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FOUNDATIONS

Gospel

THE GOSPEL: The Focus of the Bible

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The gospel is what the Old Testament points toward and what the New Testament refers back to. The good news of God (the gospel) is that Jesus lived the life that we should have lived (in perfect obedience to God the Father) and that He died the death that we should have died (the Father punished Him for the sins of the world) and that He rose from death on the third day (triumphing over sin and death). The gospel is not just the way people are justified, but also the way they are sanctified. The typical approach to the gospel is to see it as the “A-B-C’s” part of Christian doctrine only, the minimum truth required to be saved. Then it is understood that we make progress in the Christian life through the application of other (more advanced) Biblical principles. However, the Reformers, especially Luther, understood that the gospel is not only the way we are saved, but it is always the solution to every problem and the way to advance at every stage in the Christian life. This is why the first of his 95 Theses were that “all of life is repentance.”

Most Christians do not understand the implications of the gospel on their lives. We must understand that the gospel is expressed in three different Biblical perspectives.

FOCUS	CALL	ARTICULATION	USE
Doctrinalist	Christ's substitutionary work	He lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died. Rest in His finished work. Faith in truth	Evangelism/Theological Training Preaching
Culturalist	Kingdom now but not yet	Receive the kingdom! Reversal of world's values. Salvation came to world through losing power; now receive it by surrendering your will and identifying with poor and powerless. Repent, change Lords	Generosity/ Reconciliation Doing justice
Pietist	Grace vs. works/ performance	Accept your acceptance. You are more sinful than you dared believe but more loved and accepted in Christ than you dared hope. Rely on grace.	Problem-solving, personal/ church renewal Counseling

The word evangelion ('the gospel') or evangelizdomai ('declare the gospel') occurs so often in the New Testament (virtually every author uses it) that "clearly the term gospel is a kind of code word for many New Testament writers that summarizes something very basic regarding what the early Christians thought Christian faith was all about." [James V. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love: New Testament Resources for a Missional Hermeneutic*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series (Trinity Press: Harrisburg, PA, 1998), p.31]. But what is that 'very basic' core of Christian faith?

In our desperate search for simplicity, it is easy to overlook the great variety of ways that the 'gospel' is used in the Bible. The most obvious example is how Paul makes 'gospel' almost synonymous with 'justification by faith', while the gospel writers almost seem to make it synonymous with 'the kingdom of God'. We have to be careful that we do not elevate one perspective on the gospel over all others, nor that we assume the perspectives contradict one another. We must have an outline of the gospel that encompasses the way all the Biblical writers speak.

1. The gospel is news rather than ethical instruction.

("THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST" Mark 1:1)

The 'normative' perspective: **What** happened?

The Greek term "ev-angelion" distinguished the Christian message from that of other religions. An 'angel' was a herald or messenger that brought news of some historical event that had already happened, and that radically changed the listeners' condition. The most common examples in Greek literature are "evangels" about a victory in war or the ascension of a new king.

When Christians chose evangelion to express the essence of their faith, they passed over words that Hellenistic religions used, such as "illumination" (photismos) and "knowledge" (gnosis) or that Judaism used such as "instruction" or "teaching" (didache) or "wisdom" (sophia). [Brownson, p. 46] Of course, all of these words were used to describe Christianity, but none achieved the centrality of "gospel". What does that mean?

First, it means that the gospel is news about what God has already done for you, rather than instruction and advice about what you are to do for God. The primacy of his work, not our work, is part of the essence of faith. In other religions, God reveals to us how we can find or achieve salvation. In Christianity, God achieves salvation for us. The gospel brings news primarily, rather than instruction.

Second, it means that the gospel is all about **historic** events, and thus it has a public character. "It identifies Christian faith as news that has significance for all people, indeed for the whole world, not merely as esoteric understanding or insight." [Brownson, p. 46] In other religions, the stories of miracles and other special events in the lives of the founder are not essential. Whether or not Buddha did Miracle X does not affect whether the 8-Fold path to enlightenment works or not. But if Jesus is not risen from the dead, Christianity does not "work". The gospel is that Jesus died and rose for us. If the historic events of his life did not happen, then Christianity does not

“work” for the good news is that God has entered the human “now” (history) with the life of the world to come. This public, historic aspect of the gospel is especially seen when the term “the gospel of Christ” or “of Jesus Christ” is used. Often the word “gospel” and the life and work of Christ are essentially synonyms. Particularly significant is how Luke links “gospel” to “Jesus”.

In Acts 5:42, it reads, literally, “they never stopped... evangelizing Christ Jesus”. Obviously, Jesus is not the object of their evangelism (they are not trying to convert him!). But the word “evangelizdomenoi” means, all by itself, ‘to preach the gospel’ or literally “to gospelize”. So in the places in Acts where it says, literally “they evangelized Jesus”, the English translations have to render it “they told the gospel about Jesus Christ” or “they told the good news that Jesus was the Christ” (cf. NIV Acts 5:42).

But the Greek construction clearly has a stronger meaning than that. Its intentional redundancy aims to say that the good news they preached was Jesus. His very life, and all his works, is what saves us. To declare Jesus and to declare the gospel is the same thing. Jesus does not bring the gospel – he is the gospel, because the gospel is that God has broken into history and accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. (You will find this same construction repeatedly. See Acts 8:35, 10:36, 11:20.) We can also see the terms “gospel of Christ” or “gospel of Jesus Christ” in Mark 1:1; 1 Cor. 9:12,18; 2 Cor. 2:12, 9:13, 10:14, Gal. 1:7, and so on. (Compare also Rom. 1:9 “The gospel of his Son”.)

Summary: So the gospel is news about what God has done in history to save us, rather than advice about what we must do to reach God. The gospel is news that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection in history has achieved our salvation. We do not achieve it, only accept it. Jesus does not just bring good news; he is the good news.

The gospel is that Jesus lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died, in your place, so God can receive you not for your record and sake but for his record and sake.

2. The gospel is grace to the weak rather than power to the strong. (“THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM” Matt. 4:23)

The ‘situational’ perspective: **How** did it happen?

We also see that the gospel is not simply that Christ has come into history to save us, but also it is how he accomplishes that. The answer is: through a new, deep structure or ‘paradigm’ that completely contradicts the way of the world. God’s saving purposes are effected through the crucified and risen Christ. Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. And those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost. In short, Jesus pulls off ‘the great reversal’. “The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man... puts himself where only God deserves to be; God... puts himself where only man deserves to be.” [John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.160].

This pattern so contradicts the thinking and practice of the world, that it creates an ‘alternate kingdom’, an ‘alternate city’ (Matt. 5:14-16) in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status and wealth. The gospel reverses the place of the weak and the strong, the “outsider” and the “insider.” It is an advantage, spiritually speaking, to see one’s weakness; it is a severe danger, spiritually speaking, to be successful and accomplished. And when we finally understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation (either that of psychological fulfillment, or of social transformation, or of spiritual blessing, or of all three) in power, status and accomplishment. That destroys their power in our lives. **The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, thus liberates us from bondage to other power of material things and worldly status in our lives. We begin to live a new life without much regard to them.**

The gospel creates a people with a whole alternate way of being human. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition – all these things are marks of living in the world and are the opposite of the mindset of the kingdom (Luke 6:20-26).

What is the ‘kingdom of God’?

Sin, the resistance of God’s authority and kingship, leads to the ‘unraveling’ of the fabric of creation. Relationships with God, with other races and classes, with individuals, with one’s own true self and with physical nature itself – all ‘come apart’ and disintegrate where God is not recognized as King.

The kingdom of God is the entrance into the world of God’s ruling power – and that power will heal and ‘re-weave’ all of creation back together, spiritually, psychologically, socially and even physically. The kingdom of God means, first of all, Jesus is Lord of your salvation, not you! So the kingdom means salvation is of sheer grace. But the kingdom also means he is Lord of everything else. Relationships between races and classes, between individuals and between man and God are healed and re-woven into one fabric again to the degree that they come under the authority of Jesus, through his Word and Spirit. God reveals that his redemption will entail the complete healing of creation, including social justice, the reunification of all humanity and the end of physical decay and death (Is. 11:1-10.) Everything in the world is properly understood only if we see: 1) it was created good, 2) it is fallen and marred by sin and 3) it will be redeemed in Christ.

What is the relationship of the gospel to the kingdom?

On the one hand, we could say that the gospel ‘brings’ the kingdom. It brings us into it (see Col 1:13-14; John 3:5) in that it brings us under the ruling power of God. Luke tells us in 16:16 that the gospel brings or proclaims a kingdom – a new order of life – that we need to ‘press into’. People who are converted by the gospel “see” a new kingdom (see John 3:3.) Also, it transforms people so that they live according to the great reversal of the cross. Living lives of sacrificial service – devoid of self-justification in relationships or in our use of money or in attitudes toward other races and classes or in our work and vocation – goes a long way toward re-weaving the fabric of society and communities. Once we see that we are sinners saved by grace alone, our old patterns are broken up, and we live lives of sacrificial service rather than self-aggrandizement

(cf. 2 Cor. 8:9). Also, the gospel thereby creates a ‘kingdom community’ – a counter-culture, the church – in which we are ‘royal priests’ showing the world what the future kingdom will look like (1 Peter 2:9-10). We ‘model’ how all of life – business practices, race relations, family life, art and culture – are healed and re-woven by the King.

On the other hand, the in-breaking kingdom of God (to restore all of creation) is the gospel! Twice, Luke actually says that the kingdom is the gospel message (Luke 4:43; 16:16). The fact that Jesus has broken into history to redeem all of life and give us a new order is great news. Why? We said above that looking to anything for salvation to but the grace of Christ sets up an ‘idol’ or a ‘power’ or a ‘false savior-king’. Human society is miserable under the influence of these idol-powers: such as sex, money, power or race. When we understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation by any other means. That destroys the power of these false savior-kings over us. The declaration of the gospel of grace is therefore always a declaration of the kingdom. A new savior is a new king. For example, Paul says that Peter’s racism was “not in line with the truth of the gospel” (Gal.2:14). If we are saved by grace alone, but we continue to be racists, we continue to bow to a false savior-king; we continue to look to our race and culture to justify ourselves over others. But the gospel is the gospel of Christ’s kingdom. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, tears down our pride and thus liberates us from bondage to other powers in our lives and our society.

Summary: We see that the gospel of free grace is necessarily a ‘gospel of the kingdom’ which affects the way we live in society and in the world. The gospel is not just (as is often thought) the message of how you can get individual forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. But we cannot separate this second ‘perspective’ from the first. If we are not saved wholly by Christ (not ourselves) then the kingdom of God is not good news!

It is not good news to be told, simply: “God has created a mini-society of freedom and justice based on his laws. Join up!” That would make the message of Christianity a burdensome one of instruction on how to live (Perspective #1) not a message of grace. But also, separated from the other perspectives, the kingdom of God would simply never ‘work’. What makes people able to change their mindset from ‘worldly’ to ‘kingdom’ is the existential experience of justification and sonship (Perspective #3), not just being told to live unselfishly.

The gospel is: the way up is down, the way to power is give up power and serve, the way in to God is to go to the margins in repentance and faith. The gospel is God loves to work through the weak, the marginal, the poor.

3. The gospel is of faith rather than of merit or performance.

(“THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION” Eph. 1:13)

The ‘existential’ perspective: **In whom** does it happen?

While the gospels (especially the ‘Synoptics’ – Matthew, Mark, and Luke) stress the gospel of the kingdom, the epistles and especially those of Paul, show how it is additionally “the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13).

Paul, better than any other Biblical writer, explores the meaning of the ‘gospel of Christ’ for the individual believer. He tells us that the gospel “reveals a righteousness from God” (Rom. 1:17). Here and in Galatians 2 Paul specifically identifies the gospel with the teaching that we receive not just pardon and forgiveness but also the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). This is received by faith in the finished work of Christ, not by good works or our merit.

If we think of the gospel as only pardon or forgiveness of sins, we will trust in God for our past salvation, but will trust in our own present strivings and attainments for our present relationship with God. But the “hope of the gospel” (Col. 1:23) is that “now he has reconciled you by Christ’s body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” (Col. 1:22). The gospel offers not just forgiveness for our bad record, but also complete acceptance through Christ’s perfect record. Christ did not only die in our place but lived a perfect life in our place. Therefore we do not simply get forgiveness for sins from Christ, but also complete acceptance. His perfect past and record now (in God’s sight) becomes ours.

Thus the entire Christian life is a life “lived (in a continual present progressive) by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

On the one hand, this certainly means we can only enter a relationship with God by the deliberate act of trusting in his work and rejecting any trust in our own. (Rom. 4:5 – *Now to the one who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited to him as righteousness.*) But, on the other hand, (as the present progressive of Gal. 2:20 indicates) we must continually remind ourselves of our status as legally righteous, adopted children of God. Galatians is written to Christians who are losing their grip on the doctrine of free justification and may be ‘returning to the bondage’ (Gal. 5:1) to false savior-gods (Gal. 4:8). Whenever we lose our grip on the gospel of salvation-by-faith-not-works, and we fall back into some form of works-righteousness, we return to fear and bondage.

Through the gospel we can say: “I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey.” But the human heart operates on the ‘religious’ principle: “I obey, therefore I am accepted”. The gospel, then, differs from both religion and irreligion. You can, of course, seek to be your own ‘lord and savior’ by breaking the law of God. But you can also do so by keeping the law to earn your salvation. Disbelief in the gospel of grace is therefore not only the main thing that keeps the unconverted from God. It also is the main cause of spiritual deadness, fear and pride in Christians because our hearts continue to act on the basis of “I obey, therefore I am accepted.” They look to things to ‘save’ us (such as our family, our moral record, our work and so on.) They become more central to our hope and identity than God, which returns us to fear and bondage. So we do not ‘get saved’ by believing the gospel and then ‘grow’ by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. The gospel is the way not only to meet God, but to grow into him. Only by deepening and renewing our understanding of the gospel do we overcome our character flaws. Only profound knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes the law of God a thing of beauty instead of a burden. Then we can use it to delight, resemble and know the one who saved us—rather than to get his attention or procure his favor. Then we can run the race “for the joy set before us” rather than “for the fear coming behind us”.

The gospel is that you are more wicked and flawed than you ever dared believe, and more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope at the same time. Unconditionally loved and radically humbled.

SOURCES

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FOR FURTHER READING

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According to Plan, Graeme Goldsworthy

God’s Big Picture, Vaughan Roberts

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