

CHRISTIAN BASICS

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Study Four

CALLED THROUGH THE GOSPEL

William Tyndale, in his Prologue to the NT, described the gospel as ‘good, mery glad and joyfull tydinge, that maketh a mannes hert glad, and maketh hym synge, dounce, and leepe for oie.’ This characteristic word for the Christian message, and its verbal form ‘preach the gospel,’ indicate that God’s call to man touches his very life at its centre, and when truly seen, sets loose an exclamation of praise that can never subside.

GOOD NEWS BECAUSE APPLICABLE

News gains its news worthiness not simply by being information previously undisclosed, but by being applicable to the hearer. And it becomes good news by ‘scratching where it itches’. The gospel can only be the gospel by being native to man and to the situation in which he finds himself. It does not in any way arise from man, but must cause man to say, ‘This is what I want’.

The angels at the time of Christ’s coming referred to ‘a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born ... a Saviour’ (Luke 2:10f.). The angels understood how closely God’s action would touch man’s need. Mankind is, in fact, slow to see this relevance, but all who are of the truth finally see it and rejoice, and the measure of a man’s faith is the measure of his praise.

GOOD NEWS BECAUSE OPERATIVE NOW

The proclamation of Jesus gained its relevance to Israel not so much by its new material or emphasis as by the announcement that what was promised by the prophets would now be fulfilled (Mark 1:14f.). They had announced the coming of a king who would rule justly (Isa. 32:1–8, 15–20), and an era when relief would come to the disabled (35:5–6), when sin would be forgiven and the law written on men’s hearts (Jer. 31:31–34). These and numerous other prophecies were common knowledge to all who heard Jesus speak. The disciples walking to Emmaus and unwittingly talking to Jesus, echoed the understanding of many when they said, ‘We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.’ (Luke 24:21). Even though the nature of the kingdom’s inauguration was misunderstood, (John 6:14f.) Jesus

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constantly showed that he and his teaching were not an innovation but a fulfilment of what they should have been expecting. Those who looked for the redemption of Israel, recognised Jesus from the start and for them, his coming was 'gospel'. (Luke 2:36–38)

The apostolic presentations of the gospel never left behind the essential content of what God said in the OT that he would do (Acts 2:14–36; 3:17–26; 8:26–38; 10:43; 13:26–52) and the apostolic letters reveal the same. (For example: Rom. 1:1–3; II Corin. 1:19f.). All of the essential truths concerning Christ and his grace were prophesied (Matt. 1:22f.; 3:3; 8:17; Acts 2:16ff.; 13:32–34; I Peter 1:10–12; Rev. 10:7).

It is necessary to note that Paul did not feel under obligation to speak in Jewish terms when addressing the Athenians, but the truth he proclaimed was not grounded in Greek poetry, although he quoted them, but in the Hebrew scriptures. (Acts 17:22–31)

It can be seen then, that apart from an understanding of the OT prophecies, one has a deficient view of what it was that excited the attention of NT believers. But if we can understand that to Israel 'belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh is the Christ' (Rom. 9:4f.), and if we appreciate that Gentiles are grafted into the true Israel (Rom. 11, and I Peter 2:9f.), then we can exult as they did. There is only one plan of God for the renewing of all things and only one kingdom of God to which we may belong, and therefore the OT prophecies are as relevant to Jews and Gentiles now as they were to Jews of the first century. The gospel will seem far more like good news when this is appreciated (See Rom. 15:4–13; Eph. 3:4–6).

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Many times, and especially in Matthew, the preaching of the good news is related to the kingdom. A comparison of parallel passage in Matthew and Mark shows there is no distinction to be made between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of God (Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:14), and in some instances, preaching of the kingdom is used as a summary of Jesus' ministry (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Again, in parallel passages, there is no distinction made between the kingdom of God, and Christ with his gospel (Mark 10:29; Luke 18:29); for either, one should be ready to leave family and possessions. So Jesus preached concerning the kingdom as a matter of great significance (Matt. 12:28; Luke 8:1) and it was so readily recognised as good news, that men stormed its gates to enter (Luke 16:16f.).

When one realises the tremendous social implications of the kingdom as seen in the OT (the healing of the disabled is one case in point (cf. Matt. 11:2–6 with Isa. 35:5f., also Matt. 4:23; Luke 4:18; 9:6), one can more readily appreciate people's interest in it. Many corrections were needed in the application of these promises to existing conditions (Acts 1:6–8 for example), but the hope of God's ultimate victory was strengthened by these corrections, not sublimated, and people were able to live in the present dynamic of a kingdom yet to come, in which Satan, and sin and disease and death would be banished (Matt. 11:2–6; 12:28; I Corin. 15:24–28). (cf. salvation to come Rom. 13:11)

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When the church lives in confident expectation of God's final rule, and is secure in the knowledge that the king is already reigning (I Corin. 15:25) and that the kingdom is among them (Matt. 12:28; Luke 17:20f.), then the world will see that the church is not terrified by its adversaries (Phil. 1:28; II Thess. 1:4–7) or any other circumstance (Rom. 8:18–39), and will see that the church alone has a reasonable hope for the future of our world and be attracted by the announcement that they also may have a place in the kingdom. So the Gospel is essentially about the reigning king and the coming triumph.

THE ACTION OF GOD AND OF HIS CHRIST

The gospel may not be separated from its author and agent. It is not a statement of truth to which one may give assent and so be saved, though that statement of truth is still important. Frequently, the NT refers to the gospel of God (Mark 1:14; Rom. 1:1; II Corin. 11:7; I Thess. 2:2,8f.; I Tim. 1:11) or the gospel of Christ (Rom. 1:9; I Corin. 9:12; II Corin. 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Gal. 1:7; I Thess. 3:2; II Thess. 1:8), and these two terms are clearly interchangeable (Rom. 15:16,19; II Corin. 4:4).

This gospel is theirs not just because they originated it but because by it, the power and glory of God and the glory of Christ are displayed for man and for his salvation. So Paul pleads with people to be reconciled to God, on behalf of Christ (II Corin. 5:18–20), and Peter says that the joyful announcement made to his readers was, in fact, the word of God, and that this was the cause of its powerful effect (I Peter 1:23–25).

Therefore, the gospel cannot be fettered, even though its messenger are in chains (II Tim. 2:9). It is the releasing of the almightiness of God (Rom. 1:16).

THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL

Against the background of prophetic fulfilment and the arrival of the kingdom, the gospel consisted in the announcement and explanation of certain historical events. (Acts 2:14–42; 3:11–26; 8:35; 10:36–43; 13:16–41; 17:18; Rom. 1:1–6; 10:8–13; I Corin. 15:1–11; II Tim. 2:8). The facts were that Jesus of Nazareth had been empowered by God to do many good deeds and powerful signs, and that he was then condemned by his own rulers and crucified by wicked men, but now he was alive again and had been seen by many witnesses.

The explanations given for these facts were that Jesus was Israel's Messiah and that her leaders had crowned Israel's sins by rejecting him, through ignorance of the meaning of their prophecies. Yet it was God's intended purpose that these things should happen. It was God also who had raised Christ from death, making him Lord over all things; and in his name, forgiveness of sins would now be given to all who believed. On this basis men were summoned to repent and receive forgiveness.

That Christ was now Lord gave great authority to the proclamation; and the event whereby the Lordship of Christ was demonstrated, namely the resurrection, became 'the catalyst which precipitated in the minds of the disciples the total significance of

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God's redemptive activity. It released the gospel.' (Bakers Dictionary of Theology p 257).

It can be seen that the gospel is not a demonstration of moral leniency and spurious by-passing of law. Sin was fully exposed and propitiated by Christ's sufferings, and God's victory fully revealed by the resurrection. It is appropriate that the gospel should include the announcement of judgement, when God will judge the secrets of all men by Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:16; Acts 17:31), and according to their response to the gospel (II Thess. 1:7f.).

THE PURPOSE AND ACTION OF THE GOSPEL

The intention of God in giving the gospel is that man might be obedient to the faith and so be saved, or made righteous (Rom. 1:16f.; I Corin. 15:1f.; Eph. 1:13) and have eternal life (Col 1:23), peace (Eph. 2:17; 6:15; Acts 10:36), hope (Col. 1:5), and immortality (II Tim. 1:10; I Peter 4:6).

Therefore God calls man through the gospel (II Thess. 2:13–15); and the gospel becomes fruitful (Col. 1:6). Man receives the righteousness of faith (Rom. 1:16–17) and is reconciled to God (II Corin. 5:19). In this way, the rebellion of man is subdued by love, and these sons of the kingdom long for and hasten the coming of the king.

In this way God demonstrates to all men, and to all principalities and powers, and all angels as well, his manifold wisdom and his love (Eph. 3:4–13; I Peter 1:12).

RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

The gospel is to be believed and obeyed (Mark 1:14f.; Rom. 10:16–21; II Thess. 1:8; Heb. 4:2,6) and is to cause man to repent (Acts 14:15). Perishing men will not see it as truth (Rom. 10:16–21; II Corin. 4:3; II Thess. 1:9) but as foolishness (I Corin. 1:18ff.). But no adaption of content may be made, or any flattery used, to make the message more palatable.

THE PROCLAMATION

Because the gospel is the word of God, revealing the grace of God to lost sinners, it is to be proclaimed boldly (Eph. 6:19f.) and simply (I Corin. 1:17; II Corin. 4:2).

Paul felt himself to be under obligation to all the Gentiles (Rom. 1:14f.) and made it his ambition to preach as widely as he could and especially where others had not gone (Rom. 15:17–21). In this, he followed the example of Christ who moved as widely as he could within the sphere appointed to him (Luke 4:43; 9:6; 14:21). Paul said, with obvious pleasure, that the gospel was being heard, and bearing fruit 'in the whole world' (Col. 1:5f.). Probably, for this reason, he did not trouble greatly with those who preached Christ from false motives, knowing that the over all effect was to spread the gospel's influence anyway (Phil. 1:15–18).

Christ had said the gospel was to be proclaimed everywhere before the end came (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10) and gave his authority for its execution (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15).

THE COST OF PROCLAMATION

Because of the nature of the gospel, namely salvation through the suffering of the cross, those who proclaim it must demonstrate the spirit of it. So men must be willing to lay down their lives for the gospel (Mark 8:35; Acts 20:24) and adapt to thought patterns of others (I Corin. 9:22f.) and bear injustice (II Tim. 2:8f.), gladly (Matt. 5:11). Because the gospel is opposed by those who prefer not to come to the light, the opposition is levelled at the messenger (I Thess. 2:2; II Tim. 1:11f.). The messenger becomes personally identified with his message and can call it 'my gospel' (Rom. 2:16; Gal 1:11ff.; II Tim. 2:8) or 'our gospel' (II Corin. 4:3; I Thess. 1:5).

AUTHORITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROCLAMATION

The gospel is to be proclaimed by men and those who proclaim it may be called stewards of the kingdom or of the gospel (Luke 12:41–48; I Corin. 4:1f.). Because the gospel is the 'property' of the Father or the Son stewards must be trustworthy. Preaching the gospel for Paul was simply a matter of obedience (I Corin. 9:16–18).

Paul regarded himself and Apollos as steward (I Corin. 4:6), and said that bishops were stewards of God (Titus 1:7). Peter included all who had received gifts of speech or action, and in particular said those who speak should speak as those having the oracles of God. (I Peter 4:10f.).

Some men were called evangelists (evangelistes), suggesting that their whole ministry related to the proclamation of the gospel (evangelion) (Eph. 4:11; Acts 21:8). Timothy was required to do the work of an evangelist (II Tim. 4:5). But whole groups of people, by heartily receiving the gospel, could have as telling an effect as the proclamation. This happened in all of Macedonia and Achaia (I Thess. 1:4–10). So in a wider sense, all believers are stewards of God's grace, or the mysteries of God, and involved in the proclamation. The Philippians shared in Paul's stewardship of the gospel by their gifts (Phil. 4:14–16) and others (at Rome?) by their speaking (Phil. 1:12–14). The whole church is to live (as a church) in a manner worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:27f.).

Special responsibility for the gospel lay with the apostles. They were established for its defence as well as its proclamation (Phil. 1:7,16f.), and had responsibility to keep it free of contamination (Gal 1:6–9; 2:5,14). Paul said that he knew the truth of the gospel by revelation (Gal. 1:11f.), and demonstrated the reliability of his message by showing that it received the approval of the apostles at Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1–10). He spoke of the gospel as the word of truth (Col 1:5; Eph. 1:13). When the apostles died, the truth of the gospel would be maintained by reference to their writings.

However, the authority of the gospel could not be guaranteed by a Church council or apostolic documents. It was constantly affirmed by God himself in the consciences of the hearers (I Thess. 1:5). The Spirit gave evidence of its truthfulness (John 16:8–

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11; I Peter 1:12) as did the working of miracles and specific gifts of the Spirit (Rom. 15:19; Heb. 2:3f.). Not even Jesus claimed to authenticate his own teaching. He told Peter that it was not flesh and blood that revealed the truth to him; but his Father in heaven. (Matt. 16:17). He made it clear that John the Baptist, and his own works, and the OT scriptures were the evidence of his truthfulness, not his own testimony to himself (John 5:31–47). He showed that those who speak on their own authority seek their own glory (John 7:18), therefore servants of God must be seen to be glorifying God, by submission to rightful authority.

Paul gave careful attention to the manner of his own presentation of the gospel so that none could accuse him of ulterior motives. (I Corin. 4:9–21; II Corin. 1:12-14; 2:17; I Thess. 2:1–12). He did it simply for God.

No-one can appoint themselves to this ministry. It was by appointment that Paul preached (Rom. 1:1) with special authority to reach out to Gentiles (Acts 15:7; Rom. 16:16; Gal. 2:7; Eph. 3:7). So ambassadors must be sent (Rom. 10:14–15) and be under the direction of the Spirit in their particular sphere of influence (Acts 13:1f.; 16:6–10).

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