What Is The Gospel II

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In a previous post, we asked "What is the Gospel?" and answered that question by looking at an early creed contained in I Cor. 15:1-8. And in a second post we asked, "What is the Response called for by the Gospel?" But there is much more that we can learn about the shape of the Gospel from the further revelation of the canon of Scripture. How does the NT conceive of the Gospel? What message did the early church preach? We can answer In several different ways.

The Gospel as Seen through the Eyes of the Early Church

The Gospel is a Person we Introduce

Evangelism at its core is simply introducing someone to the loving Person of Jesus by sharing some basic historical facts about Him. Those “facts” are what we know as the gospel message. The NT everywhere understands evangelism to be the sharing of a Person, Jesus. Thus, the gospel can be equated with his Person. Preaching the gospel is preaching Christ; He Himself is always the content of the proclamation. Note the following passages where this becomes clear;

- Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. (Acts 8:35 KJV)
- Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. (Acts 8:5 ESV)
- And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." (Acts

9:20 ESV)

- Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." (Acts 19:13 ESV)
- Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? (1 Cor. 15:12 ESV)
- For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. (2 Cor. 1:19 ESV)
- For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. (2 Cor. 4:5 KJV)
- Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16 ESV)
- The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mk. 1:1 ESV)
- For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. (Mk. 8:35 ESV)
- Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, (Mk. 10:29 ESV)
- When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, (2 Cor. 2:12 ESV C.f. I Cor. 9:13; II Cor. 10:14)
- But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; (1 Cor. 1:23 KJV)
- Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. (Phil. 1:15 ESV)
- And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. (Acts 5:42 KJV)
- But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18 ESV)preaching the Lord Jesus. (Acts 11:20 ESV)
- Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages (Rom. 16:25 ESV)

Michael Green, in his marvelous study of evangelism in the early church, sums up well what it was that the early church preached,

"So we find them spreading the good news that Jesus is Messiah, or that through him the ancient promises have been fulfilled. We find them proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus, of the Lordship of Jesus, of the cross of Jesus, of the resurrection of Jesus, or simply of Jesus himself. Nothing more was needed. For however expressed, whether as the Messiah of Old Testament expectation, as Lord over the demonic powers or whatever other category of interpretation was employed, the early preachers of the good news had one subject and one only, Jesus. This was their supreme concern. This was their 'word' which they broadcast so assiduously."
(Michael Green, Evangelism In The Early Church)

The early church Father Origen of Alexandria explained the essence of the Gospel as being the person of Christ as well. He wrote,

"But our whole energy is now to be directed to the effort to penetrate to the deep things of the meaning of the Gospel and to search out the truth that is in it when divested of types. Now what the Gospels say is to be regarded in the light of promises of good things; and we must say that the good things the Apostles announce in this Gospel are simply Jesus. One good thing which they are said to announce is the

resurrection; but the resurrection is in a manner Jesus, for Jesus says: 'I am the resurrection'... Let no one wonder if we have understood Jesus to be announced in the Gospel under a plurality of names of good things. If we look at the things by the names of which the Son of God is called, we shall understand how many good things Jesus is, whom those preach whose feet are beautiful. One good thing is life; but Jesus is the life. Another good thing is the light of the world, when it is true light, and the light of men; and all these things the Son of God is said to be."

After his stunningly comprehensive examination of the Early Christian Mission, Eckhard Schnabel summarizes their preaching of Christ,

"The early Christian missionaries proclaimed a message with Jesus at its center – his person, his life and ministry in Galilee and in Jerusalem, his messianic dignity, his prophetic teaching, his death and resurrection, his exaltation at God's right hand as Kyrios, his gift of the Holy Spirit, his return as judge."

"It all comes down to one thing: our message is a person. We proclaim a person, not a dogma, a rule, or even a religion. Our message is a conversation that has an individual at its core. We are talking about Jesus. We are praising Jesus. We are introducing people to Jesus."
(Rick Holland, Christ The Savior: Evangelism as a Person, Not a Plan, in "Evangelism: How to Share the Gospel Faithfully.")

The Gospel is a Story We Tell

Beyond the realization that the early Christians understood "The Gospel" to be essentially a *Person*, that is the Person of Christ, we can learn much also from looking at the verbs the NT authors use to describe the process of spreading the gospel. First among these is the word "proclamation." The gospel is a story, which we proclaim as heralds, which tells about a Person. That Person is Jesus. Proclaiming that story gives opportunity to those alienated from God to "meet" that Person and come into relationship with Him. We share what He did in the Cross and Resurrection, so that they may see who He is. This story, with its plot turns, is a message about a Person. Thus the NT often pictures evangelism as proclaiming a *message*.

The Message we Proclaim = κήρυγμα (Kerygma), "A public declaration, something proclaimed aloud, proclamation, by a herald sent by God" (BDAG 2). The message we proclaim as heralds is the story about Jesus (Rom. 16:25; I Cor. 1:21; 2:4; 15:14; 2 Tim. 4:17; Tit. 1:3).

The Gospel is an Announcement We Make

The Gospel is also an *announcement of good news that we make* as Heralds. There are two senses in which this comes into focus. First, a herald would announce the "good news" that a new emperor had come to the throne. The good news was the announcement of this new reign. But to Jesus in the NT, and the Jews to whom he preached, and to whom the Apostles continued to preach after his ascension, this word had a second and more important element. The Jews had gone into exile under Babylon, and that exile had never fully ended. Yet Isaiah had prophesied (Is. 40-53, 61-62) that one day the age of God's rule would come. A Messenger would announce the coming of this Kingdom, when God Himself would come to the throne and reign as King. When the time of God's Reign (The Kingdom of God) came, exile, captivity, and injustice, would be over. This would be signaled by the release of captives, the healing of blind, lame, and deaf, and various other acts of power. Jesus picked up this language and claimed in his ministry that the Kingdom had come in Him. (Luke 4, Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:23-25). A delightful presentation of this understanding of the gospel is seen in the video here.

The Gospel = εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion), "God's good news to humans, good news as proclamation" (BDAG1). But it is always found with the article, that is, not just any, "good news," but rather, "THE good news." The gospel has very specific content; a very specific shape. As heralds, our position is simply that of the one who makes the announcement that the Kingdom has come in Jesus as King, Crucified and Risen.

Sometimes the content of this announcement is pointed to more specifically (The Gospel of the Kingdom – Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mar; 1:14; The Gospel of the Lord Jesus – II Thess. 1:8; The Gospel of Christ – Rom. 1:16; 15:19, 29; I Cor. 9:12, 18; etc.).

The Gospel is a Testimony we Give

Perhaps the most important verb used in the NT to explain Evangelism is the word, "Witness." The gospel as a Person and as story and as a message we share is related to the fact that it happened in history, and the Apostles saw it happen as eyewitnesses. They thus bore witness to the story they saw unfold before their eyes. In fact, "bearing witness" (marturomia) became such a technical term for sharing the gospel, that it came to describe those who bore witness even at the cost of life, whom came to be described as "martyrs" or "witnesses."

To share to Gospel is "To Witness" = μαρτυρέω (martureo), "to confirm or attest something on the basis of personal knowledge or belief, bear witness, be a witness" (BDAG). Jesus commissioned the disciples as witnesses (John 15:27; Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8, 22) and this is the primary way they conceived of their evangelistic ministry (Acts 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 26:16; 13:31; 22:15; I Pet. 5:1). Today, we share their witness of what they saw, but we also witness of how that same God has appeared in our own lives. Thus, sharing our own "testimony" of how God has redeemed us, is an inherent part of "witness" to the gospel. One of the easiest ways to present the gospel is less focused on any "method" and more focused on simply using our own story to tell *his* story.

The Content of the Gospel

Does the Gospel about Jesus have a specific shape or some specific, definable, identifiable content? This is a much debated question in some critical scholarship. But to anyone who takes the NT seriously as Christian revelation, the answer is a decided yes. The gospel does have a definitive shape.

Three Implied Elements Of The Gospel

These three elements are not usually listed or mentioned in the New Testament when the gospel is defined, but because of the worldview of the audiences to whom the passages are written, they can be assumed. Even apart from that assumption, these elements can be found inherent within the three essential elements of the gospel. Like installing a "ZIP" file on your computer, they can be "extracted" from the other 3 elements.

1. There is a loving God who pursues me (there is no such things as an atheist Christian)

Obviously, if the gospel declares that Jesus is the God-man, there is no room for someone to accept the gospel, but then say that they don't believe that God exist. The fact that Jesus was raised from the dead powerfully declares that we do not live in a naturalistic world. The resurrection of Christ was a supernatural event that could only take place because there is a God who loves us. And even further, the atoning death of Christ in our place ends up demanding belief in the Incarnation itself.

"If the essence of the atonement is substitution... the theological inference is that it is impossible to hold the historic doctrine of the cross without holding the historic doctrine of Jesus Christ as the one and only God-man and Mediator. As we have seen, neither Christ alone as man nor the Father alone as God could be out substitute. Only God in Christ, God the Father's own and only Son made man, could take out place. At the root of every caricature of the cross their lies a distorted Christology. The person and work of Christ belong together. If he was not who the apostles say he was, then he could not have done what they say he did. The incarnation is indispensible to the atonement."

(John Stott, The Cross Of Christ, Pg. 158-159)

The fact that the God-man died in our place shows that this God is intent on providing for our own redemption. He has come to earth as man to pursue us in love to redeem us to himself.

2. I am a sinner

If the gospel declares that Jesus died "for our sins," then obviously, we can't deny that we are sinners. If we were not sinners, or if there were any way we could save ourselves, or atone for ourselves, then Jesus would not have had to die. The fact that he did shows that there is no other way.

3. I deserve to be judged for my sin – my sin must be dealt with

Again, the historical fact that Jesus died in our place presupposes that as sinners, we were already condemned to die. It forces us to take our sin seriously, and to realize the gravity of its heinousness. Perhaps the most important query to ask is – If my sin didn't condemn me, why would Jesus have to die?

> *"The doctrine of substitution affirms not only a fact (God in Christ substituted himself for us) but its necessity (there was no other way by which God's holy love could be satisfied and rebellious human being could be saved). Therefore, as we stand before the cross, we begin to gain a clearer view both of God and ourselves, especially in relation to each other. Instead of inflicting on us the judgment we deserved, God in Christ endured it in our place. Hell is the only alternative. This is the 'scandal,' the stumbling block, of the cross. For our proud hearts rebell against it. We cannot bear to acknowledge either the seriousness of our sin and guilt or our utter indebtedness to the cross. Surely, we say, there must be something we can do, or at least contribute, in order to make amends? If not, we often give the impression that we would rather suffer our own punishment than the humiliation of seeing God through Christ bear it in our place."*
> *(John Stott, The Cross Of Christ, pg. 159).*

Three Essential elements of the Gospel

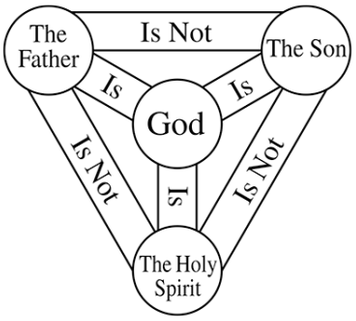
There are three historic elements that must be shared every single time that the Gospel is presented. If one of these elements is left out, the gospel shared is deficient. Many other aspects can be shared as well. The gospel is a broad story that contains many chapters; a tapestry with numerous threads woven through it. But it is at its core a series of historical events, chapters in the story of God, and while we can and should often share the fuller story, we dare not ever skip over the essential turning points in its plot. We can certainly share more; we dare not ever share less.

1. The Full Deity of Jesus (or the "Kingship" or "Messiahship" of Jesus or "The Incarnation")

Someone probably doesn't need to understand all the details and implications of what it means that Jesus is God to be saved (frankly, I don't think anyone fully understands how Jesus can be God and the Father can be God, but they are not the same - We call that the "Trinity" and it confuses even the best of minds!), or even what it means that Jesus is very God and very man. But they do need to know and be willing to confess that Jesus is God. The confession, "Jesus is Lord" (where "Lord" was the word used in their translation of the OT for Yahweh) was in fact the earliest Christian creed, which the convert would confess at their Baptism (Rom. 10:9-10; Phil. 2:9-11; C.f. Matt. 16:16; John 20:28; I Tim. 3:16). This confession is that in Jesus, God himself has come in human flesh. There are some groups (like the Jehovah's witnesses) that will say Jesus is a god, (or god-like) but not the God. There are some religions, like Islam, that find the notion of God having a Son repugnant. This is largely because they misunderstand the nature of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Bible does not teach that Jesus is the product of a sexual union between God and Mary. Some have assumed this to be implied in the Virgin Birth, but this misunderstands the nature of the Virgin Birth. Jesus is eternally the Son of God. The Gospel message is that Jesus is not part God, one of many gods, or sort of god-like but fully God –the very monotheistic God of Israel in human flesh. In the gospels themselves, Jesus makes this point subtly, and in a way that grows more clear in the final weeks of his ministry, often pointing to His role as Judge, Messiah, the King to sit on David's throne, the Son of Man in Daniel's Vision, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the Seed of Abraham, etc.. In the way the evangelists tell the story of the incarnation, this comes to the fore more (like John 1:1; Mark 1:1-2), and it comes to its clearest expression in the apostolic preaching in Acts and the letters of Paul. In Jesus, God Himself has come in human flesh. Jesus is the God-man. The best work explaining this truth and equipping you to present it and defend it is, Putting Jesus in His Place by Rob Bowman and Ed Komyscinski.

This concept of the "deity" or "God-hood" of Jesus, and the doctrine of the Trinity which it culminates in, can be easily misunderstood. The Doctrine of the Trinity does NOT teach that there are three gods. Christianity is NOT polytheistic. Christianity is, like Judaism before it, fundamentally monotheistic. There is only ONE God. What we call the Trinity is simply the combination of three great truths taught in Scripture, and progressively experienced by the Apostles.

1. There is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4)
2. The Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God
3. The Father, Jesus, and the Spirit, are not each other



Thus, there is only one God; one essence. But in the God-head there are three Divine Persons who all share in that one essence. One essence; three Persons.This can be graphically shown in what we call "The Shield/Symbol of the Trinity."

2. The Atoning Death of Jesus in our place

This is probably the most commonly misunderstood element of the gospel message. There are a variety of theories about how Jesus atoned for our sins. For example;

- Ransom to Satan theory (Jesus had to die to pay a ransom to Satan, in whose kingdom we were in bondage)
- Moral influence theory (Christ death was simply a way God showed his love for and identification with us even in our sufferings and death)
- Recapitulation theory (Jesus had to live a perfect life for us since we couldn't)
- Example theory (Jesus died as an example for us of how to be good by sacrificing for others)
- Governmental theory (the law had been broken and God chose to demonstrate in Christ death that there is some penalty for law-breaking)
- Penal Substitution Theory (Jesus as the Son of God died in our place to satiate the wrath of a just, holy, loving, and merciful Father)

We believe, (and I think the Bible makes clear) that Jesus atoned for our sins by dying as our *substitute*. He literally died *in our place*, in an act of vicarious atonement, in order to pay the sin-debt that was owed to the Father because of our sins. There are elements of truth in each of the other views as well (especially in the recapitulation theory), but it is substitutionary atonement that we want most to present, and in which the gospel finds its most fruitful expression. One of the best works to date to present and dig into this truth is the Classic by John Stott, The Cross of Christ. It will change your life if you read it.

> *"He placed himself in our room, and thus became a sinner, and subject to the curse, not in himself indeed, but in us, yet in such a manner, that it became necessary for him to occupy our place. He could not cease to be the object of his Father's love, and yet he endured his wrath. For how could he reconcile the Father to us, if he had incurred his hatred and displeasure? Again, how would he have freed us from the wrath of God, if he had not transferred it from us to himself? Thus, 'he was wounded for our transgressions,' (Isaiah 53:5,) and had to deal with God as an angry judge. This is the foolishness of the cross, (1 Corinthians 1:18) and the admiration of angels, (1 Peter 1:12,) which not only exceeds, but swallows up, all the wisdom of the world."*
> (John Calvin, *Commentary On The Twelve Minor Prophets,* as quoted by Ascol in "Calvin and the Atonement.")

> *"For in giving his Son he was giving himself. This being so, it is the Judge himself who in love assumed the role of the innocent victim, for in and through the person of his Son he himself bore the penalty that he himself inflicted. As Dale put it, 'the mysterious unity of the Father and the Son rendered it possible for God at once to endure and to inflict penal suffering.' There is neither harsh injustice nor unprincipled love nor Christological heresy in that; there is only unfathomable mercy. For in order save us in such a way as to satisfy himself, God through Christ substituted himself for us. Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice. The cross was an act simultaneously of punishment and amnesty, severity and grace, justice and mercy... the righteous, loving Father humbled himself to become in and through his only Son flesh, sin and a curse for us, in order to redeem us without compromising his own character. The theological words satisfaction and substitution need to be carefully defined and safeguarded, but they cannot in any circumstances be given up. The biblical gospel of atonement is of God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us."*
> *(John Stott, The Cross Of Christ)*

3. The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus

The final essential of the gospel is that Jesus did not stay dead, but was bodily raised from the grave after three days, and seen by many witnesses. It wasn't just a "spirit" or a ghost that appeared to the disciples, it was the very resurrected body of Jesus. Thomas could even touch the wounds in his hands, and he could eat a meal of fish. He was bodily resurrected. This is the power of the gospel. This is what vindicates Christ's claims to be God. This is what proves that there is a God and that he loves us. It is all wrapped up in the miracle of the resurrection. A great work equipping you to present and defend this element is Gary Habermas and Mike Licona, The Case for the Resurrection. Because this truth is the center of the Christian faith, you may wish to dig deeper in your understanding of its implications. One of the best (and very hefty) works to date to help you do so is, The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N.T. Wright.

The bodily Resurrection of Jesus is the absolutely central tenant of the Christian Faith.

The essential nature of the Apostleship was that of witness to the resurrection in history. We might think of them as preachers of Scripture (and eventually, writers of Scripture). And this they surely were. But it wasn't their primary function. Their primary qualification was that they had to have seen the gospel happen. The gospel is the story of how Jesus of Nazareth declared himself to be King of the promised Kingdom, demonstrated that this Kingdom had come in his preaching and mighty deeds, who ruled not by force, but by dying an atoning death for sin, and then who conquered sin, death, and the grave, by rising bodily from the grave. Thus, if one was to be an Apostle, the qualification wasn't, "sign our statement of faith about every detail of bibliology and cosmology. Agree on every point of soteriology. Have exactly the same understanding of the role of circumcision, the place of the Jews, the offer to the Gentiles, etc." There would in fact be a great deal of debate about these issues, as they were being worked out (see Acts 10, 15, Gal. 1-2, etc.), and at times Peter, James, and Paul would find themselves taking different positions on such things (at which point Paul would point back to the thing that grounded them – the gospel). Rather, to be an Apostle, what one had to be was a witness to the gospel. One who had been with the Lord in his ministry, and, more importantly, seen him alive after his death (Paul didn't witness the ministry of Jesus, but explained in I Cor. 9 that he had seen the Risen Jesus, and been commissioned by him, and this was the essential qualification). Thus, when the disciples sought to appoint a replacement for Judas, they explained, that they could only choose (or seek who God had chosen) from the company of men who had seen these things happen. What were they being chosen to be? "A witness with us of his resurrection. (Acts 1:20 KJV)."

This explanation of gospel ministry as "Witness" to the resurrection is the most common description of the evangelism to which we are called. Jesus commissioned the disciples as witnesses, "And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. (Jn. 15:27 KJV)," "And ye are witnesses of these things. (Lk. 24:48 KJV)," and, in the famous Great Commission, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8 KJV)," and this is the primary way they conceived of their evangelistic ministry (Acts 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 26:16; 13:31; 22:15; I Pet. 5:1).

When Luke summarized the preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem, what was the content of their preaching? "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33 KJV)." Of course in Jewish contexts, like synagogues and temples, they usually began with the Hebrew Bible (it would be silly not to work already with what revelation is accepted, just as Jesus, when taking with the Samaritan woman at the well who only accepted the Pentateuch, didn't try to convince her of The Writings being inspired – he worked from what she accepted (which included Deut. 18) and pointed to himself, the Person of the Gospel). In context where there wasn't an acceptance of the Hebrew Bible, they built from the revelation in Creation, and jumped right from there to, you guessed it, the Resurrection. Paul's preaching in pagan Athens is a great example. In the synagogue, surely he was using the Hebrew Bible as normal (17:17), clearly pointing to the resurrected Christ. But as he began to converse with those who didn't accept the Hebrew scriptures, what did he preach, "he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18 KJV)." In fact, Luke give us the low-down on his speech (Acts 17:22-31). Not a single mention of a single text of Scripture (though surely, as always, the theology Paul preached is in line with the Scriptures). But what was he driving at? What conclusion was he preaching towards? And how did he ground this message, and claim that it was vindicated by God? Because the Bible told them so? Not quite. Just read the conclusion of his sermon, "Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:31 KJV)." Jesus love you, this you know. And this you've been assured of. In fact, this all men have been assured of. How? "in that he hath raised him from the dead." When Paul explained his preaching ministry to Agrippa, he naturaly presents it as the fulfillment of prophecy. But what is the ultimate message Paul preached? "That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:23 KJV)."

When Paul wrote to the Romans, in what did he believe their faith to be grounded? Certainly, they've been steeped in the Jewish Scriptures, and so he quotes and appeals to them often. But where do we find the definitive declaration that Jesus is God? Not in the Bible. In the Resurrection. "And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: (Rom. 1:4 KJV)." In Paul's personal desire to conform to Christ, he sought to conform to his death, and, you guessed it, his resurrection. "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; (Phil. 3:10 KJV)." How did Peter think he had been born again? By the Gospel of course. The gospel that declared what? You guessed it. The resurrection. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...(1 Pet. 1:3 KJV)." What did Jesus explain concerning himself? That he would die and rise again, and that this would vindicate him as God's Son ("And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; Luke 18:33; 24:7; KJV)" When would powerful proclamation of the gospel be appropriate for those whom jesus had showed himself to? After the resurrection "And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead. (Mk. 9:9 KJV)." When Jesus after his passion and resurrection explained the new way they were to read scripture, he explained that it all pointed to him, and his resurrection (not meaning there were specific predictions of his resurrection in the OT; but rather that the Resurrection is the fulfillment of everything God has always been doing with Israel, which they would come to understand meant that the broad themes of the OT pointed to his resurrection, John 20:9, etc.), "And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: (Lk. 24:46 KJV)." What did Peter preach at Pentecost, this Jesus "Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. (Acts 2:24 KJV)" and to what did he witness, "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. (Acts 2:32 KJV)." When Peter spoke before the crowd that gathered after the healing, what did he preach, and to what did he bear witness as its vindication? God had glorified his son, who they killed, "whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. (Acts 3:15 KJV)." How can we know God kept his promise to the patriarchs and declared Jesus the Son of God? "God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee. (Acts 13:33 KJV)." When Paul entered Thessalonica, since it was a Jewish synagogue there, he naturally began in the Jewish Scriptures. And what did he seek to prove? "Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. (Acts 17:3 KJV)." In what did Paul ground the belief that we could look beyond this life to a future one? "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. (1

believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. (1 Thess. 4:14 KJV)." The Resurrection of Jesus is the core event of the gospel, and center of Christian theology and practice.

> *"For the writers of the New Testament, Jesus' resurrection was the focal point of their teaching. Peter wrote that we have in indestructible inheritance awaiting us in heaven, made available, 'through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.' Paul wrote that belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead is required for eternal life. In fact, Paul was so adamant about the importance of Jesus' resurrection that he wrote, 'And if Christ be not raised, your faith is worthless; you are still under condemnation for your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished!' For Paul, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity is false, we will be judged for our sins by the true God, and Christians who have died are lost. In addition, Paul writes a few verses later, 'If the dead are not raised, 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' In other words, if Jesus' resurrection did not occur, we may as well live it up, because this life is all there is."*
> *(Gary Habermas, The Case For The Resurrection Of Jesus, pg. 26)*

> *"The Ramifications of Jesus' resurrection go beyond the realm of the theological into the practical. When God seems silent and far away, Jesus' resurrection encourages us. Although we may not understand why God is being silent for the moment, we can have the assurance given in his Word that he loves us and knows our situation. We can know that our sufferings are temporary, since we have in indestructible inheritance in heaven. We can know this because if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is not just a nice story like Santa Clause; Christianity is true."*
> *(Gary Habermas, The Case For The Resurrection Of Jesus, pg. 28-29)*

> *"The Resurrection, in other words, declares that Jesus really is God's Son: not only in the sense that he is the messiah, though Paul certainly intends that here, not only in the sense that he is the world's true lord, though Paul intends that too, but also in the sense that he is the one in whom the living God, Israel's God, has become personally present in the world, has become one of the human creatures that were made from the beginning in the image of this same God."*
> *(N.T. Wright, explaining Rom. 1:3-4, The Resurrection of the Son of God, pg. 733)*

> *"The point is that one cannot say, 'Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead' [with minimal involvement, since it is a self-involving truth.]... If it happened, it matters. The world is a different place from what it would be if it did not happen. The person who makes the statement is committed to living in this different world, this newly envisioned universe of discourse, imagination and action."*
> *(N. T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, pg. 714.)*

In sum, the Gospel message has three elements. The *full Deity*, *atoning death*, and *bodily resurrection* of Jesus Christ. *Deity, Death, Resurrection*. This is the historical shape of the gospel message. These three historic events (incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection) are the three crucial turning points in God's story of redemption. Jesus died on the cross for our sins, was raised from the grave bodily, and as a result must be seen to be God visiting earth in human flesh. The gospel is a story that is based on these three historical turning points – Incarnation (the deity of Jesus), Crucifixion, and Resurrection. These elements can often be seen when the gospel is defined in Scripture;

Romans 1:2-4

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, 2 (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) 3 Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; 4 And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead..."

Romans 10:9-10

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

The Gospel According To Paul And Early Christian Tradition (I Cor. 15:1-11)

Perhaps no passage in Scripture is more clear in defining the gospel than I Cor. 15:1-5.

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:

1. that Christ died for our sins (the historical event)
    1a. in accordance with the Scriptures, (as a fulfillment of God at work in Israel's story)
        1b. that he was buried, (the proof that it actually happened)
2. that he was raised on the third day (the historical event)
    2a. in accordance with the Scriptures, (as a fulfillment of God at work in Israel's story)
        2b. that he appeared... (the proof that it actually happened)"

Note the basic structure, repeated twice;
1. Statement of historical event
1a. Claim that event was the culmination of Israel's story in the Hebrew Bible
1b. Proof that validates historical event

This is in fact likely an early creed that quite predates Paul's own conversion, showing us what Christians believed and preached about the gospel even before the formulations of Paul, and what Paul continued to teach and preach. It highlights the fact that the early Christians saw the gospel as consisting of two historical events, which both serve as the culmination of Israel's story, and both declare Jesus to be the Christ;

1. *Jesus of Nazareth died a sin-atoning death,*
2. J*esus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead,*
3. *Both of these events happened as the climax of the story of Israel told in the Hebrew Bible,*
4. *Both of these events (especially the resurrection) declare Jesus to be the promised Christ.*

Note the, "according to the scripture." The only other use of the phrase is in James 2:8 where he shows the "climax of the law" in the command to "love your neighbor as yourself." James' point there is not "just as the Bible promised" but rather, "as the commands of the Bible find there climax in this command." It's not like a typical fulfillment formula. Likewise here, Paul and the tradition see the "climax of the story of Israel" in the Christ-event. The point of the phrase in this text isn't so much, "Just as the Bible promised" (though some have looked long and hard for an OT passage that promises Jesus would be buried three days and rise again!), but rather, "as the climax of everything the Bible says." Thus, Paul declares this Jesus to be the promised one who fulfills that Bible and finished that story (this is why Paul begins with "Christ" not "Jesus." Christ is not a name - it is a title. Jesus is "The messiah," the promised King). Jesus is the promised King, and his resurrection has proven him to be this King.

Both of these events have historical validation. We know Jesus was truly dead (and hadn't simply fainted), because "he was buried." And we know Jesus was truly raised alive (and isn't simply a "whisper in the heart" or a ghost), because "he was seen" (by Peter, then the 12, then 500, then James, then all the apostles, then finally and lastly, Paul). That is the gospel, plain and simple. Two historical facts about what a Person did, followed by one theological deduction from those facts about who that Person is. The gospel is a story about what a Person did in history that reveals who this Person has always been. The Gospel is a story about what Jesus has done for us that proves he is who he said he was.
Note also that Paul claims this is the gospel as it has always been preached, "the gospel I preached to you...the word I preached to you...I delivered unto you, " the gospel which has power to save, "by which you are being saved," and the gospel which has power to sanctify, "in which you stand," and is the most important truth he could proclaim, "as of first importance" (I Cor. 15:1-2).

2 Tim. 2:8-9
"Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel: 9 Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound."

The Gospel as seen in The Sermons in Acts

We can see these three core elements of the gospel, especially as historical events, highlighted in the Christian evangelistic proclamation of the early church in Acts. Note that in each of the sermons presented in Acts, while different things are emphasized based on the need of the audience, the three basic elements of the gospel that we have outlined above are emphasized. The death and resurrection of Jesus are asserted, and the theological conclusion is drawn from the Resurrection that Jesus is the promised King/Judge/Son of God. Notice the elements highlighted in snippets from the sermons here;

He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. 32 This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. 33 Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. 34 For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, 35 Until I make thy foes thy footstool. 36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.
(Acts 2:31-36 KJV)

The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. 14 But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; 15 And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.
(Acts 3:13-15 KJV)

Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. 11 This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. 12 Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.
(Acts 4:10-12 KJV)

The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. 31 Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.
(Acts 5:30-31 KJV)

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: 35 But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. 36 The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all:) 37 That word, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judaea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; 38 How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. 39 And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and

hanged on a tree: 40 Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; 41 Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead. 42 And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. 43 To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.
(Acts 10:34-43 KJV)

And though they found no cause of death in him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain. 29 And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulcher. 30 But God raised him from the dead: 31 And he was seen many days of them which came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are his witnesses unto the people. 32 And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, 33 God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.
(Acts 13:28-33 KJV)

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: 2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, 3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.
(Acts 17:1-3 KJV)

Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.
(Acts 17:31 KJV)

After the NT era, we see the same message preached as the gospel by the early church. Ignatius, one of the earliest of Church Fathers, explained the content of the Gospel as follows,

> *"For I heard some people say, 'if I do not find it in the archives, I do not believe it in the gospel.' And when I said to them, 'It is written,' they answered me, 'That is precisely the question.' But for me, the 'archives' are Jesus Christ, the unalterable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith that comes through him; by these things I want, through your prayers, to be justified."*
> *(Ignatius, Epistle to the Philadelphians, 8:2. Translation by Holmes. Written sometime prior to 117 AD, as he was on route to Rome to be martyred for his faith in this Christ.)*

Michael Green notes,

"But the historicity of Jesus, the continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the reality of the atonement, assurance about the physical resurrection – these constituted the bedrock on which [the early church] built their evangelism. Where evangelism is strong in the modern world there is a similarly robust emphasis on the historical truths of the incarnation, atonement and resurrection. There is room, of course, for much theological debate about Christian doctrine, but any presentation of the gospel which fails to do justice to these three central events is not likely to get far."
(Michael Green, Evangelism In The Early Church)

Likewise, the Church of which I am proudly a part, highlights the same elements as essential to Gospel proclamation.

"We believe that the gospel is the good news of what God has accomplished for sinners through the life,

death, and resurrection of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. The gospel is centered in Christ and is not proclaimed if his death and resurrection are not the focus of our message. The church is responsible for the declaration of this good news and the defense of it against all who would seek to distort or re-define its core truths. The gospel is the foundation for the life of the Church and our only hope for eternal life. The Gospel is not only the means by which people are saved, but also the means by which people are sanctified. The truth of the Gospel enables us to genuinely and joyfully do that which is pleasing to God and to grow in progressive conformity to the image of Christ."
(Bridgeway Statement of Faith)

If we will simply share the gospel message, it will brew in a person's heart and allow the Holy Spirit to do his convicting work. The gospel has a power greater than we can imagine. This story that tells of the person of Jesus changes hearts and lives. Even if we don't see immediate results, the gospel festers in the heart that hears it.

For example, an old man long ago shared the gospel with a philosopher named Justin Martyr, and Justin described how the gospel just wouldn't let him go;

"When he had spoken these and many other things, which there is no time for mentioning at present, he went away, bidding me attend to them; and I have not seen him since. But straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me; and while revolving his words in my heart, I found [Christianity] alone to be safe and profitable. Become acquainted with the Christ of God..."

Justin came to Christ, and was used as an evangelist (and is known as the first of "The Apologists") to bring may others to Christ. The gospel shared never ceased to work in his heart once proclaimed to it. And so it will always be.

The gospel will do its work if we will simply share it with clarity and boldness.

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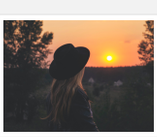

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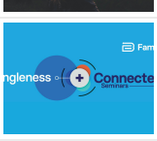

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