



## What Is The Gospel?

Timothy Berg

Like 0

Tuesday, February 28, 2017

Ok. Let's be honest. You probably think the answer to the question in the title is a simple one. Of course you know what the Gospel is! Most believers who follow Christ have some idea of the shape of the Gospel, and many are convinced there is nothing more they could learn about the Gospel. You already know all there is to learn. The Gospel is simple, right? The Gospel is to the Christian life sort of like baby steps are to walking, isn't it? Actually, the Gospel is far deeper than we could ever fathom, and far simpler than we usually grasp. It isn't the baby steps - it's the whole walk.

### Misconceptions About The Gospel

The truth is, misconceptions about the Gospel. Some of the biggest misconceptions relate to the question - "What is it?" What is the Gospel? I've learned that if you ask 10 strong believers to write out an answer to that question on a 3x5 index card, you will get at least 10 very different answers. Why? Why can something so simple seem at times so hard to define? There are several reasons, which we will take up in a later blog. But first I want to sketch out the basic shape of the Gospel.

#### *The Gospel According To Paul And Early Christian Tradition*

(I Corinthians 15:1-11)

Many Christians who are asked to define the Gospel would turn immediately to I Corinthians 15:1-11, and pronounce that the Gospel is "The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus." I've heard this summary hundreds of times. In one sense it's not a bad answer. At the least, it has turned to the text most immediately relevant to the question. But are "death burial and resurrection" the three elements of the Gospel? Is that what the text says? Is that what Paul taught? I'd suggest that if you say yes, you haven't looked very closely at this text, or at most of the rest of the NT and the early apostolic preaching. Surely Paul gives a summary of the Gospel here, and perhaps no passage in Scripture is more clear in defining the Gospel than this one. But we must be careful with the text to hear in it only what the Spirit intends to say (and all that He intends to say!). So let's take a look. I'll break the text down structurally first so that you can see its shape. (For my KJV readers, note a few minor translational differences - where the KJV leaves the ambiguous "first of all" which could mean first in chronology or importance, the ESV has clarified that Paul means "first in importance." After all, this is chapter 15 - not quite the first thing Paul has said. But decidedly the most important!)

- *"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. The language of "I delivered to you...what I also received" is technical language for the passing on of oral tradition (c.f. I Cor. 11:2, 22; Luke 1:2; Jude 3). In addition, note the clear Aramaic origins of what was originally an Aramaic creed (like "Cephas" instead of Peter), the "that...that...that...that" structure that is typical of Aramaic poetry, and the non-Pauline elements (like "according to the scriptures" - a phrase used in James but never in Paul). Thus, Paul's use of this early creed shows 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-atonement death,
2. Jesus 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 in the NT 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 their climax in this command." That is, 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, I think largely unsuccessfully, for an OT passage that promises Jesus would be buried three days and rise again!), but rather, "as the climax of everything the Hebrew 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. Specifically, 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).

### Not Just "Death, Burial, And Resurrection"

Note finally that there are not *three* "that" statements (death, burial, and resurrection), but *four* such statements, ("*that* [he] died...", "*that* he was buried," "*that* he was raised," and "*that* he was seen"), and two of them are clearly subordinate logically to the other two. Thus, the Gospel here has two great historical prongs which suggest a theological conclusion (Jesus is the Christ). The two great historical events which form the substance of the Gospel are the *Atoning Death* and *Historical Resurrection* of Jesus of Nazareth, who is thus seen to be the promised Messiah. "Death, Burial, and Resurrection" has simply missed the point, at least slightly. As we will explore in later posts, Paul only rarely made a point of burial, and in the context of the early creed, it functions as the "proof" that Christ actually died, rather than as a separate element of the Gospel message.

### The Context Of Corinth

So what is going on in Corinth, and why is Paul sharing the gospel with them here? The Corinthian problem contained many elements which we won't get into here (Gordon Fee's NICNT commentary on I Corinthians does a marvelous job setting out the background). Chief among them was a poor understanding of what it meant to be Spiritual. But a part of this problem was also a kind of "over-realized eschatology" which claimed that the believer has already been spiritually resurrected, and so doesn't look forward to a future bodily resurrection, and they in fact didn't think such bodily resurrection possible. Paul understands that to deny the possibility of the bodily resurrection of the believer is to unwittingly cut out the legs from under the Christian faith, since there are two such legs, and since the most important of them is that Christ was raised *bodily*. No bodily resurrection means no Gospel. Thus, Paul doesn't argue *for* the Gospel here, but *from* it. He shows the Corinthian believers that what they are espousing about eschatology is inconsistent with the Gospel that they have already believed. He thus grounds his instruction in the Gospel they already know. And this provides us with one of the clearest expositions of the Gospel in all of Paul's writings.

But what of Paul's other writings? Does he elsewhere explain the gospel? Did the other Apostles preach the same Gospel? What about the rest of the preaching of the early church? Did they preach something? Or did He preach something different? And what about Jesus? Did he preach the same Gospel but Paul did? Or did He preach something different? We will take up each of these questions in later posts. (In "[What is The Gospel II.](#)" we take up an examination of some of the rest of the NT and its understanding of the Gospel. In "[What is the Right Response to The Gospel?](#)" we take up the issue of the call to response inherent in the Gospel message.)

Stay tuned!

If You Enjoyed it, Share This Blog!

Facebook | Twitter | LinkedIn

And Subscribe to The Blog Here!

Blog RSS

#### SEE ALSO

- How The Gospel Reshapes Your Worth...  
The church does just tolerate...
- Single Not Dead: A Holy Handling Of The Single...  
The possession of your sex...
- Jesus > The Bible (Part 2)  
Jesus is the core of the...

| Exegesis                   | Bible                         | Kjv                              |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Kjvo                       | Kjv Only                      | Textual Criticism                |
| Gifts                      | Gospel                        | Fundamentalism                   |
| Preservation               | Resurrection                  | Textus Receptus                  |
| Reformation                | Luther                        | Neo-Fundamentalism               |
| New Testament              | Tongues                       | Apologetics                      |
| Church History             | Eschatology                   | Kingdom                          |
| Tr Only                    | Tyndale                       | Apostolic Fathers                |
| Commentaries               | Easter                        | Gospels                          |
| Jesus                      | Luke                          | Sex                              |
| The Shire                  | Theology                      | Tr                               |
| Anabaptist                 | English Bible                 | Holy Week                        |
| Inaugurated Eschatology    | King James Bible              | King James Only                  |
| Lord Of The Rings          | Luke-Acts                     | Missions                         |
| Objections To Christianity | Preaching                     | Protestant                       |
| Single                     | Singleness                    | Slander                          |
| Slavery                    | Song Of Songs                 | Technical Commentaries           |
| Textual Essays             | Translation                   | Acts                             |
| Already/Not Yet            | Anabaptists                   | Apostles                         |
| Bible Study                | Biblical Commentaries         | Burgon                           |
| Cen                        | Charismatic                   | Charity                          |
| Christmas                  | Christology                   | Chronology Of The Life Of Christ |
| Church History \           | Contemporary Issues           | Cross                            |
| Cursing                    | D. A. Carson                  | Demonization                     |
| Die Hard                   | Doctrine Of Preservation      | End Times                        |
| Exegesis                   | Exegesis                      | Faith                            |
| Fathers                    | Fundamentalism                | Gordon Fee                       |
| Gospel Contradictions      | Greek                         | Hands                            |
| Historical Jesus           | Historical Theology           | History                          |
| Homosexuality              | Journal Of Travels            | Kingdom Chronicles               |
| Kingdom Of God             | Kjv Only                      | Lewis                            |
| Liturgy                    | Marriage                      | Matthew                          |
| Matthew                    | Minimal Facts                 | Music                            |
| Nt                         | Oh My God                     | Omg                              |
| Paraphrase                 | Pastor                        | Paul                             |
| Philosophy                 | Polycarp                      | Praying                          |
| Psalms                     | Radicals                      | Reformers                        |
| Satire                     | Sermon Notes                  | Sex Drive                        |
| Sexuality                  | Single Life                   | Singles                          |
| Spiritual Gifts            | Spirituality                  | Strongs                          |
| Synoptic Problem           | Taking The Lords Name In Vain | Tattoo                           |
| Text                       | The Doctrine Of Preservation  | The Power Of The Tongue          |
| The Singer                 | Translation Methods           | Tro                              |
| Webster's                  | William Tyndale               | Word Studies                     |
| Words                      | Worship                       |                                  |

Facebook | Twitter | LinkedIn