

What Is The Gospel? | EDC 2023-2024

Gospel-Centered Panel Night

Intro

Imagine with me for a moment that you have one night—and *one night only*—to share the gospel with a man on death row the night before his scheduled execution. The man is curious. He *wants* to know what the gospel is. In fact, the reason *you* are there is because this man asked for you to be there. He had you, specifically, brought to him so that you could tell him what the gospel is.

What would you say?

Or another way to ask it: what would you *have* to say in order for it to actually count as “the gospel?” What are the things that, if you were to leave them out, it would no longer be considered the gospel?

While you are thinking about and formulating your own answer to that question, listen again to these words from Andrew Wilson’s article titled: *What Is The Essential Gospel?*

“It’s a minefield: no matter what you say, you will miss something out, and somebody will point it out with their best disappointed face. You didn’t talk about sin. You didn’t talk about the kingdom. You only described the resurrection in passing. The Holy Spirit wasn’t mentioned. Neither was baptism. Neither was repentance. You didn’t preach ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’. You didn’t explain the cross, or substitutionary atonement, or the victory of Jesus, or grace, or the lordship of Christ, or ... Despite your best efforts, you obviously didn’t quite squeeze in the essential Gospel. Maybe next time.” — Andrew Wilson, *What Is The Essential Gospel?*

To let all of us off the hook a little bit, I spent time seeking out gospel summary statements from a wide range of pastors and theologians. Great church fathers from the past—Augustin, Calvin, Luther—and current pastors who are known for being “gospel-centered”—John Piper, Mark Dever, Tim Keller, R.C. Sproul—and on and on... Interestingly, every single one of them gave a different answer to the question, all with a different emphasis!

The most exhaustive/hilarious answer came from D.A. Carson who gave a lecture at *The Gospel Coalition* on “What Is The Gospel?” He structured his talk around the following:

“Eight summarizing words, five clarifying sentences and one evocative summary.”

It turns out that answering the question, “What is the gospel?” is actually much more complex than it at first appears. And that’s actually okay! A major reason why it’s so complex is because it’s so vast and beautiful! It’s like asking someone to explain what it was like to witness the birth of their child in one word...Or to explain what it felt like to see your wife walk down the aisle on your wedding day in one sentence...Any brief summary won’t do it justice...

The gospel has been described as a pool in which a toddler can wade and yet an elephant can swim.

So with that in mind, let me try and give a few answers to that question: “What is the gospel?” I want to answer that question in 4 different ways...

01. The Gospel & Historical Context

The Word “Gospel” In Today’s World

In our day, the word “gospel” is a church word. When we think of the word “gospel” we instinctively think about Christianity. We think about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, in our world today, we have things like: gospel-centered movements, gospel-centered books, gospel-centered preaching, *The Gospel Coalition*, *Together for the Gospel*, etc...

(And by the way, we should celebrate this! Yes and amen to the gospel-centered movement! May God multiply more of their tribe!)

The Word “Gospel” In The Ancient World

But in the early 1st century, this was not the case. The word “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) wasn’t primarily a Christian word at all. Interestingly, the word “gospel” was used primarily by the Roman Government...A Gospel announcement was made when one of two things happened:

01. A Roman Emperor/Caesar was born or put on the throne.

02. When a strategic and decisive Roman military victory occurred.

In fact, something called **The Calendar Inscription of Priene** from 9 B.C., found in the late 1800’s, says this about the birth of Caesar Augustus:

“Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations)...and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the gospel [εὐαγγέλιον] for the world, which have been proclaimed on his account...” — Calendar Inscription of Priene, (dated 9 B.C.)

The point being, that the word “gospel” carried with it very strong Roman connotation of either the birth/arrival of a new King or a decisive military victory for the kingdom of Rome.

“Son Of God”

In addition to that, Caesar Augustus claimed to be “*The Son of God*” and was considered to be divine by the Roman Empire...In fact, the Roman coins in the early 1st century had a picture of Caesar Augustus’ face on one side and the phrase *Divi filius* / “*Son of God*” in Latin on the other.

Therefore, when you put this all together, a common gospel announcement in the early 1st century sounded a lot like this: “*Caesar Augustus is our Lord and Savior! He has defeated our enemies and brought salvation and peace! He has ascended to the throne! He is our King! He is the Son of God!*” <— This was the “gospel” for the average Roman.

Why Does All Of This Matter?

With all of that history and backstory, think with me about those early Roman Christians secretly huddled down in the Catacombs. They had just received a new book from a man named Mark, one of the Apostle Peter’s closest friends. And the opening line of this book reads these massively subversive words:

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” — Mark 1:1

Mark is saying: It isn't Caesar who is Lord...JESUS is Lord...He is the true King who has come to defeat our enemies of Satan, Sin, and Death...He is the King who has come to rescue us... He is the one who has come to re-make this world and usher in His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This is the real good news that needs to be heralded.

The Gospel Is Subversive

Since the very beginning, the good news about Jesus has been a massively subversive claim to the surrounding culture, and it continues to be to this very day. Because of sin, our human tendency is to always establish other "lords," other "saviors," other "kings," other visions of "salvation," or what constitutes "good news." And it's in the face of all of those other fraudulent claims and faux "gospels" that the ACTUAL GOOD NEWS of Jesus comes breaking in.

(And that leads me to the second thing I want you to consider.)

02. The Gospel & The Gospels

So What Is The Gospel?

One legitimately good answer to the question "what is the gospel?" goes something like this:

"The Gospel According to Mark, chapters 1-16..." Or...

"The Gospel According to Matthew, chapters 1-28..." Or...

"Luke has a great answer in his Gospel account, chapters 1-24..." Or

"John has a really unique take on it in his gospel account."

We Need A Recovery Of The Gospels As THE Gospel

Let me give you a few reasons why...

First, The Gospels Deal With The Whole Story

The Gospel is a climactic moment in a *story*, so it cannot be separated from the story without losing its power altogether (Andrew Wilson). What you have in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is the climactic moment of the entire story of the Old Testament. Knowing that story is essential for making sense of *how* and *why* the Gospel Accounts are actually offering us breathtakingly good news. Let me explain it like this:

- Reading *"In the beginning was the Word..."* in John 1 is wildly different after reading *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth"* in Genesis 1.
- Reading the opening of Matthew's gospel: *"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham"* is wildly different after reading about the genealogies and stories of David and Abraham.
- Reading that Jesus came down from heaven with grace and truth is wildly different after reading that Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Law...
- Reading that Jesus came to dwell with / "tabernacle among" us is wildly different after reading the wilderness wanderings of Israel.

- Reading that Jesus is the "Second Adam" who said YES to His Father in a Garden is wildly different after reading that about the First Adam who said NO to the Father in a Garden.
- Reading that Jesus' coronation to the throne was through a cross is wildly different after reading about the failed kings of Israel who tried to take the throne by force.
- Reading about Jesus dying *outside of the city* is wildly different after reading about the consequences for the unclean in the purity laws in the Old Testament who were sent outside the camp.
- Reading about Jesus dying on a tree for our curse is wildly different after reading about the curse for those who are hanged on a tree in Deuteronomy.
- Reading about Jesus' sacrifice for sins is wildly different after reading about the sacrificial system in the Old Testament.

Second, The Gospels Remind Us That The Work Of Salvation Is Inherently Trinitarian

Father, Son, and Spirit are all powerfully at work in each of the Gospel accounts...The Father gives the Son. The Son dies for us. The Spirit brings us life.

We don't hide from the Father behind the work of the Son. The Father so loved that He gave. We are brought back to the Father through the work of the Son. We enjoy the Father and Son through the work of the Spirit.

Third, The Gospels Communicate Good News From Different Perspectives For Different Cultures

Its one timeless, true story applied in timely ways. I don't have the margin to fully unpack this here, but its fascinating that God chose to inspire four different historical accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. All four Gospel Accounts offer us different perspectives for different communities with different backgrounds.

To be a gospel-centered Elder means many things, but, it at least means that you are so aware of THE STORY and so aware of the stories of the flock among us that you know how to apply this good news to the specific people God has called you to serve and lead.

The gospel is a climactic moment in a vast story. Its complex. Its massive. And not everything should be reduced down to 144 characters.

But does that mean that any attempt at a *concise definition or summary of the gospel* is impossible to achieve? Not at all. In fact, several "gospel summaries" exist in the New Testament, and that leads me to the third thing I want you to see...

03. The Gospel & Summary Statements

Here Are Three Summary Statements To Consider Briefly...

The Gospel Of The Kingdom

"And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people." — Matthew 4:23

Let this blow your mind a minute...Jesus announced the gospel before his death and resurrection. There is something about the Kingdom of God itself that is a “good news announcement” for the world, and it was what Jesus preached in Matthew. We will get into more of that in our “Kingdom-Focused” Distinctive, but suffice it to say that the gospel isn’t just about “me and Jesus.” Its an announcement of good news for the entire cosmos!

The Gospel Of Death & Resurrection

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...” — 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Absolutely loaded with meaning and significance. Pointing us towards the bigger Story found in the Old Testament to make sense of the work of Jesus in His death and resurrection.

The Unsearchable Riches Of Christ

“Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...” — Ephesians 3:7-8

The Gospel is the good news of the unsearchable riches we have in Jesus. The good news is that you and I get God! This is why John Piper isn’t actually wrong when he says: “God is the gospel.”

(And that leads me to the final thing I want you to see...)

04. The Gospel & Atonement

If The Gospel Is A Climactic Moment In The Story, Then The Cross Is The Absolute Crescendo Of That Climactic Moment

I realize I am mixing metaphors a bit here...But think about the significance of what Christ did for us on the cross. The symbol that represents Christianity in the world today isn’t a fish. It isn’t an empty tomb. It isn’t a dove. Its a cross. Why is that?

Because very quickly, the New Testament writers (especially Paul) realized the absolute significance of the place of the cross of Jesus in this over-arching story. This is why Paul, an expert in the Old Testament and a theological genius can say this in 1 Corinthians 2:

“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” — 1 Corinthians 2:1-2

The Multi-Faceted Reality Of The Atonement

Multiple things are being done when Jesus climbs upon the cross and dies in our place. Here are just a few of them:

Propitiation (1 John 4:10) — Jesus bears and absorbs the wrath, punishment, and justice that we rightly deserved for our sins. Represented in the Old Testament with the lamb/goat who was slaughtered.

Expiation (1 John 1:7) — Jesus makes us clean by removing our sin from us and separating it from His face, as far as the East is to the West. Represented in the Old Testament with the lamb/goat who was released into the wilderness.

Reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18) — In our sin, we were exiled from the presence of God and our relationship was broken. On the cross, Jesus died to reconcile us back to the Father.

Redemption (Titus 2:13-14) — A term from the Exodus narrative. We were slaves to Satan, Sin, and Death. Jesus redeems us from our slavery, brings out of death into life, and will one day bring us to the Promised Land. This is represented in Baptism. Israel safely passed through the waters of God's judgement into life with God. They were given a unique identity through the Law, the very presence of God, and the promise of a better country that was to come.

Christus Victor (Colossians 2:13-15) — On the cross, Jesus defeated all the spiritual forces of darkness and now reigns victorious. The world that was at one time Enemy-Occupied territory has been reclaimed by King Jesus through His work on the cross.

Closing

So to bring it full circle, you are invited to share the gospel with a man on death row the night before his execution. What do you say? Well, it depends. It depends on the man's story and the place where he, specifically, needs to hear the good news about Jesus.

Our job is to become as fluent in the story of the Gospel as possible so that we can apply the beauty of it, the subversive nature of it, the power of it, and the grace of it in whatever context we find ourselves in. This is what it means to be gospel-centered. Our whole lives are wrapped up in the gospel. The gospel becomes the lens by which we make sense of the world. The gospel story becomes THE STORY that re-shapes and subverts all other lower-case "s" stories.

I will close with one final quote from Andrew Wilson's article:

"In all of this, it should become obvious that no matter what people's stories are, the good news is ultimately very simple: Jesus. He is the Lord of the cosmos, the bringer of the kingdom, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the one who lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died, and then rose again, conquering sin, death, and everything that goes with it, and redeeming us from slavery, emptiness, ugliness and the grave itself. But he is so definitive, and his accomplishment so multifaceted, that he – his life, death and resurrection – can and should be presented as Gospel in literally dozens of ways." — Andrew Wilson, *What Is The Essential Gospel?*