

What Is the

Gos•pel? (gōs'pəl)

Greg Gilbert

Foreword by D. A. Carson

“Greg Gilbert is one of the brightest and most faithful young men called to serve the church today. Here he offers us a penetrating, faithful, and fully biblical understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no greater need than to know the true gospel, to recognize the counterfeits, and to set loose a generation of gospel-centered Christians. This very important book arrives at just the right moment.”

—R. ALBERT MOHLER JR., President,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Two realities make this a critically important book: the centrality of the gospel in all generations and the confusion about the gospel in our own generation. *What Is the Gospel?* provides a biblically faithful explanation of the gospel and equips Christians to discern deviations from that glorious message. How I wish I could place this book in the hands of every pastor and church member.”

—C. J. MAHANEY, Senior Pastor,
Sovereign Grace Church, Louisville, Kentucky

“A wonderful telling of the old, old story in fresh words—and with sound warnings against subtle misrepresentations. As the old gospel song attests, and as is true of Greg Gilbert’s fine book, those who know the old, old story best will find themselves hungering and thirsting to hear this story like the rest.”

—BRYAN CHAPPELL, Pastor,
Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“Greg Gilbert is someone I have had the honor and privilege of teaching and who is now teaching me. This little book on the gospel is one of the clearest and most important books I’ve read in recent years.”

—MARK DEVER, Senior Pastor,
Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC

“What is the gospel? This short but powerful book answers that question with a clear and concise presentation. It is a superb treatment of the good news. Read it and then pass it on.”

—DANIEL L. AKIN, President,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Greg Gilbert, with a sharp mind and a pastor’s heart, has written a book that will be helpful for seekers, new Christians, and anyone who wants to understand the gospel with greater clarity. I’ve been waiting for a book like this! As a sure-footed guide to a surprisingly controversial subject, it clears up misconceptions about the gospel, the kingdom, and the meaning of the cross.”

—KEVIN DEYOUNG, Senior Pastor,
Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, North Carolina

“Greg Gilbert has called the church back to the source of her revelation. In a simple and straightforward manner, he has laid bare what the Bible has shown the gospel to mean.”

—ARCHBISHOP PETER J. AKINOLA,
Former Primate of the Church of Nigeria,
Anglican Communion

“Greg Gilbert cuts through the confusion by searching Scripture to answer the most important question anyone can ask. Even if you think you know the good news of what God has done in Christ, Gilbert will sharpen your focus on this glorious gospel.”

—COLLIN HANSEN, Editorial Director,
the Gospel Coalition; author, *Blind Spots*

“This book will help you better understand, treasure, and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if you think you know enough about the gospel already, you might need it more than you think.”

—JOSHUA HARRIS, Former Senior Pastor,
Covenant Life Church, Gaithersburg, Maryland
author, *Dug Down Deep*

“Amidst a contemporary Christian culture characterized by rampant confusion regarding the central tenets of our faith, Greg Gilbert has given us a portrait of the gospel that is clear for those who have believed and compelling for those who have yet to believe. Word-saturated, cross-centered, and God-exalting, *What Is the Gospel?* will capture your mind’s attention and ignite your heart’s affection for the God who saves us by his grace through his gospel for his glory.”

—DAVID PLATT, Pastor-Teacher,
McLean Bible Church

“Clarity on the gospel brings both confidence in the gospel and conviction concerning core gospel truths. This excellent book is wonderfully clear and biblically faithful, and will repay reading with renewed gospel focus.”

—WILLIAM TAYLOR, Rector,
St. Helen Bishopgate, London

“When I think of the centerpiece of my Bible, my heart immediately embraces the gospel. I know many people who love the gospel, but I’m always open to loving it more and understanding it better. Greg Gilbert has written this book to help us to know and love the gospel more.”

—JOHNNY HUNT, Pastor,
First Baptist Church,
Woodstock, Georgia

“What makes this book profound is its simplicity. Perhaps the greatest danger in Christianity is making assumptions about what the gospel is without hearing the Bible’s clear and definitive voice. It is not an overstatement to say this may be the most important book you’ll read about the Christian faith.”

—RICK HOLLAND, Senior Pastor,
Mission Road Bible Church,
Prairie Village, Kansas

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To Moriah

I love you.

Tons and tons.

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SERIES PREFACE

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize. We at 9Marks believe that a healthy Christian is a healthy church member.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

By this token, the reader might notice that all "9 marks," taken from Mark Dever's 2001 book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway Books), begin with the Bible:

- expositional preaching;
- biblical theology;
- a biblical understanding of the gospel;
- a biblical understanding of conversion;
- a biblical understanding of evangelism;
- a biblical understanding of church membership;
- a biblical understanding of church discipline;
- a biblical understanding of discipleship and growth; and
- a biblical understanding of church leadership.

More can be said about what churches should do in order to be healthy, such as pray. But these nine practices are the ones that we believe are most often overlooked today (unlike prayer). So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. These volumes intend to examine the nine marks more closely and from different angles. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

FOREWORD

More than thirty years of teaching theological students have shown me that the most controverted questions they ask vary from generation to generation—and the same is true of the broader Christian public. At one time you could guarantee a heated debate by throwing out the question, What do you think of the charismatic movement? or Is inerrancy worth defending? or What do you think about seeker-sensitive churches? It is easy enough to find people willing to discuss these questions today, but there is usually little heat left in them and not much more light. Today the question most likely to light a fuse is—as the author of this volume points out—What is the gospel? One might usefully add that question’s first cousin, What is evangelicalism?

That these questions engender mutually exclusive answers, often dogmatically defended with only a minimum of reflection on the Bible, is, quite frankly, alarming, because the issues are so fundamental. When “evangelicals” hold highly disparate opinions about what the “evangel” is (that is, the “gospel,” for that is what “evangel” means), then one must conclude either that evangelicalism as a movement is a diverse phenomenon with no agreed gospel and no sense of responsibility “to contend for the faith” that the Lord has “once for all entrusted” to us, his people (Jude 3 NIV), or that many people call themselves

“evangelicals” who do not have any legitimate right to do so because they have left the “evangel,” the gospel, behind.

Enter Greg Gilbert. This book does not so much claim to break new ground as survey afresh some old ground that should never have been ignored, much less abandoned. The clarity of Greg’s thought and articulation is wholly admirable. This book will sharpen the thinking of not a few mature Christians. More importantly, it is a book to distribute widely to church leaders, young Christians, and even some who have not yet trusted Christ who want a clear explanation of what the gospel is. Read it, then buy a box of them for generous distribution.

D. A. Carson

INTRODUCTION

What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?

You'd think that would be an easy question to answer, especially for Christians. In fact, you'd think that writing a book like this—one asking Christians to think carefully about the question, *What is the gospel of Jesus?*—would be completely unnecessary. It's like asking carpenters to sit around and ponder the question, *What is a hammer?*

After all, the gospel of Jesus Christ stands at the very center of Christianity, and we Christians claim to be about the gospel above all else. It's what we intend to found our lives upon and build our churches around. It's what we speak to others about, and it's what we pray they also will hear and believe.

For all that, how firm a grasp do you think most Christians really have on the content of the Christian gospel? How would you answer if someone asked you: *What is this news that you Christians go on and on about? And what's so good about it?*

My sense is that far too many Christians would answer with something far short of what the Bible holds out as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Maybe they'd answer, “The gospel is that God will forgive your sins if you believe in him.” Or they'd say something like, “The good news is that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Or, “The gospel

is that you are a child of God, and God wants his children to be abundantly successful in every way.” Some would know that it’s important to say something about Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection, but then again, how does all that fit in?

The fact is, getting Christians to agree on an answer to the question, What is the gospel? is not as simple as it should be. I work with a ministry called 9Marks, an organization affiliated with Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC. For the most part, those who read and comment on our material are from a pretty narrow slice of evangelical Christianity. They believe the Bible is true and inerrant, they believe Jesus died on the cross and rose bodily from the dead, they believe human beings are sinners in need of salvation, and they intend to be gospel-centered, gospel-saturated people.

But what would you guess is the topic that single-handedly generates the most comment and the most energetic response of anything we write on? Yep, it’s the gospel. We can write and speak for months about preaching, discipling, counseling, church polity, even church music, and the response from our readers is interesting but not surprising. But let us post an article trying to be clear about what the Bible teaches is the good news of Christianity, and the response is stunning.

Some time ago, one of my friends posted a short article on our website about a well-known Christian artist who had been asked in an interview to define what the good news of Christianity is. Here’s what the artist said:

What a great question. I guess I’d probably . . . my instinct is to say that it’s Jesus coming, living, dying, and being resurrected

and his inaugurating the already and the not yet of all things being restored to himself . . . and that happening by way of himself . . . the being made right of all things . . . that process both beginning and being a reality in the lives and hearts of believers and yet a day coming when it will be more fully realized. But the good news, the gospel, the speaking of the good news, I would say is the news of his kingdom coming, the inaugurating of his kingdom coming . . . that's my instinct.

Several of us responded by asking questions such as, “If we’re articulating the Christian gospel, shouldn’t we include some *explanation* of Jesus’ death and resurrection?” Or, “Shouldn’t we say something about sin and the need for salvation from God’s wrath against it?”

The response to that series of posts was incredible. For literally months, we received dozens of messages about it. Some who wrote to us appreciated the questions we raised; others wondered what was wrong with articulating the gospel like that since Jesus preached about the arrival of the kingdom. Others were just refreshed to hear Christians thinking hard about how to articulate the gospel in the first place.

In some ways, I’m glad to see Christians getting excited when a discussion about the gospel begins. It means they’re taking it seriously, and that they have deeply held thoughts about what the gospel is. There would be nothing healthy at all in Christians who couldn’t care less how we define and understand the gospel. On the other hand, I think the energy generated by discussions about the gospel points to a general fog of confusion that swirls around it these days. When you come right down to it, Christians just don’t agree on what the gospel is—even Christians who call themselves evangelical.

Ask any hundred self-professed evangelical Christians what the good news of Jesus is, and you're likely to get about sixty different answers. Listen to evangelical preaching, read evangelical books, log on to evangelical websites, and you'll find one description after another of the gospel, many of them mutually exclusive. Here are a few I've found:

The good news is, God wants to show you his incredible favor. He wants to fill your life with "new wine," but are you willing to get rid of your old wineskins? Will you start thinking bigger? Will you enlarge your vision and get rid of those old negative mind-sets that hold you back?

Here's the gospel in a phrase. Because Christ died for us, those who trust in him may know that their guilt has been pardoned once and for all. What will we have to say before the bar of God's judgment? Only one thing. Christ died in my place. That's the gospel.

The message of Jesus may well be called the most revolutionary of all time: "The radical revolutionary empire of God is here, advancing by reconciliation and peace, expanding by faith, hope, and love—beginning with the poorest, the weakest, the meekest, and the least. It's time to change your thinking. Everything is about to change. It's time for a new way of life. Believe me. Follow me. Believe this good news so you can learn to live by it and be part of the revolution."

The good news is that God's face will always be turned toward you, regardless of what you have done, where you have been, or how many mistakes you've made. He loves you and is turned in your direction, looking for you.

The gospel itself refers to the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true, and only Lord of the world.

Good news! God is becoming King and he is doing it through Jesus! And therefore, *phew!*, God's justice, God's peace, God's world is going to be renewed. And in the middle of that, of course, it's good news for you and me. But that's the derivative from, or the corollary of the good news which is a message about Jesus that has a second-order effect on me and you and us. But the gospel is not itself about *you are this sort of a person and this can happen to you*. That's the result of the gospel rather than the gospel itself. . . . Salvation is *the result of the gospel*, not the center of the gospel itself.

The gospel is the proclamation of Jesus, in [two] senses. It is the proclamation *announced* by Jesus—the arrival of God's realm of possibility (his “kingdom”) in the midst of human structures of possibility. But it is also the proclamation *about* Jesus—the good news that in dying and rising, Jesus has made the kingdom he proclaimed available to us.

As a Christian, I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live. . . . Over time when you purposefully try to live the way of Jesus, you start noticing something deeper going on. You begin realizing the reason this is the best way to live is that it is rooted in profound truths about how the world is. You find yourself living more and more in tune with ultimate reality. You are more and more in sync with how the universe is at its deepest levels. . . . The first Christians announced this way of Jesus as “the good news.”

My understanding of Jesus' message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now—here and today. It's almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, "Change your life. Live this way."

You see what I mean when I say the gospel is surrounded by a fog of confusion! If you had never heard of Christianity, what would you think after reading those few quotations? You'd obviously know that Christians intend to be communicating some message that is good. But beyond that, it's just a jumble. Is the good news simply that God loves me, and that I need to start thinking more positively? Is it that Jesus is a really good example who can teach me to live a loving and compassionate life? It might have something to do with sin and forgiveness. Apparently some Christians think this good news has something to do with Jesus' death. Others apparently don't.

My point is not to decide here and now which of these quotations are better or worse than the others (though I hope that after reading this book you'll be able to decide). It's simply to point out how many different things come to people's minds when they're asked, What is the gospel?

I want to try in this book to offer a clear answer to that question, one that is based on what the Bible itself teaches about the gospel. In the process, I am hoping and praying for several things.

First, if you are a Christian, I pray that this little book—and more importantly, the glorious truths it attempts to articulate—will cause your heart to swell with joy and praise toward Jesus Christ for what he has accomplished for you. An emaciated gospel leads to emaciated worship. It lowers our eyes from God to self and cheapens what God has accomplished for us

in Christ. The biblical gospel, by contrast, is like fuel in the furnace of worship. The more you understand about it, believe it, and rely on it, the more you adore God both for who he is and for what he has done for us in Christ. “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” Paul cried (Rom. 11:33), and it was because his heart was full of the gospel.

Second, I hope that reading this book will give you a deeper confidence as you talk to others about the good news of Jesus. I have met any number of Christians who hesitate to share the gospel with friends, family, and acquaintances for fear of not having answers to all their questions. Well, it’s probably true, no matter who you are, that you’ll never be able to answer *all* the questions! But you *can* answer *some* of them, and I hope this book will help you answer *more* of them.

Third, I pray that you will see the importance of this gospel for the life of the church, and that as a result you will work to make sure that this gospel is preached, sung, prayed, taught, proclaimed, and heard in every aspect of your church’s life. It is through the church, Paul says, that the manifold wisdom of God will be made known to the universe. And how is that? Through the preaching of the gospel, which brings to light “for everyone” God’s eternal plan to save the world (Eph. 3:7–12).

Fourth, I hope this book will help to shore up the edges of the gospel in your mind and heart. The gospel is a stark message, and it intrudes into the world’s thinking and priorities with sharp, bracing truths. Sadly, there has always been a tendency among Christians—even among evangelicals—to soften some of those edges so that the gospel will be more readily acceptable to the world. One of my prayers is that this book will serve

to preserve those edges and prevent the erosion of truths that, though hard for the world to swallow, are indispensable to the good news of Jesus. All of us are tempted, in the name of being winsome witnesses, to present the gospel in as attractive a way as possible. That's fine in some respects—it is “*good news*,” after all—but we must also be careful not to round off the gospel's sharp points. We must preserve the edges, and I hope this book will help us to do that.

Finally, if you're not a Christian, then I pray that by reading this book you will be provoked to think hard about the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the message on which we Christians have staked our entire lives, and it's one that we believe demands a response from you, too. If there's anything in the world that you cannot afford to ignore, it is the voice of God saying, “Good news! Here is how you can be saved from my judgment!” That's the kind of announcement that demands attention.

FINDING THE GOSPEL IN THE BIBLE

Did you know that GPS navigation systems are causing havoc in towns across the United States? That's especially the case in small towns. For people who live in large cities, the little machines are lifesavers. Plug the GPS in, type in an address, and you're off to the races. No more missed exits, no more wrong turns—just you, your car, your GPS, and ding! “Arriving at destination!”

I just recently got my first GPS device, which was primarily an act of defiance against whoever is responsible for the almost impossible road system in Washington DC. My first experience with it, though, wasn't in Washington. It was in Linden, Texas, my very small, very rural, and very out-of-the-way hometown.

It turns out that my GPS has no problem whatsoever navigating the crisscrossing, back-and-forth streets of Washington. Oddly enough, though, it did have trouble in Linden. Roads that the GPS was quite certain existed, didn't. Turns that it insisted were possible, weren't. Addresses that it firmly believed would be in a certain place, turned out to be several hundred yards further down the street—or even nonexistent.

Apparently GPS systems' ignorance of small towns is a growing problem. ABC News ran a story about neighborhood

roads that have literally become commercial thoroughfares because GPS systems are routing traffic there, rather than along larger highways. There are other problems, too. One poor guy from California insisted he was only following his GPS's instructions when he made a right turn onto a rural road and found himself stuck on a train track, staring into the headlight of an oncoming locomotive! He survived. His rental car, though, and presumably the offending GPS along with it, didn't make out so well.

One representative from the American Automobile Association was sympathetic—kind of. “Clearly the GPS failed him in the sense it should not have been telling him to make a right turn on the railroad tracks,” he said. “But just because a machine tells you to do something that is potentially dangerous, doesn't mean you should do it.” Indeed!

So what's going on? GPS manufacturers say the problem isn't with the devices themselves. They're doing exactly what they're supposed to do. Instead, the problem is in the maps the devices are downloading. It turns out that especially for small towns, the maps available to GPS systems are often several years, or even decades, out of date. Sometimes the maps are nothing better than planning maps—what city planners *intended* to do if their towns grew. The result? Sometimes addresses that show up in one place on the planning maps ended up being somewhere else when the town was actually built. Sometimes roads that city planners intended to build never actually got built—and sometimes they got built not as roads at all, but as railroads!

In the world of GPS, as in life, it's important that you get your information from a reliable source!

What's Our Authority?

The same thing is true when we approach the question, What is the gospel? Right at the beginning, we have to make some sort of decision about what source of information we're going to use in order to answer the question. For evangelicals, the answer usually comes pretty easily: we find the answer in the Bible.

That's true, but it's useful to know up front that not everyone agrees entirely with that answer. Different "Christian" traditions have given a number of different answers to this question of authority. Some have argued, for instance, that we ought to base our understanding of the gospel not solely, or even primarily, on the words of the Bible, but on Christian tradition. If the church has believed something for long enough, they argue, we should understand it to be true. Others have said that we know truth through the use of reason. Building our knowledge from the ground up—A leads to B leads to C leads to D—will bring us to a true understanding of ourselves, the world, and God. Still others say we should look for the truth of the gospel in our own experience. Whatever resonates most with our own hearts is what we finally understand to be true about ourselves and God.

If you spend enough time thinking about it, though, you realize that each of those three potential sources of authority ultimately fails to deliver what it promises. Tradition leaves us relying on nothing more than the opinions of men. Reason, as any freshman philosopher will tell you, leaves us flailing about in skepticism. (Try to *prove*, for example, that you're not just a figment of someone else's imagination, or that your five senses really are reliable.) And experience leaves us relying on our

own fickle hearts in order to decide what is true—a prospect most honest people find unsettling at best.

What do we do, then? Where do we go in order to know what is true, and therefore what the good news of Jesus Christ really is? As Christians, we believe that God has spoken to us in his Word, the Bible. Furthermore, we believe that what God has said in the Bible is infallibly and inerrantly true, and therefore it leads us not to skepticism or despair or uncertainty, but to confidence. “All Scripture is breathed out by God,” Paul said, “and profitable for teaching” (2 Tim. 3:16). King David wrote,

This God—his way is perfect;
the word of the LORD proves true. (Ps. 18:30)

And so it is to God’s Word that we look in order to find what he has said to us about his Son Jesus and about the good news of the gospel.

Where in the Bible Do We Go?

But where do we go in the Bible to find that? I suppose there are several different approaches we could take. One would be to look at all the occurrences of the word *gospel* in the New Testament and try to come to some sort of conclusion about what the writers mean when they use the word. Surely there are a few instances where the writers are careful to define it.

There could be important things to learn from this approach, but there are drawbacks, too. One is that often in the New Testament a writer obviously intends to give a summary of the

good news of Christianity, yet he doesn't use the word *gospel* at all. Take Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2, for example. If ever there was a proclamation of the good news of Christianity, surely this is it—yet Peter never mentions the word *gospel*. Another example is the apostle John, who uses the word only once in all his New Testament writings (Rev. 14:6)!

Let me suggest that, for now, we approach the task of defining the main contours of the Christian gospel not by doing a word study, but by looking at what the earliest Christians said about Jesus and the significance of his life, death, and resurrection. If we look at the apostles' writings and sermons in the Bible, we'll find them explaining, sometimes very briefly and sometimes at greater length, what they learned from Jesus himself about the good news. Perhaps we'll also be able to discern some common set of questions, some shared framework of truths around which the apostles and early Christians structured their presentation of the good news of Jesus.

The Gospel in Romans 1–4

One of the best places to start looking for a basic explanation of the gospel is Paul's letter to the Romans. Perhaps more clearly than any other book of the Bible, Romans contains a deliberate, step-by-step expression of what Paul understood to be the good news.

Actually, the book of Romans is not so much a *book* at all, at least as we usually think of books. It's a letter, a way for Paul to introduce himself and his message to a group of Christians he had never met. That's why it has such a systematic, step-by-step feel. Paul wanted these Christians to know about him, his ministry, and especially his message. He wanted them

to know that the good news he preached was the same good news they believed.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel,” he begins, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). From there, especially through the first four chapters, Paul explains the good news about Jesus in wonderful detail. As we look at these chapters, we’ll see that Paul structures his presentation of the gospel around a few critical truths, truths that show up again and again in the apostles’ preaching of the gospel. Let’s look at the progression of Paul’s thought in Romans 1–4.

First, Paul tells his readers that it is God to whom they are accountable. After his introductory remarks in Romans 1:1–7, Paul begins his presentation of the gospel by declaring that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven” (v. 18). With his very first words, Paul insists that humanity is not autonomous. We did not create ourselves, and we are neither self-reliant nor self-accountable. No, it is God who created the world and everything in it, including us. Because he created us, God has the right to demand that we worship him. Look what Paul says in verse 21: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

Thus Paul indicts humanity: they have sinned by not honoring and thanking God. It is our obligation, as people created and owned by God, to give him the honor and glory that is due to him, to live and speak and act and think in a way that recognizes and acknowledges his authority over us. We are made by him, owned by him, dependent on him, and therefore accountable to him. That’s the first point Paul labors to make as he explains the good news of Christianity.

Second, Paul tells his readers that their problem is that they rebelled against God. They—along with everyone else—did not honor God and give thanks to him as they should have. Their foolish hearts were darkened and they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (v. 23). That’s a truly revolting image, isn’t it? For human beings to consider their Creator and then decide that a wooden or metal image of a frog or a bird or even *themselves* is more glorious, more satisfying, and more valuable is the height of insult and rebellion against God. It is the root and essence of sin, and its results are nothing short of horrific.

For most of the next three chapters Paul presses this point, indicting all humanity as sinners against God. In chapter 1 his focus is on the Gentiles, and then in chapter 2 he turns just as strongly toward the Jews. It’s as if Paul knows that the most self-righteous of the Jews would have been applauding his lashing of the Gentiles, so he pivots on a dime in 2:1 and points his accusing finger at the applauders: “Therefore *you* have no excuse”! Just like Gentiles, he says, Jews have broken God’s law and are under his judgment.

By the middle of chapter 3, Paul has indicted every single person in the world with rebellion against God. “We have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin” (v. 9). And his sobering conclusion is that when we stand before God the Judge, every mouth will be silenced. No one will mount a defense. Not one excuse will be offered. The whole world—Jew, Gentile, every last one of us—will be held fully accountable to God (v. 19).

Now, strictly speaking, these first two points are not really good news at all. In fact, they're pretty *bad* news. That I have rebelled against the holy and judging God who made me is not a happy thought. But it is an important one, because it paves the way for the good news. That makes sense if you think about it. To have someone say to you, "I'm coming to save you!" is really not good news at all unless you believe you actually need to be saved.

Third, Paul says that God's solution to humanity's sin is the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having laid out the bad news of the predicament we face as sinners before our righteous God, Paul turns now to the good news, the *gospel* of Jesus Christ.

"But now," Paul says, in spite of our sin, "*now* the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law" (v. 21). In other words, there is a way for human beings to be counted righteous before God instead of unrighteous, to be declared innocent instead of guilty, to be justified instead of condemned. And it has nothing to do with acting better or living a more righteous life. It comes "apart from the law."

So how does it happen? Paul puts it plainly in Romans 3:24. Despite our rebellion against God, and in the face of a hopeless situation, we can be "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Through Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection—because of his blood and his life—sinners may be saved from the condemnation our sins deserve.

But there's one more question Paul answers. Exactly how is that good news for me? How do *I* become included in this promised salvation?

Finally, Paul tells his readers how they themselves can be included in this salvation. That's what he writes about through the end of chapter 3 and on into chapter 4. The salvation God has provided comes "through faith in Jesus Christ," and it is "for all who believe" (3:22). So how does this salvation become good news for *me* and not just for someone else? How do *I* come to be included in it? By believing in Jesus Christ. By trusting him and no other to save me. "To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly," Paul explains, "his faith is counted as righteousness" (4:5).

Four Crucial Questions

Now, having looked at Paul's argument in Romans 1–4, we can see that at the heart of his proclamation of the gospel are the answers to four crucial questions:

1. Who made us, and to whom are we accountable?
2. What is our problem? In other words, are we in trouble and why?
3. What is God's solution to that problem? How has he acted to save us from it?
4. How do I—myself, right here, right now—how do *I* come to be included in that salvation? What makes this good news for me and not just for someone else?

We might summarize these four major points like this: God, man, Christ, and response.

Of course Paul goes on to unfold a universe of other promises God has made to those who are saved in Christ, and many of those promises may very appropriately be identified as part

of the good news of Christianity, the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it's crucial that we understand, right from the outset, that all those grand promises depend on and flow from this, the heart and fountainhead of the Christian good news. Those promises come only to those who are forgiven of sin through faith in the crucified and risen Christ. That is why Paul, when he presents the heart of the gospel, starts here—with these four critical truths.

The Gospel in the Rest of the New Testament

It's not just Paul who does this. As I read the apostles' writings throughout the New Testament, these are the four questions I see them answering over and over again. Whatever else they might say, these are the issues that seem to lie at the heart of their presentation of the gospel. Contexts change, angles change, words change, and approaches change, but somehow and in some way the earliest Christians *always* seem to get at these four issues: We are accountable to the God who created us. We have sinned against that God and will be judged. *But* God has acted in Jesus Christ to save us, and we take hold of that salvation by repentance from sin and faith in Jesus.

God. Man. Christ. Response.

Let's take a look at some other passages in the New Testament where the gospel of Jesus is summarized. Take Paul's famous words in 1 Corinthians 15, for example:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you

are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (vv. 1–5)

Do you see the central structure there? Paul is not as expansive as he is in Romans 1–4, but the main contours are still clear. Human beings are in trouble, sunk in “our sins” and in need of “being saved” (obviously, though implicitly, from God’s judgment). But salvation comes in this: “Christ died for our sins . . . was buried . . . was raised.” And all this is taken hold of by “hold[ing] fast to the word I preached to you,” by believing truly and not in vain. So there it is: God, man, Christ, response.

Even in the sermons recorded in the book of Acts, this central framework of the gospel is clear. When Peter tells the people at Pentecost what they should do in response to his proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection, he says, “Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Again, Peter’s appeal is not expansive, and God’s judgment is again implicit, but it’s all there nonetheless. The problem: you need God to forgive your sins, not judge you for them. The solution: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which Peter has already talked about at length in the sermon. The necessary response: repentance and faith, evidenced by the act of baptism.

In another sermon of Peter's, in Acts 3:18–19, these four crucial truths are obvious again:

But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. (NIV)

Problem: you need your sins wiped out, not judged by God.
Solution: Christ suffers. Response: repent and turn to God in faith.

Or consider Peter preaching the gospel to Cornelius and his family:

We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:39–43)

Forgiveness of sins. Through the name of the crucified and risen One. For everyone who believes.

Paul, too, preaches the same gospel in Acts 13:

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. (vv. 38–39 NIV)

Once again, the clearly recognizable framework is God, man, Christ, and response. You need God to grant you “forgiveness

of sins.” That happens “through Jesus,” and it happens for “everyone who believes.”

Explaining the Core Truths in a Variety of Ways

Obviously this God-man-Christ-response structure is not a slavish formula. The apostles don't necessarily tick the points off like a checklist when they proclaim the gospel. Depending on the context, how long they have to preach, and who is included in their audience, they explain those four points at various lengths. Sometimes one or more of them are even left implicit rather than explicit—especially the fact that it is God to whom we are accountable and from whom we need the gift of forgiveness. But then again, that's a fact that would already have been deep in the minds of the Jews to whom the apostles most often preached.

On the other hand, when Paul speaks to a group of pagan philosophers at the Areopagus, he starts right at the beginning, with God himself. Paul's sermon in Acts 17 is often cited as a model for preaching the good news to a pagan culture. But there's something very interesting and unusual about that sermon. Look at it carefully and you start to realize that Paul doesn't really proclaim the good news of Christ at all, just the bad news!

“Let me tell you about this unknown God to whom you have an altar,” he begins, in effect. Then he explains to them in verses 24–28 that there is a God, that this God made the world, and that he calls us to worship him. That established, he turns in verse 29 to explain the concept of sin and its root in worship of created things rather than of God, and he declares that God

will judge his hearers by the “man whom he has appointed,” a man whom God has raised from the dead (v. 31).

And then he stops! Look at it closely. There’s no mention of forgiveness, no mention of the cross, and no promise of salvation—just a declaration of God’s demands and a proclamation of the resurrection as proof of his coming judgment! Paul doesn’t even mention Jesus’ name!

So what’s going on here? Does Paul *not* preach the gospel here? Well, no, not right then. There’s no gospel, no good news, in his public sermon. The news Paul proclaims is all bad. But look at verses 32–34, where the Bible says that the men wanted to hear Paul again, and that some of them eventually believed. Apparently, Paul preached the *good* news—that sinners could be saved from this coming judgment—at some later time, perhaps publicly, perhaps privately.

Like the other apostles, Paul was perfectly able to present the core truths of the gospel in a variety of ways. But the important thing to understand is that there *were* in fact some core truths of the gospel, and from the sermons and letters preserved to us we have a very good idea of what those core truths were—and are. In Romans, in 1 Corinthians, in the sermons of Acts, and throughout the New Testament, the earliest Christians structured their declaration of the good news around a few critical truths.

First the bad news: God is your Judge, and you have sinned against him. And then the gospel: but Jesus has died so that sinners may be forgiven of their sins if they will repent and believe in him.

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