

What Is the Gospel?

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Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.

—1 CORINTHIANS 15:1–4

It was in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses onto the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. As you know, this event triggered the Protestant Reformation, and at the very heart of this Reformation is the recovery of the gospel from the corrupt Roman Catholic Church.

You might ask, “What did the Roman Catholic Church do to the gospel?” The Roman Catholic Church distorted the gospel, and the gospel became so distorted that it could no longer be regarded as good news. In the Roman Catholic Church, the gospel is not good but, in fact, bad news. Why? Well, for instance, while Roman Catholics do not deny the necessity of faith in Christ, they add to that faith a list of works that one must do in order to be saved. The first in that list is baptism, without which no one can be saved, according to Roman Catholics. In their catechism we read, “The Lord Himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation. The church does not know of any means other than

baptism that assures entry into eternal bliss.” Then their catechism adds, “All men may attain salvation through faith, baptism, and the observance of the commandments.” This is indicative of the Roman Catholic “gospel”—and it is not good news; it is bad news. Why? Because if salvation or entrance into eternal joy is through faith, baptism, and the observance of the law, then who can be saved? Who can keep God’s law perfectly, and how do you know if you have kept God’s law sufficiently to attain eternal life from God? And, since you cannot know, you obviously cannot have assurance of salvation. Therefore, the kind of gospel that you find in the Roman Catholic Church is not the true gospel but another “gospel.” We recall that the apostle Paul says in Galatians 1:8, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed,” or anathema. Here you see how Paul takes the gospel seriously, because it is a matter of life and death. It is a matter of eternal life and eternal death, heaven and hell.

Do you take the gospel seriously? The question however is, what is the gospel? In response, let me first define the gospel, then, second, give you six elements of the gospel, and finally conclude with the proper response to the gospel.

What is the Gospel?

Let’s answer this deep question.

Many people today unfortunately talk about the gospel, but do not really understand or know what it is. They have a distorted or over-simplified understanding of the gospel, and that is why it is crucial that we define the gospel.

Let’s return to our text, where we read that word “gospel” (1 Cor. 15:1). There Paul says to his fellow believers, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you *the* gospel which I preached unto you.” The Greek word for gospel here is *euaggelion*, which means *good message*. And with the definite article “the,” Paul wants to make it clear that there is only one good message. If the apostle Paul had said, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you *a* gospel,”

then we would not have a problem or conflict today with other religions. If there is no absolute or definite gospel message, then every other message about salvation offered by any other religion is not necessarily wrong. But what we have here in our passage is not *a* gospel, but *the* gospel, and thus any message that contradicts the message of the cross is a false message. There cannot be two gospels; there is only one gospel.

Of course, advocates of religious pluralism would object to this claim and argue that all religions are equally true and that there are many ways to God. Once on a trip to Iowa to preach, I sat next to a passenger who was originally from Japan. The Lord opened an opportunity for me to share the gospel with him. When I asked him about Jesus, he said to me, “Yes, I have heard about Jesus.” He said, “Jesus is one of the many ways towards eternal joy”—one of the many ways. I said, “No, no! He is *the* only way!—the only way to eternal joy.” Jesus Himself makes that exclusive claim in John 14:6. “I am *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Having said that and established that there is only one gospel, we have not yet answered the question, what is that one gospel? Interestingly, in Mark 1:15, Jesus says, “Repent ye, and believe in the gospel,” with the implication that you will be saved. So in this context, if you were to ask Jesus, “Lord, please tell me what I must do to be saved,” His answer would be, “Repent, and believe in the gospel, and you will be saved.” In Acts 16:30–31, when the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas simply replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” Now notice, they did not say, “Believe in the gospel”; instead, they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” In Mark 1:15, Jesus did not say, “Believe on me and you will be saved.” Instead, He said, “Believe in the gospel.” So here we see that to believe in the gospel and to believe on Jesus Christ are essentially the same. Why? Because the gospel *is* the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the gospel. That is why, if you were to ask me, “Pastor Brian, can you please define the gospel to me in a sentence,

just in a simple way? What is the gospel?”—then I would say that the gospel, simply put, is the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the essence of the gospel. The gospel centers on His person and on His work.

Six Elements of the Gospel

Now I will give you the six elements of the gospel.

We see the first one in verse 3 of our passage, 1 Corinthians 15. “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.” The first element of the gospel is the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice what Paul says here in verse 3. “Christ died for our sins”—not for His sins, because Jesus never sinned, but for our sins, as the prophet Isaiah says: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5). We should have been the ones to die on Calvary. Why? Because we are the ones who offended God. We are the ones who transgressed God’s law. We are the ones who sinned against God. But Jesus died in our place. He died as our substitute. Remember the story of Abraham in Genesis 22. God asked Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. Abraham obeyed, but as he stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son, the angel of the Lord stopped him. “Do not lay your hand on your son,” said the angel of the Lord, and God provided a substitute for Isaac, a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham then offered that ram in place of his son Isaac. Fast forward to Mount Golgotha: there was no voice to stop the Father from bruising His only-begotten Son. Even the angels did not say, “Stop! Stop! Don’t lay your hand on your only-begotten Son! Don’t!” There was no voice. Why? Because Jesus was the substitute. There was no other substitute, because He was *the* substitute. He was the Lamb of God slain for our sins. God spared Abraham’s son Isaac, but at Calvary God did not spare His own Son, because it was the only way that He could spare you and me. And thus, this beautiful hymn:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood,
Sealed my pardon with His blood:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Jesus died for our sins. That's the first element of the gospel: His death.

The second element is His burial. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:4: "And that he was buried." In the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 16, we have this beautiful question (41): "Why was Jesus buried?" Have you ever thought about that question? Why was Jesus buried? We have this answer: "His burial testifies that He really died." Jesus was buried, and His burial proves that He really died on the cross for our sins. Why is that important? Because, for instance, Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross. According to their Quran, it was not really Jesus who was crucified, but only a resemblance of Him. Our passage clearly asserts the contrary: "He was buried." He was buried, confirming His death, and Paul says that Christ died "according to the scriptures." We know that God's Word would not tell a lie. If God's Word says that Jesus died on the cross, we must believe it.

The third element of the gospel: Christ's resurrection. Look at verse 4, the second half: "and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures." We know that Christ's resurrection shows that He has overcome death. That is why Paul can say, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?... Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:55, 57). Because Jesus rose from the dead, now we have victory over our last enemy—namely, death. Death no longer has dominion over us. Death cannot separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. In fact, for us believers in Christ, death is now a blessing. Death is like an airplane that will transport you to the very presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus rose from the grave, the firstfruits of our resurrection, Paul says (1 Cor. 15:20).

So death, burial, and resurrection. Added to these three elements are three more following: first, Christ's birth. We read in Luke 2:10, "And the angel said unto them [that is, to the shepherds], Fear not:"—why?—"for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." This is the same as saying: "I bring you the gospel." And what is the gospel all about? The angel continues: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." So, the gospel is also about the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus was born not just to die for our sins but also to live a perfect life on our behalf. In theology, we call this the twofold obedience of Christ—it was both passive and active. That word *passive* does not mean that Christ was idle and listless; it comes from the Latin word *passio*, which means suffering. So, when you say the passive obedience of Jesus, you are talking about His suffering—that He suffered, that He died, to pay the penalty of our disobedience, of our sins—"for the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

But if the gospel story ended there, we would all still be in trouble. No one can stand before a holy, just, and righteous God. Let me illustrate my point here. Imagine someone who is going to an important interview for a job. But right before he walks into the building, a truck drives past him and splatters him with mud. Now his suit and long-sleeved shirt are filthy. So, he decides to first head home and take his dirty suit and shirt off. Now he is clean. But that does not really solve his problem. He still cannot return and have the interview. He needs a new shirt and suit jacket to clothe him.

In this analogy, the removal of his dirty suit is a symbol of the forgiveness of our sins. John the Beloved says that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sins (1 John 1:7). Through the atoning blood, through the atoning death, of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been forgiven. Our sins are taken and buried in the blood of Jesus Christ. That's His passive obedience. He died for the forgiveness of our sins.

But if the gospel story ended there, as I said, then no one could stand before this holy, just God. Why? Because we remain naked. We need a new robe. Putting on a new jacket is a symbol of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to him, received by faith. That's the blessing of active obedience: in it, Christ weaves a robe of righteousness to give to us. In other words, Jesus was born not just to die on the cross to pay for the penalty of our sins, but also to keep God's law perfectly. He was born to obey that perfect righteousness which we all need, without which no one can stand before God—because, by nature, the righteousness that we have is as a filthy rag, Isaiah says (Isa. 64:6). It stinks before God. Even your best performance, even your best religious works before God, stink. You and I need the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. And praise the Lord, Christ was born to live a holy life. He kept all the commandments of God on behalf of His people, so that when you believe on Jesus that righteousness will be imputed to you, and on the basis of that righteousness, now you can stand before this holy, just, righteous God. Now you can stand as if you had not sinned before and as if you yourself had kept God's law perfectly. On the basis of that righteousness, God can declare you righteous and just. In fact, Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For [God the Father] hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." Think about that. Because of the active obedience of Jesus Christ, we have become the righteousness of God. Praise God! As Isaiah says, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God...for he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10). That is our comfort in life—that we have both the passive and active obedience of Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon, the so-called "Prince of Preachers," championed the passive obedience of Christ. Towards the end of his life, he said, "My theology is very simple. I can express it in a few words and they are enough to die by: 'Jesus died for me.'" That was Spurgeon's theology. And here the focus is on the passive obedience of Christ: He died to pay the penalty of my sins.

Unfortunately, sometimes in the presentation of the gospel, the focus is merely on the passive obedience, not His active obedience. Focus on Christ's suffering is wonderful! But we also need His righteousness. We need His active obedience. And others have focused upon this, such as Gresham Machen, the founder of Westminster Theological Seminary and a founder of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Shortly before his death, he sent a telegram to his friend John Murray. The words of the telegram were these: "I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ—no hope without it." Those were his last recorded words. He died at the age of fifty-five. "I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ—no hope without it," that Jesus did it for me. I failed to meet God's perfect demands, but I have Jesus who did it on my behalf. Now, by faith, I have His perfect obedience, His perfect righteousness; and on that basis, when God the Father looks at me, He cannot condemn me anymore. What He sees in me is the righteousness of His Son, and therefore what God the Father said of His Son at the Jordan River, He also says of me in Christ: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). That is hard to think about, that is, that God is well pleased in me. It is not, of course, because of who I am by nature or because of what I do or what I have done, but it is only because of Christ in me—because of His righteousness.

So, Spurgeon focused on the passive obedience of Jesus, whereas Machen finds comfort in the active obedience of Jesus. We need both, of course, but sometimes we find more joy in the active obedience of Jesus (that Jesus did it all for me) and sometimes in His passive obedience (that He died to pay the penalty of my sins). He was born not just to die but also to live a perfect life.

The fifth element of the gospel: Christ's ascension. Romans 8:34 says, "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." Jesus ascended into heaven. And what is He doing there? He is sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Paul says that He is making intercession for

us. Jesus is praying for me. And if you are a believer in Christ, you can say the same, that Jesus is praying for you. What a joy, what a comfort, what an encouragement that I have Jesus who constantly and unceasingly prays for me, making intercession for me! Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me." I tell you, this is one of my sources for assurance of salvation. Ask me, how do I know that I will make it to the end? How do I know that I will see Jesus someday face to face? How do I rest in that with confidence and full assurance? It is because of Jesus, who is making intercession for me. My assurance of salvation does not depend on my prayers for myself, because I fail as a Christian. But I have Jesus, the great High Priest, who always, always prays for me, even when I am sleeping and even when I am, unfortunately, sinning. When I am sinning, Jesus is praying for me, and that is the only reason why even sin cannot snatch me out of the hand of Jesus, that even Satan cannot take me away from the presence of Jesus: it is because He is praying for me.

Christ's birth, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His ascension, and now finally the last element of the gospel: His second coming. In John 14:3, Jesus says, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Don't we long to be with Jesus? Don't we want to be with Jesus right now? There is a sense that our worship service every Sunday is just virtual, because we don't really see Jesus face to face. Yes, He is present with us through His Spirit; but the truth remains that, bodily speaking, He is absent from us. He is with His Father, but He makes this beautiful promise that He will come again. Why? To receive us to Himself, so that where He is, there we may be also. We will be able to see Jesus, hug Him and kiss Him, the one who died for us.

These are the six elements of the gospel. They are like six rings forming a chain. I call this the glorious chain of the gospel, and each element is inseparably connected to each of the others—you

cannot separate one from another. Paul says to the Corinthian church, “This is what I declare unto you.” And we pastors, we elders, we deacons, we Christians, we who claim to be Christians: this is the message that we need to declare to the world, that Jesus was born, He died, He was buried, He rose again from the dead, He ascended, and He is coming again. This is the gospel. Paul says in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” Why? “For it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.” The gospel is God’s *dunamis*, a Greek word from which we get the English word dynamite. Paul is saying, “This is the *dunamis* of God.” The gospel is so powerful. Once lit by the Holy Spirit, and once it explodes, it will change you, it will transform you. There is no way that you will not feel the explosion of the *dunamis* of the gospel. It will change you. It changed the life of the apostle Paul. Remember, before his conversion he was going to persecute the church and kill Christians. But when he encountered Jesus, when he encountered the gospel which is Jesus, he became a completely different person. From being a persecutor, Saul became Paul; he became a proclaimer and preacher of the gospel of Christ. It was a day-to-night change, from darkness to light, a radical change.

I say this to you, by the grace of God, that the same gospel changed my life. We sang the song by Katherine Hankey, “I love to tell the story.” This is the old, old story that we ought to be sharing with others. And we don’t need to add gimmicks to it. You don’t need to add drama to it. Just preach and proclaim the plain simple message of the cross. Yes, it is simple; and yet it is profound, that whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have everlasting life.

The Proper Response to the Gospel

As we conclude, what should be our proper response to this gospel? Let’s go back to our text, 1 Corinthians 15:1. Paul says, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received.” Notice this last part: “which you have received.” This is our proper response

to the gospel. We must receive the gospel by faith. Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:15, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” Literally, this verse reads this way: “Faithful is *the* Word.” The King James translates it as “faithful is the saying,” but it is actually *logos* in the original. “Faithful is *the* Word,” *the logos*, “and worthy of all acceptance.” In other words, what Paul is saying is this: “This *logos*, this faithful *logos*, Jesus, the living Word, and the gospel, the risen Word, this *logos* is worthy of all acceptance. It deserves full acceptance, not partial.” And, that term “accept” is a biblical expression. We Reformed people tend to be allergic to it. “No, you don’t accept Jesus; you don’t accept the gospel.” What Paul just told us is that this gospel is worthy of all acceptance. We need to recover that term from those who have misused it. We need to embrace the gospel fully. Full acceptance of the full gospel. We need to accept this complete, full Christ. St. Augustine of Hippo once said, “If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe but yourself.” You don’t pick and choose. You either accept the gospel fully or not.

Perhaps you are saying, “I don’t need the gospel. Why are you talking about the gospel? I am already a Christian. The gospel is for unbelievers. I am hoping to hear a different message, not the gospel! Preach it to unbelievers!” You are wrong, my friend! I cannot imagine my Christian life without the gospel. How often I get discouraged in the ministry, or as a husband and a father of five children. Where do I find my comfort? In the gospel! In the gospel. That is why Robert Murray M’Cheyne once said, “For every look at yourself take ten looks at Christ.” We must do this because if we focus on ourselves, we will get discouraged, because we fail and struggle with sin—yes, even we believers in Christ stumble, sin, and offend the Lord. There were times in my life that I would say, “Why did I do it again?!” I was so disappointed in myself. I had repented of that sin, and I said, “How did I do it again?!” You are so disappointed in yourself, and yet, thankfully, we have Jesus

Christ, where we find our identity. I don't find comfort in myself, because I am not consistently faithful as a father or as a husband or as a pastor. I find my joy in my identity in Christ, that He died for me, that He lived a perfect life on my behalf, that He is my Lord and Savior, that I belong to Him—and that He belongs to me.

So we need the gospel. Someone said, "There are two parts to the gospel: the first part is believing it, and the second part is behaving it." We Christians ought to behave according to the gospel. We need to be gospel-minded, saturated with it. Again I say to you, the gospel is Christ. We need to be like Jesus Christ, because that is the ultimate goal of redemption. God did not save us just for the sake of saving us. He saved us so that we might become more and more like His Son Jesus Christ. That will happen in full when Jesus returns, according to John the Beloved, when we see Jesus face to face. We shall be like Him. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Too good to be true! The time will come that I will be like Jesus. You will not be able to find any mistakes in me anymore. I will be like Jesus.

But here in this life, in the meantime, we need to be gospel-saturated. We need to smell like the gospel so that the people around us will see the gospel in us. That is a good, good tool in evangelism, especially when you are not allowed to talk about the gospel, such as in the workplace—let your life speak the gospel to them. Let them see Christ in you. Take, for example, this illustration: A missionary approached a native whom he had not seen before and asked, "Have you ever heard the gospel?" "No," he replied, "but I have seen it with my own eyes. I know a man who used to be the terror of the neighborhood. He was a bad opium smoker and as dangerous as a wild beast, but he became completely changed. He is now gentle and good. He has left off opium. I saw the gospel in this neighbor."

May I ask you with love, husbands, when your wives look at you, do they see the gospel in you? Fathers, when your children look at you, do they see Christ in you? Students, do your fellow students see Christ in you at school? If you are working, do your

fellow workers smell the gospel in you? Maybe there is no change in your life; you remain the same person. Could it be because you have not yet received the gospel?

In Romans 1:16, Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” But then when he wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:1, he said to him, “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” “Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead”—note this now, please; don’t miss this—“according to my gospel” (v. 8). That’s quite something. Earlier Paul said, “This is the gospel of Christ,” but then he said to Timothy, “Remember that Jesus Christ...was raised from the dead according to my gospel.” Now Paul owns the gospel. In other words, he has come to embrace the gospel experientially, so that the gospel becomes his. “This is my gospel,” which really is a matter of saying, “Christ is mine.” Can you say the same thing? Can you say, “That gospel is actually mine, because that gospel has changed my life; I have felt the transforming, saving, sanctifying power of the gospel of Jesus Christ”?