

THE GOSPEL AFFECTS EVERYTHING

We have seen that *the gospel is not everything*, meaning it must be distinguished as an announcement of news, distinct from its results and implications, and that *the gospel is not a simple thing*, meaning it cannot be packaged in a single standard form. My third contention, that *the gospel affects virtually everything*, builds on these two statements.

In his article “The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1 – 19),” D. A. Carson surveys the ethical directives of 1 Corinthians and draws this conclusion:

[This] book . . . repeatedly shows how the gospel rightly works out in the massive transformation of attitudes, morals, relationships, and cultural interactions . . .

Just as Paul found it necessary to hammer away at the outworking of the gospel in every domain of the lives of the Corinthians, so we must do the same today . . .

It does not take much to think through how the gospel must also transform the business practices and priorities of Christians in commerce, the priorities of young men steeped in indecisive but relentless narcissism, the lonely anguish and often the guilty pleasures of single folk who pursue pleasure but who cannot find happiness, the tired despair of those living on the margins, and much more. And this must be done, not by attempting to abstract social principles from the gospel, still less by endless focus on the periphery in a vain effort to sound prophetic, but precisely by preaching and teaching and living out in our churches the glorious gospel of our blessed Redeemer.¹

Even though the gospel is a set of truths to understand and believe, it cannot *remain* a set of beliefs if it is truly believed and understood. As Lesslie

Newbigin states, “The Christian story provides us with such a set of lenses, not something for us to look *at*, but for us to look *through*.”² Paul says as much in Romans 12:1, when he looks back on his rich exposition of the doctrine of justification in chapters 1 – 11 and states, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.” Scripture teaches that the gospel creates an entire way of life and affects literally everything about us. It is a power (Rom 1:16 – 17) that creates new life in us (Col 1:5 – 6; 1 Pet 1:23 – 25).

THE RICHNESS OF THE GOSPEL

New Testament scholar Simon Gathercole offers the following outline of the gospel taught in common by Paul and the Gospel writers:

1. The Son of God emptied himself and came into the world in Jesus Christ, becoming a servant.
2. He died on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice.
3. He rose from the grave as the firstfruits of a whole renewed world.³

Each of these three truths can be fleshed out to show that the implications of the gospel are endless.

THE INCARNATION AND THE “UPSIDE-DOWN” ASPECT OF THE GOSPEL

Because Jesus was the king who became a servant, we see a reversal of values in his kingdom administration (Luke 6:20 – 26). In Jesus’ kingdom, the poor, sorrowful, and persecuted are above the rich, recognized, and satisfied. The first shall be last (Matt 19:30). Why would this be?

This reversal is a way of imitating the pattern of Christ’s salvation (Phil 2:1 – 11). Though Jesus was rich,

he became poor. Though he was a king, he served. Though he was the greatest, he made himself the servant of all. He triumphed over sin not by taking up power but by serving sacrificially. He “won” through losing everything. This is a complete reversal of the world’s way of thinking, which values power, recognition, wealth, and status. The gospel, then, creates a new kind of servant community, with people who live out an entirely 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 are marks of living in the world. They represent the opposite of the gospel mind-set.

THE ATONEMENT AND THE “INSIDE-OUT” ASPECT OF THE GOSPEL

The Pharisees tended to emphasize the externals of the covenant — the covenant boundary markers of Sabbath observance, circumcision, Torah, and so on — rather than a regenerated heart (Luke 11:39 – 41). God’s kingdom, however, “is not a matter of eating or drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). Why would this be?

Jesus took our place on the cross and accomplished salvation for us, which we receive freely as a gift. Traditional religion teaches that if we do good deeds and follow the moral rules in our external behavior, God will come into our hearts, bless us, and give us salvation. In other

to God, to ourselves, and to others on the outside.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE “FORWARD-BACK” ASPECT OF THE GOSPEL

Jesus is resurrected, but we are not. He has inaugurated the kingdom of God, but it is not fully present. The coming of the messianic King occurs in two stages. At his first coming, he saved us from the penalty of sin and gave us the presence of the Holy Spirit, the down payment of the age to come (2 Cor 1:21 – 22; Eph 1:13 – 14). At the end of time, he will come to complete what he began at the first coming, saving us from the dominion and very presence of sin and evil. He will bring a new creation, a material world cleansed of all brokenness.

Christians now live in light of that future reality. We evangelize, telling people about the gospel and preparing them for the judgment. We also help the poor and work for justice, because we know that this is God’s will and that he will ultimately overcome all oppression. We teach Christians to integrate their faith and their work so they can be culture makers, working for human flourishing — the common good. The “already but not yet” of the kingdom keeps us from utopian, triumphalistic visions of cultural takeover on the one hand, and from pessimism or withdrawal from society on the other.

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words, if I obey, God will love and accept me. But the gospel is the reverse of this: If I know in my heart that God has accepted me and loves me freely by grace, then I can begin to obey, out of inner joy and gratitude. Religion is outside in, but the gospel is inside out. We are justified by grace alone, not by works; we are beautiful and righteous in God’s sight by the work of Christ. Once we gain this understanding on the inside, it revolutionizes how we relate

[it] richly” (Col 3:16), will look like an unusual hybrid of various church forms and stereotypes. Because of the inside-out, substitutionary atonement aspect, the church will place great emphasis on personal conversion, experiential grace renewal, evangelism, outreach, and church planting. This makes it look like an evangelical-charismatic church. Because of the upside-down, kingdom/incarnation aspect, the church will

place great emphasis on deep community, cell groups or house churches, radical giving and sharing of resources, spiritual disciplines, racial reconciliation, and living with the poor. This makes it look like an Anabaptist “peace” church. Because of the forward-back, kingdom/restoration aspect, the church will place great emphasis on seeking the welfare of the city, neighborhood and civic involvement, cultural engagement, and training people to work in “secular” vocations out of a Christian worldview. This makes it look like a mainline church or, perhaps, a Kuyperian Reformed church. Very few churches, denominations, or movements integrate all of these ministries and emphases. Yet I believe that a comprehensive view of the biblical gospel — one that grasps the gospel’s inside-out, upside-down, and forward-back aspects — will champion and cultivate them all. This is what we mean by a Center Church.

THE GOSPEL CHANGES EVERYTHING

The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is inaccurate to think the gospel is what saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying hard to live according to biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our minds, hearts, and lives by believing the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on (see Rom 12:1–2; Phil 1:6; 3:13–14).

In the first chapter, we introduced the idea that there are two errors that constantly seek to steal the gospel from us. On the one hand, “moralism/religion/legalism” stresses truth without grace, for it claims we must obey the truth to be saved. On the other hand, “relativism/irreligion/liberalism” stresses grace without truth, for it claims we are all accepted by God (if there is a God), and we each have to decide what is true for us. We must never forget that Jesus was full of grace *and* truth (John 1:14). “Truth” without grace is not really truth, and “grace” without truth is not really grace. Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths falls into legalism or into license. Either way, the joy and power and “release” of the gospel are stolen — by one thief or the other.

Edward Fisher’s *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* is a classic, comprehensive description of how important it is to remember the two enemies of the gospel. Fisher discusses how legalism can be of two types, either of the theological type (a theology that mixes faith and works and is not clear on free justification) or simply of a moralistic spirit and attitude. He also warns of the opposite error of antinomianism, an attitude that is afraid to ever say, “You *ought*,” and refrains from insisting that God’s law must be obeyed.⁴

The power of the gospel comes in two movements. It first says, “I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe,” but then quickly follows with, “I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope.” The former outflanks antinomianism, while the latter staves off legalism. One of the greatest challenges is to be vigilant in both directions *at once*. Whenever we find ourselves fighting against one of these errors, it is extraordinarily easy to combat it by slipping into the other. Here’s a test: if you think one of these errors is much more dangerous than the other, you are probably partially participating in the one you fear less.

Unlike legalism or antinomianism, an authentic grasp of the gospel of Christ will bring increasing transformation and wholeness across all the dimensions of life that were marred by the fall. By removing the primary cause of all of our alienations — our separation from God — it also treats the alienations that flow from it. The gospel addresses our greatest need and brings change and transformation to every area of life. Let’s look at just a few of the ways that the gospel changes us.

Discouragement and depression. When a person is depressed, the moralist says, “You are breaking the rules. Repent.” On the other hand, the relativist says, “You just need to love and accept yourself.” Absent the gospel, the moralist will work on behavior, and the relativist will work on the emotions — and only superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. Assuming the depression has no physiological base, the gospel will lead us to examine ourselves and say, “Something in my life has become more important than God — a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness.” The gospel leads us to

embrace repentance, not to merely set our will against superficialities.

Love and relationships. Moralism often turns relationships into a blame game. This occurs when a moralist is traumatized by severe criticism and in reaction maintains a self-image as a good person by blaming others. Moralism can also cause people to procure love as the way to earn salvation; gaining love convinces them they are worthy persons. This, in turn, often creates codependency — you must save yourself by saving others. On the other hand, much relativism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You relate only as long as it does not cost you anything. Without the gospel, the choice is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. The gospel leads us to do neither. We selflessly sacrifice and commit, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others that we are acceptable. We can love a person enough to confront, yet stay with the person even when it does not benefit us.

Sexuality. The moralist tends to see sex as dirty, or at least as a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. The relativist/pragmatist sees sex as merely a biological and physical appetite. The gospel shows us that sexuality is supposed to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely, without conditions. Consequently, we are not to seek intimacy while holding back the rest of our lives. If we give ourselves sexually, we are also to give ourselves legally, socially, and personally. Sex is to be shared only in a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage.

Family. Moralism can make a person a slave to parental expectations, while relativism/pragmatism sees no need for family loyalty or keeping promises and covenants if they do not meet one's needs. The gospel frees us from making parental approval a form of psychological salvation by pointing to how God is the ultimate Father. Grasping this, we will be neither too dependent nor too hostile toward our parents.

Self-control. Moralists tell us to control our passions out of fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Relativists tell us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based ap-

proach. The gospel tells us that the free, unshakable grace of God “teaches us to say ‘No’” to our passions (Titus 2:12) if we will only listen to it. It gives us new appetites and affections.⁵ The gospel leads us to a whole-person approach that begins with truth descending into the heart.

Race and culture. The moralist/conservative bias is to use truth to evaluate cultures. Feeling superior to others in the impulse of self-justifying pride, moralists idolize their culture as supreme. The relativist/liberal approach is to relativize all cultures (“We can all get

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along because there is no truth”). The gospel leads us, on the one hand, to be somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since truth *is* objective and real). On the other hand, it leads us to recognize we are morally superior to no one, since we are saved by grace alone. In this instance, the gospel is the grand leveler. Both sin and grace strip everyone of every boast. “*All* have sinned” (Rom 3:23, emphasis added); “there is *no one* righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10, emphasis added; cf. Ps 143:2); therefore, “*whoever* believes in [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, emphasis added; cf. Mark 16:16; John 3:36; 5:24; 7:38; 11:26). For *in Christ* “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal 3:28, emphasis added). Christianity is universal in that it welcomes *everybody*, but it is also particular in its confession that Jesus is Lord, and culture and ethnicity (or whatever other identity) are not. Gospel-relying Christians will exhibit both moral conviction and compassion with flexibility.

Witness. The moralist believes in proselytizing, because “we are right, and they are wrong.” Such an approach is almost always offensive. The relativist/pragmatist approach denies the legitimacy of evange-

lism altogether. Yet the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. We are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. We are freed from the fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we have already received the favor of God by grace. Our dealings with others reflect humility because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. We are hopeful about everyone, even the “hard cases,” because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were people likely to become Christians. We are courteous and careful with people. We don’t have to push or coerce them, for it is only God’s grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness (Exod 4:10–12). Together, these traits create not only an excellent neighbor in a multicultural society but also a winsome evangelist.

Human authority. Moralists tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, and cultural customs) too anxiously, since they rely heavily on their self-image as upright persons. Relativists/pragmatists will either obey human authority too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (since they may obey only when they know they can’t get away with it). The result is either authoritarianism or a disregard for the proper place of authority. The gospel gives a standard by which to oppose human authority (if it contradicts the gospel), as well as an incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when we could get away with disobedience. To confess Jesus as Lord was simultaneously to confess that Caesar was not. Though there have been several studies of late that discuss the “counter-imperial” tenor of various texts, it is important to stress that the Bible is not so much against governing authorities or “empire” as such but that it prescribes a proper reordering of power. It is not that Jesus usurped the throne of Caesar but that when we allow Caesar to overstep his bounds, he is usurping the throne of Christ and leading people into idolatry.

Guilt and self-image. When someone says, “I can’t forgive myself,” it indicates that some standard or condition or person is more central to this person’s

identity than the grace of God. God is the only God who forgives — no other “god” will. If you cannot forgive yourself, it is because you have failed your true god — that is, whatever serves as your real righteousness — and it is holding you captive. The moralists’ false god is usually a god of their imagination, a god that is holy and demanding but not gracious. The relativist/pragmatist’s false god is usually some achievement or relationship.

This is illustrated by the scene in the movie *The Mission* in which Rodrigo Mendoza, the former slave-trading mercenary played by Robert de Niro, converts to the church and as a way of showing penance drags his armor and weapons up steep cliffs. In the end, however, he picks up his armor and weapons to fight against the colonialists and dies at their hand. His picking up his weapons demonstrates he never truly converted from his mercenary ways, just as his penance demonstrated he didn’t get the message of forgiveness in the first place. The gospel brings rest and assurance to our consciences because Jesus shed his blood as a “ransom” for our sin (Mark 10:45). Our reconciliation with God is not a matter of keeping the law to earn our salvation, nor of berating ourselves when we fail to keep it. It is the “gift of God” (Rom 6:23).

Without the gospel, our self-image is based on living up to some standards — either our own or someone else’s imposed on us. If we live up to those standards, we will be confident but not humble; if we don’t live up to them, we will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can we be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble, for we are *simul justus et peccator*, both perfect and sinner!

Joy and humor. Moralism eats away at real joy and humor because the system of legalism forces us to take our self (our image, our appearance, our reputation) *very* seriously. Relativism/pragmatism, on the other hand, tends toward pessimism as life goes on because of the inevitable cynicism that grows from a lack of hope for the world (“In the end, evil will triumph because there is no judgment or divine justice”). If we are saved by grace alone, this salvation is a constant source of amazed delight. Nothing is mundane or matter-of-fact about our

lives. It is a miracle we are Christians, and the gospel, which creates bold humility, should give us a far deeper sense of humor and joy. We don't have to take ourselves seriously, and we are full of hope for the world.

Attitudes toward class. Moralists, when they look at the poor, tend to see their entire plight stemming from a lack of personal responsibility. As a result, they scorn the poor as failures. Relativists tend to underemphasize the role of personal responsibility and see the poor as helpless victims needing the experts to save them. The poor themselves either feel like failures or angrily blame their problems on others.

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The gospel, however, leads us to be humble, free from moral superiority, because we know we were spiritually bankrupt yet saved by Christ's free generosity. It leads us to be gracious, not worried too much about people getting what they deserve because we are aware that *none* of us deserve the grace of Christ. It also inclines us to be respectful of poor Christian believers as our brothers and sisters in Christ, people from whom we can learn. The gospel alone can produce a humble respect for and solidarity with the poor (see Pss 140:12; 146:9; Prov 14:31; 21:13; 22:22–23; 29:7).

In James 1:9–10, the poor Christian “ought to take pride in his high position” but the rich Christian “should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.” Here James is using the gospel on his listeners' class-consciousness. Everyone in Christ is at the same time a sinner who deserves death and also an adopted child of God, fully accepted and loved. But James proposes that the well-off believer would spiritually benefit by thinking about his or her sinfulness before God, since out in the world he or she gets a lot of acclaim. The poor believer, however, would spiritually benefit by

thinking about his or her new high spiritual status, since out in the world he or she gets nothing but disdain.

In a remarkable, similar move, Paul tells the Christian slave owner Philemon that his slave, Onesimus, must be treated as a fellow “man and as a brother in the Lord” (Philemon 16). Therefore, Paul says, he should welcome and treat his slave “as you would welcome me” (v. 17). By teaching that Christians who understand the gospel should have a radically different way of understanding and wielding power, Paul deeply undermines the very institution of slavery. When both master and slave recognize each other as sinners saved by grace and beloved siblings, “slavery has been abolished even if its outer institutional shell remains.” The gospel “emptied [slavery] of its inner content.”⁶

Most of our problems in life come from a lack of proper orientation to the gospel. Pathologies in the church and sinful patterns in our individual lives ultimately stem from a failure to think through the deep implications of the gospel and to grasp and believe the gospel through and through. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts and our thinking and changes our approaches to absolutely everything. When the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will look unique. People will find in it an attractive, electrifying balance of moral conviction and compassion.

D. A. Carson writes the following:

The gospel is regularly presented not only as truth to be received and believed, but the very power of God to transform (see 1 Cor 2; 1 Thess 2:4; [Rom 1:16–17]) . . .

One of the most urgently needed things today is a careful treatment of how the gospel, biblically and richly understood, ought to shape everything we do in the local church, all of our ethics, all of our priorities.⁷

But how does this happen? What does a church that believes in the centrality of the gospel actually look like?

How does a church, or even a group of churches, change to become a gospel-centered community of faith? There must first be a life-changing recovery of the gospel — a revival in the life of the church and in the hearts of individuals. We call this *gospel renewal*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Keller writes, “Here’s a test: if you think one of these errors [legalism or license] is much more dangerous than the other, you are probably partially participating in the one you fear less.” Which error have you tended to fear less, and why?
2. Keller writes, “The primary cause of all of our alienations [is] our separation from God.” How has the gospel mended this primary ailment in you and how has it helped curb the many other symptoms that flow from it? How does this experience prepare you to minister to alienated people?
3. Keller writes, “The gospel addresses our greatest need and brings change and transformation to every area of life.” The gospel also treats the

alienations that flow from our alienation from God. Rehearse, in your own words, how the gospel treats at least three of the following areas.

- discouragement and depression
 - love and relationships
 - sexuality
 - family and parental expectations
 - self-control
 - racial and cultural differences
 - our motive for witness
 - obedience to human authority
 - guilt and self-image
 - joy and humor
 - our attitudes toward class
4. Look at the three aspects of the gospel dealt with in this chapter: incarnation/upside-down, atonement/inside-out, and resurrection/forward-back. Compare these to the similar outline in the section titled “The Gospel Has Chapters” in chapter 1. How can you sharpen and clarify the way you set the gospel within the story line of the Bible?

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1. D. A. Carson, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1–19)," *The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal* (Spring 2008): 10–11, www.thespurgeonfellowship.org/Downloads/feature_Sp08.pdf (accessed January 5, 2012); see also Carson's chapter "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), 164–66, where he writes that "the gospel is not just for unbelievers but also for believers" and makes the biblical case.
2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 38, italics in original.
3. Simon Gathercole, "The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom," in *God's Power to Save*, ed. Chris Green (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity, 2006), 138–54.
4. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645; Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2009).
5. See Thomas Chalmers, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection" (sermon, date unknown), www.theologynetwork.org/historical-theology/getting-stuck-in/the-expulsive-power-of-a-new-affection.htm (accessed January 6, 2012).
6. Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 92.
7. Carson, "What Is the Gospel? – Revisited," in *For the Fame of God's Name*, 165.