

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, green, spotted frog. The hand is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, with the fingers curled around the frog. The frog is oriented vertically, with its head at the top. The background is dark and out of focus. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

The Gospel of Sin Management & The Loss of Discipleship

Jeff K. Clarke

When we reduce the gospel story to salvation and salvation to personal forgiveness and personal forgiveness to a plan of salvation that focuses exclusively on getting people to make a decision (what Dallas Willard referred to in *The Divine Conspiracy* as the gospel of sin management), we essentially de-storify the gospel of Jesus and offer people what proves to be a serious mutation.

We move from the birth of Christ to the death of Christ and forget the in-between life of Jesus. As a result, we end up living as though the middle section (i.e., his teachings,

miracles, healings, and other kingdom-of-God-has-come indicators) has no inherent significance and salvific import (check out N.T. Wright's *How God Became King*).

When we couple this with our North American preoccupation and unhealthy interest in numbers, we end up trying to compel as many people as possible to make a decision (whatever it takes), but only end up presenting a powerless, lopsided, half-story.

However, our methods of persuasion ask people to make a decision, not for Christ alone, as the goal of the gospel, but to avoid hell (fire insurance), make

us happy, help us find a mate, heal our marriage, etc, setting people up for failure. Then we add up the 'salvations' as though numbers indicate success.

The problem with this emphasis is that the correlation between those who make a decision and those who become mature students of Jesus is not high. In fact, some statistics show that as many as 50% of those who make decisions do not become "the disciplined."

As Scot McKnight wrote in *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*,

"... we cannot help but conclude that

making a decision is not the vital element that leads to a life of discipleship.”

He goes on to say,

“... getting people to make decisions that is, ‘accepting Jesus into our hearts’—appears to distort spiritual formation.”

Why? Because it diminishes the significance of discipleship and does not require “the decided” to become “the disciplined.” It also creates a false sense of security—“I made a decision to follow Jesus, so I must be safe”—while at the same time removing the element of personal responsibility.

However, by reducing the

story of Jesus, a story that calls people to a life of devoted discipleship, to a system of salvation that only asks people to make a decision, we effectively short-circuit the power of the gospel.

As McKnight says,

“... we have created a salvation culture, not a gospel-discipleship culture.”

However, the ‘just believe and you won’t go hell’ approach is one that Jesus never employed. His approach was simple, yet demanding—“**follow me.**” If you want to be my disciple, consider the costs, and place me first. And, if you cannot make that kind of commitment, you cannot be my disciple (see Luke 14-25-35).

That message sounds very

different from the de-storified, don’t-go-to-hell, ask-Jesus-into-your-heart-message that has permeated much of Western Evangelicalism.

Maybe we need to re-capture Jesus’ discipleship message if we truly desire people (and ourselves) to follow him along the path of discipleship.

Maybe we need to begin creating a gospel culture of discipleship that sets people up for a lifetime of loving devotion to Christ and his church, rather than a short-lived, saved-from-our-sins, get-out-of-hell-free-card, system of salvation.

Maybe we need to re-consider the cost. □

This article first appeared on Jeff K. Clarke’s “Jesus (Re)Centered” blog April 9, 2017.

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A More Christlike Way: A More Beautiful Faith



Earlier this year, Brad Jersak’s latest book, ***A More Christlike Way*** (CWRpress, 2019), was awarded the Illumination Book Awards’ 2020 Enduring Light Gold Medal.

A More Christlike Way, the highly anticipated follow-up to *A More Christlike God*, is already receiving high praise and it promises to impact the lives of readers in a similar way. Students and seekers of Jesus will be thrilled with the transforming insights in both of these Gold Medal Award winning books

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