

The Bias of the Gospel

Journalists are under obligation to ensure that what they publish is verifiable. If what they put into print is incorrect, they and the media outlet they work for could be sued. Thus, a journalist might say, "The chief economist says that interest rates are going to rise." That is a verifiable fact, and the journalist might actually have a recording of the chief economist saying those very words. The same journalist could write, "Interest rates are going to rise," and if they did write that, they would have verified that fact. How do they know that interest rates are going to rise? A credible journalist will not make a statement without being able to support that statement with credible sources.

That being said, journalists can still shape the story by deciding what to report and what to leave out. Thus, CNN and Fox News can report on the same story, but their takes on the story are so different we wonder if they are living on the same planet. Yet, both Fox and CNN journalists will be able to give a list of credible sources. The reasons that the stories are radically different is not because they are reporting false facts but that they are reporting only part of the facts. They do this because they want to spin the story so that it matches the political leanings of the media outlet that is paying their salary. The journalist has something to gain by presenting a particular perspective. The media outlet, when presenting a story about the presidential campaign, for example, spins the story so that the political party they are backing will gain power and return favours to them. It is not very difficult to identify some sort of benefit the journalist receives by presenting a biased story. As consumers of media, we always need to ask, "What does this person/outlet gain by presenting the facts in the way they do?" Or, if the journalist or the media outlet spreads false information, they may be sued, thus incurring loss.

Some have accused the Bible of having a bias as well, and it would be difficult to deny it. John, in his gospel, actually states his bias: These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). At the end of the next chapter, John openly admits that he could have recorded much more of Jesus' life and ministry, but that if he recorded everything, the number of volumes would have become overwhelming (John 21:25). John had a purpose for his gospel, and he picked things from Jesus' life that supported that purpose. He also left a lot out, leaving us to wonder if perhaps we are left with an incomplete picture and therefore a biased picture of Jesus.

John put a certain spin on the life story of Jesus, and his spin is a little different from that of the other three gospels. In fact, all four gospel writers seem to have a purpose in mind that results in their telling the story in a particular way. This can lead us to ask the question: do the gospels give a fair presentation of who Jesus is? Or are they so biased that we can't trust them fully?

Some will never be convinced that the biblical accounts of Jesus life and ministry are untrustworthy because of the biases of the authors. We can challenge that accusation with this one question: what do the gospel writers have to gain by presenting Jesus in the way that they do? Let's consider John for example. What did John gain from presenting Jesus as he did?

John did not gain a position of power. When the mother of John and his brother James suggested to Jesus that they become the vice presidents in his kingdom, Jesus taught that those who wanted to be first in his kingdom had to become servants. Or, as Jesus said several times over, those who are first will be last and the last will be first. John did not follow Jesus for his own personal advantage. In fact, the opposite is true. Instead of gaining a position of power and influence, John was eventually arrested and exiled, being humiliated by the political powers of that time. None of the followers of Jesus Christ became rich from following Jesus. Peter and John, when asked for money by a beggar by the gates of the temple, told him, "We don't have any money," although, as we know, through the power of Jesus, they were able to give the man the ability to walk. That too led to a loss on their parts, for the healing led to a challenge by the religious authorities with the command to be silent about Jesus.

In the first three centuries of the New Testament church there was no distinct advantage to being a Christian, at least not economically, socially, or politically. In fact, the early Christians found themselves at a significant disadvantage as they followed Jesus Christ. We cannot say that either the apostles or those who followed them gained anything by presenting Jesus in the way that they did. Anyone who says that the early Christians presented a biased view of Jesus for their own gain would have a hard time proving it. (This changed quite significantly when Christianity became the preferred religion of the west and the church gained tremendous political, economic and social power. Leaders presented very biased views of Jesus and the teachings of Scripture often for great personal gain. The world still suffers from some of those abuses.)

If we cannot say that John and the other gospel writers wrote what they did for personal gain and in fact suffered great disadvantage by believing what they did, we would have to say that the reason for their presentations of Jesus was for some other purpose. In fact, John's statement that he chose to present certain parts of Jesus' ministry and not others so that people would believe in Jesus and gain eternal life becomes very credible. John became a servant of the gospel not for his own benefit but for the benefit of others.

As a church we must be careful that we do not present the gospel for personal gain. The church growth movement in which churches seek to gain members by whatever means possible often results in a biased view of Jesus. The problem with the church growth movement is that the church presents the gospel to unbelievers so that it can fill the seats in the sanctuary and boast of the largest youth program in the community. We can sense that the efforts of such a church are not entirely altruistic (showing unselfish concern for the welfare of others). In the same way, our efforts as a church to bring the gospel to the world (VBS, Burger Bash, for example), should be entirely for the benefit of others without the thought that they come to our church. Rather, we do expend energy and time on the lives of others so that they also can believe in Jesus and by believing have eternal life. Our efforts should never be for our own gain.

If we do things as a church for our own gain, we will be presenting Jesus in a biased way that is unhealthy and maybe even incorrect. If, however, we go about the work of the church in making Jesus known to the world and we do so entirely as servants seeking the blessing of others sometimes at great cost to our ourselves, we will never be accused of presenting Jesus in a biased way.

Journalists work for media outlets which have a bias, and that bias results from the desire for personal gain or the avoidance of personal loss. As Christians we want those who benefit to be others, and we tell them about Jesus so that they too can have life in his name. And, for our efforts, we gain nothing and even if we are put at a disadvantage as were the apostles, we continue our work. If we gain nothing, it

would be hard for others to accuse us of having a bias. Let it never be said that our church is doing something because we sense it will gain us something, but, rather, may it always be clear that what we are doing gains us nothing but gains others eternal life.

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