

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOPE IN THE GOSPEL” ~ 1st Thessalonians 2:1-13

→ “‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go to them without being sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Romans 10:13-15a)

In your mind’s eye, fast-forward a hundred years. If the Lord has not yet returned, will there be any “**beautiful feet**” in Beverly? Will anyone hold to the Gospel?

☛ By “the Gospel” I mean the message that Christ Jesus is the Son of God who came to establish his kingdom. He died on the cross and conquered the grave to reconcile us to God and give us a place in his realm. Then he ascended into Heaven and sent the Holy Spirit to dwell inside his followers. But Christ will return! God will give his people eternal life; but those who reject his gift of salvation will receive what they have demanded: existence apart from God (i.e., hell).

Will there be “**beautiful feet**” here in 100 years? To put it another way, does the Gospel “**have legs**”?

Can it thrive (or even survive) in a culture whose citizens (commonly) misunderstand it, who (by and large) appear politely uninterested in it, or who are (increasingly) hostile to it?

🕒 Many Christians are afraid it cannot.

☞ For that reason, some try to promote the Gospel by *deemphasizing* it. They literally remove the cross from their worship spaces, so as not to offend seekers. In their larger services they hardly speak of sin and never of hell. That language is reserved for more mature believers in smaller gatherings. It’s almost a bait-and-switch approach.

☞ Some try to further the Gospel by *modifying* it. They, too, remove the cross – not only for the seekers, but because it contradicts their beliefs. They say Jesus came to help us be good, to bless us with our “best life now”, and to give us a boost when we cannot make it on our own. This is called moralistic therapeutic deism.

☞ And some try to advance the Gospel by *binding* it to a particular social or political agenda. They spotlight the cross – along with the national flag, or a political banner, or the symbol of their movement. Conservative or progressive, they preach a tribal gospel given by a tribal god in service of their tribal interests.

Given people’s cool reception, it can be tempting to “help” the Good News along. But *is it really the Gospel if we deemphasize it, change it, or yoke it to another message?* Or is it something else?

Please turn to First Thessalonians, chapter two.

More than anything, the apostle Paul desires that his ministry in Thessalonica will glorify Christ and strengthen the kingdom of God by bearing eternal fruit. Yet he has good reason to doubt the future of the

Gospel there. That gives him every incentive to tone down his message, minimizing off-putting talk about the cross and the nature of discipleship and God's judgment of sin.

Let's see how he handles the temptation.

❑ 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2a: **“You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results.”** (That's encouraging.) **“We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, and thrown in prison as you know.”**

● When Paul came to Thessalonica he began preaching the Gospel in the synagogue. Three Sabbaths in a row Paul {Ac 17:2-3} **“reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.”** That is the Gospel message in a nutshell: {1 Co 1:23} **“Christ crucified,”** Christ risen, and (once that has been presented) Christ coming again.

But the synagogue leaders did not receive it as Good News. Within a month of Paul's arrival {Ac 17:5} **“they rounded up some [street thugs], formed a mob, and”** attacked {Guthrie, [NT Intro](#)} **“the house where Paul and his companions were staying.”** The missionaries were compelled to flee the city.

Paul was not caught off-guard by this violent pushback. If anything, he expected it.

✚ 1st, the content of the Gospel is inherently offensive to many: {1 Co 1:23} **“a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”**

✚ 2nd, Paul himself was once the chief enemy of the Gospel. Until he encountered the risen Christ, he was determined {Ac 8:3; 9:1} **“to destroy the church.”** With

murder in his heart he “[breathed] **out ... threats against the Lord's disciples.**” The hatred of others was hardly a surprise.

✚ 3rd, anti-Christian harassment is the norm. The pattern repeats itself many times in Acts 13-16: the missionaries come to town, preach the Gospel, and people start coming to faith. This is distressing to traditional Jews, idol merchants, devout pagans, and politicians. In many communities they react with vicious brutality. No wonder Paul **“kept telling”** the new disciples they **“would be persecuted. And [indeed] it turned out that way”** (1st Th 3:4)!

Put yourself in Paul's shoes. You expect the Gospel to elicit stiff opposition, possibly violent persecution. Your life could come to an abrupt and bloody end. Your mission could trigger the deaths of spiritual brothers and sisters.

Deemphasizing the crucifixion might well avert Jewish opposition. Softening the demand for undivided loyalty to Christ would probably forestall Gentile hatred.

It would be safer. More importantly, it would provide additional time to sow {Mk 4:3-9, 14-20} the **“seed”** of the word. It could really **“[come] up, [grow] and [produce] a crop,”** possibly **“multiplying thirty... sixty... a hundred times.”** It would be expedient to “help” the Gospel along.

If Paul is tempted by these ideas, he resists. In v 2 he says, **“with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.”**

□ On to verses 3-4: Enemies of the cross have been slandering Paul to the Thessalonians: “He abandoned you when things got tough! He’s only in it for what he can get.” And if the messenger cannot be trusted, what does that say about his message?

And so Paul writes, “[Our] **appeal ...does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.... We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts.**”

This is, fundamentally, a repudiation of false accusations of greed and exploitation. But it also sheds light on Paul’s handling of the Good News.

Notice the phrases: “**nor are we trying to trick you,**” and “**We are not trying to please people but God.**” Consider the implications.

We want others to receive eternal life. We pray for their salvation. We look for openings to witness and demonstrate practical love. We desire to {Mt 28:19-20} “**make disciples... baptizing them.... Teaching them to obey everything [the Lord Jesus has] commanded.**”

Then we come across a teaching like:

{Mt 10:37-38} “**Anyone who loves their father or mother... son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.**” But our neighbors put family first (as do we?). So we skip it.

Or: {Mt 19:23} “**It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom.**” But our neighbors want more money (as do we?). So we reason that Jesus is warning a tiny minority against excessive greed, and besides, God rewards obedient Christians with plenty.

Or: {Jn 14:6} “**I am the way... the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**” But our neighbors hate how that sounds (as do we?). So we don’t push it. And if it comes up we make it personal: “Jesus is the way for me. Maybe he is for you, too.”

And as we deemphasize and modify and hitch the Gospel to popular causes, we tell ourselves that we are doing so for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul was confronted with the same temptation. His Jewish listeners had exemplary knowledge of Scripture, but were captive to many anti-Gospel traditions. As for the Gentiles, the Bible was so alien to their worldview that even the well-educated found it difficult to grasp the Good News – and many were trapped in the addicting world of materialism and immorality.

Accentuating Christ’s morality would go a long way in pacifying traditional Jews. Emphasizing the Gospel’s earthly benefits could bridge the gap with the Gentiles.

That would multiply Paul’s opportunities to “**bring Good News**” to the city. More people would “**hear about**” Jesus, “**believe in him,**” “**call on him**” and “**be saved.**” The church would grow bigger, stronger, better informed and more mature. It would be expedient to “help” the Gospel along.

Paul is a practical man, yet he rejects these ideas: “**We [are not] trying to trick you,**” he says. “**We are not trying to please people but God.**” He preaches the Gospel, though it is foreign to their

worldview, though it makes them uncomfortable, though they beat him to shut him up.

Does the Gospel “have legs”?

Will there be “**beautiful feet**” here in 100 years?

On the authority of God’s word, the witness of the Saints, and the testimony of history, I am confident it does “have legs.” Assuming the Lord Jesus has not yet returned, there will be “**beautiful feet**” here in the year 2110.

Here and now, I recommit myself to trust the Good News of Jesus Christ to accomplish the purpose for which God gave it. Today, I renew my hope in the Gospel!

Will you join me?