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**The Gospel of Jesus:
The Simplicity, Efficacy and Priority of Christ's Saving Message**
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Introduction

Not long ago I had a discussion with an older Christian who is a seasoned Bible teacher. The topic of conversation was “the gospel,” about which there was disparity between the two of us. After some interactive interchange I finally posed the direct question to him and asked, “What is the gospel? If you had the opportunity to share the gospel with an inquiring unbeliever, in a nutshell, what would you tell him?”

His first response was, “Well...(pause)...I don't know what I would tell him.”

I was amazed. I pressed the issue further. “Come on. You have a willing candidate who wants to know how to get to heaven—what do you tell him?”

This time he said, “Well, I'd tell him that God is a holy God and totally sovereign and that He cannot tolerate any evil and that He must punish sin. And that all of our human works, no matter how good we think they are, are actually nothing but filthy rags!”

I asked, “Is that it?”

He said, “Yep.”

I proceeded to point out to him that the word “gospel” means “good news” and that his response entailed no good news whatsoever. I reminded him also that he failed to mention Jesus' name, Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus' resurrection and that he did not tell the unbeliever how one might appropriate the good news and actually receive eternal life.

Even more recently on a casual family drive, my five-year old son, Timothy, noticed a building outside the window as we drove by. The building was emblazoned with a huge moniker that the novice reader actually recognized. Timmy blurted out with enthusiasm: “Mommy—that building has the letters G-O-S-P-E-L on it.”

My wife affirmed, “That's right Timmy. And what does that spell?”

Timothy shouted, “Gospel!”

Mom followed up with a question that has stumped the greatest of theologians and learned Christians for centuries: “And what is ‘the gospel,’ Timmy?”

Timmy exclaimed, “Jesus!!”

(Out of the mouths of babes...) I shouted out, “Amen, praise the Lord—preach it little brother!” Timmy nailed it on the head—the gospel is all about Jesus Christ. He is the epicenter and circumference of the good news. He is the incarnation and embodiment of what it means to have a relationship with God, forgiveness of sins, purpose for living and eternal life. But from the above true life scenarios we are reminded that the essence of the gospel is unclear and convoluted in the minds of many professing Christians. The seasoned Bible teacher above represents in microcosm what is a sad reality in the macrocosm of Evangelical Christianity today. The beautiful simplicity of the saving gospel of Jesus is constantly being shrouded, smothered and diluted by ignorance, poor teaching and misguided good intentions. One pastor describes the grim reality this way:

It should come as no surprise that, at this point in time, the enemy of men’s souls—God’s archenemy, Satan himself—has cranked up his efforts to prevent the spread of the gospel. One of his prime tactics is to make the church confused about what the gospel is. It doesn’t do any good to have this fantastic contemporary communication technology, or wealth, manpower, and passion to take the gospel message to the ends of the earth, if you don’t know what the gospel message is. So it’s certainly a wise strategy on the part of the enemy of men’s souls to confuse the church about the message.¹

Although there is much confusion and lack of clarity among professing Christians today as to what constitutes “the gospel,” the Bible is crystal clear. The gospel is the fulfillment of the Old Testament (Matt 11:1-5), the heart of the New Testament and the mission and message of Jesus Himself (Lk 4:18). The preservation, protection and proliferation of the gospel message is the mandate for the Church (Mk 16:15). The apostle Paul’s whole purpose in life was to preach, teach and defend the gospel (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:8-9). This was the mission of the rest of the apostles as well (Acts 8:25). And today, every Christian is an ambassador for the gospel (2 Cor 5:20). Therefore it is imperative that every Christian be able to answer with clarity and confidence the most important question of all: “What is ‘the gospel’?”

The Gospel and the Contemporary Scene

Much has been written in the last century (not to mention the last two millennia) in the quest of defining the gospel—too much, in fact, for any one person to read and absorb. But the Bible has the answers. As a teaching pastor in the local church, I have the opportunity to teach frequently on theology and specifically soteriology. A question I frequently ask the saints wherever I teach is, “What is the gospel?” I have done it enough times, to enough Christians, in enough different contexts, that I am no longer surprised by the lack of consensus in the responses I receive. The Church today is quite confused and unsure about what specifically the gospel is. A corollary question I always use is the following: “What passage in the Bible most clearly and concisely defines the essence of what the gospel is? What verse distills it down in the most cogent and simple way?” Rarely do I get the response I am looking for. The answer I am looking for from the sheep is a confident bleating of, “First Corinthians fifteen!”

¹John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2003) 187.

The Gospel Compass: 1 Corinthians 15

When it comes to defining the gospel, there is no better, nor clearer, starting point than Paul's own definition of the "good news" in 1 Corinthians 15. Consider his words:

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. (NIV)

There is no ambiguity here—Paul pointedly says, "this is the gospel" (v. 1) and then delineates the specifics of its contents in outline form. There is no other passage in Scripture that speaks with such definitional authority about the gospel message.

Because of its specificity, one would think that 1 Corinthians 15 would be paradigmatic for Christian theologians, pastors and teachers when it comes to defining what the gospel is and addressing issues of how a person can be saved, receive eternal life, become a Christian, etc. But amazingly, such is not the case. In just a cursory survey of major works written relative to cutting-edge soteriological issues and debates that have confounded the Evangelical Church in the past fifty years, it can be observed that 1 Corinthians 15 is neither prominent nor primary in the discussion. Such vital issues include "easy-believism"¹, the Lordship debate², the ECT accord³, ECT II⁴, writings on

¹See Walter Chantry's classic, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970). In what is an otherwise helpful little book on the gospel, Chantry never mentions the resurrection as an essential element of the saving gospel, nor does he make mention of 1 Corinthians 15 at all. Ironically, Chantry concludes his book with the stern words, "True evangelism preaches the whole counsel of God with explanation and application to sinners" (p. 91), but he never mentions the resurrection! Similarly, in a more recent polemic against easy-believism, James Boice makes some helpful soteriological observations, but regrettably neglects the priority of the resurrection as a priority of the gospel message; see *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?: Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

²See especially the writings of Zane Hodges and Robert N. Wilkin.

³*Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (1994). Printed in *First Things*, no.43 (May 1994):15-22; see Appendix I.

⁴Also known as *The Gift of Salvation*, it is the follow-up document to ECT signed by fifteen Roman Catholics and eighteen Evangelicals (including Bill Bright, Charles Colson, Max Lucado, and J. I. Packer, among others), the purpose of which is to elucidate their common understanding in salvation and the truth of the gospel. In their nineteen assertions they never mention or quote the gospel as delineated in 1 Corinthians 15. The document has been printed in *Christianity Today*, 8 December 1997, pp. 35-36, 38; see Appendix II.

Sola Fide disputations,¹ the Inclusivist-Exclusivist salvation debate, etc.

When the above issues are discussed and debated, the tendency of many is to become myopic and focus on certain elements of the gospel at the expense of neglecting or dismissing the importance of others. For example, in his zeal for defending the purity of the gospel against the pollutant of any man-made meritorious works, Zane Hodges routinely omits the doctrine of Christ's resurrection relative to the saving gospel². Yet plainly, Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 15 that the resurrection of Christ is at the very core of the gospel.

Exegetical Guidelines from 1 Corinthians 15

The Gospel is Good News

As we delve into the details of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's key topic needs to be defined, namely the word 'gospel.' 'Gospel' means "good news" (Gk. *euaggelion*; cf. Lat. *evangelium*; Anglo Saxon *god-spell*, "good tidings"). *Euaggelion* occurs more than 75 times in the New Testament, mostly in Paul's writings. In sum, it refers to the "good news" about the person, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that sinners can be reconciled to God, by grace, through Christ (cf. Lk 2:10-11). The gospel is first and foremost "good news!" And Christians have been commissioned with the mandate to "preach the gospel to all" people. So we are to go to unbelievers with an exciting message of good news—giving hope to those in a hopeless world (Eph 2:12).

There is Only One Gospel, not Two

It needs to be kept in mind that "the gospel" here in 1 Corinthians 15 is a specific message, with definitive content. The gospel does not refer generically to the whole Bible, or even to the first four books of the New Testament. That latter ascription did not become normative until the second century.³

¹For example, in R. C. Sproul's helpful treatise on biblical justification, any discussion of 1 Corinthians 15 and the topic of the resurrection is inconspicuously neglected; see, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995); more recently, John Piper exhorts fellow preachers to make a priority of preaching the true gospel, but when he delineates what the message is, it entails no resurrection truth!; see, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: "Brothers, Live and Preach Justification by Faith"* (Nashville: Holman Publishers, 2002) 17-32. This is apparently an all too common occurrence of a default on an all too important and essential element of the gospel.

²See, for example, his main works on salvation, [*The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981); *Absolutely Free* (Dallas: Redencion, 1989); *Harmony With God* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 2001)], in which he never refers to the resurrection of Christ as an essential component of the gospel. Although he champions himself as a guardian of the purity of the one true gospel, he gives nary a word on 1 Corinthians 15 in all his discussions on what constitutes the true gospel.

³"Within the New Testament, the word *euaggelion* always refers to oral communication, never to a document or piece of literature," Trent C. Butler, ed, *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991) 569.

As has been stated, the specific content of the gospel has to do with the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. This gospel about the Savior was predicted in the Old Testament (Isa 52:7; Gal 3:6-9), announced at the advent of Christ (Matt 3:1-3; Mk 1:14-15) and fulfilled after His resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:14-41). It is all one message,¹ albeit, it progressed quantitatively throughout redemptive history, but not qualitatively. There has always been only one saving message for sinful humanity (Rom 1:1-4; Eph 4:5-6).

The fact that there is only one gospel is important, because there are those who erroneously suppose that there is more than one gospel. Some eccentric dispensationalists assert that there was “the gospel of Jesus” and then there was “the gospel of Paul.” Supposedly Jesus preached the “gospel of the kingdom” and Paul preached the “gospel of grace.” They say the two were different gospels, with different requirements on the part of the recipients. For example, Charles Ryrie posits that when Jesus preached the gospel, it was only for the Jews, only in reference to the earthly Millennial Kingdom, is not being preached during the Church age, will only be preached again during the future seven year Great Tribulation, and is to be distinguished from Paul’s gospel that we read about in his epistles.² This is an astonishing assertion in light of the warning of Galatians 1:6-9:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (NIV)

Ryrie did not invent the theory of two gospels. He got it from his predecessor, Lewis Sperry Chafer,³ co-founder of Dallas Seminary. Chafer went even further than Ryrie, for

¹The “gospel of Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 9:12) is described in many ways in the NT, illustrating its multi-faceted beauty and complexity like a fine diamond, i.e.: ‘the gospel of God’ (Mk 1:14); ‘the gospel of His Son’ (Rom 1:9); ‘the gospel of the kingdom’ (Matt 4:23); ‘the gospel’ (11:5); ‘the gospel of the grace of God’ (Acts 20:24); ‘the gospel of the glory of Christ’ (2 Cor 4:4); ‘the gospel of ...salvation’ (Eph 1:13) ‘the gospel of peace’ (6:15); the ‘eternal gospel’ (Rev 14:6).

²Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989) 38-39.

³Chafer said, “the ‘gospel of the kingdom,’ ...should in no wise be confused with the Gospel of saving grace;” see, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (Grand Rapids: Dunham Publishers, 1922) 132. Chafer was known for making such antithetical and dichotomizing statements in the area of soteriology; not only did he propose more than one gospel—at one time he proposed there were *two* New Covenants! He said, “To suppose that these two covenants—one for Israel and one for the Church—are the same is to assume that there is a latitude of common interest between God’s purpose for Israel and His purpose for the Church. Israel’s covenant, however, is new only because it replaces the Mosaic, but the Church’s covenant is new because it introduces that which is God’s mysterious and unrelated purpose”; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 7 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948) 98-99. Despite what Chafer wrote, there is no exegetical support for the idea of “two New Covenants”—there is only one! For a definitive study on that issue, see, Larry Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001).

he posited three distinct eras, with *three* distinct messages/proclamations/gospels. They include: 1) the time of pure law under Moses; 2) the kingdom portions of the Gospels; 3) and the Church age. The message differs with each respective era: 1) the key words for the Mosaic period are “law” and “obedience”; 2) the key words for the period Christ was teaching are “righteousness” and “peace”; and 3) the key words during the Church age are “believe” and “grace.” Chafer definitely paved the way for Ryrie’s eventual gospel bifurcation of the one true gospel of biblical history by constructing false distinctions during the respective historical eras. So in effect, Chafer postulates three distinct gospels!¹ In his systematic theology, Chafer wrote the following about being “justified” or being saved under the Mosaic Law versus being saved or “justified” during the Church age, the “age of grace”:

A distinction must be observed here between just men of the Old Testament and those justified according to the New Testament. According to the Old Testament men were just [*saved*] because they were true and faithful in keeping the Mosaic Law....Men were therefore just [*saved*] because of their own works for God, whereas New Testament justification is God’s work for man in answer to faith (Rom. 5:1).²

Men were saved in the Old Testament by doing good works? Such an assertion is mind boggling in light of the clear testimony of Scripture which emphatically declares that, “Clearly no one is justified before God by the law” (Galatians 3:11)—including Old Testament saints! Romans 3:28 adds, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” The verses here, from Galatians and Romans, both speak specifically of how Abraham, an Old Testament guy, got saved or was justified. Contrary to Chafer’s comments, it was by faith in God, apart from any works.

Chafer’s fabricated soteriological discontinuity was not self-conceived—he got it from his predecessor, mentor and teacher, C. I. Scofield. Scofield was a self-taught theologian who at times manifested schizophrenic hermeneutical tendencies when it came to soteriology. One author aptly notes a pitfall of those tendencies:

C. I. Scofield, for example, included a note in his reference Bible that contrasted ‘legal obedience as the condition of [Old Testament] salvation’ with ‘acceptance . . . of Christ’ as the condition of salvation in the current dispensation.³

¹Chafer, *Grace: The Glorious Theme*, (Grand Rapids: Dunham Publishing Company) 122-135; John D. Hannah, long-time professor of Historical Theology at Dallas Seminary, posits that Chafer “seemed to denigrate the revelation of God in the Old Testament” which “created in his mind...a discontinuity between the two testaments that became a defining characteristic in his understanding of the Bible,” ‘Chafer, Lewis Sperry’ dirnOnline: Lewis Sperry Chafer, 5. This explains Chafer’s apparent paradoxical and antithetical style of writing, especially in the area of soteriology.

²Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 7 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948) 219.

³John MacArthur, *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993) 279; for details, see *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1917) 1115.

Two ways of salvation? One by works and one by faith? Unthinkable. But not even Scofield invented the idea of two gospels, one by works and one by grace. Who knows where he got it from, but it has plagued the Church like a menace for 2,000 years. Even the apostle Peter and Paul's mentor Barnabas had a momentary lapse in this area once. When they entertained the idea, under the influence of the Judaizers, that one must first get circumcised before being saved, Paul rightly rebuked Peter to the face, publicly (Galatians 2:11-16). Paul got mad because the simplicity of the pure gospel of grace was being compromised by Peter. So Paul decried this error by declaring in effect, "There aren't two gospels—one by works and one by faith—there is only one true gospel, for all people, for all time!" We need the same clarion cry of Paul today. There is only one saving gospel, for all people, for all time.

The Gospel is a Complete Message—According to the Scriptures

As to the content of the gospel that Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says twice that the gospel is "according to the Scriptures" (Gk. *kata tas graphas*) (vv. 3-4). This phrase is of paramount importance. It means that the saving truth of Christ's death and resurrection is "in keeping with the Scriptures," "consistent with all the biblical teachings," or "confirmed by the testimony of the Scriptures as a whole." The Bible from Genesis to Revelation has something to contribute regarding the truth of the gospel. Paul's gospel was no novel contrivance of theological speculation originating in his day. His gospel was the gospel of Christ, the gospel of Jesus, the gospel of God, the eternal gospel taught all throughout Scripture, all throughout redemptive history, issuing forth from the eternal decree of God in eternity past.

Because the gospel is "according to the Scriptures," Paul is saying that what he is revealing in 1 Corinthians 15 is a distilled summation of the complete gospel, an intentional adumbration of the gospel—not an exhaustive explication of it. He is presenting an outline of the major components or elements of the gospel, all of which need to be augmented, explained, highlighted, illustrated, and cross-referenced with all the other pertinent Scriptures pertaining to gospel truth. Paul was not suggesting that we preach an abbreviated, reductionist gospel. On the contrary, Paul declared to the Ephesian pastors that he himself declared the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27, NKJV) wherever he went. We need to do the same when it comes to the gospel.

If the perpetuation of an overly-complex, burdensome, works-oriented gospel was the scoundrel of the Middle Ages (and it was!), then the rascalion of today's Church is the proliferation of an emasculated, minimalist, ineffectual reductionist gospel. Like the guy on the side of the road holding the card-board sign trying to communicate his need with the fewest words possible, so the Church is more and more, holding out a pared down, indiscernibly meager message with the least common denominators of truth to be believed. One author puts it this way:

In the twentieth century the church has tried to see how little it could say and still get converts. The assumption has been that a minimal message will conserve our forces, spread the Gospel farther, and of course, preserve a unity among evangelicals. It has succeeded in spreading the truth so thinly that the world cannot see it. Four facts droned over and over have bored sinners around us and weakened the church as well....Now is the hour to recover the full, rich Gospel of Christ....Needed most of all, then, is the demolition of the dreadful trend that sees the Gospel as simply a few facts. True evangelism preaches the whole counsel of God with explanation and application to sinners.¹

Jesus preached the complete gospel

Jesus was the Master and Model of preaching the gospel, the full gospel, “according to the Scriptures.” A classic example is in Luke 24 when Jesus meets two disciples on the road to Emmaus on Resurrection Sunday. They spoke with the resurrected Lord, not knowing it was Jesus, and were downcast about Jesus’ death. Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith and said,

“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Lk 24:25-27)

Several comments are in order. First of all what Jesus explained to them at length was the gospel—i.e., Jesus’ death and resurrection—the very same content Paul summarizes in 1 Corinthians 15. Second, Jesus explained the gospel “according to the Scriptures” by referring to “all the Scriptures” (v. 27). He explained the significance and need of His death and resurrection in light of “all the Scriptures.” He began with Genesis, and preached the gospel, went through the whole Torah, then explained the gospel as revealed in “all the Prophets” (v. 27). This was no fly-by-night, hurried minimalist presentation of the gospel. To go through the key truths in all the Scriptures takes a long time. This may have been a personal Bible study that lasted for hours. Third, in giving the gospel, Jesus did not simply spit out a canned spiel of gospel facts in less than sixty seconds. He “opened up the Scriptures” (v. 32) and “explained” all the pertinent information relative to the gospel. We need to do likewise. We need to thoroughly preach, teach, explain, highlight, accentuate, illustrate, and explicate the gospel using the totality of Scripture.²

Paul preached the complete gospel

This is what Paul did. When he preached the gospel to unbelievers he was thorough, comprehensive and labored long hours, days and even weeks in his presentation. For Paul, the gospel was not a pithy one-line mantra like, “Turn or Burn!” or “Believe in

¹Walter Chantry, *Today’s Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint, 2001) 45, 91-92.

²An excellent example of how to do this is given by J. I. Packer in *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961) 37-73; also, see Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996).

Jesus” as some today would have us believe. These statements are trite, inadequate and ineffectual truncations of gospel truth. They are not “the gospel.” They are not attended by “all the Scriptures.” In contrast, look at a typical gospel-preaching scenario of Paul’s ministry:

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Appollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead (Acts 17:1-3).

This passage shows how Paul labored for three consecutive Sabbath days with the same group of people, fully explaining the gospel to them. It was hard work. Contrast Paul and Jesus’ methodology of exhaustively teaching a complete gospel, “according to [all] the Scriptures,” with some popular versions today. For example, Zane Hodges has written a trilogy on what he purports to be the true gospel. Note some of his conclusions:

To be saved, all the unsaved person needs to do is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31)!¹

And when a man or woman is ready to hear the message of grace—no matter how God has worked to prepare them for that—then there is no need to speak to him or her at that point about repentance. Instead one may simply say, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:31)!²

Thank God there is only one answer to the question, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ That of course, is the answer not only Paul and all the apostles, but of Jesus Himself. The answer is: ‘Believe!’³

In his books on the gospel, Hodges never says that we are supposed to preach about the resurrection to unbelievers, or about who Jesus is, or about sin, or about the character of God who is holy. He says the gospel we present to unbelievers is simply, “Believe in Jesus. That’s all.” But that is inadequate. Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that statement. When Paul defined the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 he mentioned who Jesus is, what Jesus did, why Jesus did what He did, the reality of sin, the need for Christ’s death, the reality of Christ’s resurrection. We need to thoroughly explain what it means to believe in Jesus. Hodges comes up with his reductionist gospel by isolating Acts 16:31 and showcasing it as an absolute and comprehensive statement by Paul. But it is not. It is an umbrella summary statement. It gives the essence of how to be saved, but it does not reveal the prerequisites of the gospel contents. Paul said a lot more to that Philippian jailer about the gospel that night. 16:32 clearly shows that Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”

¹Zane C. Hodges, *Harmony with God* (Dallas: Redoncion Viva, 2001) 29.

²Ibid., 55.

³Ibid., 123; see also Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free* (Dallas, Texas: Redoncion Viva, 1989)144,154, 202-203.

A cohort of Hodges presents a similarly minimalist gospel when he writes the following:

Tell unbelievers that if they simply believe in Christ they will at that moment have eternal life. That is justification by faith alone....If an unbeliever asks if he must give up his sinful ways to have eternal salvation, tell him no. The only condition is faith in Christ....Paul's answer to the question, 'What must I do to be saved?' was, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved' (Acts 16:30-31, NKJV). If repentance is the condition, then Paul got it wrong! That is, of course, absurd. The only condition is to believe in Christ. Believe. Not repent. Not believe plus repent. Just believe. It's that simple.¹

To expose the folly of the above minimalist statements, consider two statements from Christ Himself that debunk such a trivialized and simplistic notion of how to get saved. First, according to Jesus there were other conditions to be saved in addition to the one given above. In John 5:24 Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life." So Jesus adds two more stipulations: to be saved one must hear Jesus' word and one must believe in God the Father. Nowhere will you read those prerequisites in "the gospel according to Hodges."

Second, someone did in fact ask Jesus the question, "What must I do to be saved?" It was the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16-26; Mk 10:17-27; Lk 18:18-27). When he asked Jesus that question, Jesus did not say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved," as Hodges and Wilkin insist we must always respond. Rather Jesus told him to keep the commandments, to be perfect, to sell all his possessions and give to the poor and to follow Christ. Quite a scandalous response!²

So clearly, what Hodges and company propose as "*the* gospel" is found wanting—they give part of the truth, but not the whole truth. Contrast their insufficient, anemic gospel with the thorough and refreshing presentation of the complete gospel that is "according to the Scriptures" in the recent collaborative document called, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration*.³

The Gospel is Christocentric

The Gospel is About Knowing Who Jesus Is

The gospel as stated in 1 Corinthians 15 is Christo-centric. Paul showcases "Christ" as the subject of the gospel (v. 3). The good news is all about who Jesus is and what He did. As little Timmy proclaimed, the gospel is "Jesus!" Paul said, "we preach Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:23). When we preach the good news, we are first and foremost telling

¹Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident In Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999) 210.

²see, Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel*, for a thorough exegesis of this passage and why Jesus gave such a response.

³see Appendix III for details.

people about a Person; we are introducing them to the God and Savior of the world. We must clearly explain to people who Jesus is. We are not in the business of simply spewing out a little data and a few facts. We are charged with the mandate to reveal the nature of an infinite God. That can't be done with a one-sentence mantra, "Believe in Jesus." Bumper-sticker Christianity is ineffectual. Becoming a Christian or getting saved is about having "eternal life." What is the essence of eternal life? Jesus told us clearly in John 17. He said, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (v. 3).

To gain eternal life one must first come to know who God the Father and Jesus Christ really are. That takes some time, a prerequisite amount of information and some thorough explaining. John the apostle understood this. His Gospel was written for an explicitly evangelistic purpose—to introduce people to Jesus Christ, for he stated, "But these [*miracles of Jesus*] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (20:31).

John went to great lengths in his Gospel to thoroughly explain who Jesus was and what Jesus did—twenty-one chapters' worth, one of the longest books in the New Testament. He was not a shallow, superficial evangelist with a handful of spiritual laws. Also notice in John's purpose statement of 20:31 that he does not say that he wrote so people would "believe in Jesus," but rather that they would believe "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." There's a big difference. He was compelled to explain fully who Jesus was. People can't "just believe in Jesus" if they don't know who He is.

In his Gospel, John explained thoroughly who Jesus was: he says that Jesus was uncreated (1:1a), co-equal with the Father (1:1b; 10:30), God (1:1c), the Creator (1:3, 10), the Author of salvation (1:12), all-glorious Incarnate Deity (1:14; 17:5), the Unique Son of God (1:18, 34), the Savior from sin (1:29), the Eternal One (1:30; 8:58), the Teacher (1:38), the Messiah of the Old Testament (1:45), omniscient (1:48-50; 2:24; 4:18; 21:17), supernatural (2:1-11), a holy God of wrath (2:12-17), sovereign over death (2:19; 11:43-44), from Heaven (3:13), the Son of Man (3:14), the Savior of the World (3:17; 4:42), the Judge of all souls (3:18; 5:22), the Light of the world (3:19), hated by men (1:11; 3:19-20; 5:18; 15:18), the Bridegroom (3:29), Sovereign over all (3:31), a Jew (4:9), greater than Jacob (4:12), the Messiah (4:25), a Prophet (4:44), omnipotent (4:50; 19:11), the theme of the Scriptures (5:39), the Bread of Life (6:35), sinless (8:46; 18:38) greater than Abraham (8:56), worthy of worship (12:1-7; 20:28), the only way to Heaven (10:1-10; 14:6), the Good Shepherd (10:11), the Resurrection and the Life (11:25), the fulfillment of prophecy (12:37-41), the Coming One (14:3), the Truth (14:6), the only way to the Father (14:6), the True Vine (15:1), the King of Heaven (18:36-37), the Suffering Servant (19:1-17), the crucified Savior (19:18-42), and the Risen Lord (20-21)! That is who Jesus is. And to believe in that Jesus is to have eternal life.

To say that the gospel is simply, "Believe in Jesus" without explanation or qualification is not the gospel. Mormons "believe in Jesus" but they believe Jesus is a created being who worked his way to godhood, that He was not born of a virgin, is not co-equal with the Father, had multiple wives on earth and is now a polygamist in heaven, and is not to be worshipped. They believe in a false Jesus. They adhere to a pseudo-gospel.

Jehovah's Witnesses "believe in Jesus," but they believe Jesus is a created being (not eternal or co-equal with the Father), that He is Michael the Archangel reincarnated (not Almighty God), that He did not die on the cross and that He is not to be worshipped. They believe in a false Jesus and a false gospel. Muslims "believe in Jesus" but they believe that He is a created being and not eternal, that He was not a Jew, that He is not God nor is He to be worshipped, that He was not virgin born, that He is inferior to Muhammad and Allah, and that His death on the cross does not provide forgiveness of sin. Islam believes in a counterfeit Jesus and a false gospel.

Many Protestants today who claim to "believe in Jesus" don't believe Jesus was born of a virgin, was sinless, was uncreated, is eternal, is a holy God of wrath or the only and exclusive way to the Father in heaven. Such people believe in a false Jesus—they don't know the true gospel. Every false religion and cult on planet earth "believes in Jesus" in some manner or another. But they don't believe the correct things about who He is and what He did. This should not be surprising for Jesus warned us this would happen:

Jesus answered: 'Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many....For false Christs and false prophets will appear...See, I have told you ahead of time (Matthew 24:4-5, 24-25).

The true gospel is about proclaiming fully who Jesus is.

The Gospel is About Knowing What Jesus Did

Preaching the gospel means telling people what Jesus did and why He did it. Paul wrote, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3). The death of Christ is of "first importance." Jesus' crucifixion is the cornerstone of the good news and gives significance to every other truth about Him. That's why Paul made statements like, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2) and "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). That's why John spent half of his entire Gospel on the last week of Christ's ministry, culminating with His death. Christ's death is the central feature of Christianity.¹

It is the central feature because it is Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice that provides forgiveness of sins. Christ's death absorbed God's wrath² against sin (Rom 3:25).

¹Bruce Demarest says, "Christ's death on the cross...is the central, indeed crucial doctrine of the faith....The importance of the cross is reflected in part by the attention Scripture gives to the death of Jesus Christ....there are 175 direct references to his death in the NT"; *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997) 166-67.

²Christ's death was a "propitiation" (ἱλαστήριον [*hilasterion*]) that satisfied God's wrath because of His hatred of sin as a holy God; see, George J. Zemek, *A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace: Exegetical Considerations of Key Anthropological, Hamartiological and Soteriological Terms and Motifs* (Little Rock, AR: B.T.D.S.G., 2002) 129-131.

Christ's death redeemed¹ sinners by fulfilling the penal requirements of God's holy law and satisfied His justice (Gal 4:5). It was through Christ's death that God purchased² sinners (Rev 5:9). Christ's death was the ransom³ that liberated us from the slavery of sin (Tit 2:14). Christ's death reconciled⁴ us to God (Rom 5:10). Christ died as the substitute⁵ for sinners (2 Cor 5:15). Christ's death became the grounds for our justification⁶ before God the Judge (Rom 5:18). Without death, or the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin (Heb 9:22). That is what God requires. When we preach the gospel, we preach the meaning of Christ's death.

Jesus died for sins

But why did Christ have to die? Paul says because of "sins" (15:3). We must talk about sin when we preach the gospel with unbelievers. This is not a popular notion. People get mad when you tell them they are sinners. But in order for people to be receptive to the "good news" they must first know the bad news. We must tell people where sin came from (Rom 5:17) and that we are all sinful (Rom 3:23). We must tell people what sin is. Sin is a personal offense against God. We must tell people sin has separated us from God. They need to understand their desperate need for the forgiveness of sin and salvation. They need to be told that God is holy and cannot tolerate sin and that He must punish sin (Ezek 18:4). People need to know they can't save themselves from their sin (Rom 3:19-20). They must be told that the wages of sin is death and that without the total forgiveness of sin, no one can please God, know God or enter into heaven (Jn 8:24; Rom 6:23). Clearly diagnosing humanity's spiritual terminal illness of sin on a personal level with people will help them understand their need for a Savior. When we preach the gospel, we must preach about sin! Jesus did:

I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin....I tell the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin....(Jn 8:21, 34).

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell (Matt 5:29-30).

The Gospel is a Call to "Repentance"

Not only must we preach about sin and its deleterious effects, but we must also call unbelievers to repent of their sins. Preaching repentance is part of the gospel. This is a basic biblical truth. Again Jesus is the Master and Model for us:

¹ εξαγοραση [*exagorase*], "buy back"

² ηγορασας [*egorasas*], "paid for and taken home"

³ λυτρωσεται [*lutrosetai*], "purchased from the slave market"

⁴ κατηλλαγημεν [*katellagemen*], our relationship "changed" with God—we are now at peace

⁵ υπερ [*huper*], "instead of" or "in behalf of"

⁶ δικαιωσιν [*dikaiosin*], a forensic term meaning "acquit," "declare righteous" the opposite of "condemn"; see, Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 251-298; James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001) 64-92.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mk 1:14-15).

The first word Jesus proclaimed as He preached the “good news” or “the gospel” was “repent”! The call to repentance was the heart of Jesus’ saving message. He summarized His whole purpose for coming as the Savior in this way: “Jesus answered them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to *repentance*’” (Lk 5:31-32).

And Jesus commissioned the church to do the same—to preach the gospel of repentance. In Luke 24 Jesus gave the contents of the gospel thusly: “He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and *repentance* and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Lk 24:46-47). If we were to ask the familiar question today, “What Would Jesus Do? (WWJD)” relative to evangelizing the lost, the clear answer from Scripture tells us “He would preach repentance!”

The apostles also preached repentance in their gospel presentations. The apostles and the early church were to continue what “Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). And relative to the gospel they did just that. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached an evangelistic message, the gospel of Christ, and the listeners responded positively by asking, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Peter responded by saying, “**Repent** and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord will call” (2:38-39). This verse makes it clear that “forgiveness” is contingent upon repentance. Peter said, “Repent!” And this call for repentance is a timeless message, still applicable today, for Peter said it was “for all” whom the Lord will call.

Similarly, in Acts 3, when Peter was preaching the gospel in the temple courts, Peter proclaimed, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out” (v. 19; cf. Acts 8:22). Again, “forgiveness” results from repentance. Peter even equates getting saved with “coming to repentance” in 2 Peter 3:9 when he says that the Lord is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

Paul also clearly taught and modeled that repentance was part of the gospel. Paul summed up his evangelistic ministry with the following statements: “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (17:30). God commands “all people” “everywhere” to repent. It is a universal demand—no one is excluded.

I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus (Acts 20:21)

So then King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds (Acts 26:19-20)

So clearly repentance is a basic component of the gospel of Jesus. But unfortunately there is a growing trend in Evangelicalism that flat-out denies this truth. And it is gaining popularity. Note a recent example from one Bible teacher:

Tell unbelievers that if they simply believe in Christ they will at that moment have eternal life....If an unbeliever asks if he must give up his sinful ways to have eternal salvation, tell him no. The only condition is faith in Christ. Tell him, however, that sin never pays, for the believer or the unbeliever, and that he should turn from his sinful ways whether or not he is convinced that Jesus gives eternal life to all who merely believe in him for it...

Paul's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31, NKJV). If repentance is the condition, then Paul got it wrong! That is, of course, absurd. The only condition is to believe in Christ. Believe. Not repent. Not believe plus repent. Just believe. It's that simple.¹

That statement is unbelievable in light of biblical truth. Jesus emphatically said, "repent and believe" (Mk 1:15) and yet this author says, "Not believe plus repent." Peter said, "Repent!" (Acts 2:38), but this author says, "Not repent." Paul said, "Repent" (Acts 17:30), but this author says, "Not repent." Who will you believe?

Wilkin also says that if an unbeliever asks if they must give up their sinful ways to have eternal life, he says to tell them, "No"! On the other hand, Jesus said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, then gouge it out and throw it away...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away." Further, Jesus said, "If anyone would come after Me [*anyone who wants eternal life*], he must deny himself [*give up your sins and self desires*], and take up his cross [*be willing to die*], and follow Me [*obey Jesus, commit to Him, do what He says, go where He goes*]. For whoever wants to save his life [*inherit eternal life and forgiveness*] will lose it [*turn from sin and self*], but whoever loses his life for Me will save it [*if an unbeliever asks if he must give up his sinful ways to have eternal salvation, tell him Jesus said, 'Yes—absolutely!'*]." (Lk 9:23-24). Jesus also said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be My disciple" (Lk 14:26).

So, the gospel of Jesus is clearly a call to repentance. Nevertheless, there are those who insist otherwise. Zane Hodges for example, makes the following assertions despite the clear testimony of Scripture:

...repentance is *not* a condition for eternal life.²

...the view that 'repentance is necessary for eternal life' ...cannot be demonstrated from Scripture.³

¹ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999) 210; Wilkin has also gone on record to say, "I do not believe that one *must* recognize that he is a sinner to be saved"; 'Letters to the Editor', *The Grace Evangelical Society News* (August 1990) 3.

² Zane Hodges, *Harmony With God*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 9, 49, 57, 62, 93, 109.

No text in the New Testament...makes *any direct connection* between repentance and eternal life. No text does that. Not so much as one!¹

Those who teach that repentance is necessary for eternal salvation can have no true assurance of their eternal destiny. And if they claim to have this, they are either fooling themselves or us or both!²

But Jesus repeatedly said otherwise—salvation is directly related and contingent upon repentance. That is why the recent *Evangelical Celebration* of the Gospel of Jesus (which is signed by more than 125 distinguished representative Evangelicals), says, “We affirm that saving faith includes...acknowledgement of our own sin and need.”³ That is a good definition of repentance—“acknowledgement of our own sin.” That just goes to show that Hodges’ view is theologically spurious, outside the mainstream of Evangelical Christianity and even historically unprecedented in the Christian Church.

Why does Hodges hold this skewed view on repentance? Several reasons. First of all he argues that the Gospel of John never mentions the word “repentance” and it is the Gospel about evangelism and salvation; therefore “repentance” has nothing to do with evangelism and salvation. He avers,

...repentance...is totally absent from John’s gospel. There is not even so much as one reference to it in John’s twenty-one chapters!...The fourth evangelist explicitly claims to be doing evangelism (John 20:30-31)... Only a resolute blindness can resist the obvious conclusion: John did not regard repentance as a condition for eternal life. If he had, he would have said so. After all, that’s what his book is all about: obtaining eternal life (Jn 20:30-31).⁴

This is a classic illegitimate ‘argument from silence.’ John’s Gospel also failed to employ the words “gospel,” “redemption,” “propitiation,” “justification,” “reconciliation,” “atonement,” or the noun “faith.” So are we to assume that none of these truths are related to Christ’s saving message because they are absent in John? Absurd! Jesus never mentions the word “grace” in the Gospels. Do we conclude grace is not a part of Jesus’ saving gospel? The Bible never uses the word “Trinity” but that doctrine is what distinguishes true biblical Christianity from other religions. We don’t argue from silence to prove a point—that is dangerous and misleading. Hodges’ argument also assumes that the Synoptics were not written for the purpose of evangelizing the lost, which is another absurdity (cf. Matt 26:13; 28:19-20; Mk 13:10; 16:15; Lk 24:45-48).

¹Ibid., 10; Earl Radmacher has also embraced the “non-repentance” view; he says, “Repentance is not necessary...for entering into an eternal saving relationship with Jesus”; *Salvation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 135. Unfortunately, Chuck Swindoll has also recently adopted Wilkin’s “non-repentance” view; see, *Understanding Christian Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003) 938-944. Similarly, John Walvoord, another Dallas Seminary guy, says, “The divine message is not...‘believe and repent’, ” *Major Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Academic, 1974) 187. But Jesus said “Repent and believe,” (Mk 1:15) plain and simple.

² Ibid., 123

³‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,’ *Affirmations and Denials*, 16.

⁴Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 147-48.

The second reason Hodges holds the non-repentance view of the gospel is because of his hermeneutic.¹ Because of his hyper-dispensationalism, he is prone to making numerous false distinctions in the Bible, often pitting complementary doctrines against one another, which results in false dichotomies, exaggerated discontinuities, contrived theological distinctions and a botched hermeneutic. He pits “the Kingdom” vs. “the Church age,” “the Kingdom of God” vs. “the Kingdom of Heaven,” inheriting the kingdom of God vs. inheriting salvation, overcomers vs. normal Christians, law vs. grace, temporal salvation vs. eternal salvation, the gift of eternal life vs. the gift of the Holy Spirit, false teachers vs. unbelievers, justification vs. sanctification, Christians vs. disciples, faith vs. repentance, perseverance vs. assurance, apostasy vs. unbelief, “the gospel of Jesus” vs. “the gospel of Paul,” “the gospel of Israel” vs. “the gospel to the Gentiles”, etc. He even pits “forgiveness” against “eternal life” when he says this amazing statement:

...eternal life and forgiveness of sins are *not the same thing!*²

And this one: “forgiveness...is personal and not judicial.”³

And another: “Paul...received eternal salvation (1 Jn 5:1). But *not* forgiveness of sins.”⁴

The third reason Hodges holds the non-repentance view is because he inherited it. He did not invent all this zany thinking by himself. He got it from Chafer.⁵ Chafer taught at times that there was more than one gospel—one for the Jews and one for the Church. Repentance was the gospel for Israel, but repentance was not the gospel for the Church:

It is an error to require repentance as a preliminary act preceding and separate from believing. Such insistence is too often based on Scripture which is addressed to the covenant people, Israel...The preaching of John the Baptist, of Jesus and the early message of the disciples was “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”; but it was addressed only to Israel (Mt. 10:5, 6).⁶

¹D. A. Carson has done an excellent job of exposing Hodges’ hermeneutical foibles in his helpful little book, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

² *Harmony With God*, 99.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵Chafer’s theology influenced countless professors and students who followed at Dallas Seminary over the years. For example, J. Dwight Pentecost, long time Professor of Biblical Exposition at Dallas, perpetuated Chafer’s unbiblical “non-repentance” view in his teachings and writings. While Pentecost has contributed much helpful material in areas like eschatology and theology in general, unfortunately he did not escape the Chafer curse on simple soteriology. In, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine*, Pentecost goes so far as to say it is “Satanic” to require the unbeliever to repent in order to be saved: “Satan’s method of deceiving men has been to add to the simplicity of the gospel. That is why some will teach that salvation is by...faith plus repentance” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965, 1969, 1976; 61). Again, contrast that view with Jesus Himself who came preaching, saying, “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15)!

⁶Chafer (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1917) 48. Strangely, five years later Chafer said the following: “*Repentance*, which means ‘a change of mind,’ is never *excluded* from the terms of salvation; it is *included* as an essential part of believing....It is impossible for a person to believe who does not repent”; *Grace*, 18.

And the fourth reason Hodges holds the non-repentance view is because he has a wrong definition of repentance. He maintains that repentance is a human work and therefore violates the doctrine of *sola fide*. He confuses biblical repentance with medieval-Catholic “penance,” which in fact is a humanly-contrived, meritorious view of earning forgiveness. Biblical repentance is the human response in faith, and attitude change, toward one’s sin which results from the inner working of the Holy Spirit, Who convicts the human heart (Jn 16:8-11; Acts 16:14). Repentance is not a work of man, but a work wrought by God manifest by man. Repentance is a gift from God—just as faith, grace, forgiveness, and every good thing regarding salvation is a gift from God (Eph 2:8-9).¹ So Hodges confounds the whole issue.

A definitive example from the teachings of Jesus illustrating that “repentance” is at the heart of the saving gospel is in Luke 18. The self-righteous Pharisee prayed to and praised himself. At a distance from him was the outcast tax collector who prayed a prayer of repentance in faith that saved him:

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a² sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (vv. 13-14).

Jesus clearly says that the penitent sinner went home “justified.”³ So when we preach the gospel of Jesus, we must preach about the nature of sin and call sinners to repentance.

The Gospel is about the Resurrection

The truth of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus. That is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:4—Jesus “was raised the third day according to the Scriptures.” That is Paul’s whole argument in chapter 15 for 58 verses. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then there is no Christianity, no salvation, no forgiveness of sins—our faith would be futile (15:14). But by rising from the dead, Jesus secured victory over sin, death, hell, the devil and the world and assumed the preeminence in all things (Phil 2:9-11; Rev 1:5, 17-18). Christ’s resurrection validates all of God’s promises and secures our eternal salvation. This is good news. Jesus is alive! This is the saving gospel. Because He lives, we also will live! (Jn 14:19).

¹Even on this point Hodges goes astray from historical orthodoxy and exegetical consistency when he alleges that “faith” is not a gift from God!; see, *Absolutely Free!*, 259. Here Hodges is even in direct conflict with his predecessor, Chafer who affirmed that, “Even the faith by which [salvation] is received is itself a gift from God”; *The Ephesian Letter* (Findly, Ohio: Dunham, 1935) 79.

²literally, “the sinner,” [Gk. τῶ αμαρτωλῶ (*toi hamartoloi*)]

³δεδικαιωμένος, (*dedikaiomenos*) from δικαιῶ, perf. pass. part., “to justify, to declare righteous. Perf. looks at the completed state; i.e., the state of having been declared to be in the right....Theol. pass. indicating that God is the One justifying”; Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 155.

Jesus commanded the Church to preach the gospel of the resurrection. Jesus set the example in Luke 24 when He said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (vv. 46-47). Notice the parallels of Christ’s message here with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 about the gospel—they are identical. Jesus’ gospel includes “good news” (forgiveness) and “one gospel” (all the nations). His message is Christo-centric. And He mentions “sin,” “repentance,” and the reality of His death and the glory of His resurrection.

The early church preached the resurrection as an essential component of the gospel.¹ The first sermon Peter ever preached after Christ’s ascension was a gospel presentation, the cornerstone of which is the reality of Christ’s resurrection, which he mentions more than four times (Acts 2:22-36). Paul also preached the gospel of the resurrection. Acts 17:18 declares that Paul was accustomed to “preaching Jesus and the resurrection.” Similarly, in Philippians, Paul says the essence of being a Christian is “to know Him and the power of His resurrection” (3:10). There is no gospel without the truth of the resurrection. There is no salvation if one neglects this truth. Paul said unequivocally, “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). Being saved is contingent upon believing in the *risen* Christ.

Despite the blatant truth that Jesus’ resurrection is at the very heart of the full gospel message, unfortunately this truth is grossly neglected in the Evangelical Church today. Just a cursory overview of many gospel tracts will reveal the reality of the ongoing dissemination of an emasculated gospel, as many omit the resurrection (or some other essential element of the gospel) in their presentation of the good news.

Trite gospel tracts are not the only culprits here. Pastors and theologians who should know better have done the same.² For example, in a special issue of *Christianity Today*,³ nine Evangelical “experts” were asked to give a written summary of the essential gospel in 300 words. Two of the nine did not even mention the resurrection! (Only one of the nine referred to 1 Corinthians 15 in reference to the gospel. Four of the nine gave no Bible verses whatsoever. Only three of the nine refer to “repentance.” Two experts failed to mention “sin.” Only one refers to Jesus as God. And one expert apparently had a modalistic view of God! So much for the “experts”). These nine gospel experts perfectly illustrate the crisis in the Evangelical Church today regarding the confusion about what constitutes the gospel. These nine may have neglected key elements of the gospel by

¹26 of the 27 New Testament books refer explicitly to the reality and importance of Christ’s resurrection by either declaration or by reference to “Jesus” as the living Savior and Lord; Third John is the one exception, although it does make reference to “the Name” (v. 7).

²Refer to the several examples already delineated in the beginning of this paper.

³*Christianity Today*, (vol 44. num. 2, Feb. 7, 2000); 46-51; the “gospel experts” include Myron Augsburger, Darrell Bock, David Dockery, Ajith Fernando, Cheryl Johns, Roberta Hestenes, Dennis Kinlaw, Robert Smith Jr. and Steven Voth.

default. But there are others who are deliberate in their gospel truncation. For example, Robert Wilkin has gone on record to say the following:

...it is possible to believe savingly in Christ without understanding the reality of His resurrection.¹

To the contrary, the Bible is clear—one must understand the reality of the resurrection to be saved. No resurrection, no salvation. The *Evangelical Celebration* got it right, for it declares the resurrection to be indispensable to the gospel:

This Gospel further proclaims the bodily resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of Jesus as evidence of the efficacy of his once-for-all sacrifice for us, of the reality of his present personal ministry to us, and of the certainty of his future return to glorify us (1 Cor. 15; Heb. 1:1-4, 2:1-18, 4:14-16, 7:1-10:25)...10. We affirm that the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead is essential to the biblical Gospel (1 Cor. 15:14).²

The Gospel is Appropriated by Faith

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:2 that the Corinthian Christians were “saved” because they “believed” in the gospel. “Believed” is from πιστευω and means “to believe, also to be persuaded of, and hence, to place confidence in, to trust, signifies in this sense of the word, reliance upon, not mere credence.”³ Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who *believes*” (Rom 1:16). So salvation is received or appropriated by believing or by exercising faith in the gospel.

To believe in the gospel means to believe in all the elements of the gospel. To become a Christian people must believe in who Jesus is—that He is God incarnate, the Lord (Acts 16:31; 18:8; Rom 10:9), the Savior (Lk 2:11), and the only way to the Father (Jn 14:6). They must believe in God the Father (Jn 5:24). They must believe that they are sinners in need of forgiveness. They must believe that Jesus died for their sins. They must believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is the living Lord (Matt 22:32). One must act on his faith and ask God to forgive him of his sins (Rom 10:13)—i.e. one must repent⁴ (Acts 11:21; 19:18). That’s what it means to believe in the gospel. There are no human works here in this scenario. People bring nothing to the equation of salvation except their sin and the prayer of faith and repentance. Salvation is totally of God—a free gift from Him (Ps 80:3; Jonah 2:9). But one must believe in the whole package, not just the wrapping.

¹Robert Wilkin, ‘Tough Questions About Saving Faith’, *The Grace Evangelical Society News* (June 1990) 1.

²*Christianity Today*, ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,’ (vol. 43, num. 7; June 14, 1999) 52, 55.

³Zemek, 177.

⁴At times “repent” is used synonymously for “believe” and vice versa; cf. Matt 3:2 with Acts 19:4 as an example where “repent” means “to believe”; for a thorough study on this issue, see James E. Rosscup, ‘The Relation of Repentance to Salvation and the Christian Life’ (unpublished paper delivered at ETS, n.d.). Another thorough and excellent study on this truth is Richard Owen Roberts, *Repentance: The First Word of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002).

Conclusion

There is confusion in the Evangelical Church today about what constitutes the “gospel of Jesus Christ.” Although the true gospel is simple, many versions of it are anemic, insufficient, and convoluted. Such versions of the gospel are ineffectual. Such versions result by straying from the compass of Scripture. It has been proposed that 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 should be paradigmatic for Christians when it comes to understanding, articulating, and proclaiming the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul explicitly says “this is the gospel.” We should take note of what follows as he delineates the flashpoints of gospel truth—the indispensable priorities and essentials of the saving message of Jesus.

First, the gospel is “good news.” It is a specific message, with specific content, about hope. The good news is that God has provided a way for hell-bound sinners to be totally forgiven, accepted, reconciled and adopted into the family of God, and they can enjoy eternal life with Him, beginning now and extending into eternity.

Second, Paul says the gospel is about “Christ.” Our gospel message orbits around the Person of Christ—all that He is and all that He did. He is the eternal God who took on human flesh, He is the only way to have forgiveness, the only way to know God, the only way to get to heaven. In simplest terms, the gospel is “Jesus”!

Third, the gospel entails preaching about “sin.” That’s what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:3. Sin entered the world through Adam. Sin separates us from God. Every person is a sinner from birth. Sin deserves to be punished. We cannot save ourselves from sin. Death and hell are the wages of sin.

Fourth, the gospel entails preaching about the meaning and significance of Christ’s death. Sin has been conquered by Christ’s atoning death. He “died for sins.” Jesus willingly got punished for the sins of the world. Jesus’ death was the only acceptable sacrifice that could appease God’s holy wrath and justice because Jesus was God (so He provided an infinite sacrifice) and Jesus was sinless (He provided a perfect sacrifice). Jesus’ death is the only thing that can forgive sin and reconcile a sinner to God. Jesus’ death provides eternal life, forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, acquittal and adoption.

Fifth, the gospel entails preaching about Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Jesus’ resurrection fulfilled prophecy, validated all the promises of God, conquered sin, death, the devil, hell¹ and the world, and vindicated Jesus Christ as the rightful King over all the

¹The fact that Jesus saves some from going to hell implies that others are going there—that is what the Bible teaches (Matt 7:13-14; 2 Thess 1:7-9; Rev 14:9-11; 19:20; 20:14-15). Contrast this with the very popular universalist Brennan Manning, who talks about gospel truth, but affirms that everyone is going to heaven because God’s love is “unconditional.” He says, “the Father of Jesus loves all, no matter what they do...Have you learned to think of the Father as the judge...? If you think that way, you are wrong,” *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2000) 22, 75.

universe. Jesus' resurrection guarantees that He will likewise redeem our lowly bodies after the pattern of His glorious body.

Sixth, the gospel is appropriated and made efficacious by "faith"—by believing in the truths of the good news listed above. Believing also includes "repenting" whereby one agrees with God's verdict that we are all undeserving sinners. Repenting entails asking God to forgive one's sins in Christ. Confessing sins is a prayer of faith (Lk 18:13). Repentance is not a human work, for salvation is a gift from God. Repentance is the result of the Holy Spirit's convicting work on the human heart that manifests itself in a heart and attitude change, enabling one to believe in the gospel (Jn 16:8-11; Acts 16:14). So repentance, along with the whole work of salvation, is a gift (Jonah 2:9).

Finally, the gospel is "according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The gospel is a specific, yet comprehensive message, sufficiently explained in God's written Word, the Bible. The gospel is therefore from God—supernatural revelation. Being "according to the Scriptures," the gospel is one consistent message, for all people, for all time. And because it is "according to the Scriptures" it entails more than any one isolated Bible verse or truth, that might be set forth in contradistinction from the rest of written revelation—which results in an insufficient, misrepresentative, truncated gospel. In other words, the gospel of Jesus needs to be taught, preached, understood and appropriated in light of the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

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