

IDENTIFYING THE GOSPEL

By

Curtis Dickinson

The Bible is often treated as though it were a kind of spiritual K-Mart, offering a great variety of things. The fact is that it more like a specialty store, offering one product — life in God's image — and all other items there are accessories to this one product.

A great amount of preaching, which is called “gospel preaching,” fits the K-Mart concept, but there really is only one gospel. Paul pinned down the facts of the gospel by writing “Now I make know to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you, which also your received, wherein you also stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast to the word which I preached unto you, except you believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received; that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he has been raised on the third day according to the scriptures” (I Cor. 15:1–4).

Here and elsewhere the gospel is identified as the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet this is not related to man as “good news” merely by the facts of Christ dying and rising from the dead. For it to be good news it must be coupled with man's basic problem and the assurance that it is the solution to that problem.

In the worldwide spiritual K-Mart of our day, the facts of Christ's death and resurrection are preached over and over without ever establishing any connection between these facts and the basic issue which grips the human race. It is as though the physician were prescribing a cure without ever having established a diagnosis. To understand the good news one must be conscious of the prevailing fact of the bad news.

This bad news and how it came about is given in the first three chapters of the Bible and established the diagnosis to which all the rest of scripture, especially the new Testament scripture applies.

In the beginning man was doubly perfect: within (in his person) and without (in relation to God and others), He was morally and physically perfect, pronounced by his Creator as “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

Moral perfection meant that man had no evil thoughts or motives. He thought God's thoughts. He obeyed God's voice. There was no sin, because in the mind of Adam there was not the thought of deviating from the course the Creator set.

He was perfect physically. God does not present to us a dualistic man, a man of two separable parts. I was the whole man, body and spirit, that God created “in His likeness.” Scripture does not say that God created man's spirit in His likeness, but “Let us make MAN in our image and after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Then “God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). It is man as a bodily creature that God formed into His own likeness.

As a living soul of flesh and spirit man was undying. He was perfect physically as well as morally and thus personally perfect in the sight of God. Also, he was perfect in relationship to God. He knew God's will and did it. His relationship to God was exactly as designed: a created being following after the intent and desire of the Creator.

Adam's rejection of this design destroyed his perfection both in his personal nature and in his relationship to God. To eat of the forbidden fruit was to disobey his Creator and challenge His intent. "You shall know good and evil," the tempter said. This meant that Adam would decide for himself what was right and wrong with no reference to the design of the Creator. The same attitude is echoed by the humanist, the behaviorist and the atheist.

Between Creator and creature the power and command must flow in only one direction. The clay cannot tell the potter how it is to be fashioned. The creature must always fulfill the desire of the Creator. To do otherwise is to become different and, therefore, less than what he is created to be.

But the rejection of God's way did more. It annulled any purpose for Adam's existence. He was created to be in God's image, but when he rejected this purpose, there was no further reason for him to be sustained. Separated from the Creator he was doomed to return to dust (Gen. 3:19).

The gospel is the good news that man can be restored to the original: a creature in the image of God. It presupposes that man already knows the diagnosis: that because of sin he is doomed to die (The wages of sin is death), with no hope of becoming an eternal man in God's image. Against this background comes the good news that Christ "died for our sins." The preposition "for" has the import of "in place of," not "because of." It is as if one would say, "John went to the store for Mary." Since Mary could not go, John went in her place to do the shopping. Christ went in our place to judgment. "He who knew no sin was made to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (II Cor. 5:21). He died "for our sins" that we might not have to die for them ourselves.

God reveals this as a means of holding to His own integrity as a just God (Who holds to His original purpose and stated words, that the act of rebellion must result in destruction (Gen. 2:17), and at the same time makes it possible for Him to fulfill His desire to have a race of people who can fellowship with Him eternally. The just sentence of death is passed upon Christ, who had no sin of His own, but assumed the guilt of ours. "Who his own self bare our sins in his body on the tree" (I Peter 1:24).

The meaning of this good news is obfuscated by the popular doctrine that the wages of sin is not death of the person, but rather a continuation of life into eternity under a system of perpetual torture. The term given to death at judgment is "spiritual death," in spite of the plain terminology used in scripture indicating that the unredeemed are to be destroyed wholly. "The soul that sins, it shall die" (Ezek. 18:20).

If Christ died ("I lay down my life that I may take it again" John 10:17), to meet the penalty of sin, then the final penalty for sin must certainly be death—the giving up of life.

Another obstacle to understanding the gospel is the popular idea that God is a benign Benevolence who would not destroy anyone for their sins.

As one evangelist put it, "God is standing at one gate inviting you to everlasting life; the devil is standing at the other, inviting you to everlasting death." NOT SO! God stands at both gates! "I have the keys of death and of hades," Jesus said. Death is God's decree against sin. The final destruction by fire is to be the word of God, not by the power of the devil (II Peter 3:6–7). Judgment is delegated to Christ, and the day for it is

appointed by God (Acts 17:30–31). Its result will be the destruction of all who are found in a state of rebellion or indifference to the Creator (II Thess. 1:9, John 3:36).

It is this conviction—that man fails to measure up to the intended design and must pay the penalty of death—that furnishes the background for the good news. Christ was a substitute dier who paid the penalty of death for all who have the true desire for God’s purpose to be fulfilled in them. Consequently the acceptance of the gospel is not merely an escape from the punishment of death but also an acceptance of the Creator’s will and purpose for one’s life.

The object of the gospel, therefore, is to restore man to his innocence and right relationship to his Maker in order that God might re-create him into His image—like HIM: righteous in morals, holy in desires, perfect in actions, undying in body and spirit and living in a perfect and sufficient environment of paradise.

God is eternal, and His purpose is eternal, unchanging and unchangeable (II Tim. 1:9, Eph. 3:11). He will have man in glorious and undying perfection, or He will not have him at all!

One who has this hope, John writes, will “purify himself as he is pure” (I John 3:3–4). It is inconsistent and unreasonable for one to claim the hope of the gospel while at the same time living without a conscious desire to be in constant fellowship with God. One truly converted by the gospel desires God’s presence and fellowship more than anything else, for this is the ultimate aim and result of the gospel.

Sermons on Christian ethics, character sketches, positive thinking, possibility thinking, emotional experiences, biographies of Bible Heroes, teaching on marriage, stewardship and prophecy—all may be Biblical and helpful. But they do not necessarily constitute the gospel. Thousands are swept forward to so-called “conversion” in great crusades, never once having heard the gospel, but rather having been stirred by well-planned psychological manipulation.

If a person doesn’t have faith in the fact of being salvaged from sin and death to righteousness and ultimate immortality, through the death and resurrection of Christ, then he has not believed the gospel.

On the other hand, if he has truly believed the gospel, then all the afflictions, burdens, difficulties and obstacles of this world will be seen as trifles in comparison to his relationship to the Creator and his expectation of glory and joy beyond imagination (II Cor. 4:17–18).

By comparison, all other religions of the world are hollow and pitiful fancies of childish minds. One saved by the gospel is saved from total death that he might become totally alive, eternally glorified in power and immortality like God. In His image! (I Cor. 15:42–44).

All this is done through the gospel, and by no other means in the world. All believers in this gospel are united: all saved from the same terrible fate, by the same redemptive act of Christ, to the same ultimate and glorious destiny and for the same purpose of being one with God and like God. The gospel is the basis of our unity.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

.....
Copyright © Curtis Dickinson. Formatted and Posted by Ken Fortier Ministries.
Permission is hereby granted by Mrs. Regina Dickinson to reproduce and distribute
Curtis' articles to as many as possible. This statement is to remain attached to this article
for permission to be valid. Vol. XXI, Number 11.
.....