

Faith Pulpit

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Do We Really Know the Gospel?

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Each year, as I teach the doctrine of salvation, I give a quiz to test my students' understanding of the Gospel. I ask them to imagine that they are in a hospital room, calling on an unbeliever who is at death's door. The students have time for only twenty-five words to communicate the Gospel. After the 25th word the patient has passed away. What would the students say in this situation? Are they able to express the Gospel so concisely that if the mortally ill person responds properly, he is saved? Do the students comprehend the Gospel sufficiently to put the saving message in these few words? We will return to the students and their quiz shortly.

Christ issued a comprehensive command to believers: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Let us note (1) what the Gospel is not, (2) what the Gospel is, and (3) how we can accurately communicate it.

I. What the Gospel is not.

1. The World Council of Churches declared in Nairobi at its Fifth Assembly that the Gospel "always includes" "the responsibility to participate in the struggle for justice and human dignity, the obligation to denounce all that hinders human wholeness." (Christianity Today, January 2, 1972, p. 12). Is this the Gospel?

A few years ago, Evangelist Leighton Ford held a crusade in Des Moines. He was introduced to the audience as "the preacher of the two-edged Gospel." The Gospel, according to Ford, similar to the WCC position, must include the salvation of the individual as well as the salvation of society. Is this the Gospel?

2. Robert Schuller, of Crystal Cathedral fame, asserts that "the Gospel of Christ must be proclaimed as salvation from shame to glory, from self-doubt and self-condemnation to self-confidence and self-affirmation," Schuller further maintains that "the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be proclaimed as a theology of self-esteem." (Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, p. 161, 47). Is this the Gospel?

3. John MacArthur, in his controversial book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, writes that "the call to Calvary must be recognized for what it is: a call to discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ" (p. 30). "The gospel Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship. . ." (p.21). The essence of saving faith is "a complete resignation of self and absolute submission . . ." (p. 153). Is this the Gospel?

II. What the Gospel is.

The Greek word euangelion, translated as Gospel, means “good news.” But the question needs to be asked: good news about what? The New Testament uses the term Gospel in several different ways.

1. The Gospel can be good news about people. In 1 Timothy 3:6 Paul wrote that Timothy brought good news, literally a gospel, about the steadfast walk of the saints in Thessalonica.
2. The New Testament further makes reference to the Gospel of the kingdom. In the Gospel of Matthew the word euangelion is used primarily of the Gospel of the kingdom (Mt. 3:1,2; 4:17; 10:5–7), that is, the good news that the Messiah would arrive and set up His kingdom as predicted in the Old Testament. At Christ’s first coming the nation of Israel officially rejected His bonafide offer of the kingdom. However, the Gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed once again during the tribulation period (Mt. 24:14), just prior to Christ’s return to set up the Davidic, millennial kingdom.
3. The third usage of the term euangelion is that of “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). This Gospel is described in detail in the epistles but is defined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: “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: ” What is the Gospel which Paul reached and every believer is to proclaim? As one writer succinctly puts it: “the good news is that Christ died for sins and arose from the dead.” (Cocoris, *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach*, p. 60.) A helpful analysis of the elements of the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 is given by Ryrie. He notes that, “the Gospel is the good news about the death and resurrection of Christ. He died and He lives—this is the content of the Gospel. The fact of Christ’s burial proves the reality of His death ... He actually died and died for our sins... The inclusion of a list of witnesses proves the reality of His resurrection.” (So *Great Salvation*, p. 39).

The Gospel then is good news about Christ, that He died for us and that He was raised again. It is the “Gospel of the grace of God” in which He offers the sinner the gift of eternal life. The sinner simply needs to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31) and God will graciously grant eternal life and all the blessings this entails (Ephesians 1:3).

III. How to present the Gospel.

Nothing is more central to the Christian faith than the Gospel. Nothing is more crucial to the sinner’s salvation than the Gospel. We dare not divide the Gospel into a social gospel to reform society and a saving gospel to redeem sinners, as the WCC and Leighton Ford are doing. We dare not divest the Gospel of the concept of human sin necessitating the death of Christ, as Schuller is doing. We dare not distort the Gospel by confusing salvation and sanctification and making submission to the Lordship of Christ a prerequisite for salvation, a “sine qua non of saving faith” (p. 135) as MacArthur is doing.

Let us return once more to the theology quiz I gave to my students (an idea originating in Dr. Ryrie’s theology class). Some clever student will normally quote John 3:16, which, with its 25 words, is within our limit. However, this answer does not count. The assignment was that the student put the Gospel in

his own words. Several students usually present their message something like this: "Jesus Christ gave His life for you. If you accept Him as your Savior He will save you." This answer is good but not good enough. I am afraid our fading friend does not have much of a chance. Lacking in this presentation is the first element of a clear Gospel presentation. The three ingredients of a complete and yet concise presentation of the gospel are

- (1) the human problem,
- (2) the divine provision and
- (3) the personal procurement.

There is no salvation without the realization of the human problem. The recipient of the Gospel message needs to be made aware of his sinful and lost condition. Next he needs to be informed about the divine provision. The bad news is that man is lost and totally unable to come to God on his own merit. The good news is that God has provided a Savior. Christ died for sinners. He is their substitute, bearing the penalty for human sin. Finally, the unsaved individual must be told about the personal procurement of salvation. It is good to know that Christ tasted death for every man (Hebrews 2:9). But the fact that the Savior died for all does not imply that all are automatically saved. The sinner needs to appropriate personally this salvation. Biblically, the individual needs to believe or trust. He needs to receive the gift of salvation freely offered to all.

After I analyze some of my students' answers in light of the three basic ingredients of the Gospel presentation, I present them with my idea how, in twenty-five words or less, the Gospel presentation can be made to include the human problem, the divine provision and personal procurement:

"Friend: You have sinned. But Christ died for sinners and rose again. Trust Him alone and He will save you eternally. Do it now!"

This, in a nutshell, is a valid Gospel presentation. It includes, as any offer of the Gospel should, information and an invitation. The sinner needs to know why he should be saved, who can save him and how he can be saved.

Do we really know the Gospel? Theological training, helpful as that may be, is not necessary for a clear and comprehensive communication of the Gospel. Sir Robert Anderson, with a fine balance, underscores the qualifications of those who would be Gospel witnesses: "What God wants in those whom He will put in trust with the gospel, is not that they shall be polished and educated gentlemen, much less that they shall be coarse and ignorant boors; not that they shall be skilled in dogmatic theology, much less that they shall be unlearned in doctrine; not that they shall be brilliant and eloquent, much less that they shall be ungifted and dull. All He seeks is a fitting instrument upon whom the power of Christ can rest, an empty earthen vessel that He can fill with His priceless treasure." (The Gospel and Its Ministry, p. 6,7.)

Our responsibility is to preach the Savior and proclaim pardon and peace to every creature. All of us can do this. All of us should do this. All of us should do it more. As we are faithful to the Master's mandate we can expect the Spirit to empower us and the sovereign Lord to give the increase.