

Jesus Is the Savior!
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This article will address three distinct but related subjects: what is the gospel, what doctrines should be included in a good gospel presentation, and does the gospel presentation focus clearly on Christ?

First, what is the gospel? Some argue that the gospel of John should answer this question, but John's purpose statement is not to define the gospel, but to provide a foundation for faith in Jesus as the Messiah (John 20:31). While many texts have been offered as central, 1 Corinthians 15 should be the starting point. Some in the church at Corinth had followed a doctrinal error concerning the resurrection; Paul takes the church back to the first days he was with them.

The "first of all" (1 Cor. 15: 3) is first both in chronology as well as importance. "Declare," "preached," "received," "stand," "preached" (used twice), "believed," "delivered," and "received" (used twice) are all verbs in the Greek aorist tense (this tense indicates a completed kind of action and is therefore translated using the English past or perfect past tense). These verbs of verses 1 and 2 serve to designate the gospel Paul received from Christ and declared and preached to them. Twice he states that he "preached" this gospel to them. On their part, they received and believed it. Nestled among the verbs in the aorist tense are two verbs in the present tense (this tense indicates an on-going action at the time of the speaker). The change from one verb tense to another is significant. If they "are holding fast" (present tense) to Paul's gospel, then they "are being saved" (present tense) by it. One way to understand the shift to the present tense is to recognize that Paul is addressing matters of sanctification. The simple gospel of grace is essential to deliverance--both from the penalty of sin and also from the power of sin in a believer's life. The resurrection is fundamental to both justification and sanctification. If there is no resurrection, Christ cannot impute His righteousness to the believer. If there is no resurrection, Christ does not dwell within the believer, and there is no victory over sin. If a believer abandons the gospel, the Spirit of God will not assist him in the struggle against sin (cf. Gal. 5:2 for a similar statement). The doctrinal error of denying the resurrection will ruin the believer's spiritual life and his faith in Christ will not bring him to maturity. It will be a vain faith, that is, one without purpose and results.

In verses 3 and 4 Paul defines the gospel; the phrase "according to the Scriptures" follows two statements and makes them stand out from the rest. Jesus gave Paul the gospel ("that which I also received"), and it has two elements. The first is that Christ died for our sins, and the second is that He rose again. The proof that He died is that He was buried; the proof that He rose again is that He was seen. The proof that He died for our sins is that He rose again from the dead. Both the death of Christ for our sins and His subsequent resurrection must be included. "Christ died, Christ arose" contains no good news regarding my sin. "Christ died for our sins" is not the gospel, for He might still be dead. "Christ died for our sins, Christ arose from the dead" is the gospel. These two full statements are the gospel.

Second, what doctrines should be included in a good gospel presentation? There are three: sin, the person and work of Christ, and faith. All three of these can be found in 1 Corinthians 15. Without an understanding of sin, the Savior's person and work are irrelevant. Faith, or accepting something as true, is mankind's response to the Savior, and it stands in contrast to meritorious works. Paul states that Christ died for our sins; accepting this as true is the personal appropriation (saving faith) of the person and work of Christ.

Paul's statements in verses 1 and 2 refer back to the Corinthians' initial belief in Christ, but he is also emphasizing the importance of Christ's death for sins and His resurrection as it relates to the believer's present victory over sin. Therefore, he includes other terms besides faith: "received," "stand", and "holding fast." Many other passages make it clear that to be justified before God, one simply believes in Christ. This was true of both Abraham (Genesis 15:6) and Nicodemus (John 3:15-16).

If the evangelist wishes, he may expand John 3:16 in order to cover all three central doctrines: sin=shall not perish; person and work of Christ=God gave His only begotten Son—Jesus is the God/Man Who died for our sins and rose again from the dead; faith=whoever believes in Him. A gospel presentation may also include any number of other doctrines, such as the love of God, the coming judgment, the coming kingdom of God, repentance from wrong doctrines, etc. A skilled evangelist will listen to the person and biblically address their questions and concerns. Together the two may travel to many biblical issues, but the skilled evangelist will always graciously return to sin, the person and work of Christ, and the lost person's need to believe in Christ.

Finally, does the gospel presentation focus clearly on Christ? While it is essential to biblically establish the person and work of Christ, and this, by its very definition, requires doctrine, it is an error to think that correct doctrine provides salvation. The Jews searched the Scriptures because they thought the Bible gave everlasting life (John 5:29). The Bible doesn't give everlasting life, it tells about Jesus, and He gives everlasting life.

In a recent Grace Evangelical Society article it was stated: "The marvelous truth of free grace is this: A guilty sinner with far from adequate knowledge about the Person and work of our Lord can come to Him and believe *that Jesus will give him eternal life*. And the moment he does believe, he will have that life."¹ Thus the focus of this gospel presentation is a doctrinal statement: "that Jesus will give him eternal life." But the authors of Scripture are remarkably consistent in directing our faith, not to a doctrine, but a person: the person of Christ. This is done through the use of a prepositional phrase "in Me" (one example of many: "Whoever believes in Me has everlasting life." John 6:47).

The Bible presents Jesus as the God/Man who died on the cross for our sins and rose again from the dead. As central as these doctrines are in identifying "which Jesus," it is **Jesus** who declares one righteous and gives the gift of everlasting life. Shouldn't this be

¹ Zane Hodges, The Hydra's Other Head: Theological Legalism, Grace in Focus, September/October 2008, p. 3; emphasis not in the original

our focus? There is a measurable difference between announcing “place your faith in a doctrine” versus “place your faith in Jesus.” A doctrine cannot save, but to believe **in Jesus** becomes the foundation for justification before God as well as sanctification, and ultimate glorification.

As marvelous as everlasting life is, we should regard it as one of results of believing in Jesus. Security, possession, relationship, and reward are all attached to the significance of everlasting life. The gift of everlasting life is truly a proper motivation to believe in Jesus, as is the desire to “not perish,” experience the love of God, and never be alone again. But these fruits of salvation should not be exchanged for the Person who provides them. The focus of a good gospel presentation is Jesus.

Conclusion: In God’s grace, He has declared righteous many who have heard inadequate, interrupted, and misleading gospel presentations and messages. Salvation is of the Lord and He seems to enjoy doing unusual and odd things when it comes to bringing people to Himself. Just listen to the wide range of testimonies from any group of Christians! When given an opportunity, however, this pastor does his best to present Jesus as the Savior; He is the God-Man Who solved mankind’s sin problem through His death for our sins and His resurrection. Anyone who believes **in Him** receives the gift of everlasting life. Hallelujah, what a Savior!