

What is the gospel?

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I remember, more than twenty years ago now, an international visitor to Sydney being asked this question. Throughout the week that he had been here, the speaker had appealed to the gospel many times. Clearly in a part of the world well-known for the strength of its evangelical witness, such an appeal was essential if he was to get a hearing. But the appeal had not been convincing and it had become increasingly obvious that at this most basic level our guest had a very different idea of what exactly it was that he was appealing to repeatedly throughout the week. So some brave soul — someone braver than me — publicly asked him the question. What *is* the gospel?

He hesitated for a moment. I suspect he feared a trap of some kind. The young man asking the question did not back off but quietly waited. Then the man who had been appealing to the gospel all week replied, ‘I don’t think I could define it yet. I’m still learning more and more what it means and what should be included in it. I’ve got a way to go yet.’

At one level his answer came across as humble and gentle and appropriately Christian. It provided cool relief from the bold, even strident, claims he and others had made from the platform that week. Who among us has it all together and nothing to learn? Who hasn’t got a way to go yet? Nevertheless, not being able to articulate in a simple and clear way what it is that lies at the heart of the Christian message — especially when the person concerned is presenting themselves as a Christian teacher — struck many of us as not just sad but alarming. This reticence when it comes to proclaiming and explaining the gospel message seems light years away from the attitude of the first Christians. The apostle Paul could even exclaim ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!’ (1 Cor 9.16). He urged Timothy to do the work of an evangelist, a gospel-speaker (2 Tim 4.5). To do that, he would have to be clear about what is the gospel.

Clarity about the gospel is all the more urgent just at the moment because of the variety of ‘gospels’ on offer.

The gospel of inclusion has swept many parts of the United States. According to this gospel, there are no grounds on which anyone could be left outside the kingdom. No

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matter what background, belief or behaviour — all must be recognised as belonging in the kingdom, because no one is excluded.

The grain of truth in this view is the simple fact that according to the New Testament the gospel does cross what many in the first century considered insuperable barriers and so includes the outcast, the marginalised and the foreigner in the blessings first promised to Israel. All who come in repentance and faith are welcomed. But this is not everyone and it does not disregard persistence in immorality of whatever kind. In the end, this view of the gospel requires some imaginative exegesis of vast swathes of the New Testament (not to mention the Old Testament). How does it square with the picture of the end, where amongst those outside the city include ‘the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood’ (Rev 22.15)? Not everyone is inside. The gospel excludes those who, tragically, will not come (Mk 4.11–12; Matt 25.41–46).

The gospel of unity is another popular offering just at the moment. We are told the gospel is unity and unity is the gospel. In a slightly more nuanced form we are simply told the gospel is intrinsically about the unity issue. The gospel brings people together and so anything that separates people is against the gospel. Now clearly unity between Christian brothers is a wonderful gift of God (Jn 17.20–23). It is a very good thing (Ps 133.1). It is something given but also something we are called upon to maintain and protect (Eph 4.3). The divisive person is described by Paul as ‘warped and sinful’ and ‘self-condemned’ (Titus 3.10–11). Yet the gospel of unity goes a step beyond valuing unity highly. It involves defining the gospel in terms of unity.

The ecumenism of the early- to mid-twentieth century made much of this and so have postmodern approaches at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. No matter how serious you may think a theological issue is, no matter how far you may be convinced a particular person or group has wandered from the biblical gospel with dire consequences for them and others, unity is more important. To utter a criticism of another’s behaviour or another’s teaching, no matter how justified that criticism might be in light of Scripture, is disallowed because it is an assault upon unity and ultimately an assault upon the gospel.

More nuanced contemporary forms would not go that far. They would still leave a place, at least formally, for repudiating false doctrine. However, by making the gospel intrinsically about unity they are in reality more reluctant to engage in that repudiation themselves and suspicious of those who do. In some circles the only heresy that remains is intolerance. Truth and unity are still valued highly, at least in theory; but unity trumps truth almost every time.

Yet immediately at least three issues arise. Firstly, Scripture does, of course, give us very important guidelines for how we ought to behave when we find ourselves scandalised by the behaviour or departure from the truth of one who has the name of a brother: speaking to him or her face to face (Matt 18.15); correcting with gentleness and with a view to their repentance rather than their condemnation (2 Tim 2.25); but also, ultimately, if they will not listen, disassociating from them (1 Cor 5.11). Paul could certainly envisage this within a properly functioning Christian community — disassociating from a Christian brother (he stresses the person he has in mind is not an enemy but a brother) in order to bring him to repentance (2 Thess 3.14–15). So we must beware lest an appeal to the priority of unity become a device to shield us from criticism and from the godly rebuke envisaged in the Scriptures for our good.

Secondly, a description of the gospel message as unity confuses the gospel and a vital consequence of the gospel. Paul's confrontation with Peter at Antioch was a gospel confrontation, not because unity is the gospel and the gospel is unity but because given the gospel—given that all people, Jew and Gentile, are set in the right with God in exactly the same way, by God's grace through faith in Christ not by works of the law—it was entirely wrong for Peter to separate from the Gentile Christians because they were uncircumcised. Unity between Jews and Gentiles is a critical consequence of the gospel, but the gospel is not first and foremost about unity but about what God has done in Christ to save both without a reference to their works. This is why Paul deals with the issue of salvation and its basis in Ephesians 2.1–10 *before* spelling out the consequence of this in the unity of Jew and Gentile in Ephesians 2.11–22.

Thirdly, unity is properly what philosophers call an incomplete predicate. We are bound to ask 'unity in what?' And the New Testament answer is 'the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God' (Eph 4.13) and 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4.3). We are to 'all have the same mind' (Phil 2.2; 1 Cor 1.10), which happens when we understand that we are in Christ Jesus, that he has become to us 'wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,' and so we give up boasting in ourselves but boast instead in the Lord who saved us through the foolishness of the cross (1 Cor 1.30–31). Our fellowship is, therefore, not an abstraction, not something that exists for its own sake, but rather 'our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' (1 Jn 1.3).

The gospel of cosmic renewal has its contemporary advocates as well. Picking up a sometimes neglected biblical theme, they insist that we should be talking about the new creation and not just the salvation of sinners. Of course this is true and though sometimes neglected it has not at all been forgotten by evangelical preachers and writers over the years. The bringing of all things together under the headship of Christ (Eph 1.10), the hope of 'a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness

dwells' (2 Pet 3.13) — these are biblical themes in which we rejoice. Yet serious issues arise when the new creation itself becomes the gospel.

Sophisticated versions of this approach sometimes appeal to the resurrection of Christ as the affirmation of creation, allowing advocates to stress the continuity between this creation and the new creation. Insufficient attention is given to the fact that the New Testament explicitly points to the resurrection primarily as the affirmation of the crucified Messiah as Lord of all. This present creation stands under the shadow of the cross. The created order seeks its redemption in the redemption of the sons of God (Rms 8.21) and is yet to go through both destruction (1 Pet 3.10–12) and transformation (Rev 21.1).

Other accounts appropriate the rather inflated view of common grace associated with certain influential figures in early twentieth century Dutch Calvinism (sadly, a century later we cannot help but conclude that the use of the doctrine to energise serious cultural engagement has not been particularly successful in transforming Dutch society in a Christian direction). The enduring value of our cultural achievements is seen as a sign of the grace of the God who 'makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust' (Matt 5.45). Our work in the world is presented, oddly in my view, as the glory John speaks about in Revelation 21.24 — 'By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it ...' The end result is that our hope is redirected from the future to the present, from God's great triumph at the end to what we are able to achieve in this world now.

At the centre of the creation in Genesis 1 is the humanity God has made and the word of blessing he has given to them (Gen 1.27–30). At the centre of the new creation is the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev 22.3, the Lamb earlier spoken of standing 'as though it had been slain' Rev 5.6) and the vast crowd of those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7.9–14). The new creation is indeed a fulfilment of God's plan from the beginning, but as the arena in which those who are made in his image might live as those from whose eyes every tear has been wiped away' as 'death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Rev 21.4). The goal to which all things has been heading is not a new heavens and a new earth, as if these things alone suffice, but the glory given to God by redeemed men and women *in* a new heavens and a new earth. Salvation is the centrepiece at the end as it has been all the way through the Bible.

The gospel of social justice was very popular in the early twentieth century and is currently undergoing a revival in some circles. According to its advocates, the imperatives of the gospel are not simply repent and believe, but the relief of social,

economic and even political inequality. We should be seeking to realise kingdom values now in line with the second petition of the Lord's Prayer.

Undoubtedly much of what is done in the name of the social gospel is good and right and appropriate activity for Christians. It arises quite clearly from the obligation to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22.39). A spirituality that has no regard for physical need is empty and useless (James 2.15). The Pharisees were busy tithing mint and rue and every herb but they neglected justice and the love of God (Lk 11.42). In contrast Jesus, even after just declaring that he had come out in order to preach rather than conduct a healing ministry (Mk 1.38–39), interrupted this priority in order to attend to the concrete physical need of the leper who pleaded 'if you are willing, you can make me clean' (Mk 1.41–42). The love that flows out of the gospel sees the person it addresses as a whole person, with spiritual, physical and emotional needs which each require attention. It also takes into account the impact of larger factors, such as unjust structures or political decisions and seeks to right them. Wilberforce's work for the abolition of the practice of slavery, which finally succeeded after 43 years in 1833, is a model of faithful Christian perseverance in social action.

However, problems arise when the pursuit of social justice is presented as the message of the gospel itself. Once again there is a confusion of content and consequence. As Martin Luther famously put it, freed from the misapprehension that we must do good works in order to gain God's favour, we are able to do good works in order to 'serve and benefit others in all that [we do], considering nothing except the need and the advantage of [our] neighbour' (*The Freedom of a Christian*. LW 31:365). In the wake of the gospel our love can be truly disinterested in the best sense. We serve for our neighbour's sake and not our own. But this is only possible because in the gospel we are freed from the need to justify ourselves since we have been justified in Christ by faith.

The gospel of social justice tends also to confuse life in the interim between Jesus' resurrection and return with life at the end. While love most certainly cannot rest satisfied with a passive acceptance of injustice and cruelty and deprivation, the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord generates hope as we wait for the day when all wrongs are set right, all tyranny overthrown and every tear wiped away. The sufferings of this present age will eventually give way to incomparable glory (Rms 8.18). The kingdom of God is not something we can realise on earth, but something that will come, a gift to be given to us by God himself. It awaits the day when 'every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father' (Phil. 2.10–11). Only at the end will Christ deliver the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power (1 Cor 15.24). Our commitment to act in love, especially towards those who are suffering or vulnerable is right and proper and real.

But the kingdom of God can never be our accomplishment. According to the gospel of the king, it is God's gift at the end.

So what is the gospel as the New Testament presents it?

Let's unpack it in four steps.

1. The gospel is a message.

When Jesus came into Galilee, following his temptation in the wilderness, he came 'proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"' (Mk 1.14–15). The gospel is something that can be proclaimed. It is a message that confronts, challenges, informs and gives hope. It transforms lives and turns the world upside down. But it is a message that is proclaimed before all else. 'This gospel of the kingdom,' Jesus made clear, 'will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come' (Matt 24.14). The Book of Acts describes how this begins as first Peter and John (8.25), then Philip (8.40), and then Paul and Barnabas (14.7) 'preach the gospel'. It is something that is heard (Eph 1.13; Col 1.5; Rms 10.14–17).

This means that the gospel is not something we do but something we first hear and then pass on to others. We cannot take any credit for the gospel or suggest we are superior in any way because we have been given the gospel to take to the ends of the earth.

2. The gospel is God's message.

The letter to the Romans begins with the apostle Paul insisting that as one called to be an apostle he was 'set apart for the gospel of God' (Rms 1.1). It is critical to recognise that this message is not *our* message (Gal 1.11). It is not a human theological construct, the product of our thoughtful reflection upon what God has done in Jesus. It is God's message addressed *to* us. It is his announcement of what he has done and the difference it makes. It has its source in his purposes and his love for the world of human beings lost in sin (Jn 3.16).

This of course means we have no right to tamper with it. We are not at liberty to redefine it for a different age or introduce a 'full gospel' as if the gospel as it was preached by Jesus and then by his apostles was deficient in some way or other. We have no authority to omit part of it for any reason, least of all that we are uncomfortable with it. We have a responsibility to pass on what we have received, undiluted and unaugmented. It is not our message, it is God's message to us.

3. The gospel is God's message concerning his Son.

At the heart of this message from God is what he has to say about his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Rms 1.3). In fact it is often described in the New Testament as 'the gospel of Christ' precisely because it is the gospel concerning Christ (Rms 15.19; 2 Cor 9.3; Gal 1.6; Phil 1.27; 1 Thess 3.2). It is not first and foremost a message concerning the church, though what is said about Jesus Christ has an enormous impact on the church. The church is a creature of the word. It is not first and foremost a message concerning humanity, though necessarily what is said about Jesus enables us to understand ourselves and our future from God's perspective. It is not first and foremost about creation, though the one the gospel presents to us is the same one through whom and for whom all things were made. In him all things hold together (Col 1.16–17). It is about Jesus, about who he is and what he has done. It is not too much to say that you cannot avoid talking about Jesus and still be talking about the gospel. In him all the promises of God are 'yes' (2 Cor 1.20).

This is critical in the current environment when the gospel has become for some a theological cypher, a principle or determining concept rather than a message about a person. Quite a few contemporary articles and books on the gospel are preoccupied with the function of the gospel rather than the content of the gospel. But what the gospel does must flow out of what the gospel is, and at its very heart it is a message from God about God's Son.

4. The gospel is God's message concerning his Son and the salvation he has won for us.

The first mention of 'the gospel' in Paul's letter to the Ephesians speaks of it as 'the gospel of our salvation' (Eph 1.13). Early in Romans Paul wrote 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Rms 1.16). While the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing, to those who are being saved God 'has shone in our hearts to give the light to the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 4.1–6). We cannot and must not leave 'salvation' out of our proclamation of the gospel. The Jesus who is proclaimed in the gospel is both Lord and Saviour. He proclaimed the gospel during his earthly ministry and his disciples proclaimed the gospel after his resurrection, so that people might hear and be saved. 'There is salvation in no one else,' they insisted, 'for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved' (Acts 4.12).

Of course this raises a number of important questions which fill out any faithful explanation of the gospel. Salvation from what? The very idea of salvation implies a danger from which we are saved. What is that danger? Paul makes it crystal clear in two places in particular. To the Greeks at the Areopagus he declared,

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17.30–31)

And to the Thessalonians he could write,

... our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction ... they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess 1.5, 9–10)

The salvation the gospel brings is salvation from the judgment and wrath of God before all else. All other things, social disintegration, ecological catastrophe, political tyranny, economic loss, dashed hopes in so many areas — all other things pale in the light of salvation from the judgment and the holy, justified anger of the living God. We are not simply the passive victims of sinful structures and forces outside of us; we are sinners who are active and responsible for the sins we have committed. The absolutely right and just and pure wrath of God at sin is exactly what we all deserve. Yet because of Jesus and his death and resurrection, those who are his are saved from ‘the wrath to come.’ That is the good news of the gospel. That is the point made so often in the New Testament that we cannot simply avoid it (Mtt 3.7; Jn 3.36; Rms 1.18; 2.5, 8; 3.5; 5.9; Eph 2.3; 5.6; Col 3.6; 1 Thess 1.10; Rev 6.16 etc.). Hearing this message, responding to this message in repentance and faith, brings the forgiveness of sins and the present and future reality of eternal life.

The language of salvation also raises the question, ‘salvation *for* what?’ We have not only been rescued *from* something but *for* something. Once again it is the apostle Paul who helps us answer this question. We have been both ‘delivered from the domain of darkness’ and ‘transferred to the kingdom of his beloved Son’ (Col 1.13). We now live in an entirely new context, where sin and the condemnation of the law do not reign but where instead Christ reigns as Lord (Rms 6.5–14). Yet Jesus’ death and resurrection do more than just make a difference to the context in which we live. This salvation changes the way in which we live: ‘he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised’ (2 Cor 5.15). This too is the good news of the gospel: that we can be forgiven and set free from our former rebellion against God to live a new life under the lordship of Christ.

Just as significant is the question of how this gospel contains the dynamic of both news and summons. The call to repentance and faith is intrinsic to the gospel. From the very first New Testament preaching of the gospel, by Jesus himself, the message of what God

was then about to do, and now has done, included a summons to repentance and faith (Mk 1.14–15). The logic is spelt out in Romans 10. The word is proclaimed, it is heard and believed, and it is confessed — ‘everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved’. ‘So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ’ (Rms 10.10–17). The gospel is not simply a piece of information that can be comfortably integrated with other information we have acquired over the years. It cuts across the fabric of our lives, exposing the danger we are in because of our sin and its inevitable consequence in judgment, and presenting us with the one who is our only hope and the work he has accomplished which can change the future forever. It is a call to turn back and bow before the Christ who has died for our sins, the one who is both a saving Lord and the lordly Saviour.

The gospel is God’s message concerning his Son and the salvation he has won for us. And so we are led to Paul’s summary in 1 Corinthians 15:

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 ...

Not a bad summary of the gospel, that. The long-promised Messiah has come. He died for our sins. Yet he triumphed over death by rising on the third day. This is the heart of it. Of course there is much more to say, though we cannot afford to say less. We could reflect on how crucial was Paul’s observation that his message was ‘in accordance with the Scriptures’. The gospel did not just emerge *ex nihilo* with Jesus’ preaching ministry in Galilee. It has always been in God’s mind, right from the beginning and the promise in the midst of the curse in the Garden (Gen 3.15). We could reflect on how the gospel relates to the idea of God’s kingdom, especially in Matthew’s Gospel, where to speak of ‘the gospel of the kingdom’ was possibly more necessary because of the particular audience he had in mind (and more particularly, their expectations). We could reflect on just how many themes from the Old Testament converge on Jesus and what he has done — the sacrifices, the covenant, the kinsman redeemer, the suffering servant, the last Adam, the Davidic king, and the firstborn of all creation. ‘Messiah’, especially when applied to Jesus, is a very big idea indeed. But while each one of these things will undoubtedly add richness and texture to the picture, none of it should displace the central figure, Jesus, and the central idea, salvation.

In a world confused by a range of different gospels and in the churches where both clarity and boldness are all too often absent, it is good from time to time to ask ourselves this most basic of questions: what is the gospel? We have no business preaching any other gospel than the one given to us by Christ and his apostles.

Sadly, the distorted but popular gospels I mentioned at the beginning all in the end underplay the seriousness of sin and how it relates to salvation. The gospel of inclusion and the gospel of unity both underestimate the Lordship of Jesus and the need to repent of our sin before him. They leave room for us simply to stay as we are or unite as we are, as if sin and error do not really matter before the one who is the risen Lord and righteous judge. The gospel of cosmic renewal and the gospel of social justice, on the other hand, displace the saving death and resurrection of Jesus from the centre and put some of the consequences arising from these events in their place.

In contrast the biblical gospel is God's message concerning his Son and the salvation he has won for us. This is the message that we should present plainly and unaltered, in all its cross-centred glory, to a world so desperately in need. As the Apostle Paul put it:

We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.
(2 Cor 4.2)

[The first edition of this article concluded with a quote from Gal 1.9 and Paul's anathematising of anyone preaching a false gospel. On reflection, quoting this verse may have created the impression that anyone who has expressed something similar to or touching upon a gospel of inclusion or unity or cosmic renewal or social justice was henceforth anathema. This was not at all my intention. Paul opposed Peter in Galatia because Peter was in the wrong on a gospel issue — this did not render Peter immediately cursed!]
