

What is the Gospel?

Grace Church Position Papers

If you ask a cross section of adults to explain the gospel, you are likely to hear a wide variety of answers. Some may say that the gospel is good news, but many wonder—good news about what? And why is it so good? Some may say that the gospel is about a God who loves us all unconditionally and wants to give us good things. Still others may say that the gospel has to do with the teachings of Jesus and that we should follow him as our example of how to live a good life. The truth is that there is often much confusion surrounding exactly what the gospel is and what it means to us.

This is not only true of our society, but also of the early church. In many of Paul's letters to the early churches, he exhorted believers to preserve the message of the gospel. He so strongly believed in the importance of the gospel, that despite persecution, mockery, and ridicule, he continued to proclaim it boldly, calling it the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). Why was he so adamant about preserving the gospel? Why have so many over the years died proclaiming it?

The one true Gospel

The early church contended with many who taught false gospels, and that is still true of the church today. Paul adamantly tried to protect believers from being led astray by distorted versions of the Gospel. In his book, *Counterfeit Gospels*, Trevin Wax warns that, "All Christians everywhere must realize that we are at war Awareness of this battle can help alert us to counterfeit gospels the Enemy wishes to spread into our churches, counterfeits that will destabilize us, confuse us, and cause us to lose confidence in the biblical gospel" (pg. 13).

Counterfeit gospels may be appealing by what they promise, but they lack the power, hope, and life found in the biblical gospel alone. Contrary to many of the teachings of our culture, the biblical gospel is not about our health, wealth, happiness, prosperity, or comfort. We do not deserve good things. God does not exist to satisfy our desires or to serve us. He does not heed our formulaic approaches to him—our beliefs that if we do certain things, then he will bless us and give us everything we want in this life. Nor is the biblical gospel about living a life of moralistic obedience—a belief that my relationship with God is based upon my obedience to a list of rules and regulations. Yet, these very ideas have infiltrated our churches and are believed by millions.

We wish to be very clear: there is only one true gospel. There is only one name under heaven by which we must be saved

(Acts 4:12). That name is Jesus Christ. It is our intent to provide clarity on the true gospel, to separate it from the counterfeits that have diluted its message of salvation.

Essentially, the word gospel means good news. But in order to understand what the gospel is and why it is good news, we must first take a look back into history—we must learn something about God and about ourselves.

Scripture says that from the very beginning, before anything else existed, God existed in perfect community within the Trinity (Genesis 1, Colossians 1). God created all that is, speaking the world into existence and forming man from the dust of the ground and breathing life into him. Then from the man he made woman, and he placed them in the garden to tend to and enjoy his creation. The importance of knowing God as our Creator is that it establishes his absolute authority over us. Because he created all that is, he has all authority to rule and reign over his creation.

In the garden, the man and woman enjoyed peace and fellowship with God. But, due to their pride and unbelief, the man and woman sinned against God, usurped his authority, and chose their own way instead. As a result of their rebellion, all of creation stood condemned under the wrath of a holy, righteous, and just God and became subject to sin, death, and decay.

Sin entered the world through Adam. As a result of sin, instead of living in peace and fellowship with God, all mankind became enemies of God. No longer can man enter God's presence because God is holy and perfect. All of humanity has turned away from God and chosen his own way. There is no one who does good; there is no one righteous; no one seeks God. Not even one (Romans 3:9-18).

Those are very strong words. The truth is that we are all broken and slaves to sin. Our hearts are deceitful and desperately sick (Jeremiah 17:9), and at our very best, our righteous deeds (our good works) are filthy before a holy God (Isaiah 64:6). Everything we do, think, and say is often a result of mixed motives. At our best, our good works are intermingled with feelings of superiority, pride, or a need to feel good about ourselves. At our worst, we are liars, adulterers, and murderers. We harbor bitterness, resentment, and ill will toward our fellow man. We envy, gossip, and manipulate. We are so good at it, so accustomed and desensitized to it, that we do not even realize we do it. Sin is insidious and deeply rooted within us, so much so that we even sin when we don't want to do so.



The apostle Paul understood this very well:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” – Romans 7:15-24 (ESV)

Our sinful, wicked nature is probably one of the hardest concepts for mankind to grasp. In our arrogance, we want to believe in our basic goodness and self-worth. We want to believe that our relationship with God is based on our own merit, our own performance. We believe that we are somehow irresistible, that he needs us. The truth is that God is fully self-sustaining. He has no needs that are not met fully within himself.

Therefore, his desire to be in relationship with us is not based on his lack, but on his abundance. The fact that a holy and righteous God would desire to be in relationship with us is all about him. In fact, all of the Old Testament tells the story of a holy God pursuing his people. He is leading them, protecting them, and providing for them even though they were rebellious, idolatrous, and unbelieving.

Just as our own sinful nature is difficult to grasp, it is also difficult to grasp a God who would judge, who would condemn all of mankind for the sin of one man. Adam was our representative in the garden. He chose as we would have chosen. To think we would have made a different choice only highlights our arrogance. Our prideful, rebellious, autonomous hearts would lead us astray every time.

Furthermore, people do not want to believe in a God of judgment at all, but a God of unconditional love—who accepts and loves everyone for who they are, regardless of their failures. There is a misconception that God cannot be a God of love and at the same time be a God who is offended by sin and exacts justice. Yet God’s love and wrath are not exclusive

of one another; they are in perfect harmony with one another. God is both infinitely holy and infinitely loving. God is so holy, he couldn’t dismiss evil; but he is so loving, he couldn’t just punish us for it.

The gap between sinful humanity and a holy God is far too wide for man to bridge on his own. Without someone or something to stand in the gap for us and restore our fellowship with God, all of humanity stands condemned under God’s judgment and wrath. This is very bad news for all of mankind.

All of this leaves us in a place of tension. If we stand opposed to God, as his enemies, with no way to reconcile that relationship, then what is the answer? If we really are that bad, if we are slaves to sin and have no hope of being free of it on our own, then what hope do we have? In the words of Paul, “who will deliver us from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24)

Thanks be to God, the answer is Jesus Christ, for at just the right time, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law to redeem those under the law that we might receive the full rights of sons (Galatians 4:3-7). Jesus was fully man, born of a woman, and fully God, conceived through the Holy Spirit. He lived as a man born under God’s law, tempted in every way as we are, yet he was without sin (Hebrews 4:14-16). As such, he was a fitting sacrifice on our behalf, perfectly fulfilling God’s law and purchasing our freedom once and for all.

The gospel, the good news, is this: though we were once alienated from God and considered his enemies because of our sin, God reconciled us to himself through Christ’s death on the cross (Colossians 1:21-23). Christ suffered the weight of our sins; he bore the punishment we deserved. Because of Christ’s death in our place, God forgave us all our sins, canceling the written code (the law) that condemned us, nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).

Central to the gospel is Christ, who stands in the gap created by our sin, making a way for us to be at peace with God. In God’s infinite wisdom and mercy, just as one man’s trespass brought condemnation for all men, so also one man’s act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. Through the disobedience of the one man (Adam) many were made sinners; through the obedience of the one man (Jesus), many will be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

The most important thing about the gospel is that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with



the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). It is only through Christ's sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection that sinners have hope of redemption. This is the good news of the gospel.

Christ's death on the cross for sinners cannot be separated from his resurrection. These two things are inexorably linked. In Chapter 15 of his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul went into great detail regarding those who were witnesses to Christ's physical body resurrected from the dead. After having been crucified, buried, and guarded by Roman guards for three days, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter, to his twelve disciples, and then to more than five hundred men, many of whom were still living at the time Paul wrote the letter. He also appeared to James, the apostles, and lastly to Paul himself (vs. 4-8). The significance of this is that Paul provided the reader with credible witnesses to an actual, historical resurrected Christ. These were real people who walked, talked, ate with, and touched a real, resurrected Jesus.

Why is Christ's resurrection so important? What does it mean for us today?

Christ's resurrection is the point on which our faith hinges. The resurrection is important because "a dead savior cannot save." Paul declared that if Christ was not raised from the dead, then our faith is futile, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all men (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). Christ's resurrection from the dead is our assurance that Jesus is who he said he was, and that God received Jesus as a satisfactory offering for our sins once and for all.

If forgiveness of sin were all he ever gave us, it would be far more than we deserve. But God, being rich in mercy, because his great love, even when we were dead in sin, made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5). The believer is so united with Christ that his death is actually considered our death. If we have been united with him in his death, we will also be united with him so that our body of sin might be done away with. Because we died, we are free from sin. And if we died with Christ, we will also live with him (Romans 6:3-8). Those who are in Christ are given new birth—they are a new creation. We have been given a new potential and a transcendent hope.

New life in Christ, the redemption of our bodies, is both a spiritual and a physical reality. Though our outer man, our physical body, is still wasting away, our inner man is being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). Part of the gloriousness and hope of the Gospel is not only renewed spiritual life, but also that we will one day have actual physical bodies that are no longer subject

to sin, death, and decay. New life in Christ is both something we already have, and something we still wait to attain.

Furthermore, if forgiveness of sins and eternal life were not enough, Christ's life, death, and resurrection purchased for us the full rights of sons. As a result of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, we are adopted into the family of God—made heirs to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Peter 1:3-5) and given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our future inheritance (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

All of this is ours on the basis of faith alone, not our good works. It is by God's grace alone that we are saved through our faith in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:8) "Jesus Christ never died for our good works. They were not worth dying for. But He gave Himself for our sins, according to the Scriptures."

Conversion: What does it mean to be "born again?"

In Ephesians 2, Paul describes man's spiritual state as dead and calls all of us enemies of God. In 1 Corinthians 6, he says we are idolaters, revilers, and swindlers apart from God. These classifications are not merely representative of behaviors that can be altered but more accurately describe our position and condition before God. Such a hopeless state cries out for something radical, something outside of ourselves: a new birth.

The concept and terminology of "being born again" is deeply rooted in Scripture. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, "in order to see the Kingdom of God, you must be born again." (John 4:3) As we are all born physically, we must all be born again spiritually. Similar to our physical birth, our spiritual birth is out of our control. It is a supernatural work of God that cannot be forced, earned or manipulated.

To be "born again" (the doctrine of regeneration) means that we have been made new. Throughout the New Testament it is often described as a new life or a new birth. This new birth—made available to us by Jesus' sacrifice and God's grace—saves us from the wrath of God (Ephesians 2:3, John 3:36), makes us right with God (Ephesians 2:13, Hebrews 9:22) and grants us adoption into his family (Galatians 4:5). Without being born again, we remain in the helpless state Jesus described to Nicodemus. Without this new birth, we will never enter the Kingdom of God.



Here are some questions to consider when reflecting on the gospel and your response to it:

- Are you able to think about and articulate some things that God has personally done for you? Note that this is more than just saying Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead for you. Yes, he did that, but what has he done for you recently? How has he intervened to shape your life personally?
- How have you changed on the inside? What desires, passions, and affections have changed within you? What used to make you angry that doesn't anymore? In the past, what used to control your thoughts but no longer does?
- What has changed in your life that can only be explained by Jesus? In what areas are you more like Jesus from no effort of your own?
- Do you have a story? Can you explain why God doesn't hate you when you sin—or why he doesn't love you more when you obey?

If you are struggling to answer these questions, you may not have had the spiritual rebirth that Jesus longs to give you. We would encourage you to read through the Gospel of John and continue to ask the same questions to yourself. Begin to cry out to God and confess to him that you need him and him alone to save you from your sinfulness. Ask God for a spiritual “rebirth.” Additionally, discuss this issue with a community group leader, neighbor, or friend who has a personal relationship with Jesus. If you still have a hard time understanding the gospel, God's great love for you personally, and what it means to be born again, please contact the church office. Pastors on staff would love to discuss this issue with you further.

1 Keller, Tim (2005, September 25th). The Gospel [Podcast]. Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Teaching.

2 Gilbert, Greg. “The Gospel: God's Self-Substitution For Sinners.” Don't Call It a Comeback: The Old Faith for a New Day. Crossway, 2011.

3 Gilbert, 77.

4 Carson, Dr. Don, and Martin Luther. “Session 1: What Is The Gospel and How Does It Work?” Speech. Gospel Coalition LA Regional Conference. The Gospel Coalition. The Gospel Coalition, 26 Nov. 2010. Web. 11 Oct. 2011

5 Wax, Trevin. Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope. Moody Publishers, 2011.

