

Interpreting the Gospel

By

Curtis Dickinson

The gospel—the “good news”—centers on what God has done through His Son Jesus in redeeming man from sin and death that he might live in fellowship with the Creator. It is the responsibility of the church to present this gospel to every creature, for it is the gospel that is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16, Mt. 28:19–21, Mark 16:15).

To put it mildly, there is a lot of confusion today as to what is meant by the “gospel.” Many people attend church all their lives and seldom hear the biblical gospel but may assume that it is being proclaimed in the many references to scriptures and expressed through the church’s numerous social programs. While the scope of Christ’s commandments certainly extend to every facet of life—public and private—the gospel itself is defined in certain prepositional terms.

The saying, “That’s the gospel truth,” has caused many to think of the gospel as any truth found in scripture, especially in the first four books of the New Testament, often labeled as “The Gospels.” Other proclaim as “gospel” the terms of salvation—faith, repentance, and baptism, being born again or receiving Christ, etc. These identify man’s response to the gospel, but the gospel is not what man does; it is what God has done.

Paul defined the gospel as Christ’s death for sin, His burial, and his resurrection (I Cor. 15:3). In these three events is summed up the redemptive work of God and its implications.

“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.” He was not a martyr, and he didn’t die just to demonstrate God’s love, although He did that, too. His death was not an act designed to stir our emotions that God might have our attention. Indeed, that is one of its effects but not the reason for it. In that Jesus died for us, He died for our sins. Peter explains that He bore our sins in His body upon the tree, and Paul says that He was made to be sin on our behalf (I Peter 2:24; II Cor. 5:21). These and many other scriptures present Christ’s death as vicarious, the One suffering the penalty of sin for the many (Isa. 53).

The gospel of God’s grace must be interpreted against the background of sin and death. To get the message of Christ’s death one has to have a sense of the criminality of sin and its inexorable consequence: death! The modern church shies away from any mention of sin, for the most part. I called on a couple who had visited the church on a Sunday when I had preached on repentance, and the man told me that he did not like to attend a church where sin was identified or made an issue! Of course, he didn’t have any difficulty in finding one where he would be comfortable. In our age of “anything goes...if it feels good, do it,” it is easy to rationalize our actions or fix the blame on external causes, so that it is unthinkable that anyone should be accused of sin! We all have our faults, but who had done anything worthy of death? To speak of Christ dying for sin is a foreign language to many modern men. As J. B. Phillips suggested, we must preach the diagnosis (sin) before we can preach the cure.

It was because of the wrath of God against sin that He sent His Son to save sinners by the sacrifice of Himself. The power of the good news of His death is

diminished in ratio to the degree that sin is tolerated and condoned, and today in most quarters it is condoned by silence, if not by overt consent. Jesus said that He came not to call the self-righteous (those who consider themselves righteous, like the Pharisees) but sinners (those who humbly acknowledge they have sinned against God). The implication of the gospel is that our sin is a shameful violation of God's perfect creative purpose and deserves His wrath, but in extraordinary mercy He has gloriously provided a cleansing Savior.

The cross implies judgment. How seldom one will hear anything about a fiery judgment in which the unredeemed are destroyed from the face of God (II Thess. 1:9). Yet this is the reason Christ died for our sins, because all who face God in judgment without having sins forgiven through Christ will be put to death. Christ's death was a judgmental death because He was bearing our sins and therefore "became sin" on our behalf to suffer the penalty of death as judgment. This is good news, that judgment is past for all who are in Christ Jesus (John 3:16–18), Rom. 8:1).

"And that he was buried." Burial is what happens to the dead. One dies and is buried. Death is bad news, for it is the enemy of God and man. Abraham, Moses, David—all died and were buried. Jesus died and was buried, but He arose. The good news is that the grace cannot prevail of the Christian (Mt. 16:18), for Jesus has the power over the grave (Re. 1:18) and will call forth the dead and give immortality to those He has redeemed.

Jesus was not buried in the ordinary manner. His tomb was sealed with an official Roman seal, meaning that it was against the law for anyone other than a government official to open it. Resurrection was against the law! By breaking that seal in a supernatural manner Jesus demonstrated that all power of His enemies was broken. "All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18). He arose with authority over the Roman government, over Israel, and over all governments of the world. Try as they could, they could not seal up the glorious power of God in a tomb of solid rock. It broke forth in the resurrection and now shines forth in His presence through His Spirit.

"And He has been raised on the third day according to the scriptures." Here is the heart of the gospel. For centuries Christian orthodoxy has maintained that the foundation of Christian faith is Christ's death. The cross has become its symbol, although without any biblical support. Resurrection is used as "proof" of Christ's deity and of His claims, and as a symbol of never-ending life, thus removing it from its central point in the gospel as the cornerstone in the foundation.

The resurrection of Jesus was nothing less than a restoration of life from the dead. "I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore" (Rev. 1:18). Christ's death was a real human death and involved His whole person. Otherwise sin's penalty would not have been met in death. "I lay down my life, that I may take it up again," He said (John 10:17). Isaiah said of Him: "He poured out his life unto death" (Isa. 53:12). His resurrection was not merely the continuation of life, but the restoration of life that had been forfeited. Christ Jesus, therefore, became the first-fruits of them that are asleep" (I Cor. 15:20).

Resurrection is the very center of the gospel. The cross is the means, but the resurrection is the end. This is the good news: because sins are now put away through Christ's dying for them, I can have the sure hope of being resurrected, as He was, to live as an immortal creature in His image. This is the only hope, the only solution to sin and

death, and those who reject it and die in unbelief can only expect God's wrath and final condemnation to death.

Contrary to what one often hears at funerals, the reward of the saints is not something that takes place at death but at the resurrection. Paul teaches that if the dead are not raised, then faith is vain, we are yet in our sins and all they that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished (I Cor. 15:17–18). He writes of facing death with faith, “knowing that he that raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also with Jesus, and shall present us with you” (II Cor. 4;14). What a glorious experience awaits the believer in that day when he is raised with all the other saints and is given a body described as “incorruptible, glorious, powerful” and “spiritual” (I Cor. 15:42–44).

The resurrection say that God is able to overcome every obstacle. He has power over life and over death and the grave. If we believe that He can overthrow the power of death and bring us back from the grave, then we can believe that He can handle any and every problem we may face between now and then.

At the death of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, Jesus said that it was for the purpose of glorifying God. At the tomb, when they hesitated to open it because of the stench of death, Jesus reminded them that they were to see the glory of God. What they saw was not a manifestation of God's person, but the great work of God in giving life to the dead.

This is the glory of the gospel, the good news of LIFE. Not only that Jesus now lives never to die again, but that we also have this hope, to receive life and immortality. “We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like Him” and “everyone that has this hope set on him, purifies himself, even as He is pure” (I John 3:2–3). The church desperately needs to recapture the significance and glory of this truth, that every member might purify his life, knowing that this it's the ultimate goal. The world needs to hear this good news, in contrast to the popular mysticism that permeates almost all religious thought.

Let us imitate the faithful disciples of the early church, who “proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection of the dead!”

.....
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. XXVIII, Number 9.
.....