
CLARIFYING THE GOSPEL: A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

- A. When God first opened your eyes to his love for *you*

- B. Thomas Blackshear's "Forgiven"

- C. Romans 5:6-11

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

- D. What *is* the gospel?

It has often been said that the gospel is simple enough for a child to understand, and deep enough to keep the greatest theologian pondering its depths.

- E. 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

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, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Some technical notes on this passage:

1. Scholars have seen in this passage, not merely the words of Paul, but a very early formula or creed that he received from the first witnesses, and then delivered to others, just as it was delivered to him.
 - a. The words “received” and “delivered” are terms descriptive of rabbinic treatment of sacred tradition, indicating that 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 is a sacred tradition received by Paul.
 - b. The fourfold use of “that” (*hoti*) is common in creeds.
 - c. Several primitive, pre-Pauline terms are used, such as, “the Twelve,” “the third day,” “he was seen,” “for our sins,” and “he was raised.” These phrases are very Jewish and very early.
 - d. The poetic style is Hebraic, containing parallelisms.
 - e. The Aramaic Cephas is used; this was an early way of referring to Peter.

2. Furthermore, according to Galatians 1:18-19, Paul was in Jerusalem on a fact-finding mission three years after his conversion to Christ. There he spent two weeks with Peter (Jesus’ chief disciple) and James (Jesus’ brother)—the two people specifically mentioned in this ancient formula. This is most likely where Paul received the tradition, if not, earlier. If Jesus died ca. 30 AD, and Paul was converted ca. 33 AD, and Paul went to Jerusalem three years after his conversion, then **the contents of this creed and the list of witnesses it contains go back to no later than six years after Jesus’ crucifixion.**

3. The British New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn notes how startlingly early this creed may be: “Paul was converted within two or three years of Jesus’ death, perhaps as little as eighteen months after the first reports of Jesus being seen alive after his death. And almost certainly he received the basic outline of the gospel very soon after his conversion, as part of his initial instruction. In other words, the testimony of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 goes back to within just a few years of the events described.”

4. As a side note, we might observe that when Paul adds, “After that, [Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep,” these are hardly the words of someone trying to cover up a deliberately fabricated event that could be shown to have never taken place.

I. WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

A. The Definition of the Gospel

1. The gospel is not good do’s.

2. The gospel is not good views.

3. The gospel is good news.
 - a. The term *euangelion* as used among the Greeks

 - b. The term *euangelion* as used among the Romans
 - (1) Virgil, Eclogue IV

 - (2) Caesar as “the Savior of the world”

 - (3) Caesar’s birth as “the beginning of the good news” for the world

(4) The New Testament’s “hijacking” of the word “gospel” and its application to Jesus

(5) Mark 1:1

(6) Luke 2:8-14

4. The “gospel” = the good news announcement of what God has freely done (and will do) for his people in Jesus Christ

B. The Descriptions of the Gospel

1. Biblical encounters with Jesus help describe the gospel.

a. Zacchaeus (Luke 19)

b. The Woman Caught in the Act of Adultery (John 8)

c. The Thief on Cross (Luke 23)

d. The Wayward Sons (Luke 15)

e. The Healing Miracles & Exorcisms (Varied Scriptures)

2. Biblical images from the ancient world help describe the gospel.

Image or Metaphor:	We Were Spiritually:	Now in Christ We Are:
Courts.....	Accused	Acquitted
Orphanages.....	Homeless.....	Adopted
Banks	Impoverished	Enriched
Prisons.....	Shackled.....	Set free
Slave Auctions	In Bondage.....	Redeemed
Leper Colonies	Diseased.....	Healed
Public Baths.....	Dirty	Cleansed
Inns	Hungry/Thirsty	Filled
Temples.....	Far from God	Brought near
Broken Relationships	Estranged.....	Reconciled

C. The Drama of the Gospel

1. Christ was victorious over death. (1 Cor 15:4, 20)
2. Christ's followers will be victorious over death. (1 Cor 15:21-22, 49, 51-53)

D. The Dimensions of the Gospel

1. The gospel is historical. (1 Cor 15:3-5)
2. The gospel is Scriptural. (1 Cor 15:3-4)
3. The gospel is Christological. (1 Cor 15:3ff)
4. The gospel is theological. (1 Cor 15:3)
 - a. Substitution as "intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous" (Ayer).
 - b. That God should victimize the innocent Jesus in order to acquit the guilty sinner is seen to be a travesty of justice (cf. "divine child abuse").
 - c. Alternative views of the cross have been elevated, including subjective or "moral influence" theories.
 - d. But if the cross is not more than a mere *example*, we have to conclude that Jesus saw his death as little more than a form of emotional blackmail.
 - e. The cross must have a real (objective) value in order for it to have any personal (subjective) value.
 - f. At the cross, God did not arbitrarily punish an innocent third party; he deliberately punished *himself* instead of his people.

- g. “God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19a).
5. The gospel is final. (1 Cor 15:3-7; John 19:30)
- a. *Tetelestai* was a word used by laborers.
 - b. *Tetelestai* was a word used by artists.
 - c. *Tetelestai* was a word used by judges.
 - d. *Tetelestai* was a word used by priests.
 - e. *Tetelestai* was a word used by soldiers.
 - f. *Tetelestai* was a word used by merchants.
6. The gospel is universal. (1 Cor 15:22, 47-50)
7. The gospel is personal. (1 Cor 15:1-3)
8. The gospel is covenantal. (1 Cor 15:49)
9. The gospel is eschatological. (1 Cor 15:42ff)
- a. Personal Eschatology:

God – Sin – Cross – Salvation
 - b. Cosmic Eschatology:

Creation – Fall – Redemption – Restoration

New Testament scholar Tom Schreiner has some words of wisdom for bridging the yawning chasm between (a) the “soterian” Christians and (b) the “storybook” Christians:

“Certainly, conversion is not the central theme in the story. What’s central is the purpose for which people are converted, which is also the purpose for which we were created. As the Westminster Confession says, we were created ‘to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.’ There is a new world coming, and there we will reign with Christ forever, and we will see his face (Rev 22:4).

“At the same time, conversion is fundamental to the story, since we will not be part of God’s new creation without it. And it is quite clear from the Bible’s storyline that we will praise God forever in the heavenly city for redeeming us, for rescuing us from the dominion of darkness and including us in the kingdom of his beloved Son. We will never forget God’s decisive, saving work in our lives through Christ’s cross and resurrection. It will always be central to our praises.”

E. The Demands of the Gospel

1. The gospel demands a response of faith. (1 John 3:23a)
2. The gospel demands a response of repentance. (Acts 17:30)

F. The Displays of the Gospel

1. Ceremonial—baptism and communion display the gospel.
2. Ethical—Christian love and holiness display the gospel.

The Gospel	Implications of the Gospel
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- Note—they cannot be confused!
- Yet—they cannot be separated!

Cf. The council of Chalcedon’s resolution to the two natures of Christ controversy:

The Council of Chalcedon finally quelled most Christological tensions of the fifth century by articulating in four negative parameters the paradoxical relationship between Christ’s two natures, describing

them as “**without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.** The distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and one substance.” See Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 51.

In other words, the two natures of Christ could neither be confused nor separated. A similar distinction/unity is required when it comes to the gospel and the *implications* of the gospel.

- Notice how most of the New Testament letters BEGIN with a declaration of what God has freely done for his people through the person and work of Jesus Christ (gospel). THEN those letters set forth what it looks like when a group of believers live out their faith (implications of the gospel). The order is significant.

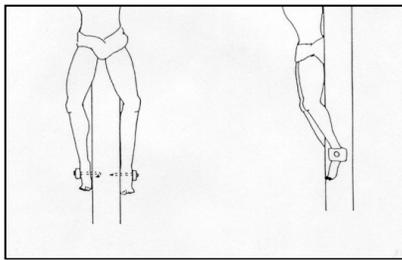
- Notice also how the simple gospel can be distorted:

<p>Gospel Distortion #1</p> <p>“Legalism”</p> <p>Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, and both good works and putting off sin contribute toward one’s right standing before a holy God.</p> <p><i>Rejected especially in Acts and Galatians.</i></p> <p><u>Gospel Distortion #1</u></p> <p>Legalism suggests that you can make yourself partially your own savior, which is clearly heretical.</p>	<p>The Gospel</p> <p>“Biblical Salvation”</p> <p>Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and good works will follow this profession of faith as believers yield to the Holy Spirit and put off sin.</p> <p><i>Taught throughout the New Testament.</i></p> <p><u>The Gospel</u></p> <p>Biblical salvation humbles you and then elevates you, conforming you over time into the image of Christ.</p>	<p>Gospel Distortion #2</p> <p>“Antinomianism”</p> <p>Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and both good works and putting off sin are matters of indifference because of God’s free grace.</p> <p><i>Rejected especially in James and Jude.</i></p> <p><u>Gospel Distortion #2</u></p> <p>Antinomianism indicates that you may not have truly met and been transformed by Christ.</p>
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II. WHY IS THE GOSPEL SO IMPORTANT?

A. The Facts of First Importance—What Actually Happened?

1. Christ died. (1 Cor 15:3d)
 - a. All four gospel writers describe the moment of Jesus' death.
 - b. The Roman soldiers did not break the legs of Jesus because he was already dead.



- c. A Roman soldier lanced the side of Jesus to verify that he was truly dead.

2. Christ was buried. (1 Cor 15:4a)
3. Christ was raised. (1 Cor 15:4b)

B. The Significance of First Importance—Why is This so Vital?

1. God did it to authenticate his word. (1 Cor 15:3f, 4c)
2. God did it to eradicate our sin. (1 Cor 15:3e)

- a. Matthew 20:28
 - b. Romans 5:8
 - c. 2 Corinthians 5:21
3. God did it to vindicate his Son. (Rom 1:3-4; Acts 2:23-24; Phil 2:9-11)
- C. The Witnesses of First Importance—Who Could Verify It?
1. The general importance of eyewitness testimony
 - a. Sir Edward Clarke: “As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidences for the events of the first Easter day. For me, the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the high court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling. Inference follows on evidence, and a truthful witness is always artless and disdains effect; the gospel evidence for the resurrection is of this class, and as a lawyer I accept it unreservedly as the testimony of truthful men to facts they were able to substantiate.”
 - b. Thomas Arnold: “The evidence for our Lord’s life and death and resurrection may be and often has been shown to be satisfactory. It is good according to the common rules for distinguishing good evidence from bad. Thousands and tens of thousands of persons have gone through it piece by piece as carefully as every judge summing tip on an important case. I have myself done it many times over, not to persuade others but to satisfy myself. I have been used for many years to study the history of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is better proved by fuller evidence than the great sign that God has given as that Christ died and rose again from the dead.”
 2. The specific list of eyewitness testimony
 - a. Peter could verify it. (1 Cor 15:5a)

- b. The Twelve could verify it. (1 Cor 15:5b)
 - c. More than five hundred could verify it. (1 Cor 15:6)
 - d. James could verify it. (1 Cor 15:7a)
 - e. All the apostles could verify it. (1 Cor 15:7b)
 - f. Paul could verify it. (1 Cor 15:8a)
- D. The Response of First Importance—What Must I / We Do with It?
- 1. I / we must receive it. (1 Cor 15:3a)
 - 2. I / we must hold firmly to it. (1 Cor 15:2)
 - 3. I / we must pass it on. (1 Cor 15:3b)
 - 4. I / we must stay amazed by it. (1 Cor 15:8b)
 - 5. I / we must stand on it. (1 Cor 15:1b)

CONCLUSION

- A. The gospel—a child can understand it.
- B. The gospel—a theologian can never exhaust it.