

The Unchanging Gospel in a Changing World

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LCJE International Conference
August 16, 2015

As we gather here in Jerusalem, the place where it all began, I am honored to be addressing you, my brothers and sisters in the faith and in the ongoing mission of God on behalf of our people Israel. The theme of this conference is well chosen. The gospel is surely unchanging as is our Lord who commissioned his followers from all times to go out from Jerusalem into all the world and make disciples. We are the heirs of those who have followed this call and today we seek to continue the legacy of those who have gone before us.

I like to ask questions and whenever I'm asked to speak or write on a subject one of the first things I do is to analyze the topic, break it apart into its various elements and ask myself – just what does this mean. We are often so accustomed to the words and ideas contained in the “headlines” that we miss their depth and meaning.

Tonight I want to take us on a journey into the meaning, the heart of one of the words we use so casually in our ministry circles. The “gospel” – we all know this word means good news. Of late, voices are being raised claiming the reverse, that the gospel as it has been proclaimed and lived is in fact “bad news” for our people Israel. To the contrary, the gospel is good news for all humanity. It is the good news of deliverance, salvation and abundant life - that God himself has made a way for us broken sinners to be in relationship with him through the life, death and resurrection of his own son to atone for our sins and heal our brokenness. The broken relationships between man and God, man and creation and within humanity have been healed. We have been first reconciled to our Father. The rest follows.

Yeshua came to proclaim the good news. He called it the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43) and said “I must proclaim the **good news** of the kingdom of God . . . because that is why I was sent.” What did he mean? What is the gospel of the kingdom and what does it indicate for our lives today, twenty-one centuries after his life, death and resurrection?

This gospel we know and love is about transformation. We have been taken out of the kingdom of darkness to live under the reign of God whose kingdom is one of light and life. We are called to proclaim that this kingdom has indeed come; and in its coming, all things have been transformed. At the cross, through unimaginable sacrifice, this kingdom has burst into the reality of a fallen world and changed it forever. No longer does this world belong to darkness with sin and death the inevitable reality for all humanity. This is good news for all mankind.

Personally, I love theology and am even passionate about its importance, but if our theology remains on our bookshelves or is confined to theological conferences it is useless. Theology informs faith. Our faith is not merely an intellectual exercise. The scriptures describe it with metaphors of activity – walking, pilgrimage, running, fighting. As with the very word of God that empowers it, faith is meant to be active and visible in the lives, the actions, the attitudes and behavior of those who are his disciples.

Evangelicalism is a religion of verbs, of activity. This conference is focused on the activity of bearing witness to the living God in a Jewish context. How will they know that the gospel we bring is true, is real, is truly good news?

As disciples of the Lord, our calling is to see the word of this gospel actualized in the world in which we live. We have been given life when we deserved death. To be faithful to that calling has never been an easy road or a popular choice. In fact, we are promised that we will suffer. When we look at the lives of those who have gone before us, we see a legacy of courage, passion, suffering, martyrdom, hope in the midst of despair and ultimately of victory. This has not changed. The characteristics of today's heroes of faith have not changed since New Testament times. Today people are dying to remain faithful to their Lord. This is particularly relevant here in the Middle East. I could easily give you facts and statistics of how many are dying but you would forget them and the number would be irrelevant next week. Pope Francis is quoted as saying recently that the numbers of those who are today's martyrs are greater than the number of those from the early church who gave their lives for their faith. That we are here together tonight is a great grace and one we must never take for granted.

The world I know today is in many ways a different world than the world in which I grew up. I think all of us would agree, no matter our age. The rate of change, in technology, culture and society is rising exponentially. An example is the doubling of computer processing speed every 18 months and this is only one manifestation of the greater trend that all technological change occurs at an exponential rate. Technology affects society and culture which are also changing at ever higher rates. Together with these changes, humanity in general is experiencing major paradigm shifts. If we read the daily news we clearly see that evil too is increasing at exponential rates.

What is unchanging is both God himself and the heart of man without God in his life. Created in the image of God, living in a world that is constantly changing, man without God is no different from Adam after the fall. It is to this reality that the gospel is always good news. God loved his disobedient sons and daughters enough to cover the vulnerability of their nakedness in the Garden, to give them a garment of praise for a spirit of heaviness and to clothe them with garments of salvation.

All that God does is done out of love. We need never question his motivation. It is clearly stated in what's often called the most famous passage in the Bible – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

God in man, Yeshua, gave us the way for our world to know him and to know the Father's heart of love. He gave us the strategy if only we listen and actually do it. We all know the words of Yeshua, his words to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:13-16, his new commandment from John 13 and his last prayer for his disciples, from John 17,

¹³ You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

³⁴ A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. ³⁵ By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love one to another.”

And: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – ²³ I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

The mission of the body of Messiah is both conditioned and challenged by its context and motivated by the way Yeshua lived and ministered. God’s mission is a ministry of reconciliation in the context of broken relationships between God and humanity, humanity and creation, within human relationships and lastly in the very context of the body of Christ. It all happens in the context of community. While individuals are reconciled to God, the implications of that truth of necessity find expression in their communities. Unity is God birthed and based on our reconciliation with God and one another.

Those of us gathered here tonight have been called to a life and a walk of faith in the double context of one of the most difficult and gospel resistant people groups in the world who are entrenched in a situation of intractable conflict with rampant anti-Semitism again on the move. We must be those who are cognizant of the times in which we live. For the unchanging gospel to be relevant it must be visible to the changing world. This visibility is not an ephemeral spiritual presence. It must be a tangible, concrete reality.

We talk much about the Jewishness of Yeshua, that the gospel is “to the Jew first,” that Israel remains the people of God who is faithful to fulfil his promises to them. We may differ as to how

we understand these axiomatic statements but they are the context of our calling and we hunger to see our people receive the reality of God's love in Yeshua. For many of us it is our passion.

If we want our people to know Yeshua, they need to see, and taste the reality of God in our lives. If we want our people to know Yeshua we must become one. If we want the world to know that Yeshua is who he said he is and that we belong to him then we must "love one another." These words were given to all who would follow and they were spoken into a community. Let us hear them for ourselves in 2015 in Israel, in the context of our calling to our Jewish people. We, the 21st century disciples of Yeshua have the same instructions, the same "strategy" Yeshua gave his disciples in the first century. The truth of the unchanging gospel is the power of His love visibly and tangibly lived in and through the lives of His disciples.

I have long believed this since I first saw the truth of Yeshua's words lived out by a community very different from my own. In my early days as a believer, my husband and I were embraced and loved by a community that was socially and culturally foreign and who considered our community a threat to their lifestyle and values. They opened their homes, invited us for meals, prayed for us, and did not judge us. They received us with grace.

The evangelical world has begun to recognize the priority of the ministry of reconciliation as God's mission. In many circles, it has become the new paradigm for mission. This awakening to the place of reconciliation is on account of increasing hostility and the brokenness of the world. A recent book "*Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*," includes eighteen case studies from around the world that show how the ministry of reconciliation is key to God's mission in the world. This is God's story and we are called to live into it.

The context of Jewish evangelism, be it Israel or the diaspora, is a context of conflict where the Jew is at best tolerated. We Jews have multiple identity issues and have never managed to even agree on a definition of who is a Jew. For the world in which we live, it is much easier – a Jew is not one of us. You are either for us or against us. The us and them mentality is endemic to human nature. This is also true for how we are viewed in the context of and reference to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. We are all, as Jews or those who work with the Jewish people, affected by

this conflict, not only those of us who live in Israel. The world will not allow us to forget or ignore the reality of this conflict. Depending on the political winds, Israel and Jews in general are alternately praised or maligned. The question is: what are we going to do about it, seeing that this conflict is integral to our context?

As disciples of our Messiah, our vocation is to bear witness to him in love and truth. Bearing witness involves identification and being present. Our call to be both salt and light in our world is explicit. Our presence must be tangibly experienced and revelatory. For this to be more than words it requires a commitment to engage with those who are other than ourselves, even with those who are the enemies of our people group. It requires radical obedience to love unconditionally, to work for God's kingdom of light to become visible, to own our own brokenness and experience God's healing on deep levels.

I am going to read a quotation from a book I've recently read: "Religion – as understood by Abraham and those who followed him – is at its best when it resists the temptation of politics and opts instead for influence. For what it tells us is that civilisations are judged not by power but by their concern for the powerless; not by wealth but by how they treat the poor; not when they seek to become invulnerable but when they care for the vulnerable. Religion is not the voice of those who sit on earthly thrones but of those who, not seeking to wield power, are unafraid to criticise it when it corrupts those who hold it and diminishes those it is held against." These are the words of Rabbi Johnathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth in his recent book "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence."¹

The way of reconciliation includes a necessity to challenge the structures of evil by the power of sacrificial love, and to actively engage with our brothers and sisters in the body of Messiah from the other side. Reconciliation across the many divides that engender hostility is a costly process involving healing, truth-telling, pursuit of justice, and forgiveness.

¹ Sacks, Jonathan (2015-06-11). Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence (Kindle Location 4169). Hodder & Stoughton. Kindle Edition

It seems significant that there are no Palestinian Christians speaking at this conference. We can no longer insularly confine “Jewish evangelism” to the context of Jews and Jewishness when the reality is far from this. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is the elephant in the room. We all know its here and its enormous; but to speak about it, to confront the reality of its presence seems too costly, too conflictual, too disrupting. This, however, is not God’s way, Yeshua endured much more than controversy and misunderstanding. As God’s people we bear the same wounds and pain as the world in which we live. The unchanging gospel is not a triumphal proclamation that God is victorious, it is rather a humble identification with broken humanity through sacrificial love. My prayer is that as a body we will reclaim the radical simplicity of the gospel of our Messiah; to be salt and light, to love one another, and together with him become those wounded healers who bring life to our people.

I have thought and prayed much about this evening and wondered if I might be using this opportunity to express and promote what others have called my reconciliation agenda. I was willing to go another way, to speak words that would be easier, to connect with the conference themes of celebrating our achievements and honoring the past. In the end, I listened to the still small voice saying this is truth and have delivered my heart. Some of you know I write poetry. I wish to finish with a poem that reflects elements of this message in another form.

Broken Body

The broken body
not only limps,
it stumbles upon itself,
tangles in multiple fractures,
shrouding the semblance
of divine image
gone spastic.

The ruptured body
walks wounded,
configures out of control,
its unaligned confusion
becoming convulsive.
Divine life lost
in the plummet to paroxysm.

Ultimately rendered dead,
slowly shrivelled
by winds of doctrine
or perhaps heresy
that breathe, caress the almost corpse
of the sidelined, sick
beloved son.

Destined to rise victorious
after the end,
traversing death's kingdom
crowned with victor's thorns,
unbent by the immolated sacrifice
of the whole burnt offering,
offered and accepted.

The once broken body
suffers healing.
Wounds allayed by
gifts of oil and wine
bestowed on the Jericho road,
succored to again walk whole,
entwined in redemption's dance.

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