

Since When Has the Gospel Been Popular?

For the last several years, Christian leaders have been asking, “What’s wrong with us and our message today? Why do so many people have such a negative view of the church?”

But are those the right questions to ask? Should we expect the gospel to be popular with the world?

On the one hand, it’s always good for us to examine ourselves and ask the hard questions:

Are we rightly representing our Savior? Do our lives reflect who He is?

Does the society associate us with purity or corruption, with integrity or scandal, with compassion or selfishness?

Sadly, all too often, we have fallen short in our conduct and example to the point that, in 1989, I wrote, “Look at our American scene today. The reproach we suffer is not for the Messiah’s sake; we are not scorned because of our militant stand. No. We are mocked because of our leaders’ sins, because of our failure to be holy and clean. Gospel and greed seem to go hand in hand, and our society equates evangelist with exploiter. Yet Jesus is the Head of the body! How can this be?”

And if we’re really candid, we will have to admit that we have often put our trust in the arm of the flesh, leaning on parties to carry out our agenda rather than trusting in the power of the gospel and the life of the Spirit (with the help of the government rather than dependence on it).

For all these failures (among many others), we need to humble ourselves and repent, having dishonored the Lord and driven

sinners away from Him. May God help us to take responsibility for our sins!

But there's another side to the story that often is overlooked today.

Who said the gospel is supposed to be popular with the lost and rebellious? Why do we measure our effectiveness for the Lord and our loyalty to Him based on what the world thinks about us?

We are certainly called to let the light of our good deeds shine brightly (Matt. 5:14-16), to live honorable lives before non-believers (1 Pet. 2:12), and to have a good reputation with outsiders, especially if we are leaders (1 Tim. 3:7).

But let us not deceive ourselves. We will never be more Christ-like than Christ, and just as the world hated Him, it will hate us too, no matter how exemplary our lives might be (John 15:18-20).

You say, "But isn't the gospel good news?"

Yes, of course it is good news—unspeakably good news.

It is the message of salvation as a free gift through the shed blood of Jesus.

It is the message of unmerited forgiveness, the almost inexpressible display of divine mercy, the astounding declaration of the love of God.

But it is a message that calls on sinners to repent and acknowledge their guilt and to confess Jesus as Lord (Acts 2:38; Rom. 10:9-10).

And it is a message that is often criticized, maligned and mocked, a message that is very costly to preach.

That's why the apostles were persecuted and killed, why

servant-messengers like Stephen were stoned to death, and why Paul reminded Timothy that everyone who lived a godly life would be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12).

The truth is that godliness is not always popular, and when everyone speaks well of us, we know that something is wrong. That's how past generations spoke about the false prophets (Luke 6:26).

People who live in darkness, by their very nature, hate the light.

People who are proud and rebellious do not take well to the call to submit to the lordship of Jesus.

People who are self-righteous are not quick to admit their guilt.

That's why the rulers of the nations "take counsel together, against the LORD and against His anointed, saying, 'Let us tear off their bonds and cast away their ropes from us.'" (Ps. 2:2-3)

As Paul wrote, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of those who do not believe" (2 Cor. 4:4). Or, in the words of John, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness" (1 John 5:19).

Yet today, as if Satan had not blinded the hearts and minds of the lost, we are told that if the world is to accept us, we must avoid controversial social issues like abortion and same-sex "marriage" and preach a non-confrontational, positive-only message.

But to do so is to conform to the world rather than transform the world, to bow down to the spirit of the age rather than liberate the lost from the dominion of darkness.

How can we be so shortsighted and naive?

Long ago the people of Israel said to the prophets, "You must not see *visions*," and to the prophets, 'You must not prophesy to us right things; speak to us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel'" (Is. 30:10-11).

In response to this challenge, Isaiah replied, "Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel" (v. 12).

That is exactly what we must do today, seeking to please the Lord rather than people, exercising wisdom and compassion in the midst of our obedience yet being determined to speak and do what is right regardless of cost or consequence. That is the ultimate manifestation of love for a dying world.

Otherwise, in our zeal to avoid offending the world, we end up offending the Lord.