

The Gospel

Introduction

Our English word *gospel* comes from the Old English *godspell* meaning “good news.” It is a transliteration of the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον which is a combination of “good” (εὖ) and “message” or “news” (ἀγγελία). In the broad view, the “gospel” is what God has revealed to the human race regarding how we can have a relationship with Him. God has proclaimed the gospel throughout history and mankind’s response to this good news has always been the same: faith. We read in Hebrews 11:6, “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” In this same chapter are many examples of men and women who apprehended God by faith. Faith has always been the means of salvation. Thus the writer to the Hebrews wrote,

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the men of old gained approval (Hebrews 11.1-2).

While the means of apprehension (faith) has remained the same throughout history, the *content* of the gospel has not. It has changed according to what God has revealed.

The Gospel Through the Ages

The clearest definition of the gospel for our day is found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Paul wrote,

¹ Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15.1-5).

Therefore, the way we have a relationship with God is by believing that Christ died for one's sins and was raised from the dead. The resurrection of Christ was the proof that He was victorious over sin and death as our substitutionary sacrifice. It's as simple as that. When one believes the gospel he is, in the words of the Scriptures, "saved."

The above verses may be diagrammed as below:

1) First proposition	Christ died for our sins		
		1a) Scriptural proof	according to the Scriptures
		1b) Physical proof	and was buried
2) Second proposition	He arose from the dead		
		2a) Scriptural proof	according to the Scriptures
		2b) Physical proof	and was seen

Paul's gospel is a gospel of grace (Acts 20.24) and consists of the message that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. The question for every individual is, "Will you believe it?" Salvation is a choice and requires an act of will. Tragically, preachers, "gospel" tracts, and other well-intentioned witnesses often confuse the simple gospel. The

gospel is that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead, period. Adding to the simple message of the gospel such statements as “invite Christ into your heart,” “accept Jesus as your personal Savior,” etc., creates confusion. The gospel message should be as simple as the Bible presents it.

John the Baptizer, Jesus, and the Twelve preached the “[gospel of the kingdom](#)” (Matthew 3.2; 4.17). This gospel was a gospel of repentance and the message was that Jesus was the Messiah-King who had come to establish His rule on the earth and fulfill the Jewish covenants (Matthew 6.9-10; Romans 15.8). It required both individual and national repentance (Acts 2.36, 38-38, 3.17-23 cf. Romans 11.25-27). Thus, this good news was that the King was present and the nation of Israel was to accept Him as the Messiah and King of Israel. That was the focus of faith.

Paul’s gospel was distinct from the gospel of the kingdom (Galatians 1.6-12; 2.1-9). Paul’s gospel was not a gospel of repentance, that Jesus was the King about to establish His kingdom on earth and fulfill Israel’s covenants. Paul’s gospel was that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. He received his gospel, not from Peter or the Twelve, but by direct revelation from the risen Christ. The language Paul used to refer to his gospel revealed that he regarded it as his own. Thus, we read of “the gospel which I preached to you” (1 Corinthians 15.1-5), “my gospel” (Romans 2.16, 16.25, 2 Timothy 2.8), “our gospel” (2 Corinthians 4.3; 2 Thessalonians 2.14), “that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles” (Galatians 2.2), “the gospel of the uncircumcision” (Galatians 2.7), “the gospel of Christ” (Romans 15.19; 1 Corinthians 9.12; 2 Corinthians 2.12, 9.13, 10.14; Galatians 1.7; Philippians 1.27; 1 Thessalonians 3.2), “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), “the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1.13), “the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6.15), “the gospel of his Son (Romans 1.9), “the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4.4), “the gospel of our Lord

Jesus" (2 Thessalonians 1.8), "the glorious gospel" (2 Timothy 1.8), and "the gospel of God" (Romans 1.1, 15.16; 2 Corinthians 11.7; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8, 9).

Paul wrote the Galatians,

⁶ Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. ⁷ Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." (Galatians 3.6-8).

While faith has always been the means of salvation, the content of faith has changed through the ages. It should be obvious that since Christ had not gone to the cross and been raised from the dead, men and women prior to this event believed something different for salvation than what Paul declared as the gospel—the death and resurrection of Christ for our sins. The Gospels indicate clearly that the Twelve had no clue about the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. In Luke, we read,

³¹ Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. ³² For He will be handed over to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, ³³ and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." ³⁴ But the disciples understood none of these things, and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said (Luke 18:31-34).

Men and women are justified by faith in what God has revealed

in their own time frame. Thus, we read regarding Abel,

“By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks” (Hebrews 11.4).

Implicit from the Old Testament account is that God had revealed that righteousness was to be obtained through the offering of a blood sacrifice. According to Genesis,

³ So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. ⁴ Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; ⁵ but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell (Genesis 4.3-5).

Why did God not accept Cain's offering? Because God had revealed that to come to him one had to offer a blood offering (Genesis 3.21). Cain chose to disobey and disbelieve God. He wanted to come to God and be accepted by God his own way. He refused God's revelation. Abel, on the other hand, believed what God had said. Because he believed, he obtained righteousness.

Abraham is another example of one who was accepted by God and who obtained righteousness. Abraham apprehended God by faith. God justified Abraham because Abraham believed him. What was the content of the “gospel” which Abraham believed? According to Genesis 15, Abraham asked God,

² Abram said, “O LORD God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

³ And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me,

one born in my house is my heir.”⁴ Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.”⁵ And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”⁶ Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15.2-6).

The gospel for Abraham was that God would give him an heir from his own body and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham responded to God by believing him (Galatians 3.6-8). This is what faith is, believing what God says.

What about those who lived under the Law of Moses? What was the gospel for them? The Law’s purpose was never to make a person righteous. Rather, its purpose was to reveal a person’s condition before God. In effect, its purpose was to condemn. Paul wrote,

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; ²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3.19-20).

The Law’s purpose was to show a person his sin and his need for God. A large part of the Mosaic Law concerned the Levitical service and sacrifices. A Jew under the Law was to believe and obey God with regard to these sacrifices. Thus, a believer in those days believed in and obeyed God by going to a priest, offering a sacrifice, and believing that God had dealt with his sin by means of the animal sacrifice. That was the “gospel” and the revelation which God had given to that

point.

What was the gospel in Jesus' day? John the Baptizer and Jesus preached the "gospel of the kingdom." According to Mark,

¹⁴ Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1.14-15).

How did a person become a believer and obtain righteousness in Jesus' day? First, it is clear that a person had to repent (cf. Matthew 3.2, 4.17; Mark 1.15; 6.12; Luke 13.3, 5). Believing the gospel meant one had to believe the good news that the Messiah of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, had come. This gospel included the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that he was about to establish the long prophesied kingdom upon earth. We also note from the ministry of John the Baptizer that one needed to be baptized in water as baptism was a sign of repentance (Matthew 3.5-6, 3.11; Mark 1.4-5; Luke 3.3, 3.12 cf. 7.29-30; John 1.33, 3.23). According to Matthew,

⁵ Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; ⁶ and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins (Matthew 3.5-6).

This requirement of water baptism continued throughout Jesus' ministry and into the ministry of the Twelve following Jesus' resurrection (see Acts 2.38). In John, we read,

¹ Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John

² (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples

were), (John 4.1-2).

Salvation under the gospel of the kingdom required that one believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Matthew 16.13-17; John 11.27; Acts 8.35-38, 9.18-20). This was a completely different gospel than Paul's. Paul's gospel requires that to be saved we must trust in the death and resurrection of Christ. We simply do not see this in the gospels or afterward with Peter or the Twelve.

Great confusion has resulted in Christianity from the teaching that the Church, i.e., the Body of Christ, began at Pentecost. The Scriptures teach clearly the Church did *not* begin at Pentecost. The early chapters of Acts reveal nothing about Jew and Gentile being equal in Christ. One will search the Scriptures in vain to find any mention of the Body of Christ by any writer other than Paul.

Only with Paul's calling and commission did God reveal the "stewardship or dispensation of the grace of God" (Ephesians 3.2) or of the "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24). Prior to Paul, *no one offered salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ* nor preached that the gospel of salvation had been sent to Gentiles. The early chapters of Acts record that the prophetic program of the Kingdom and the kingdom that had been proclaimed in the Gospels was still in effect and the audience remained wholly Jewish. On the day of Pentecost Peter addressed no Gentiles. He addressed Jews, i.e., "men of Judea" (Acts 2.14), "men of Israel" (Acts 2.22), and the "house of Israel" (Acts 2.36). Peter's message was that Jesus was the Messiah, that they had crucified Him, and that He had risen from the dead. In response to his message, his audience asked, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2.37). Peter did *not* tell them to believe that Christ died for their sins and was raised from the dead. What did he tell them?

³⁸ Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in

the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2.38-39).

Whom does this sound like? John the Baptizer! Jesus the Messiah! Baptism was a requirement under the gospel of the kingdom. Again, whom is Peter addressing? Gentiles? No. Jews. Peter quoted from the Scriptures. The Scriptures little to nothing to Gentiles but everything to Jews. He specifically said that the Holy Spirit was the promise for you and your children, etc. This was prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31.31-34), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 36.22-32, 37.14, and Joel (Joel 2.28-32). Indeed, in his sermon, Peter quoted Joel's prophecy (Acts 2.17-21) for what was then happening in Israel.

Conclusion

The content of the gospel has changed throughout the ages according to the progressive revelation of God. Salvation is gained by believing and obeying what God has revealed at the time. Today, because of the revelation of the message of grace to the apostle Paul, salvation is as simple as putting your trust in Christ's work on your behalf—that He died for your sins and rose from the dead for your justification. Salvation today is faith + 0. Faith in Christ is not "inviting Christ into your heart" or "accepting Christ as your personal Savior." Such "invitations" are false gospels without Scriptural basis. No one in this day is required by God to repent, to be baptized, to offer a blood sacrifice, to join a church, or to do anything else that may have been necessary in an earlier age. The gospel for us is that Christ died and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Christ's work is wholly sufficient and has paid for your sins. At the moment you believe the gospel and trust Christ, you can be assured that you are a child of God and

that God has given you eternal life.

©1998 Don Samdahl. Anyone is free to reproduce this material and distribute it, but it may not be sold.

Updated August 27, 2010