

Keeping It Simple

"I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way."

(2 Corinthians 11:2-6, NIV)

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

(Hebrews 1:1-3)

I recently read a book by Indian-American philosopher Deepak Chopra, named *"Jesus: A Story of Enlightenment"*. This unusual novel suggests how Jesus might have lived before events catalogued in the Gospels unfolded. It describes a man coping with the realities of life in Judea under the Roman system and attempts to flesh out how Jesus might have emerged with the ministry, influence and relationships he did. Jesus is depicted as variously meeting Jewish zealots and members of the Essene community and consulting a guru in what could be Tibet, as he searches for (and achieves) oneness with God. Chopra claimed that, in researching and writing the book he "went into incubation, meditation, and allowed the story to unfold".

The novel was a best seller in New York – but it is errant nonsense. No need to waste your time and money buying a copy; have a cappuccino instead.

Over the years, I have heard and read a lot of curious things about the life of Jesus that the Bible does not reveal to us. Some speculative traditions hold that he went to South Asia or the Far East, where he learned mystical powers and received the enlightenment needed to be a guru and a healer to his generation. Other stories have been based on misunderstandings, or cute accounts designed to make Jesus more human, or more like us; others have been totally absurd. I often encounter people talking about learning "deeper" elements of faith and understanding about Jesus. The implication is usually that those with "deeper" knowledge are superior to rest of us. Chopra's effort was no exception.

I have discovered that, the more I know about Jesus Christ (on an intellectual level), the less I really know, that there is so much about God and my relationship with Him that is higher, wider, deeper than I ever imagined, but that everything

revolves around a very simple core: there is nothing “deeper” than the Gospel and the fact that we can have a personal relationship with God through Christ.

How and why a holy God goes out of His way to reconcile sinful men and women to Himself, at enormous cost, and makes them His children for eternity, living in them and calling them the “bride” of His Son is simply astounding.

The Bible teaches us that angels desire to understand these things (1 Peter 1:12), that human wisdom alone cannot fathom them, but that God has revealed them to us by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10).

The question is: should we be aiming for “deeper” knowledge, searching for greater understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God, learning how to fathom mysteries, unlock hard passages, interpret typology and interpret obscure books of the Bible? Absolutely. Our goal should never be superficiality.

There are no prizes for ignorance. The Old Testament prophet Hosea despaired that God’s people were being “destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). The Apostle Paul assured the early church leaders at Ephesus that he had shared with them the “whole counsel, or purpose, of God” (Acts 20:27). Timothy was urged to get a functional understanding of the revealed Scriptures, so that he could “rightly divide the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Ecclesiastes 3:11 declares that God has “placed eternity in the human heart”. So much is a mystery, but we are called to share in its understanding. There is so much to explore, to discover, to peel away, to enjoy; a rich store of truth, revelation and experience that will take a lifetime to get to know.

Let’s dig, by all means; let’s move beyond superficiality and study the Bible for all it is worth and apply it to our lives. But at the end of the day, we must keep coming back to non-negotiable centre: who Jesus Christ is, and how we can follow and obey Him.

Background to the Passage

It is critical that we understand the background to what we read in Scripture. Here is a potted summary of the text at the top of the article. The Apostle Paul had gone around preaching, teaching, planting churches, reaching out to world (mostly to Gentiles), and declaring the risen Christ. Right behind him were teachers who were trying to undermine everything he stood for. They falsely claimed to be “super-apostles”; they boasted they had deeper teaching, a better grasp of truth and greater apostolic authority, and that they were able to improve on what he (Paul) had given them. As a result, these “super-apostles” drew many gullible Christians after them.

Some in the church were intimidated into following their teaching; others were impressed by their strength of personality and arguments. They set themselves up as super-spiritual Christians who knew more than Paul and his merry band, had a superior understanding of God and enjoyed a more comprehensive revelation of the way to ultimate truth. Some based their approaches on a return to strict legalistic Judaism, which was alien to Gentile converts. Others promoted

a teaching called Gnosticism, which stemmed from Greek philosophy. Others still were motivated by old fashioned jealousy and materialism.

Paul's response was to declare that he, too, had received revelations from God (2 Corinthians 12:7), but that the message was not about him, but about Christ.

We face similar situations today. The Internet, for example, is full of "teachers" who will give you anything you want – as long as you don't look too closely behind the words and check out who is posting it there and what their underlying assumptions are. The world is full of people with "itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3) who chase fads and are happy to be enticed down rabbit holes, but in the process miss the simplicity of the Gospel. "Professing themselves to be wise, they become fools" (Romans 1:22).

How can we avoid this trap and keep on track? Isaiah told the people of his day that, "The LORD has given me a strong warning not to think like everyone else does" (Isaiah 8:11). We need to guard our thinking and not follow the crowd.

In fact, we need a "paradigm shift", a completely new way of looking at the world. Isaiah put it this way: "Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark." (Isaiah 8:20). Don't imitate them.

Let me explain, by drawing on three important principles that emerge from our reading of 2 Corinthians 11:2-6.

1. *Keep to the Simplicity of the Message*

Many people today are like the ancient Athenians, who were insatiably curious to soak up new ideas and theories: "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." (Acts 17:21). However, the fundamental teaching of the Bible is that God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He has spoken to us through His Son (Hebrews 1:1-3). If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Everything is fulfilled in Him. He is the beginning and the end. We don't need another prophet, another messenger, a better revelation, or a new religion.

While the numbers of people attending traditional church services in the West are down in historical terms, people remain hungry for spiritual things. I heard a program on the radio the other day entitled "*Everything is Divine*"; people are open to spiritual realities. But the more we advance the more we need to recalibrate our thinking so that we stay on the original message, keep the anchor and compass and don't drift.

Paul complained to the Corinthian Christians, "You happily put up with whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach a different Jesus than the one we preach, or a different kind of Spirit than the one you received, or a different kind of gospel than the one you believed." Every cult, every false teaching that reinvents the core, revolves around these three key areas: a different Jesus, a different Holy Spirit and a different message. This remains a litmus test you can use to discern

between truth and error (and when encountering the latter, junk it without any qualms).

We need to know what we believe and why, and fix it in concrete, so that we can distinguish between what is of God, and what is nonsense and can be dismissed out of hand.

The Scripture warns us, “Don’t allow your mind to be corrupted and seduced from wholehearted and sincere and pure devotion to Christ (Amplified Bible). “Don’t be lured away from the simple purity of your love for Christ” (The Message).

Having a simple Gospel isn’t the same as being “simple” in our thinking. After decades of following Christ I am sure of one simple message: God loves me, Jesus died for me, He lives in my heart, I am forgiven for all my sin, I have an eternal hope because He is alive. Nothing can take that from me if I don’t want to give it up.

God is faithful; the message is powerful and transformative and we should never shy away from proclaiming it. That’s why Paul could tell the church in Rome that he was “not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, because it is the power of God to save those who believe” (Romans 1:16).

As Christians in a complex world, we can look at the diverse issues of modern life and affirm that what sustains us is a “pure and undivided devotion to Jesus Christ”. This simple truth, and the love for God that it engenders, unlock all the power of the Holy Spirit that we need to remain on track as Christians in a skeptical and materialistic age.

2. *Deal with things that distract from message*

What is this reference to Eve that pops up in the passage? What does it have to do with what we are talking about?

You will remember that God created Adam in a perfect world, an environment better than any Utopia that people’s imaginations can dream up. He then created Eve as Adam’s partner in carrying out a number of important tasks. They both lived perfect world. They were innocent. They had never been tempted and did not know what it was like to have sinned. Their relationship with God was open and intimate. What a privilege they both had, a perfect setting and unfettered access to their creator who loved them unconditionally.

But there came a time of testing when they were blindsided by Satan, fell into sin (actually they “chose” to sin; nobody really “falls into” sin) and tragically forfeited it all.

Remember God’s command: eat from every tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the full account can be found in Genesis Chapter 3). Pure and undivided devotion to God should have been enough for them to trust Him and obey His word, even if there were parts of the dialogue

they did not fully fathom. The Bible records that they saw the forbidden fruit, it appealed to them, and they walked into the trap.

What happened to them is what occurs to us all; it is illustrative of how temptation works. 1 John 2:15 explains that temptation and sin operate in the realms of (i) the cravings of sinful people; (ii) the lust of their eyes; and (iii) the boasting of what they have and do. Eve saw the fruit was good for food, so she craved it; it was appealing to her eyes, so she “lusted after it”, she simply had to have it; and it promised that she and Adam would receive wisdom to be “like God” (what a boast!). How could they resist offer like that? All their aspirations could be fulfilled in one small step.

Satan was cunning. He knew Adam and Eve were not machines, or robots, that they had God-given capacity for choice. But both of them allowed their minds to be messed with, they permitted themselves to be deceived, made the wrong choice and lost their innocence and position of privilege. In an act of rebellion (hatred of God’s word, rather than undivided devotion to Him) they pursued a course that cost them paradise.

Jesus was also tempted, in these three areas, but He chose God's way. We have the same choices today.

Like Eve, the Church is perfect bride of Christ, reserved for Him alone. And, likewise, the love and devotion we owe to our Savior can be spoiled if allow other things to get in the way. We need to be constantly on guard so as not to be distracted and detoured down a dark alleyway.

Keep it simple. Listen to God. Deal with distractions. He will lead and guide you, so that you can touch your world, experience the power of the Holy Spirit and be a leader for good. It is critical that we not allow others to smother, disillusion or discourage us; that we not be sucked in by short-term cravings, as Eve was. Our bottom line must always be: closer dedication to Jesus Christ. If we feel limited, that’s OK. When we are weak in ourselves, He makes us strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). We should never allow other things to get in way, distracting and enticing us to follow anyone or anything other than Christ.

3. *Keep on track without apologizing*

You may wonder why Paul gets so worked up about the so-called “super-apostles” who are undermining his message. Read the surrounding chapters and you will see that he gets very cranky.

The reason is simple. Having heard and responded to the Gospel message, with repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, some of the Christians in Corinth were starting to embrace extraneous teaching and practices that were not from God.

As a result, they were compromising the message, dividing the Christian community, losing the simplicity of their faith, going back to imitating the ways of world and putting Jesus back onto the menu of gods that pervaded their society.

These will always be the consequences of a “let’s be tolerant” pluralistic approach to spiritual life in modern society.

Jesus, on the other hand, was uncompromising when he declared “I am way to God; if you go around me you will lose out, for eternity”. The Gospel declares that we don’t need another prophet, priest, messenger, religion, Buddha or guru. Anything more than Jesus Christ, anything less than Jesus Christ, anything more “clever” than the message we have received, whether called Christian, progressive, liberal, or tolerant, is false. The Biblical Christian message is the only way to God. In a pluralistic society where no one is willing to offend, or to be called “narrow”, we have to be equally uncompromising. Christians will always stand out if they hold to Jesus’ declaration, “Only I know the Father; I am the door, the way, the truth, the life; without me you have zero access to God.”

Keep It Simple Sons (KISS)

During a visit to Australia a number of years ago, a reporter asked American evangelist Billy Graham whether persisting with an old-fashioned evangelical message in a modern age were not putting Christianity back fifty years. To which Graham responded that he would “Rather put it back two thousand years”.

Being rooted and ground in first principles and the simple teaching of the Gospel does not mean we should not seek deeper understanding, but it does mean that, no matter how deep go, we should always remain “in Him”. Any revelation, any explanation, any teaching or new emphasis, should focus on Christ. Not on legalism, or fads, or personalities, or denominational structures, or materialism, or doctrinal tunnels that sound deep but lead to dead-ends. The only thing that will keep us on track is “pure and undivided devotion to Jesus Christ”. This is why the Bible encourages us to keep our hearts and mind “on Christ”.

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (Colossians 3:1-4)

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” (Colossians 2:6, 7)

Do you know what you believe? In whom you have believed? Have you trusted Jesus Christ (to the exclusion of all others) to save you and be your guarantee as you face eternity? I want to encourage you to open your heart, get to know Him, and live a simple, surrendered life (regardless of how complex your life story may be). Only then will you be able to discover and live out His plan and purpose.