

What is the Gospel?

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by David Schrock

For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek

(Romans 1:16)

The Gospel

It is a word made impotent by its vague familiarity. Like 'love'—which sells hamburgers, promotes athletics, and expresses marital bliss—'gospel' has become a filler word. It is often used, but little understood. Don't believe me? Just ask a Christian what the word is, and wait for the stammering to begin—uh . . . well . . . hmmm . . . you know . . . it's the gospel.

The gospel is often assumed. Rarely defined. Abstract, not concrete. It is a good word to use in church, but it is a word more quickly said than studied.

Such gospel assumption—or it is amnesia?—impairs our witness and our worship. Therefore, we need to ask some questions about the gospel: Who needs the gospel: Christians or non-Christians? What do we do with the gospel? Is it a message to be believed and preached? Or is it a way of life to be lived? Are there variations of the gospel? Or is the message singular? How do you define the gospel?

Difficulty in answering these questions does not point out an academic problem; it diagnoses an adoration problem. Those who know God personally know the gospel intimately. And only as we labor to understand the contours of the gospel, do we begin to enjoy freedom from sin's pleasure.

As Christians, we need to be gospelaholics—sinners addicted to the grace pronounced in the message of Christ's salvation (i.e., the gospel). So, to aid in that pursuit, let's consider how the Bible speaks of the 'gospel.'

What Does the Bible Say?

The term 'gospel' means 'good news' (euangelion). At the time of the New Testament, it was a word used to declare the "good news" of a military victory. For good reason, it was applied to the victorious work of Christ over sin, death, and Satan. However, in the New Testament, the word not only has a sense of victory; it is more specifically tied to the means by which the victory was one—namely the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Going further, when you do a word study of "gospel," you find that the word itself is richly ornamented with a variety of descriptions. These descriptions give us a sense of what the gospel is and what it is not. This month, we'll consider what it is. Next month, we'll see what it is not.

The Gospel of ...

... The Kingdom. Three times Matthew attributes the gospel to God's kingdom. In his Gospel, Jesus is the king of the kingdom, and King Jesus is gathering citizens for his kingdom. Therefore, in his earthly preaching, Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom (4:23; 9:35). In his Olivet Discourse, he declared that the "gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world" before the end (24:14). From Matthew's perspective it is plain that the gospel is a royal message, one that invites sinners to be ransomed by the king (20:28), so that they might inherit the kingdom prepared for them since before the foundation of the world (25:34).

... Grace and Peace. The gospel is also a message of grace and peace. Proclaimed to a world at war the gospel offers sinners liberation from violence—theirs and others. Businessmen, housewives, and factory workers all have the same need—grace and peace. The gospel provides both of these. In Acts 20, Paul speaks of the gospel as a message of "God's grace" (v. 24), and in Ephesians 6:15, he speaks of the "gospel of peace" in the context of Spiritual warfare. Additionally, in many of his letters, Paul begins with a salutation of "grace and peace," reminding his readers of their identity in the gospel.

... God. More substantially, the gospel is "God's gospel." Seven times in the New Testament, the gospel is attributed to God (Mark 1:14; Rom 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thess 2:2, 8, 9; 1 Pet 4:17). Clearly, this ascription indicates the origin of the gospel, but it also indicates the manner by which the gospel has come. Ephesians 1:3-14 records the triune nature of the gospel: It is planned by the Father (vv. 3-6), accomplished by the Son (vv. 7-12), and applied by the Spirit (vv. 13-14). In this way, every aspect of the gospel comes from God, through God, and returns to God (Rom 11:36).

... Jesus Christ. If the gospel is attributed to God, it is equally attributed to the Son. Eight times Paul speaks of "the gospel of Christ" (Rom 15:19; 1 Cor 9:12; 2 Cor 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Gal 1:7; Phil 1:27; 1 Thess 3:2); once he calls it "the gospel of his Son" (Rom 1:9); and once more he accords the gospel to "our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess 1:8). Since everything in heaven and earth is unified in Christ, it is fitting that the gospel of God would be the Son's.

... Your Salvation. Finally, the gospel is called "the gospel of your salvation" (Eph 1:13). As with Romans 1:16, Paul clearly understands the gospel as a message of salvation. This is the point of the message. It is from the Father, centered on the Son, promising grace and peace, and intended to effect salvation.

Truly, the gospel is a glorious thing. Its mercy has no limits; its truth has no defect. Accordingly, those who believe the gospel cannot get enough of it and the church who is built upon it will labor to press its good news into every ministry and motivation.

I pray God's gospel will be good news for you. And that we as a church can continue to be more and more centered on the good news of Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds