

# "THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST"

## REVISITED

By

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The greatest benefit of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was that the gospel was rediscovered. As a result of the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church over a period of hundreds of years, the gospel had been lost. The Protestant Reformation was a major event in the history of the Christian Church.

We live in another day where there is great confusion in regard to the definition of the gospel. The previous confusion in the Roman Catholic Church resulted from a strong centralized church. Ironically, today the confusion results from the multiplicity of churches, each seeking to define the gospel in their own way. The definition of the gospel has become so confused that few people actually understand what it is. This may be one of the most important articles you may ever read. Read carefully. In an age where we hear so much about the gospel, I am convinced that few people really know what it is. From knowing people in various theological camps including liberalism, fundamentalism, evangelicalism, pentecostalism, and others, I am afraid the gospel has been lost again. Another Reformation is needed in the twenty-first century.

My attempt here in this article will be to define the gospel. I believe it is one of the greatest needs of the Church today. Without a biblical understanding of the gospel, what do we have to offer to a dying world? How do we know that we really have been saved by the gospel, if we are not clear as to what it is? When we offer a false gospel (with good intentions) to the world, we only do great harm and further distance those who hear it.

### What the Gospel Is Not...

In order to clarify what the gospel is, I first will deal with what the gospel is not. I believe that by uncovering the errors of modern day false gospels, I can better explain what the gospel actually is. Often, we can better understand truth, by first looking at error. The light shines brighter against the background of darkness. I will list several popular gospels that do not stand up against the biblical gospel.

**The Gospel is not** believing that the events surrounding Christ have historical significance or that they did actually happen. The facts of history do support that there really was a Jesus who lived two thousand years ago. Many in other religions will admit to the historicity of many of the biblical accounts and even have a zealous interest in these events. Yet, having an interest, even having made a trip to the "Holy Land", does not in anyway make you a Christian or a child of God.

**The Gospel is not** that God loves the whole world and there are many ways to God. This gospel, popular in liberal circles, teaches that Jesus just happens to be the best way to God. There are many ways to God including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. This definition is often heard from the mouths of modern politicians living in a pluralistic society, such as candidates for high offices. Their “civil religion” prayer meetings generally include a variety of religious leaders, in order not to offend any particular religion. As long as the name “God” is revered, then such people must be included among those who are defined as the children of God. This is American Civil Religion, and not Christianity. It is certainly not the gospel. Jesus clearly said in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.” Christianity is by its very nature exclusive. Those outside of Christ are not children of God.

**The Gospel is not** that God is love and if you try to live the best you can, hopefully God will let you into heaven. The Bible says in Isaiah 64:6, “For all of us have become like one who is unclean. And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment...” Paul says in Romans 3: 10, “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is no one who seeks for God...” The Book of Galatians makes it clear that “as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse...” (Galatians 3:10). Good works cannot make one ready to meet God and be accepted into heaven. God only accepts perfection, and no man has lived a perfect life, except Jesus Christ. Apart from the gospel, one sin, one miscue, one omission of duty, disqualifies every man from being accepted as a child of God.

**The Gospel is not** that I am a child of God because I am a member of a Church. Church membership never made anyone a child of God. Please don’t misunderstand me here. Church membership is important. The writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith in the seventeenth century said, “there is ordinarily no salvation outside of the visible church.” Those who are children of God are faithful members of a visible church (one with a name and people in it with elders, deacons, sacraments, etc.), but church membership in itself does not make you a child of God. There are many people sitting in the pews of many churches who have no idea what the gospel is.

**The Gospel is not** the feeling that I feel like I am saved. To say, “I’m sure I am saved”, is not the gospel. Feelings are important in understanding the gospel, but just because a man may have assurance that he is saved, does not mean that he is saved or understands the gospel. The assurance of salvation, and knowing the gospel, are two different things. There are many that do not doubt their salvation that are not saved. They do not understand the gospel. They identify good feelings or some unfounded assurance as the gospel itself. This is not the gospel. Paul encouraged the Corinthians in II Corinthians 13:5, to “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you – unless indeed you fail the test.” In other words, many that feel saved, or believe they are children of God, do not know what the gospel is. Their feelings about the validity of their salvation may be true, but they may also be wrong. I may feel healthy, but I may be dying of cancer. Feelings are not the final test of whether one believes the gospel.

**The Gospel is not** that I know that I am a child of God because God has answered my prayers. God does answer the prayers of his children, but this in itself is no guarantee that you know what the gospel is. God, because He is good, has been good to many people who are not even Christians. As a matter of fact, those who are not children of God oftentimes find life generally much better than those who are the children of God. “Life is good” may be their motto, but this in no way indicates that they know God. The Psalmist found this a great dilemma when he asked why the righteous suffered and the wicked prospered (Psalm 73). An easy life and outward, physical blessings are not final conclusive evidence that you are a child of God or that you believe the gospel.

**The Gospel is not** that I have done great things for God. A man can preach from the pulpit, be an elder in the Church, even perform miracles in the name of Christ, and still not be a child of God. Jesus said in Matthew 7:22-23, “Many will say to Me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you, Depart from Me, You who practice lawlessness.”

**The Gospel is not** walking an aisle in a revival meeting or a church service. Just because you responded to a preacher’s call to come to the front of the Church, or came to the altar, does not mean you either understand or believe in the gospel. Many preachers have a psychological quota they must meet to consider themselves successful. Many people have been manipulated into responding to an altar call who do not understand or believe the gospel.

**The Gospel is not** either having decided for Jesus or having invited Jesus into my heart. Neither of these acts on the part of man indicates that you understand or know the gospel. There are thousands of people who have decided for Jesus or invited Jesus into their heart, but do not either understand or believe the gospel. No where in the Bible is the gospel ever described as deciding for Jesus or inviting Jesus into your heart. I challenge you to try to find that particular language.

Thus none of these acts or beliefs, although some are part and parcel with the gospel, is the gospel. None of them give final evidence that you either understand or believe the gospel. That is why I said previously that I believe that the gospel has been lost today. We have many modern false substitutes.

## **What the Gospel Is**

What then is the gospel? Let me describe the gospel to you. First, to understand the gospel, you must believe that you are in a hole so deep, that there is nothing you can do to get yourself out. There is nothing you can do to save yourself. Your analysis of your condition is similar to being at the bottom of a pit a hundred miles deep with walls covered with slippery oil. There is no ladder or rope, and it would appear that there is no one within a thousand miles to hear your cry. In addition, the hole is full of poisonous snakes. You are there because of sin. You have broken God’s law, you have failed to

measure up to His standards, and He is angry with you. You are hopeless, and you are in a hopeless situation. Ephesians 1: 1-3 describes our situation before we become Christians, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” We were dead men; not sick men who could in some sense help ourselves. Dead men are hopeless men. They have no ability to give themselves life, or to repair their dead bodies.

Secondly, to understand the gospel, we must understand that we were not able to decide for Jesus. It is not even a question of whether we decided for Jesus, but rather a question of whether Jesus decided for us. The evidence that Jesus has decided for us is that we have been born again. As sinners apart from God, we needed to be born again. Jesus said in John 3:7-9, “Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said to Him, How can these things be?” John also tells us in John 1: 12-13, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Freewill never saved any man. Man’s will is in bondage to his sinful nature, and unless God changes man’s nature, man will never believe the gospel. Those who believe the gospel were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Paul said in Ephesians 1: 3-5, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will...” In Acts 13:48 Luke describes those who had believed the gospel as those who “had been appointed to eternal life.”

Thus, not only must we see first that we are dead in sins without any ability to help ourselves out of the deep pit of sin, but also, that unless Jesus decides for us, unless we are predestined from the foundation of the world for salvation, then we have no hope. Unless a man is foreordained to salvation, he cannot be saved.

My friend, the point is this, that you cannot understand or believe the gospel until there has been removed from you every possibility of your contributing, adding, or complementing in any way to the work of Christ as He saves His people. To believe the gospel you must first be driven a hundred miles into a deep dark hole. You have sinned against God, broken His law, and His wrath abides on you. You have no ability to save yourself; you have no ability to bring yourself out of that deep hole. You are in a hopeless situation. If you do not see this, it is my opinion (and I believe also the opinion of great men like Calvin, Luther, and Spurgeon) that you do not know what the gospel is.

At this point you may ask, “What can I do?” The answer is, you can do nothing! The biblical question is, “What must I do?” (Acts 2:37). This is the way a man must ask the question. The word “can” assumes that you have the ability to do something. The word “must” assumes that you have no ability, but that you do have responsibility.

The answer then to the question as to the nature of the gospel, is that in recognizing your terrible condition; you must flee to Christ and plead for His mercy, trusting that He is able to deliver you out of your present condition. You must believe in His power, His promises, and His work on the cross to forgive you of your sins. You must believe that He can pull you out of your present condition, and set you on a new pathway of serving and loving Him. Only He can do this by His power. You have nothing to add to His power. You are not His copilot. Your trust is not in yourself, or in your faith, but in His power to save you. Only He can clean up your nasty heart. Only He can plead your case before the Heavenly Father.

Only Christ can save us and make us children of God. We have no ability to do so ourselves. All we can do is cry out for His mercy, asking for grace to trust in His power and promises. As we flee to Christ, hoping, trusting, committing ourselves to Him alone who has the ability to save us, then we are justified by that faith. We are declared righteous on the basis of His life and work on the cross. Romans 5:1 tells us, “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...” Like Abraham of old, we are reckoned as being righteous because we believe and trust in the promises of God. (Romans 4:3) We need perfection to be accepted into Heaven. None of us have it. Justification is the forensic act of God whereby on the basis of our faith he declares us righteous (perfect). The righteousness of Christ, which is perfect, is charged to our account, even though we did not earn it or deserve it. It is ours by grace, and it opens the doors of heaven to us. Yet, we always recognize that even this faith which justifies us is a gift of God. It is not something that we contributed ourselves. It is our faith, but we have it because God gave it to us. “For by grace have you been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8)

Thus, you see, believing the gospel is indeed trusting in Christ, but trusting in Christ with a trust that He gave to us, because we were unable to trust in Him without His grace. We were unable to do anything. Because we realized that we were unable to do anything, we fled to Christ crying out for His mercy and forgiveness. This is the essence of the gospel. This is what the experience of every believer looks like. It is not so much that faith saves as it is that grace saves. Even more so, it is not so much that grace saves, as it is that Christ saves. Jesus saves, and Jesus alone saves!

I heard an explanation of this sometime ago that may help you focus on what I am trying to say. Once a man was asked as to the time when he was saved. He tried to prove his salvation by naming a date and time that he had decided for Jesus. This he thought was proof that he was indeed a child of God. Another man, with more insight to the real meaning of the Gospel, answered that He was saved about two thousand years ago about twenty minutes outside of Jerusalem on a hill called Golgotha. I hope you see the

difference between these two different gospels. One focuses upon the act of man, and the other focuses on the act of Christ. One focuses on the faith of the man, and the other on the work of Christ. One is a false gospel, and the other is the real gospel. Paul put it plainly in Galatians 6:14, where he says, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

In the light of how I have just described the gospel, John 3:16 really takes on a new meaning. It guarantees hope to all those who see themselves as Hell-bound sinners, so deep in a dark pit that there is no way out. It gives hope to a helpless man who flees to Christ as His only hope for forgiveness and deliverance. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." The critical word in this verse is not "believes", but the critical word is "Him". That is the difference between many modern false gospels and the true gospel of Jesus Christ. It is only Christ who can pull me out of this deep pit, cleanse my heart, and enable me to walk in His ways. The focus is upon Christ, not upon faith. Our faith must not be in faith, but in Christ. Having faith is not the gospel, but faith is only the means to appropriate the gospel defined in this article as the promises of the grace and power of the living Christ who saves His people from their sins.

It is by grace alone through faith alone that Jesus alone saves. This is our only hope. Nothing else will save you, but this gospel will genuinely save you. Flee to Christ and call out for His mercy and power. He will save you to the uttermost.