

Timothy Ministries News & Insight

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Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you — unless you believed in vain.

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, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

— Paul of Tarsus, 1 Corinthians 15.1-8 (ESV)

When I ask fellow Christians, “What is the gospel?” they often reply, “Oh, it’s the good news!”

“Yes,” I say, “but what is the good news?” Then something revealing happens. Rather than define the gospel, Christians often share their idea of how to appropriate *the salvation offered in the gospel*, perhaps listing some of the blessings that can result. They often say something like, “Well, if you ask God to wash away your sins, you can be forgiven and go to heaven when you die.” This sample response is not *untrue*, so far as it goes, but it is **not the gospel**. It’s also liable to be misconstrued by those seeking salvation, if not given further clarification. This kind of imprecise response to my questions prompts the following reflections.

(1) The gospel is simple.

Sometimes Christians struggle to define the gospel because they think they are being asked to explain how one should present the gospel. They



Owen Anderson shares insightfully at a recent discussion of the gospel.

think they’re being quizzed about how to persuade someone to receive salvation. Should they show from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah, as Peter did on the day of Pentecost, or should they give a philosophical argument like Paul did in Athens? To do either would be a daunting task for most, but how we should present the gospel is not the question. *Presenting* the gospel can be challenging, depending on our audience, but **the gospel itself is simple enough for a child to understand, and we should all be able to summarize it.**

(2) The core of the gospel consists of four historical facts.

The essence of the gospel, as summarized by

Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 (above), is that Christ:

- (1) Died for our sins as Scripture had predicted,
- (2) He was buried,
- (3) He rose from the dead as predicted,
- (4) He was seen after His resurrection by many eye witnesses.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are rightly called “the Gospels” because they tell the larger pertinent story of Christ’s birth, earthly ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. However, **it is precisely because of the four points Paul summarized that our sins can be forgiven, we can live holy lives, we can have a personal relationship with Christ as our king, and can live by intelligent — rather than blind — faith.** If *any* element of the core gospel drops out of our teaching and preaching, problems ensue.

(3) Jesus Christ is the gospel personified.

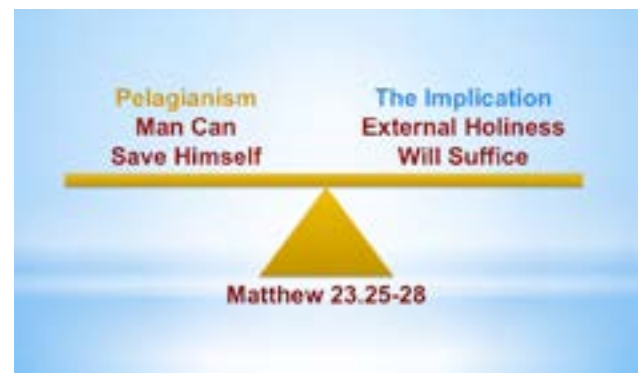
The good news begins and ends with a person. Jesus is the alpha and omega of all that we need, and that our hearts long for. That’s why the larger context of the gospel rightly begins with the Incarnation. The event of Christ’s birth announced the good news, to shepherds and magi, that God hadn’t abandoned lost and sinful humanity.

Therefore, we must not abandon the centrality of Christ in our gospel proclamation. **If we downplay the importance of Jesus in our “gospel,” our Christianity dwindles into little more than a mystery religion.** If, God forbid, we give an invitation to salvation without a clear focus upon Jesus Christ and His substitutionary sacrifice, we unwittingly slip back into the ways of the ancient mystery religions which pinned all hope for a better afterlife on the merits of their initiation rituals. We risk giving our audience the impression that they can save themselves by the mysterious act of raising their hand, or “accepting the free gift.” They are apt to think they can secure heaven by performing ceremonial rites, religious acts that initiate them into the Christian fraternity: coming forward, saying a prayer, receiving a cleansing bath, partaking of a sacred meal.

(4) Christ’s death for our sins calls us to holiness.

Sadly, Christ’s expiating death is hardly mentioned in many of the world’s Christian churches, and this omission distorts and devitalizes Christianity. **To the degree that our preaching deemphasizes Christ’s death for sins, we encourage reversion to “the natural religion of humanity.”** That religion, to which all people in their fallenness naturally incline, is known historically as Pelagianism. It’s key tenets are: (A) We are all born with equal capacity to do good or evil, and (B) we can save ourselves by our good works and religious duties. To the extent that we, by equivocation or outright exclusion, fail in our gospel proclamation to clearly state that Jesus died for our sins, we encourage our hearers toward the Pelagian belief that they can justify themselves by their own works.

Ironically, implying to people that they can save themselves, without recourse to the expiating sacrifice of Jesus, also implies to them that they need not expend any real energy in the pursuit of holiness. You see, if we believe that we can save ourselves by our own good works, it follows logically that our sins must not be very grievous — after all, we can make up for sins by just working harder at “keeping our noses clean.” And, if our sins aren’t that grievous, the pursuit of a more godly character than we already have must not be necessary; we may as well get back to our own agendas.



If, on the other hand, we do believe that Jesus died, suffering incomprehensible agony under the burden of our sins, then we realize that

our sins are infinitely grievous! No amount of good works on our part could ever compensate for the offense we have perpetrated against God by our sins. Also, if our sins are so grievous as to have required the death of the perfect Son of God, then sin must be a systemic problem, a problem of the heart and soul— not just a problem of external behavior (we can't assess ourselves as acceptable to God just because we haven't raped or murdered *but have* gone to church and put money in the offering plate). And **if our sins pertain to heart and soul, then we must cry out to God for the transformation of our character!** We must yield ourselves to God's agenda for making us holy, i.e., His agenda of conforming us to the image of His Son (Romans 8.29).



(5) The prophecies of Christ's death and resurrection confirm that our faith is rooted in God's overarching historical plan.

If we forget that Christ's death and resurrection were prophesied, we're apt to think of Christianity as a novel religion. Paul emphasized that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*. In other words, the idea that Messiah would die for sins was not a novel doctrine, but something predicted, foreshadowed and prophesied from the beginning of time, as documented in the Jewish canon of sacred texts (cf. Luke 24.25-27; 44-47). If this prophetic foundation for the events of the gospel drops out of our proclamation, we make Christianity look like nothing more than a religion invented by men disgruntled with Judaism. Any intelligent person can reason that a religion purporting to explain both

humanity's origin and humanity's destiny must be rooted in antiquity; if a religion is new, then it's probably not true. Any thinking person can also infer that a religion proclaiming a God who is the personification of love (1John 4.8), can't be a religion that suddenly appeared after ages of human suffering had already gone by; a loving God must have revealed Himself from the beginning of human history! It's important, therefore, that our gospel proclamation illuminates the fact that Christianity is not new, but is the long anticipated fruition of the ancient revelations graciously given into the safekeeping of the descendants of Abraham.

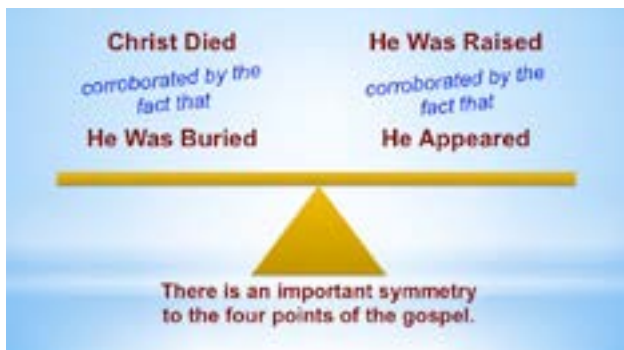
Understanding that the core events of the gospel were predicted from antiquity, assures us that Christianity is rooted in God's loving Self-disclosure to mankind through the ages of history. The prophetic foundation of the gospel also assures us that we can reasonably trust in the teachings of the Christian Scriptures about the future. Remembering to declare that the gospel had a prophetic basis, will help our hearers understand that the gospel is not just about meeting their needs for today: The gospel is part of God's overarching redemptive plan, and that plan calls us to prepare for a glorious future.

(6) Christ's burial assures us of the physicality of both His death and resurrection.

The detail that Christ "was buried," may seem relatively insignificant, but instead it is a key point in the symmetry of the core gospel: That Christ died is corroborated by the fact that He was buried; that Christ was raised is corroborated by the fact that He appeared to many witnesses.

The gospel fact of Christ's burial assures hearers that the apostolic witnesses meant real physical death and bodily resurrection when they spoke of Jesus' redemptive triumph over sin and death. If they had only meant that Jesus experienced a radical inner crisis that roused Him from a state of spiritual inertia, they would hardly have included a burial story! Imagining a

no-burial “gospel,” should help us understand that if we ignore the fact of Christ’s burial in our gospel proclamation, we make it easy for hearers to spiritualize His resurrection and ours. The apostolic assertion of Christ’s burial emphasizes the physicality of both His death and His resurrection. Skeptics often attempt to interpret Christ’s resurrection as a “spiritual” appearance to His disciples, reducing the event to no more than an inspiring vision or heart-warming realization on the part of the first Christians. The result of this kind of spiritualization is to empty the gospel of its assurance that our sins have been paid for, and of its hope that we also will, in Christ, conquer death. Thankfully, Christ’s burial assures us that He died *physically* and rose *bodily*, and this means that in Him we too will rise again in physical and immortal bodies!



(7) Christ’s resurrection proves that His expiation of sin succeeded; His resurrection also calls us into present-day relationship with a living Lord.

If God had not raised Jesus from the dead, little would differentiate Christ’s death from that of any other good person; what would make us think that *His* death erased our sins? Thankfully, as Peter explained on the day of Pentecost, “it was impossible for [Christ] to be held in [death’s] power” (Acts 2.24). **Death could not hold Jesus Christ, because death is the wages of sin (Romans 3.23), Jesus Himself never sinned, and the sins He carried for us were wiped out!**



Christ’s resurrection not only demonstrates His sinlessness, but also that His expiation of sin was successful. Had He borne our sins in His death, *but not adequately paid their penalty*, then death could rightly hold Him, even if only for our sins, not for His. But having successfully paid for our sins, death could not hold Jesus, nor would it have been just for God to leave Jesus in the grave. The fact that Jesus succeeded in fully expiating our sins made it *necessary that God raise Him from the dead*. That being the case, our confidence that our sins have been paid for rests squarely on the fact of Christ’s resurrection. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, there is no gospel (1 Corinthians 15.13-17).

Furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus calls us into present-day relationship with our risen Lord. If Jesus were still in the grave, we would hardly think of pursuing a personal relationship with Him *now*. Perhaps, if our sins were paid for in some other way, we might hope to get acquainted with Jesus in heaven, but not now. However, because Jesus is alive and ever with us (Matthew 28.20; John 14.18), we can, in the language of Scripture, receive Him now (John 1.12). In other words, we can welcome Him into our lives as our honored guest, our king, who lives with us (John 14.23), and dines with us, and we with Him (Revelation 3.20). We can have



that intimate fellowship with Jesus *now* that is the essence of eternal life (John 17.3).

(8) The three days in the tomb confirm the reality of Christ's death and resurrection.

If we forget the detail that Christ was raised from the dead *on the third day*, we obscure the definiteness of His death. In Christian circles, I've heard many stories of people being revived by prayer, moments or hours after they had died. I don't doubt that they were revived in answer to prayer, nor do I doubt that they appeared to have died. I believe in miraculous healing, and in the miraculous raising of the dead. Still, the shorter the time between the supposed death and the subsequent reviving, the more I wonder within myself if a true miracle has taken place. On the other hand, when a person deemed dead by professional executioners has been left bound and alone in a tomb for parts of three days, and is subsequently seen scarred but vibrantly alive, it is difficult to deny that a miracle of the first order has occurred. Having finished His redeeming work on the cross, Jesus could have justly returned to life *immediately* after He "gave up His spirit" (John 19.30). **God allowed Jesus' body to lie in the tomb for three days in order to confirm that Jesus really died *and* really conquered death.**

(9) The witnesses to Christ's resurrection make Christianity an evidence-based and intelligent faith.

Atheists and skeptics regularly speak of Christian faith as "the opposite of reason," and as, "by definition," devoid of evidence. This demonstrates their own ignorance both of the nature of Christian faith, and of their own faith-commitment to the principle of naturalism. Nevertheless, we must not help fuel their unbelief by deemphasizing the evidential basis for our faith, particularly with regard to Christ's resurrection. **If we don't**

proclaim the fact that Jesus appeared to many specific witnesses after His resurrection, we obscure the evidential foundation of Christianity and foster the perception that Christianity is a matter of blind faith. Having boldly proclaimed "the foolishness of the cross" (1Corinthians 1.18), it will cost us very little to proclaim the full gospel, including the fact that the resurrection of Jesus was verified by many witnesses.

(10) The more precise our gospel, the more authentic our disciples.

Over the years, I and my colleagues have repeatedly mourned the loss from our congregations of those who have fallen away from the faith, persons who once professed love for Christ, but who subsequently turned their backs on Christianity. I've also known many parents who grieve over children who have abandoned Christianity after having been reared in the church. The reasons for people's apostasy are myriad, but sometimes the reason is that they never understood the gospel and its implications in the first place. **The more fully people understand what they're "signing up for," the more loyal they are to their commitment.** There will always be those who defect from the faith, but we who proclaim the gospel do not have to be part of that problem. Now, more than ever, our world needs to see authentic disciples of Jesus. Let's increase that tribe by putting the precision back into our gospel proclamation.

✍ Roderick Graciano