

## THE GOSPEL IS NOT EVERYTHING

What do we mean by “the gospel”? Answering this question is a bit more complex than we often assume. Not everything the Bible teaches can be considered “the gospel” (although it can be argued that all biblical doctrine is necessary background for understanding the gospel). The gospel is a *message* about how we have been rescued from peril. The very word *gospel* has as its background a news report about some life-altering event that has already happened.<sup>1</sup>

1. **The gospel is good news, not good advice.** The gospel is not primarily a way of life. It is not something we do, but something that has been done for us and something that we must respond to. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament — the Septuagint — the word *euangelizō* (proclaim good news) occurs twenty-three times. As we see in Psalm 40:9 (ESV) — “I have told the glad news of [your] deliverance in the great congregation” — the term is generally used to declare the news of something that has happened to rescue and deliver people from peril. In the New Testament, the word group *euangelion* (good news), *euangelizō* (proclaim good news), and *euangelistēs* (one who proclaims good news) occurs at least 133 times. D. A. Carson draws this conclusion from a thorough study of gospel words:

*Because the gospel is news, good news... it is to be announced; that is what one does with news. The essential heraldic element in preaching is bound up with the fact that the core message is not a code of ethics to be debated, still less a list of aphorisms to be admired and pondered, and certainly not a systematic theology to be outlined and schematized. Though it properly grounds ethics, aphorisms, and systematics, it is none of these three: it is news, good news, and therefore must be publicly announced.<sup>2</sup>*

2. **The gospel is good news announcing that we have been rescued or saved.** And what are we rescued from? What peril we are saved from? A look at the gospel words in the New Testament shows that we are rescued from the “coming wrath” at the end of history (1 Thess 1:10). But this wrath is not an impersonal force — it is God’s wrath. We are out of fellowship with God; our relationship with him is broken.

In perhaps the most thoroughgoing exposition of the gospel in the Bible, Paul identifies God’s wrath as the great problem of the human condition (Rom 1:18 – 32). Here we see that the wrath of God has many ramifications. The background text is Genesis 3:17 – 19, in which God’s curse lies on the entire created order because of human sin. Because we are alienated from God, we are *psychologically* alienated within ourselves — we experience shame and fear (Gen 3:10). Because we are alienated from God, we are also *socially* alienated from one another (v. 7 describes how Adam and Eve must put on clothing, and v. 16 speaks of alienation between the genders; also notice the blame shifting in their dialogue with God in vv. 11 – 13). Because we are alienated from God, we are also *physically* alienated from nature itself. We now experience sorrow, painful toil, physical degeneration, and death (vv. 16 – 19). In fact, the ground itself is “cursed” (v. 17; see Rom 8:18 – 25).

Since the garden, we live in a world filled with suffering, disease, poverty, racism, natural disasters, war, aging, and death — and it all stems from the wrath and curse of God on the world. The world is out of joint, and we need to be rescued. But the root of our problem is not these “horizontal” relationships, though they are often the most obvious; it is our “vertical” relationship with God. All human problems are ultimately symptoms, and

our separation from God is the cause. The reason for all the misery — all the effects of the curse — is that we are not reconciled to God. We see this in such texts as Romans 5:8 and 2 Corinthians 5:20. Therefore, the first and primary focus of any real rescue of the human race — the main thing that will save us — is to have our relationship with God put right again.

**3. The gospel is news about what has been done by Jesus Christ to put right our relationship with God.** Becoming a Christian is about a change of status. First John 3:14 (emphasis added) states that “*we have passed from death to life,*” not *we are passing* from death to life.<sup>3</sup> You are either in Christ or you are not; you are either pardoned and accepted or you are not; you either have eternal life or you don’t. This is why Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones often used a diagnostic question to determine a person’s spiritual understanding and condition. He would ask, “Are you now ready to say that you are a Christian?” He recounts that over the years, whenever he would ask the question, people would often hesitate and then say, “I do not feel that I am good enough.” To that, he gives this response:

*At once I know that . . . they are still thinking in terms of themselves; their idea still is that they have to make themselves good enough to be a Christian . . . It sounds very modest but it is the lie of the devil, it is a denial of the faith . . . you will never be good enough; nobody has ever been good enough. The essence of the Christian salvation is to say that He is good enough and that I am in Him!<sup>4</sup>*

Lloyd-Jones’s point is that becoming a Christian is a change in our relationship with God. Jesus’ work, when it is believed and rested in, instantly changes our standing before God. We are “in him.”

Ever since reading J. I. Packer’s famous essay introducing John Owen’s *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, I have liked “God saves sinners” as a good summary of gospel:

*God saves sinners. God — the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing,*

*the Son fulfilling the Father’s will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and Son by renewing. Saves — does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. Sinners — men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, unable to lift a finger to do God’s will or better their spiritual lot.<sup>5</sup>*

### THE GOSPEL IS NOT THE RESULTS OF THE GOSPEL

The gospel is not about something we do but about what has been done for us, and yet the gospel results in a whole new way of life. This grace and the good deeds that result must be both distinguished and connected. The gospel, its results, and its implications must be carefully related to each other — neither confused nor separated. One of Martin Luther’s dicta was that we are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that remains alone. His point is that true gospel belief will always and necessarily lead to good works, but salvation in no way comes through or because of good works. Faith and works must never be confused for one another, nor may they be separated (Eph 2:8 – 10; Jas 2:14, 17 – 18, 20, 22, 24, 26).

I am convinced that belief in the gospel leads us to care for the poor and participate actively in our culture, as surely as Luther said true faith leads to good works. But just as faith and works must not be separated or confused, so the results of the gospel must never be separated from or confused with the gospel itself. I have often heard people preach this way: “The good news is that God *is* healing and *will* heal the world of all its hurts; therefore, the work of the gospel is to work for justice and peace in the world.” The danger in this line of thought is not that the particulars are untrue (they are not) but that it mistakes effects for causes. It confuses what the gospel *is* with what the gospel *does*. When Paul speaks of the renewed material creation, he states that the new heavens and new earth are guaranteed to us because on the cross Jesus restored our relationship with God as his true sons and daughters. Romans 8:1 – 25 teaches, remarkably, that the redemption of our bodies and of the entire physical

world occurs when we receive “our adoption.” As his children, we are guaranteed our future inheritance (Eph 1:13–14, 18; Col 1:12; 3:24; Heb 9:15; 1 Pet 1:4), and *because* of that inheritance, the world is renewed. The *future* is ours because of Christ’s work finished in the *past*.

We must not, then, give the impression that the gospel is simply a divine rehabilitation program for the world, but rather that it is an accomplished substitutionary work. We must not depict the gospel as primarily *joining* something (Christ’s kingdom program) but rather as *receiving* something (Christ’s finished work). If we make this error, the gospel becomes another kind of a salvation by works instead of a salvation by faith. As J. I. Packer writes:

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**The gospel is news that creates a life of love,  
but the life of love is not itself the gospel.**

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*The gospel does bring us solutions to these problems [of suffering and injustice], but it does so by first solving . . . the deepest of all human problems, the problem of man’s relation with his Maker; and unless we make it plain that the solution of these former problems depends on the settling of this latter one, we are misrepresenting the message and becoming false witnesses of God.<sup>6</sup>*

A related question has to do with whether the gospel is spread by the doing of justice. Not only does the Bible say over and over that the gospel is spread by preaching, but common sense tells us that loving deeds, as important as they are as an accompaniment of preaching, cannot by themselves bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Francis Schaeffer argued rightly that Christians’ relationships with each other constitute the criterion the world uses to judge whether their message is truthful — so Christian community is the “final apologetic.”<sup>7</sup> Notice again, however, the relationship between faith and works. Jesus said that a loving community is necessary for the world to know that God sent him (John 17:23; cf. 13:35). Sharing our goods with each other and with

the needy is a powerful sign to nonbelievers (see the relationship between witness and sharing in Acts 4:31–37 and Acts 6). But loving deeds — even though they embody the truths of the gospel and cannot be separated from preaching the gospel — should not be conflated with it.

The gospel, then, is preeminently a report about the work of Christ on our behalf — that is why and how the gospel is salvation by grace. The gospel is news because it is about a salvation accomplished for us. It is news that creates a life of love, but the life of love is not itself the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

### THE GOSPEL HAS TWO EQUAL AND OPPOSITE ENEMIES

The ancient church father Tertullian is reputed to have said, “Just as Jesus was crucified between two thieves, so the gospel is ever crucified between these two errors.”<sup>9</sup> What are these errors to which Tertullian was referring? I often call them *religion* and *irreligion*; the theological terms are *legalism* and *antinomianism*. Another way to describe them could be *moralism* and *relativism (or pragmatism)*.

These two errors constantly seek to corrupt the message and steal away from us the power of the gospel. Legalism says that we have to live a holy, good life in order to be saved. Antinomianism says that because we are saved, we don’t have to live a holy, good life.

This is the location of the “tip of the spear” of the gospel. A very clear and sharp distinction between legalism, antinomianism, and the gospel is often crucial for the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit to work. If our gospel message even slightly resembles “you must believe and live right to be saved” or “God loves and accepts everyone just as they are,” we will find our communication is not doing the identity-changing, heart-shaping transformative work described in the next part of this book. If we just preach general doctrine and ethics from Scripture, we are not preaching the gospel. The gospel is the good news that God has accomplished our salvation for us through Christ in order to bring us into a right relationship with him and eventually to destroy all the results of sin in the world.

Still, it can be rightly argued that in order to understand all this — who God is, why we need salvation, what he has

done to save us — we must have knowledge of the basic teachings of the entire Bible. J. Gresham Machen, for example, speaks of the biblical doctrines of God and of man to be the “presuppositions of the gospel.”<sup>10</sup> This means that an understanding of the Trinity, of Christ’s incarnation, of original sin and sin in general — are all necessary. If we don’t understand, for example, that Jesus was not just a good man but the second person of the Trinity, or if we don’t understand what the “wrath of God” means, it is impossible to understand what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Not only that, but the New Testament constantly explains the work of Christ in Old Testament terms — in the language of priesthood, sacrifice, and covenant.

In other words, we must *not* just preach the Bible in general; we must preach the gospel. Yet unless those listening to the message understand the Bible in general, they won’t grasp the gospel. The more we understand the whole corpus of biblical doctrine, the more we will understand the gospel itself — and the more we understand the

gospel, the more we will come to see that this is, in the end, what the Bible is really about. Biblical knowledge is necessary for the gospel *and* distinct from the gospel, yet it so often stands in when the gospel is not actually present that people have come to mistake its identity.

### THE GOSPEL HAS CHAPTERS

So, the gospel is good news — it is not something we do but something that has been done for us. Simple enough. But when we ask questions like “Good news about what?” or “Why is it good news?” the richness and complexity of the gospel begin to emerge.

There are two basic ways to answer the question “What is the gospel?” One is to offer the biblical good news of how you can get right with God. This is to understand the question to mean, “What must *I* do to be saved?” The second is to offer the biblical good news of what God will fully accomplish in history through the salvation of Jesus. This is to understand the question as “What hope is there for the world?”

If we conceive the question in the first, more individualistic way, we explain how a sinful human being can be reconciled to a holy God and how his or her life can be changed as a result. It is a message about *individuals*. The answer can be outlined: Who God is, what sin is, who Christ is and what he did, and what faith is. These are basically propositions. If we conceive of the question in the second way, to ask all that God is going to accomplish in history, we explain where the world came from, what went wrong with it, and what must happen for it to be mended. This is a message about the *world*. The answer can be outlined: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. These are chapters in a plotline, a story.

As we will see in the next chapter, there is no single way to present the biblical gospel. Yet I urge you to try to be as thoughtful as possible in your gospel presentations. The danger in answering only the first question (“What must I do to be saved?”) without the second (“What hope is there for the world?”) is that, standing alone, the first can play into the Western idea that religion exists to provide spiritual goods that meet individual spiritual needs for freedom from guilt and bondage. It does not speak much

### { USE WORDS IF NECESSARY }

**The popular saying “Preach the gospel; use words if necessary” is helpful but also misleading. If the gospel were primarily about what we must do to be saved, it could be communicated as well by actions (to be imitated) as by words. But if the gospel is primarily about what God has done to save us, and how we can receive it through faith, it can *only* be expressed through words. Faith cannot come without hearing. This is why we read in Galatians 2:5 that heresy endangers the truth of the gospel, and why Philippians 1:16 declares that a person’s mind must be persuaded of the truth of the gospel. Ephesians 1:13 also asserts that the gospel is the word of truth. Ephesians 6:19 and Colossians 1:23 teach that we advance the gospel through verbal communication, particularly preaching.**

CHAPTERS	GOSPEL NARRATIVE	GOSPEL TRUTHS
Chapter 1	Where did we come from?	From God: the One and the relational
Chapter 2	Why did things go so wrong?	Because of sin: bondage and condemnation
Chapter 3	What will put things right?	Christ: incarnation, substitution, restoration
Chapter 4	How can I be put right?	Through faith: grace and trust

about the goodness of the original creation or of God's concern for the material world, and so this conception may set up the listener to see Christianity as sheer escape from the world. But the danger in conceiving the gospel too strictly as a story line of the renewal of the world is even greater. It tells listeners about God's program to save the world, but it does not tell them how to actually get right with God and become part of that program. In fact, I'll say that without the first message, the second message is not the gospel. J. I. Packer writes these words:

*In recent years, great strides in biblical theology and contemporary canonical exegesis have brought new precision to our grasp of the Bible's overall story of how God's plan to bless Israel, and through Israel the world, came to its climax in and through Christ. But I do not see how it can be denied that each New Testament book, whatever other job it may be doing, has in view, one way or another, Luther's primary question: how may a weak, perverse, and guilty sinner find a gracious God? Nor can it be denied that real Christianity only really starts when that discovery is made. And to the extent that modern developments, by filling our horizon with the great metanarrative, distract us from pursuing Luther's question in personal terms, they hinder as well as help in our appreciation of the gospel.<sup>11</sup>*

Still, the Bible's grand narrative of cosmic redemption is critical background to help an individual get right with God. One way to proceed is to interleave the two answers to the "What is the gospel?" question so that gospel truths are laid into a story with chapters rather

than just presented as a set of propositions. The narrative approach poses the questions, and the propositional approach supplies the answers:

How would we relate the gospel to someone in this way? What follows is a "conversational pathway" for presenting the gospel to someone as the chapters in a story. In the Bible, the term *gospel* is the declaration of what Jesus Christ has done to save us. In light of the biblical usage, then, we should observe that chapters 1 (God and Creation), 2 (Fall and Sin), and 4 (Faith) are not, strictly speaking, "the gospel." They are prologue and epilogue. Simon Gathercole argues that both Paul and the Gospel writers considered the good news to have three basic elements: the identity of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation.<sup>12</sup> The gospel, then, is packed into chapter 3, with its three headings — Incarnation, Substitution, and Restoration. Chapter 1 on God and chapter 2 on sin constitute absolutely critical background information for understanding the meaning of the person and work of Jesus, and chapter 4 helps us understand how we must respond to Jesus' salvation. Nevertheless, it is reasonable and natural to refer to the entire set of four chapters as "the gospel."

#### WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Answer: God. There is one God. He is infinite in power, goodness, and holiness and yet also personal and loving, a God who speaks to us in the Bible. The world is not an accident, but the creation of the one God (Genesis 1). God created all things, but *why* did he do that? Why did he create the world and us? The answer is what makes

the Christian understanding of God profound and unique. While there is only one God, within God's being there are three persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — who are all equally God and who have loved, adored, served, and enjoyed one another from all eternity. If God were uni-personal, then he would have not known love until he created other beings. In that case, love and community would not have been essential to his character; it would have emerged later. But God is triune, and therefore love, friendship, and community are intrinsic to him and at the heart of all reality. So a triune God created us (John 1:1 – 4), but he would not have created us to get the joy of mutual love and service, because he already had that. Rather, he created us to share in his love and service. As we know from John 17:20 – 24, the persons of the Trinity love and serve one another — they are “other-oriented.”<sup>13</sup> And thus God created us to live in the same way. In order to share the joy and love that God knew within himself, he created a good world that he cares for, a world full of human beings who were called to worship, know, and serve him, not themselves.<sup>14</sup>

#### WHY DID THINGS GO SO WRONG?

Answer: Sin. God created us to adore and serve him and to love others. By living this way, we would have been completely happy and enjoyed a perfect world. But instead, the whole human race turned away from God, rebelling against his authority. Instead of living for God and our neighbors, we live lives of self-centeredness. Because our relationship with God has been broken, all other relationships — with other human beings, with our very selves, and with the created world — are also ruptured. The result is spiritual, psychological, social, and physical decay and breakdown. “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”<sup>15</sup> — the world now lies under the power of sin.

Sin reaps two terrible consequences. One consequence is spiritual bondage (Rom 6:15 – 18). We may believe in God or we may not believe, but either way, we never make him our greatest hope, good, or love. We try to maintain control of our lives by living for other things — for money, career, family, fame, romance, sex,

power, comfort, social and political causes, or something else. But the result is always a loss of control, a form of slavery. Everyone has to live for something, and if that something is not God, then we are driven by that thing we live for — by overwork to achieve it, by inordinate fear if it is threatened, deep anger if it is being blocked, and inconsolable despair if it is lost. So the novelist David Foster Wallace, not long before his suicide, spoke these words to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College:

*Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough . . . Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you . . . Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is . . . they're unconscious. They are default settings.*<sup>16</sup>

The second basic consequence of sin is condemnation (Rom 6:23). We are not just suffering because of sin; we are *guilty* because of sin. Often we say, “Well, I’m not very religious, but I’m a good person — and that is what is most important.” But is it? Imagine a woman — a poor widow — with an only son. She teaches him how she wants him to live — to always tell the truth, to work hard, and to help the poor. She makes very little money, but with her meager savings she is able to put him through college. Imagine that when he graduates, he hardly ever speaks to her again. He occasionally sends a Christmas card, but he doesn’t visit her; he won’t answer her phone calls or letters; he doesn’t speak to her. But he lives just like she taught him — honestly, industriously, and charitably. Would we say this was acceptable? Of course

not! Wouldn't we say that by living a "good life" but neglecting a relationship with the one to whom he owed everything he was doing something condemnable? In the same way, if God created us and we owe him everything and we do not live for him but we "live a good life," it is not enough. We all owe a debt that must be paid.

#### WHAT WILL PUT THINGS RIGHT?

Answer: Christ. First, Jesus Christ puts things right through his *incarnation*. C. S. Lewis wrote that if there is a God, we certainly don't relate to him as people on the first floor of a building relate to people on the second floor. We relate to him the way Hamlet relates to Shakespeare. We (characters) might be able to know quite a lot about the playwright, but only to the degree that the author chooses to put information about himself in the play.<sup>17</sup>

In the Christian view, however, we believe that God did even more than simply give us information. Many fans of Dorothy Sayers's detective stories and mystery novels point out that Sayers was one of the first women to attend Oxford University. The main character in her stories — Lord Peter Wimsey — is an aristocratic sleuth and a single man. At one point in the novels, though, a new character appears, Harriet Vane. She is described as one of the first women who graduated from Oxford — and as a writer of mystery novels. Eventually she and Peter fall in love and marry. Who was she? Many believe Sayers looked into the world she had created, fell in love with her lonely hero, and wrote herself into the story to save him. Very touching! But that is not nearly as moving or amazing as the reality of the incarnation (John 1:14). God, as it were, looked into the world he had made and saw our lostness and had pity on his people. And so he wrote *himself* into human history as its main character (John 3:16). The second person in the Trinity, the Son of God, came into the world as a man, Jesus Christ.

The second way Jesus puts things right is through *substitution*. Because of the guilt and condemnation on us, a just God can't simply shrug off our sins. Being sorry is not enough. We would never allow an earthly judge to let a wrongdoer off, just because he was contrite — how much less should we expect a perfect heavenly Judge to

do so? And even when we forgive personal wrongs against us, we cannot simply forgive without cost. If someone harms us and takes money or happiness or reputation from us, we can either make them pay us back or forgive them — which means *we* absorb the cost ourselves without remuneration. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life — the only human being to ever do so (Heb 4:15). At the end of his life, he deserved blessing and acceptance; at the end of our lives, because every one of us lives in sin, we deserve rejection and condemnation (Rom 3:9 – 10). Yet when the time had fully come, Jesus received in our place, on the cross, the rejection and condemnation we deserve (1 Pet 3:18), so that, when we believe in him, we can receive the blessing and acceptance he deserves (2 Cor 5:21).

There is no more moving thought than that of someone giving his life to save another. In Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, two men — Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton — both love the same woman, Lucie Manette, but Lucie chooses to marry Charles. Later, during the French Revolution, Charles is thrown in prison and awaits execution on the guillotine. Sydney visits Charles in prison, drugs him, and has him carried out. When a young seamstress (also on death row) realizes that Sydney is taking Charles's place, she is amazed and asks him to hold her hand for strength. She is deeply moved by his substitutionary sacrifice — and it wasn't even for her! When we realize that Jesus did the very same thing for us, it changes everything — the way we regard God, ourselves, and the world.

The third way Jesus will put things right is through the eventual *restoration* of all that has gone wrong with the world. The first time Jesus came from heaven to earth, he came in weakness to suffer for our sins. But the second time he comes, he will judge the world, putting a final end to all evil, suffering, decay, and death (Rom 8:19 – 21; 2 Pet 3:13). This means that Christ's salvation does not merely save our souls so we can escape the pain of the curse on the physical world. Rather, the final goal is the renewal and restoration of the material world, and the redemption of both our souls *and* our bodies. Vinoth Ramachandra notes how unique this view is among the religions of the world:

*So our salvation lies not in an escape from this world but in the transformation of this world . . . You will not find hope for the world in any religious systems or philosophies of humankind. The biblical vision is unique. That is why when some say that there is salvation in other faiths I ask them, "What salvation are you talking about?" No faith holds out a promise of eternal salvation for the world the way the cross and resurrection of Jesus do.<sup>18</sup>*

#### HOW CAN I BE PUT RIGHT?

Answer: Faith. Jesus died for our sins and rose again from the grave. By faith in him, our sins can be forgiven and we can be assured of living forever with God and one day being raised from the dead like Christ. So what does it mean to believe, to have faith? First, it means to grasp what salvation "by faith" means. Believing in Christ does not mean that we are forgiven for our past, get a new start on life, and must simply try harder to live better than we did in the past. If this is your mind-set, you are still putting your faith in yourself. You are your own Savior. You are looking to your moral efforts and abilities to make yourself right with God. But this will never work. No one lives a perfect life. Even your best deeds are tainted by selfish and impure motives.

The gospel is that when we believe in Christ, there is now "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). Putting our faith in Christ is not about trying harder; it means *transferring our trust* away from ourselves and resting in him. It means asking, "Father, accept me not because of what I have done or ever will do but because of what Jesus has done in my place." When we do that, we are adopted into God's family and given the right to his eternal, fatherly love (John 1:12–13).

The second thing to keep in mind is that it is not the quality of the faith itself that saves us; it is what Jesus has done for us. It is easy to assume that being "saved by faith" means that God will now love us *because of* the depth of our repentance and faith. But that is to once again subtly make ourselves our own Savior rather than Jesus. It is not the amount of our faith but the object of our faith that saves us. Imagine two people boarding an

airplane. One person has almost no faith in the plane or the crew and is filled with fears and doubts. The other has great confidence in the plane and the crew. They both enter the plane, fly to a destination, and get off the plane safely. One person had a hundred times more faith in the plane than the other did, but they were equally safe. It wasn't the amount of their faith but the object of their faith (the plane and crew) that kept them from suffering harm and arriving safely at their destination. Saving faith isn't a level of psychological certainty; it is an act of the will in which we rest in Jesus. We give yourself wholly to him because he gave himself wholly for us (Mark 8:34; Rev 3:20).

#### THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIP OF THE GOSPEL TO ALL OF MINISTRY

There is always a danger that church leaders and ministers will conceive of the gospel as merely the minimum standard of doctrinal content for being a Christian believer. As a result, many preachers and leaders are energized by thoughts of teaching more advanced doctrine, or of deeper forms of spirituality, or of intentional community and the sacraments, or of "deeper discipleship," or of psychological healing, or of social justice and cultural engagement. One of the reasons is the natural emergence of specialization as a church grows and ages. People naturally want to go deeper into various topics and ministry disciplines. But this tendency can cause us to lose sight of the whole. Though we may have an area or a ministry that we tend to focus on, the gospel is what brings unity to all that we do. Every form of ministry is empowered by the gospel, based on the gospel, and is a result of the gospel.

Perhaps an illustration here will help. Imagine you're in an orchestra and you begin to play, but the sound is horrific because the instruments are out of tune. The problem can't be fixed by simply tuning them to each other. It won't help for each person to get in tune to the person next to her because each person will be tuning to something different. No, they will all need to be tuned properly to one source of pitch. Often we go about trying to tune ourselves to the sound of everything else in our lives. We often hear this described as "getting balance."



But the questions that need to be asked are these: “Balanced to what?” “Tuned to what?” The gospel does not begin by tuning us in relation to our particular problems and surroundings; it first re-tunes us to God.<sup>19</sup>

If an element of ministry is not recognized as a *result* of the gospel, it may sometimes be mistaken *for* the gospel and eventually supplant the gospel in the church’s preaching and teaching. Counseling, spiritual direction, doing justice, engaging culture, doctrinal instruction, and even evangelism itself may become the main thing instead of the gospel. In such cases, the gospel as outlined above is no longer understood as the fountainhead, the central dynamic, from which all other things proceed. It is no longer the center of the preaching, the thinking, or the life of the church; some other good thing has replaced it. As a consequence, conversions will begin to dwindle in number because the gospel is not preached with a kind of convicting sharpness that lays bare the secrets of the heart (1 Cor 14:24 – 25) and gives believers *and* nonbelievers a sense of God’s reality, even against their wills.

Because the gospel is endlessly rich, it can handle the burden of being the one “main thing” of a church. First Peter 1:12 and its context indicate that the angels never tire of looking into and exploring the wonders of the gospel. It can be preached from innumerable stories, themes,

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**Because the gospel is endlessly rich, it can handle the burden of being the one “main thing” of a church.**

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and principles from all over the Bible. But when the preaching of the gospel is either confused with or separated from the other endeavors of the church, preaching becomes mere exhortation (to get with the church’s program or a biblical standard of ethics) or informational instruction (to inculcate the church’s values and beliefs). When the proper connection between the gospel and any aspect of ministry is severed, *both* are shortchanged.

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The gospel is “heraldic proclamation” before it is anything else.<sup>20</sup> It is news that creates a life of love, but the life of love is not itself the gospel. The gospel is *not* everything that we believe, do, or say. The gospel must primarily be understood as good news, and the news is not as much about what we must do as about what has been done. The gospel is preeminently a report about the work of Christ on our behalf — salvation accomplished for us. That’s how it is a gospel of grace. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, the fact that the gospel is news does not mean it is a *simple* message. There is no such thing as a “one size fits all” understanding of the gospel.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. This chapter looks at several truths that are not the gospel. In what sense are each of these not the gospel?
  - everything the Bible teaches
  - a way of life; something we do
  - joining Christ’s kingdom program; a divine rehabilitation plan for the world

If the gospel is not everything, what is the gospel?
2. Keller writes, “The gospel is not about something we do but about what has been done for us, and yet the gospel results in a whole new way of life. This grace and the good deeds that result must be both distinguished and connected.” How can an individual or ministry go about distinguishing between “the gospel” and “the results of the gospel”?
3. The section titled “The Gospel Has Chapters” shows how to present the gospel to someone as chapters in a larger story. What other “conversational pathways” have you found to be fruitful in relating the gospel to non-Christians? To Christians?
4. What happens when the gospel is proclaimed without its results, or when its results are pursued without proclamation?

CHAPTER 1 – THE GOSPEL IS NOT EVERYTHING {pages xx–xx}

1. Mark 1:1; Luke 2:10; 1 Corinthians 1:16 – 17; 15:1 – 11.
2. D. A. Carson, “What Is the Gospel? – Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 158.
3. The verb translated “passed” in 1 John 3:14 is *metabainō*, which means to “cross over.” In John 5:24, Jesus states, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has *crossed over* [*metabainō*] from death to life.” A parallel passage is Colossians 1:13, where it is said that Christ-followers have been transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the Son.
4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 34.
5. J. I. Packer, “Introductory Essay to John Owen’s *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*,” [www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/deathofdeath.html](http://www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/deathofdeath.html) (accessed January 4, 2012).
6. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1973), 171.
7. Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977) 25. Cf. Timothy George and John Woodbridge, *The Mark of Jesus: Loving in a Way the World Can See* (Chicago: Moody, 2005).
8. See Carson, “What Is the Gospel? – Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name*, 158.
9. Having heard and read this in the words of other preachers, I have never been able to track down an actual place in Tertullian’s writings where he says it. I think it may be apocryphal, but the principle is right.
10. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 99.
11. J. I. Packer, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 26 – 27.
12. Simon Gathercole, “The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom,” in *God’s Power to Save*, ed. Chris Green [Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2006], 138 – 54).
13. D. A. Carson (*The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000], 39, 43) writes, “What we have, then, is a picture of God whose love, even in eternity past, even before the creation of anything, is other-oriented. This cannot be said (for instance) of Allah. Yet because the God of the Bible is one, this plurality-in-unity does not destroy his entirely appropriate self-focus as God . . . There has *always* been an other-orientation to the love of God . . . We are the friends of God by virtue of the intra-Trinitarian love of God that so worked out in the fullness of time that the plan of redemption, conceived in the mind of God in eternity past, has exploded into our space-time history at exactly the right moment.”
14. See “The Dance of Creation,” in Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 225 – 26; “The Dance,” in Tim Keller, *King’s Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 3 – 13.
15. From the poem “The Second Coming” (1920) by William Butler Yeats.
16. Emily Bobrow, “David Foster Wallace, in His Own Words” (taken from his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College), <http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words> (accessed January 4, 2012).
17. See C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 167 – 76.
18. Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Scandal of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 24.
19. Thanks to Michael Thate for this illustration.
20. Carson, “What Is the Gospel? – Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name*, 158.