

The Way Out of Problems?

In light of the alarming statistics cited in the previous chapter, few would deny that the Church as a whole has fallen short of the powerful, disciplined, sanctified Church we see in the book of Acts. This has happened because the enemy has very subtly diverted our attention away from our core message. Instead of preaching the Good News that sinners can be made righteous in Christ and escape the wrath to come, we have settled for a “gospel” that implies that God’s primary purpose in saving us is to unfold a “wonderful plan” for our lives: to solve our problems, make us happy in Christ, and rescue us from the hassles of this life.

⇒ *Kirk’s Commentary* ⇐

Read this sentence again: Instead of preaching the Good News that sinners can be made righteous in Christ and escape the wrath to come, we have settled for a “gospel” that implies that God’s primary purpose in saving us is to unfold a “wonderful plan” for our lives: to solve our problems, make us happy in Christ, and rescue us from the hassles of this life. Make sure you understand the difference. —KC

One of America’s largest Christian publishers produces a full-color tract that epitomizes the promise of a hassle-free life. Titled, *Is There Any Way Out?*, it reads:

Everyone is looking for a way out of their problems. ... There's no easy way out. You won't get respect by joining a gang. You won't find love on the back seat of a car. You'll never find success by dropping out of school. And the chances are about one million to one that you'll win the lottery. If you're really serious about making your life better, then try God's way. God gets right to the source of most of our problems: sin.



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It may sound admirable—and even biblical—to imply to sinners that Christianity promises to make their lives better, but it's just not true.

It seems that some are so entrenched in the “wonderful plan” message that they don't equate real life with the message they preach. I know

from many years of itinerant ministry that it is no exaggeration to say that the following scenario is commonplace in many pulpits each Sunday morning:

God has a wonderful plan for your life. He wants to give you *true* happiness and to fill the God-shaped vacuum in your heart that you've been trying to fill with sex, drugs, alcohol, and money. Jesus said, “I have come that [you might] have life, and ... have it more abundantly.” So come forward now and give your life to Jesus, so that you can experience this wonderful new life in Christ.

While they are coming, let's pray for the Smiths, who lost their two children in a car accident this week. Brother Jones has been diagnosed with cancer. Remember to uphold the whole family. His wife had another miscarriage on Tuesday, and both of their other children are chronic asthmatics. Sister Bryant fell and

broke her hip. She's such a dear saint—she's had trial after trial in her life, especially since the death of her husband, Ernie. Elder Chambers lost his job this week. That will make things difficult for the Chambers family, especially with his upcoming triple-bypass operation. Sister Lancing died of kidney failure on Monday night. Keep the Lancing family in prayer, because it's their third tragedy this year.

How many of you this morning need prayer for sickness or have problems with depression? *That* many? You had better stay in your seats and we will have a corporate prayer.

This makes no sense. The preacher promises a bed of roses for those who come to Christ, but those who are in Christ are evidently sitting on a painful bed of thorns. He promises a smooth flight, but those who are already on board are suffering terrible turbulence—and no one seems to notice the paradox.

Let me tell you about a few of my Christian friends who live in the real world. One went with his wife to a meeting. Their teenage son drove there alone. On the way home, my friend came across an accident, so he stopped to help. When he looked in the vehicle, he saw his beloved teenage son, dead—impaled on the steering wheel.

The senior pastor of a church where I was on staff was roused from his bed at three o'clock one morning to counsel a man who had come to his door and was waiting in the living room. As the pastor stepped into the room, the man began to slash him with a machete. The pastor almost died, and was irrevocably scarred both physically and mentally, so much so that he was unable to minister and required twenty-four-hour care.

Another pastor friend learned that his wife had multiple sclerosis. Her crippling disease left him as the only one in the

family able to take care of their three young boys. Then he was diagnosed with cancer.

One of my friends, a graphic artist, married a woman whose Christian husband had died of cancer, leaving her to rear five kids. The marriage seemed fine until she ran off with another man. She left my friend with the one child that was his. Some time after that, someone broke into his home and beat him to a pulp. He had to be rushed to the emergency room for treatment.

On June 19, 2000, five trainees with New Tribes Mission pitched a tent during a violent storm in Mississippi. Jenny Knapp, an attractive twenty-year-old, noticed that rain was causing the roof to cave in, so she lifted the tent pole to raise the height of the roof. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck the pole and tore through her body, giving her second-degree burns

on her face, arm, and back. Her friends resuscitated her lifeless body and rushed her to the hospital where she was placed in the intensive care unit. The young missionary recovered, but she is terribly scarred and partially blind. It is a sad fact of life, but in the real world, lightning strikes the just and the unjust.

At least one church I know of may have noticed the paradox. They were called, "The Happy Church," but recently decided, for some reason, to change their name.



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If we still want to cling to the message that "God has a wonderful plan for your life," we had better hide *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* from the eyes of non-Christians. Speaking of martyrdom, have you ever pondered what it would be like to be huddling together as a family in a Roman arena as hungry and ferocious lions rush in? Have you ever considered what it would be like to be eaten by lions? I have. My fertile imagination

runs wild. What do you give the lion to eat first—your arm? How long would you remain conscious as he gnawed on it?

Can you imagine the feelings you would have if you had led your loved ones in the sinner's prayer using the wonderful plan hook? Suppose you had read to them from a booklet by a well-known and respected man of God in which he writes, "Everyone is seeking happiness. Why, then, are more people not experiencing this happiness? According to the Bible, true happiness can be found only through God's way."

What would you tell your beloved family as you looked into their terrified eyes? How could you reconcile the words, "wonderful" and "happiness," with having the fierce teeth of a lion rip you apart, limb from limb?

These are terrible thoughts, but they are not merely my fantasies. Multitudes of martyrs have suffered unspeakable torture for the name of Jesus Christ. It should not have been a surprise to the early Church when persecution hit them. Jesus warned them that they may have to give their lives for His name's sake. He even said, "Brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake" (Matthew 10:21-22).

Church tradition tells us the fate of several apostles and early evangelists:

Philip: Crucified, Phrygia, AD 54

Matthew: Beheaded, Ethiopia, AD 60

Barnabas: Burned to death, Cyprus, AD 64

Mark: Dragged to death, Alexandria, AD 64

James (the Less): Clubbed to death, Jerusalem, AD 66

Paul: Beheaded, Rome, AD 66

Peter: Crucified, Rome, AD 69

Andrew: Crucified, Achaia, AD 70

Thomas: Speared to death, Calamina, AD 70

Luke: Hanged, Athens, AD 93

Persecution has always been the portion of the godly. According to Scripture:

“Others were tortured Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth” (Hebrews 11:35-38).

The “wonderful plan” message is evident in almost every corner of Christendom. If you train yourself to keep an eye out for it, you will see it everywhere. Years ago I purchased a yellow VW Beetle. Before I made the purchase, I hardly saw a Beetle anywhere. After I had my own, they seemed to be almost everywhere I looked. This wasn’t because there had been a sudden increase in sales of VWs; it was because I now had an eye to look for them.

The same applies to the message of the contemporary Church. Search the Web sites of respected evangelistic organizations and local churches and you will see the “God has a wonderful plan for your life” message in their gospel presentations. It is in the lyrics of popular songs, ingrained in Christian books, tracts, tapes, CDs and videos. You will regularly find it tagged on at the conclusion of radio and television Bible teaching. Let’s look at a few examples:¹

“God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life . . . the reward is eternal life. God had a plan when He created the world in which we live. He also had a plan when He made you. The most wonderful experience that can happen to you is to discover and participate in God’s plan for your life.” (From the Web site of a well-known music group)

In an article titled “That Wonderful Plan for Your Life” a respected Bible teacher writes:

“I am amazed at the variety of things that are offered to us every day to help us find the secret of successful living. Magazine articles by the dozens tell us how to cope with various problems; TV commercials—dozens to a program it seems—bombard us, telling us how to be successful in life, or at least how to look successful even if we really are not; health clubs offer us saunas and whirlpool baths to relax us so we can face life with equanimity; while various kinds of drugs are available to turn us on, turn us off, take us out, or whatever. All this is evidence of the universal search for the secret of enjoyment of life. Billions of dollars are spent every day on this quest. Many of us are familiar with Bill Bright’s Four Spiritual Laws, the first of which is, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” When talking to someone about his relationship with God, that is an appropriate place to begin.”

“Bridge to Life,” a well-known and much used gospel presentation by a very well respected Christian organization begins as follows:

“Step 1—God’s Love and His plan. God created us in His own image to be His friend and to experience a full life assured of His love, abundant and eternal. Jesus said, ‘... I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full’ (John 10:10b). ‘... we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 5:1). Since God planned for us to have peace and abundant life right now, why are most people not having this experience?”

The “God has a wonderful plan for your life” message often comes in other, more subtle forms. Listen to the message of the popular preachers of our day. Unless you are familiar with the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27), you may not even notice what’s missing. Do they faithfully preach against sin? Do they preach righteousness and judgment (as Jesus did)?² Do they speak about true repentance (not simply a “change of mind”), and warn about the reality of Hell (as Jesus did)?

If you have an ear to hear, you will find that many of today’s preachers fill their churches by teaching legitimate life-changing principles. However, although these principles are helpful for daily living, they fail to unmask sin and self-righteousness that keep vast numbers of false converts sitting in a fool’s paradise, comfortable in the pews, thinking they are friends with God when they are still His enemies.

Psalms 53:2-3 tells us, “God looks down from Heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. Every one of them has turned aside; they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one.” If the Bible tells us that no man naturally seeks after God, what then is the typical “seeker” seeking? No doubt most are seeking after peace, joy, happiness, and fulfillment (a wonderful plan for their lives). Not surprisingly, that is precisely what the modern gospel message offers them.

→ *Kirk’s Commentary* ←

This method of evangelism is also known as “felt needs” evangelism. Find out where a sinner hurts, and tell him Jesus will make it better. Remember the old advertising principle: “Scratch ‘em where they itch”? Well, the modern gospel does it. The problem is that sinners aren’t itching to crucify their flesh. They aren’t hungering and thirsting for righteousness. They’re itching for a more enjoyable life and thirsting for sin. The Bible says they drink it in like water (Job 15:16). What unregenerate sinners really seek is a life change that brings positive results, won’t cramp their style, and won’t cost too much.

Does that not sum up the promise of much of contemporary American Christianity? No wonder some churches are so full they're bursting at the seams. —KC

Again, if you don't know what should be there in the gospel message, you won't know what's missing. However, if you know what to look for, you'll find the teaching of the Law, Hell, and judgment conspicuous by their absence. In essence, these preachers are saying that the patient will swallow the medicine far easier if it is watered down a little. If they leave out the parts that taste bitter to the world, people will come and fill their churches. The problem is that the bitter medicine they are watering down loses its curative properties. To keep a patient comfortable at night and then find him dead in the morning is not successful medicine by anyone's definition.

In the following story, Pat (not her real name), a mother of four, seems to be trying to reconcile the "wonderful plan" message with the reality of her life experience:

Have you ever heard, or said to someone you're witnessing to, that God has a wonderful plan for your life? What happens when that wonderful plan is not one you would have designed for yourself? It was almost Christmas, 1993. As my husband, Charlie, and I left the mall, I threw him the keys and settled into the passenger seat. I reached for the seat belt, then laid it back down, thinking that I would just recline and be comfortable for the ninety-minute trip home.

The next thing I remember is waking to Charlie's terrified screams. I looked ahead and only saw grass and darkness. Soon I awoke in intensive care, strapped to a rotating bed. My legs were badly bruised and my



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teeth broken, but worst of all, my back was broken in three places and I was paralyzed from the waist down. These injuries have had a physical, emotional, and financial impact on my family. I never really thought about something like this happening. I didn't worry about it because things like this always happen to "the other guy," not to me.

⇒ *Kirk's Commentary* ⇐

Do you see how the "God has a wonderful plan for your life" hook can be misleading? Do you see how it can cause a woman like this to conclude that the promise of Christianity is only wishful thinking and doesn't hold up in the real world? Can you see how a sinner who only trusts God for a "wonderful plan" may feel terribly disillusioned when tragedy strikes, and may feel bitter toward God and those who gave her the so-called good news?—KC

Now look at this excerpt from an article titled "Is There Happiness without Jesus?" by Merle Hertzler This article reveals the common and bitter fruit of preaching the "happiness" gospel:

Much of the Bible is false. God never visited this world as a man. We are on our own in this world, without direct intervention from God. So it would seem to me. How do you react to those statements? Does it make you feel sad to think that someone would write them? Perhaps to you, Christ is the only hope in this world. Your life is centered on him. He is your purpose in life, your Lord, and your Redeemer. I understand. I have been there. I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior many years ago. I have read the Bible from cover to cover six times—e very chapter, e very verse, and e very line.... I have been there and done that.... I know the

excitement of doing God's work all day Sunday. And I also know the emptiness that would come on Monday.

I am no longer a Christian. I am no longer marching behind the Cross. I have found something different. Life without Christ can be far more fulfilling than anything that I had ever found in Christianity. And there are hundreds of others who testify to the same thing.

Have you found joy in Christ? I am glad that you are happy. But tell me something—why do so many Christians struggle to find that joy? Where is their peace? Why are they so discouraged? You may wonder why I think many Christians are sad. Here is one way that I know—fire up your search engine and search for “sad and depressed Christians.” What do you find? As I write this I find 1510 sites. Sure, some are not relevant, but most of the top sites on the list are. Look at them. They are written by Christians to help sad, depressed Christians. Why are all of these people trying to help discouraged Christians? It seems that there is a problem....

Non-Christians are told that they need to accept Christ to have peace and joy in their life. Yet many believers are missing peace and joy, and many Christians recommend that these turn to therapies such as cognitive therapy, a treatment that was developed in the secular world. Is this consistent? If cognitive therapy is the cure for the troubled mind, why do evangelists tell us that Jesus is the cure?

Do you need to give yourself pep talks to avoid depression? Do you have a daily struggle trying to find peace and joy? If you are not happy, then you cannot be sure that what you have gives happiness, can you? And you cannot tell me that I need what you have to be happy, can you?

Perhaps you have indeed found genuine happiness in Christ. I am glad for you. I hope you understand that others have found happiness else where. You may not need what I have to be happy, and I may not need what you have.

In reference to a popular Christian song that includes the words, “every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before,” John Piper writes:

Christian Hedonism is very much aware that every day with Jesus is *not* “sweeter than the day before.” Some days with Jesus our disposition is as sour as raw persimmons. Some days with Jesus we are so sad we feel our heart will break open. Some days with Jesus fear turns us into a knot of nerve ends. Some days with Jesus we are so depressed and discouraged that between the garage and the house we just want to sit down on the grass and cry . Every day with Jesus is *not* sweeter than the day before. We know it from experience and we know it from scripture.³

Perhaps some would argue that the Christian life is a wonderful plan because God “works all things out for the good of those who love Him” (Romans 8:28). That fact is wonderful in the truest sense of the word. No matter what happens to us as Christians, we can rejoice because of that promise. But the promise does not guarantee that our lives will be without suffering and trial and pain.

In 1413, John Huss was summoned to appear before the Roman church council in Constance. When he was thrown into a prison for nineteen months awaiting trial for his faith and then sentenced to death, he no doubt knew that God would work things out for his good. When he was burned alive at the stake and his charred, lifeless body fell among the ashes, the wonderful promise that God would work out for his good such an unspeakable horror remained unwavering.

In 1995, in Mainland China when Li De Xian was arrested for his faith, he no doubt knew that God would work all things together for his good. When he was beaten with a heavy club, kicked in the groin and stomach until he vomited blood, then beaten in the face with his Bible and left bleeding on the floor, the promise remained steadfast. When Muslims burst into churches in Rwanda in the late 1990s and hacked men, women, and children to death with razor-sharp machetes, if the many who bled to death loved God and were called according to His purpose, they too could claim this incredible promise.

According to a Regent University study, in 1998 there were approximately 156,000 Christian martyrs throughout the world. The promise of Romans 8:28 was also true for each and every one of these children of God.

If indeed our Creator works all things out for good—if He brings ultimate good out of every agony suffered by His children—why then shouldn't we use that truth as bait when fishing for men? Simply because it's not biblical to do so. Go through the book of Acts and see if you can find any of the disciples telling sinners that God loved them and had a wonderful plan for their lives.

Instead, they confronted their hearers as guilty criminals—enemies of God who desperately needed righteousness. The disciples in Acts didn't merely seek to enhance their hearers' lives with God's wonderful plan. The word, "wonderful," has positive connotations; it doesn't typically evoke negative images of machetes, hatred, persecution, beatings, and martyrdom. If non-Christians respond to the gospel message only to improve their lives, they will be disillusioned when persecution comes, and they may fall away from the faith. This is because many



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respond experimentally, simply to see if the “wonderful life” is as good as Christians make it out to be.

Jesus didn’t shield the newly converted Saul of Tarsus from what was in store for him as a Christian. Instead, He said that He would “show him how many things *he must suffer* for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16, emphasis added). Stephen was cruelly stoned to death for his faith. James was murdered with a sword. John the Baptist also felt the sharp steel of persecution. Down through the ages, Christians have been hated, persecuted, thrown to lions, and—like John Huss—even burned at the stake for the sake of the gospel.

In light of the fact that in February 2000, Christians in central Africa were being burned to death for their faith, and Christians in Indonesia and China are yet today suffering persecution for their faith, perhaps the message that “God has a wonderful plan for your life” applies only to the United States. One might have offered that argument until the shooting death of Cassie Bernall and other Christians in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. Cassie was shot in the head when she answered “yes” to the question, “Do you believe in God?”

If you still want to hold on to the modern approach to evangelism, let me try one other thought that should convince you that the “wonderful plan” message is erroneous and misleading.

Imagine that you have been supernaturally taken back to September 10, 2001. You have been asked to address the people who work in Tower One of the World Trade Center. Your topic is “The Benefits of the Christian Life.” What an incredible opportunity you have to reach the lost!

You look at the vast sea of faces in front of you. There are mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters. Many have already made retirement plans. Others have made plans to be with their families for Christmas. Just like you, they have hopes, dreams, and fears.

What are you going to tell these people? Are you going to tell them what a wonderful plan God has for them? How could you? You know that within twenty-four hours many of your hearers will die in unspeakably horrible ways. In an instant, some will become human torches as jet fuel saturates them and their bodies ignite and burn to ashes. Others will be horribly suffocated in a huge ball of fiery, poisonous gases as their burning and heaving lungs gasp for breath. Rather than face the horror of burning to death, some will jump more than one hundred stories in inconceivable terror to their deaths on the unforgiving sidewalks of New York City. Those who manage to stay alive on the upper floors will eventually come crashing down, along with the earthshaking weight of twisted metal and concrete, their bodies so horribly mangled and ripped apart that they will be unidentifiable. Many others, working in the lower stories, will be crushed like helpless spiders as the building collapses.

Again, what will you tell them? Can you in good conscience say, “God has a wonderful plan for your life”?

You may be saying, “Hold on. God does have a wonderful plan for their lives—for their eternity.” You know that if they repent and give their lives to Christ, they will go to Heaven after they have been burned to death or smashed on the sidewalk. But sinners don’t equate the promise of a “wonderful plan for your life” with eternity. They think of the here and now.

I would say that I could never tell those people that God has a wonderful plan for their lives (and I trust you feel the same). So, if that popular message isn’t appropriate for the people who worked in the World Trade Center, who is it for? The only logical answer is that the message isn’t biblical.

Perhaps you are thinking, “This guy is destroying my gospel presentation. Now what am I going to tell sinners? What would bring someone to the Savior if not the promise of a wonderful

new life in Christ?” If that is what you are thinking, please be patient with me. We will answer these questions in the next chapter.

→ *Kirk's Commentary* ←

At this point, some readers may feel angry. “Why would anyone tell us not to tell sinners that God has a wonderful plan for their lives? If this is what you feel, don’t stop now. Press on and read the next few chapters. Your anger will turn to joy! —KC

End Notes

1. I have deliberately avoided naming specific ministries and individuals, because my purpose is simply to point out a problem with the message, not the ministry or minister, most of whom are sincere and earnest in their desire to reach the lost.
2. See *What Did Jesus Do?* By Ray Comfort (Genesis Publishing Group).
3. John Piper, “Kindling for Christian Hedonism,” October 20, 1983, <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/83/103083.html>.