

## What is the Gospel?

The communication of the gospel is commanded by Christ and is the primary function of any missionary organization. Not only is the gospel primary, every aspect of ministry must be related to it.

The gospel is a message which exists only in words. None of our actions are gospel. The gospel does not exist in word and deed, only in word. Our *ministry* ought to be in word and deed, in compliance with all the commands of Christ. But the gospel itself is apart from our actions, for the simple reason that it is the activity of God. The gospel is about the deeds of Christ, not ours.

The law of God is also in words. It involves the entire range of duties required of us. It is what *we* are to do. The gospel deals only with what *God* has done. Note the change of tense: we *do*, but God *has done*. Note the change in essence. The law is what God *requires* of us; the gospel is what God has *provided* for us in a very specific sense. The gospel is that in the past God acted in Christ. In Christ He has brought about reconciliation. God has in Christ's blood the sacrifice that has satisfied Him completely. Because of it, He can forgive us.

God has provided rain and food for all mankind; the kindnesses of His original creation have not been totally removed, yet His curse on man and creation continues, because of man's sin. In the new creation God brings blessing merited by the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christ is the new man from heaven, the replacement of Adam, the new Head of a redeemed people. These very different provisions of God should not be confused. The gospel is limited to salvation, and so belongs entirely to the new creation. The gospel is not old creation food for the hungry; it is new creation salvation for the sinner.

The focal point of the gospel is the cross of Christ. Often we say it is the blood of Christ or the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The basis of the gospel is the action of God in Christ; the message of the gospel is the proclamation of His action and promise of salvation. Many other actions are consistent with the gospel. They are the *fruit* of it. But the gospel itself is: 1) the saving sacrifice of Christ – an event in history past, and 2) the message of the cross – a proclamation that continues.

All of our good works follow Christ being received when we believe the gospel. The root of God's action and fruit of our obedience are the difference of cause and effect. The term "gospel" ought to be reserved for the perfect, complete work of what God has done for us. It should be distinguished from the incomplete work (so far) that He is doing in us and through us.

Though the gospel is confined to God's message and action in the Mediator He has sent, it still has many aspects. It is the act in which Christ offered His body as a priestly

sacrifice. As our Substitute, He took our guilt on the cross, and our sin is forgiven immediately upon faith in Christ. When His work in us is completed, God will have removed all sin from our conduct.

God has punished our sins in Christ and is satisfied with the offering He provided, thus His wrath against us has been removed entirely. God requires nothing in addition to what Christ has done. On the cross Jesus experienced hell for us; none is left for the believer in any form. With sin fully purged, salvation continues in us as the Lord applies the work of Christ to the believer's conduct, and at the Second Coming to the believer's physical resurrection.

Since we are united to Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, we no longer live under the domination of sin or the devil. Christ has defeated Satan in His death and resurrection. A fitting summary is:

“The *expiation* of their sins through the obedient *sacrifice of himself* in their stead, the *satisfying* of divine justice and thereby the *propitiation* of divine wrath respecting them, the removal of the divine alienation toward them (*reconciliation*), their *redemption* from the curse of the law and the power and fruitlessness of sin, and the *destruction of the kingdom of evil* which held them as captives and slaves – these are the accomplishments of Christ's cross work in behalf of all those for whom he died...” From Chapter 17 of A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith, Robert L. Reymond (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, © 1998)

Justification is the key doctrine which, when truly embraced, determines whether we will preserve any trust in ourselves or rest only in Christ for salvation. Understanding justification is necessary for presenting the gospel of grace clearly. In justification, God declares a sinner to be righteous when he trusts in Christ. When God calls a sinner righteous, His judgment includes that all his sins are have been forgiven, and that genuine righteousness approved by God has become the possession of the believer. This righteousness is the full human obedience of Christ under the law. Adam represented his children, and Christ represented His own in His sacrificial death. He also represented us in His obedient conduct. Thus the righteousness of our justification is not produced in us, but has been produced in Christ's life, and is imputed to us when we believe. The righteousness God has in mind when He justifies is only Christ's, and the bloodshed He accepted for us is also only Christ's. We are justified by a receptive faith when we lay hold of what Christ has done and never in what we do, including the obedience the Holy Spirit produces in us as believers.

All God's benefits come to us through the cross. The gospel of grace is the new covenant where He gives what we need (forgiveness), and what He requires of us He produces in us. It is God Who gives His Spirit to all in Christ and writes His laws on our hearts. Thus we are utterly dependant on God our Savior for every aspect of our salvation; He alone saves sinners. The glory is God's. Christ has died and risen again, that will never be repeated, so now the gospel is simply the message of Christ.