A Gospel-Centred Identity

Often the church has emphasized the power of our identity in Christ in the context of its benefits; what we can obtain. Whilst this is valid, it is often still centred around our needs and desires. The result is that our identity in Christ becomes a mere tool for gaining our idols. This is humanism. The Lord has shown me the importance of having an identity that is centred around the Gospel. What does a life look like when the Gospel is central? Paul was an example of this.

Phil 1:20-21

20 *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* 21 *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

A Gospel-centred-mindset will say, "Everything my body does results in Jesus being exalted. Everywhere I go and everything I say is to your honour and glory Lord." Many believers are still searching for significance yet Jesus says, "You are already significant in me."

What is the Gospel?

1 Cor 15:3-4

3 *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,* 4 *that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures*

Essentially the Gospel is the Good News as described in the verses above. *All other religions are advice whilst Christianity is news*. (Tim Keller). Other religions try to explain how to find God whilst in Christianity God Himself comes down to us and says, "Here I am to do what you couldn't do." The Gospel was referring to the Christian message, until the 2nd Century when people began to use it to describe actual books in the Bible. The implications of this scripture are phenomenal. In this message we will unpack from Paul's prison epistle to the Philippians, what it means to have an identity that is centred around the Gospel. Paul's letter to the Philippians was written while he was in prison in Rome. Despite being in prison he exhibits so much joy and this is known as his most personal and beautiful letter. He had planted the church in Philippi in AD 51 and was now writing this letter about 10 years later in AD61. This church was known for its zeal for missions so it would be a good source to explore Gospel-centricity. I will share with you 3 distinct characteristics of a Gospel-Centred identity.

1. Partnership in the Gospel (Fellowship)

We are not proclaiming Christ in isolation.

Phil 1:4-5

4 *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy* 5 *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*

Paul is rejoicing because they have stuck with him. They haven't bailed out because he is in prison.

Partnership is the Greek word Koinonia = Contributory help and participation, spiritual fellowship

When your identity is Gospel-centred it means you participate in the work of the Gospel. You are an active participant. Paul was not describing onlookers. There are many onlookers on Whatsapp groups. They are on the list of members but do not contribute. Fellowship in the true sense is not so much to do with hanging out as it is to do with contributing and participating.

This partnership works at many levels (E.g. preaching in church, small group level and one on one). We are proclaiming Christ and not mere behaviour modification.

Phil 1:6-7

6 *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* 7 *It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.*

When you are partnering in the Gospel you are guaranteed that God will complete the work you are doing because it is His work. He has promised to be with you until the end of the age by saying "I will never leave or forsake you" in the context of the Gospel.

We are partnering to defend and confirm the Gospel. Defending the Gospel (Gk – Apologia) is apologetics. This is specifically a speech in defence (particularly in court). It is important that we are able to "explain the hope that is in us". This is the heart of Christian apologetics.

1 Pet 3:15
But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

Confirming (meaning to ratify, establish and sustain) the Gospel includes our lifestyle, our testimony and also signs and wonders. God confirms His gospel not your agenda. We proclaim Christ to both the saved and unsaved. Paul says that as they partner with him they share in God's grace with him. This is a very powerful concept. There is grace (favour, unmerited kindness, benefits) made available for every assignment and we share in this divine enablement when we are in partnership with each other. Paul was given supernatural ability for the assignment and those partnering with him shared in this. This is motivating and encouraging to know. *Phil 1:27b – 28 Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.*

- Our partnership in unity revolves around the faith of the Gospel
- Our partnership in unity happens whether our leaders are present or not
- Our partnership in unity will help us to overcome persecution.
- Our partnership in unity is a sign of our salvation

True partnership in the Gospel means that we embrace different dimensions of kingdom relationships.

Phil 2:22-25
22 *But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.* 23 *I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me.* 24 *And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.* 25 *But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.*

From the verses above we see that there are different types of partnerships in the church; Fathers and sons, co-workers, fellow-soldiers, messengers and brothers. How you define relationships is important and determines what you get out of them. Someone can be a brother to you in the Lord but maybe God also wants you to start relating to them as a fellow soldier. Are you fully embracing the different roles of gifts God has placed in your life? Father and son relationships are a primary way in which mantles are passed on and impartation occurs. The spirit of familiarity in the church breeds unbelief which short-circuits the move of God. As it was with Jesus so it will be with us. No one is above this.

Mt 13:57-58 (Berean Study Bible)
57 *And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own household is a prophet without honour."* 58 *And He did not do many miracles there, because of their unbelief.*

2. The Fruit of Righteousness (Life-change)

Phil 1:8-11
8 *God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.* 9 *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,* 10 *so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,* 11 *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*

The person who has a Gospel-centred identity exhibits the fruit of righteousness. This is the fruit of being in right-standing with God. This includes an emotional longing. The word here speaks of the inward parts, the seat of feelings. It's interesting that he describes his affection as Christ's. God can give you a consciousness of Christ's affection toward those you may not ordinarily have feelings for. This is encouraging. Sadly, many of us have hardened ourselves and become professional Christians. If you can't feel anything anymore then you are not functioning from the fruit of righteousness. It means there is something wrong. When your life is Gospel-centred you have an emotional connection with those you are in partnership with for Gospel. The fruit of righteousness also includes sound judgment as they can discern what is best. We often struggle with decision making because we don't know who we are. When your identity is Gospel-centred decision-making is easier because your priorities are clear. The fruit of righteousness comes through Jesus Christ. Fruit doesn't grow through its own effort but is the product of being attached to the rest of the tree.

Phil 1:27
Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Our lifestyle and conduct must be worthy of the Gospel.

3. Advancement of the Gospel (Mission)

When you look at the life of Paul the apostle, he measured his progress, failure, success, enemies etc by assessing how the Gospel had been impacted or hindered. The Gospel was everything to Him. The advancement of the Gospel gave meaning to his suffering and challenges. He interpreted circumstances in light of the advancement of the Gospel. He was writing from prison but rejoiced because his goal of advancing the Gospel was being achieved despite his living conditions.

Phil 1:12-14
12 *Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.* 13 *As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard*[b] *and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.* 14 *And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.*

It is clear that fear is one of the things that causes us to shrink back from proclaiming the Gospel.

- Are you happy that your business is growing even if your church is not?
- Are you happy that your children are healthy even if you are not seeing miracles confirming the gospel?
- Do you see your hardships and challenges as opportunities for the Gospel to be advanced?
- When your identity is centred around the Gospel then you assess your life based on its advancement.
- When you meet new people, make new friends, grow your business, how central is Gospel advancement in your thinking?
- Are you still excited when you hear that someone got saved or have you become an indifferent professional Christian?

Phil 1:15-18
15 *It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.* 16 *The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel.* 17 *The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.* 18 *But what does it matter? <u>The important thing is that in every way</u>, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,*

Paul was so passionate about the advancement of the Gospel that whilst he acknowledged that people did it with wrong motives, he was still over-joyed by the fact that the Gospel was advancing. The fact that he says "in every way" shows us that he was innovative in how he proclaimed Christ. Sadly, in the church, we can exalt our own methodologies above Gospel advancement.

When we are Gospel-centred we keep the main thing the main thing.

Are you so consumed with the advancement of this Gospel that you are willing to suffer for it?

Phil 1:29–30
[29] *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him,* [30] *since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have***.**

Paul commends Epaphroditus to them and says:

Phil 2:29–30
[29] *So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him,* [30] *because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.*

Have you ever had to suffer for the Gospel? What would that look like in your life?

In summary, the distinctive dimensions of a Gospel-centred identity are to do with fellowship, life-change and mission.