if God is not wrathful, then there was no reason for Jesus to die because there is no hell, there is nothing for people to be saved from, and no one need be concerned about future punishment.

³ Francis Asbury, as quoted by L.C. Rudolph in *Francis Asbury*, p. 154.

⁴ Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, pp. 205-7.

⁵ C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, p. 181.

As R.W. Dale succinctly wrote, “One of the chief reasons why men do not trust in Christ to save them, is that they do not believe that there is anything from which they need to be saved.”⁶

Second, if God is not wrathful, then Jesus did not suffer God’s wrath on the cross. He was not humanity’s substitute, and no atonement took place for our sins. If God is not a God of wrath, then the gospel of the New Testament is simply not true.

Today we are often told that there is no need to tell people that they are sinners because they already know that. I ask, “If they already know it, why aren’t they acting guilty or showing a desire to repent?”

Proclaiming Christ

As we continue to survey Acts, let us look not only for the preaching of the death and resurrection of Christ but also for the proclamation of humanity’s guilt and God’s holiness and wrath. The very fact that forgiveness of sins is offered through the gospel makes it obvious to any intelligent listener that humanity is guilty and God is wrathful, otherwise forgiveness of sins is irrelevant. When we say we have been “saved” or have experienced “salvation,” we are affirming both our guilt and God’s wrath, as it is God’s just wrath from which we have been saved (see Rom. 5:9).

In Peter and John’s short defense before the Sanhedrin (see Acts 4:1-22), Peter, speaking by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Christ’s death, His resurrection, and that salvation could come only through Him (Acts 4:10-12).

Peter again appealed to Scripture, quoting Psalm 118:22, saying that Jesus was the stone whom the builders rejected, but which became the very corner stone. Again, he most likely learned this Old Testament reference from Jesus.

In Peter and the apostles’ four-sentence defense before the Sanhedrin in Acts 5, they were able to include Christ’s death on the cross, His resurrection, the need for repentance, and the benefit of forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:29-32).

After the persecution of the church following the martyrdom of Stephen, Philip journeyed thirty-five miles north of Jerusalem to preach the gospel to the people of Samaria. Luke didn’t record any of his actual sermons but simply wrote that Philip was “proclaiming Christ to them” (Acts 8:5).

I don’t think that Philip stood and just repeated, “Christ! Christ! Christ! Christ!” No, he proclaimed that Jesus had died on the cross, was resurrected, and that, through Him, forgiveness of sins was available to all who repented and believed. This must have been the case because Philip immediately baptized all his converts (Acts 8:12-13). The believers wanted to identify with the one who had identified Himself with them.

After his “Samaria crusade,” Philip was instructed by an angel to journey to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he crossed paths with an Ethiopian eunuch traveling in his chariot. Providentially, the eunuch was reading from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah when he met Philip, and he asked him to explain what he had been reading.

There could have been no better scripture in the Old Testament from which to preach the gospel. Isaiah 53 includes the truths of humanity’s guilt (53:5-6, 11-12), God’s wrath (53:4-6, 10), Christ’s atoning death (53:4-12), (obviously) the preordination of Christ’s death, and His resurrection (53:10, 12).

Luke recorded Philip’s response to the eunuch’s question: “And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35).

Philip evidently presented the message of the cross so effectively that the eunuch himself asked to be baptized when he spotted water along the road. He had heard the

⁶R.W. Dale, *The Atonement*, p. 348.

good news that Jesus had died for his sins on the cross and wanted to identify with the one who had identified with him. The eunuch confessed he believed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and then Philip immediately baptized him (see Acts 8:36-38).

Why Mention Judgment?

In the tenth chapter of Acts, we find the narrative of the first preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. Having been supernaturally directed to journey to Caesarea to the home of Cornelius, Peter found this Roman centurion “who feared God with all his household” (Acts 10:2).

Speaking to Cornelius and his family and servants, Peter proclaimed that Jesus had performed miracles by the power of God (10:38), that He had died on a cross (10:39), that He had risen on the third day and had been seen by many people (10:40-41), that He had been appointed by God “as Judge of the living and the dead” (10:42), that the prophets had spoken of Him (10:43), and that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins (10:43).

Obviously the truths of humanity’s guilt and God’s wrath were implied in Peter’s sermon as he mentioned that Jesus had been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead and that He was now offering forgiveness of sins.

Interestingly, we learn in this passage of Scripture something that Jesus *commanded* His apostles to proclaim, which heretofore had not been revealed. Peter stated that Jesus “ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42).

Thus we can confidently say that the proclamation that “Jesus is God’s appointed Judge” is a part of the gospel. The clear implication is that there is a future judgment coming when all people will be judged. If people are going to be judged, then obviously there are rewards and punishments, otherwise judgment is meaningless.

Can you see that if there is no future judgment, then Christ’s death, again, is meaningless? If there is no future judgment, then there was no reason for Jesus to die because there is no hell to escape or heaven to gain. Proclaiming the future judgment is a part of proclaiming the gospel. The apostle Paul affirmed this in his letter to the Romans:

On the day when, according to my *gospel*, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:16, emphasis added).

The future judgment is something we can and should mention when we proclaim the gospel.

Can you see how this gospel differs dramatically from the “accept Jesus and get a better life” gospel? The primary reason that people should come to Jesus is because they understand that they desperately need their sins forgiven and that forgiveness is only possible through Jesus and His atoning sacrifice. Thus, people need to be aware of their need before they will respond to the gospel. Our preaching should help people see their need for a Savior.

The only thing people believe when they hear the “accept Jesus and get a better life gospel” is that if they invite Jesus into their hearts, they will get a better life. This is why many of those “converts” stop attending church and fall away from God once their life improves (or doesn’t improve).

For years I wondered why some of my converts were so unfaithful and seemed uninterested in growing in God. The reason was because they initially came to God to improve their situation in life—to make more money, to repair their marriage, to develop good friendships, and so on. Certainly God will provide those things for His children, but people should come to God to have their sins forgiven and to escape the wrath they deserve, which Jesus endured in their place on the cross. That is the starting place.

Preaching Christ Crucified

In addition to Peter's sermons, Luke recorded several of the apostle Paul's gospel messages. In Acts 13, we read about Paul's preaching to the Jews in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. His sermon (as I'm sure you expected by now) included the mention of Jesus' death on the cross (13:27-30), His resurrection and appearance to many witnesses (13:30-37), His fulfillment of the predictions of the prophets (particularly in His resurrection) (13:23, 27, 33-37), and that through Him forgiveness of sins is offered (13:38). Paul concluded his sermon by quoting from the prophet Habakkuk a warning of God's judgment that is directed at those who will not believe in God's amazing work (13:41).

In his sermon, Paul quoted portions of Psalms 2 and 16, and Isaiah 55, to prove that the Messiah's resurrection had been predicted by the prophets.

In Acts 17 we read of Paul's preaching to Jews in Thessalonica, and although Luke did not record Paul's sermons there, he does mention their general content:

And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that *the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead*, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" (Acts 17:2-3, emphasis added).

Paul concentrated on proving from the Old Testament (as we call it) that the Messiah had to suffer, die, and rise from the dead.

In Athens we find Paul speaking to Gentiles, "preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18). Paul did alter his message somewhat. He first laid a foundation about God that would be unnecessary for a Jewish audience. Then he noticeably excluded any reference to Old Testament messianic predictions that would have been all but meaningless to his Gentile hearers. Still, Paul included the essential elements of the gospel:

"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should *repent*, because He has fixed a day in which *He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man* whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by *raising Him from the dead*" (Acts 17:30-31, emphasis added).

I wonder, if he were alive today, if Paul would be criticized by some modern ministers for preaching such a negative message. They might tell him not to mention God's future judgment and that repentance is not a requirement to be saved—it is only a doctrine preached by legalists!

Paul, on many occasions, did face opposition to his "narrow-minded" message, but that never deterred him from preaching the truth. In the next chapter of Acts (chapter 18) we read of Paul journeying to Corinth, where he remained for eighteen months. Again, we have no record of Paul's actual sermons, but we do know what he preached there from reading his later letter to the Christians in Corinth:

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

He also testified in the same letter,

For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but *we preach Christ crucified*, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to

those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:22-24, emphasis added).

And reminding them of his initial message, Paul said,

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you....For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that *Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:1, 3-4, emphasis added).

The content of Paul's messages in Corinth underscores his conviction to proclaim the true gospel without wavering.

A Convicting Message

Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea provided opportunities for him to personally share the gospel. His meetings with Felix, governor of Judea, and King Herod Agrippa II are recorded by Luke in the final chapters of Acts.

Paul discussed four subjects with Felix, a man whom history records as "indulging in every kind of barbarity and lust, [who] exercised the power of a king in the spirit of a slave."⁷

The four topics Paul discussed with him were (1) faith in Jesus Christ, (2) righteousness, (3) self-control, and (4) the judgment to come (see Acts 24:24-25). Even before this, the Bible tells us that Felix had a knowledge of "the Way" and therefore had already been exposed to the gospel (see Acts 24:22).

Paul discussed "faith in Jesus Christ" because that is how a person is saved.

He discussed "righteousness" because all people are unrighteous in God's eyes, and the gospel reveals God's righteousness (see Rom. 1:17). God righteously punished the sins of the world in Christ. When people believe in the Lord Jesus, they are made righteous.

Third, Paul discussed "self-control." Was Paul advising Felix how to lose weight if he'd only exercise self-control? No, he was discussing the fact that all people are out-of-control sinners who need a Savior.

Fourth, Paul discussed "the judgment to come." That is, all people will have to stand before God's judgment seat one day, and if they have not received on earth the pardon God offered them through Christ, then they will be eternally confined to hell. All these things Paul shared with an unsaved person.

The result was that Felix "became frightened" (Acts 24:25) and dismissed Paul from his presence.

Why was Felix so frightened? I think it is safe to say that the Holy Spirit convicted him. Of what does the Holy Spirit convict people? Read what Jesus said:

"And He [the Holy Spirit], when He comes, will convict the world concerning *sin*, and *righteousness*, and *judgment*; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me" (John 16:8-9, emphasis added).

Is it any wonder that Paul spoke to Felix about the very things Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit would convict people?

⁷ As so said the Roman historian Tacitus in his Histories V, 9.

If the Holy Spirit will convict people of sin, righteousness, and judgment, then we ought to be speaking of those things to unbelievers. It is obvious that the Holy Spirit does not do our work for us—He *helps* us do our work. He will only convict people of those things when we speak of them.

I've seen unsaved people come under so much conviction when they heard the authentic gospel preached that they literally shook. And they should have! I can guarantee, however, that you won't find anyone shaking in his seat when he hears the "accept Jesus and get a better life" gospel!

Again, I can't help but wonder how Paul might have been criticized if he were alive today and shared the gospel in the same manner as he did with Felix. How many would call him too negative or a "hell-fire and brimstone" or "gloom and doom" preacher?

Lastly, Paul was given opportunity to defend himself before King Agrippa, the grandson of the man who ordered the slaughter of Bethlehem's babies, and the son of the man who had martyred the apostle James.

In Paul's defense before this ungodly king, he mentions humanity's guilt (26:18), Christ's sufferings and death (26:23), His resurrection (26:8, 15-16, 23), the prediction by the prophets of Christ's sufferings (26:22, 27), the forgiveness of sins made possible through Christ (26:18), and the necessity of repentance and faith for salvation (26:18, 20). Did you expect anything less?

The Importance of the Resurrection

It has been observed by many that the apostles seemed to emphasize Christ's resurrection above all else in their proclamation of the gospel. The resurrection is certainly emphasized as much as Christ's death on the cross. (And of course, if Jesus hadn't died, He could not have been raised.) Why is the resurrection so important?

The resurrection is vital for several reasons. Most importantly, Jesus' resurrection proved that the penalty for our sin had been paid in full because Jesus was no longer under the wrath of God. God's justice had been satisfied; thus death could no longer hold Him. As Paul also wrote in his letter to the Romans:

He [Jesus] who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification (Rom. 4:25).

Thomas J. Crawford (quoting a Mr. Horsley), wrote concerning this passage:

We had sinned—*therefore* the Savior died; our justification was secured by His obedience unto death—*therefore* He was raised again from the dead. I may add, that this interpretation of the latter clause throws light on an otherwise obscure statement of the same apostle, 1 Cor. 15:17, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins;" that is to say, "If Christ be not raised, you have no ground for trusting that His death has been accepted as an effectual atonement for you."⁸

Second, the doctrine of the resurrection is important simply because the message of Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross is not very convincing if Jesus remained dead. When we hear of criminals who are executed in the electric chair or gas chamber, we don't normally think of them as dying for our sins, but for their own.

⁸Thomas J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of the Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement*, pp. 27-28.

Can you imagine the reaction of people in that day if they heard someone saying that Jesus had been executed by the Roman authorities, and now He, though dead, was offering them forgiveness for their sins? How can a dead criminal save anyone?

But if we proclaim that Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day and was seen by many witnesses, then *obviously* His death on the cross had some significance. This person who died on the cross must be somebody special.

Unfortunately, our culture has become numb to the message of Christ's resurrection, due partly to the fact that practically everyone has heard the Easter story repeatedly or been exposed in some way to what is commemorated on Easter Sunday. People never stop to think about how incredible it was that Jesus repeatedly predicted His death by crucifixion and His resurrection after three days, and then actually pulled it off.

If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then we ought to listen to everything He had to say, before and after His resurrection. The resurrection was in a class by itself compared to other miracles—it authenticated Christ's deity like nothing else. Just as the apostle Paul wrote in the introduction to his letter to the Romans:

Christ Jesus...who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead... (Rom. 1:1a, 4a).

Third, the fact of the resurrection was also essential to validate the apostles' claim that God had appointed Jesus as Judge of the living and the dead (which is something Jesus ordered the apostles to preach—see Acts 10:42). How could a dead man judge anyone?

How's Your Gospel?

When we began our survey of Acts, I realized it might become tedious to repeatedly read that the same consistent message was proclaimed by the early apostles. But I wanted you to see that the true gospel message contains several essential elements—some of which have been edited from the gospel we so often hear today.

We must never forget, as Jesus Himself said, that His blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28). Our gospel, above all else, offers people forgiveness for their sins. Therefore, we should not think that mentioning humanity's sinfulness, God's wrath, or the future judgment is incompatible with preaching the gospel. Yes, God has an inheritance for those who are saved, and we can receive more from God than forgiveness. Forgiveness, however, is the starting place. Only one who is forgiven can receive God's other blessings.

Of course, there are those who only preach about humanity's sins and God's judgment, never offering anyone the solution, which is the message of Jesus' death on the cross. That, too, is a terrible extreme. We should preach a balanced gospel, emphasizing certain aspects as the Holy Spirit directs us to tailor our message to certain audiences but never completely excluding any essential element.

So here is a summary of the gospel presented in Acts:

“Jesus was a man sent by God, attested by the many miracles He performed. Yet He was condemned and crucified by evil men, but in so doing, He fulfilled the preordained plan of God, because the ancient prophets predicted His sufferings and death. After three days, He rose from the dead and was seen by many witnesses; this, too, was predicted by the prophets. Now He has commanded us to preach that men everywhere should repent, because He will one day judge every person. He is offering to all the forgiveness of their sins. So repent, believe in Him, and be baptized in His name!”

How does your gospel square up with that?