



CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL WE ARE TO PROCLAIM TO NON-CHRISTIANS?

“For good reason, Christian people love the phrase “the gospel.” Tragically, however, multitudes of Christians fail to grasp the meaning of this phrase. In fact, I’m convinced there’s just as much confusion inside the Church as there is outside it regarding the gospel’s true meaning—sometimes even in churches where the gospel is regularly preached and taught.”¹

I agree. There is currently tremendous confusion in the Church about what the phrase “the gospel” means.

The bad news is that this confusion is having devastating effects on our efforts to evangelise the world. How so? First, there are many Christians who are confused about what the gospel is so they say nothing. Then there are those who think they know what the gospel is but really they don’t know. Tragically, most often this latter group are peddling a false gospel gutted of its power to save. So exactly what is “the gospel”?

The word “Gospel” means “good news.”

1 Tullian Tchividjian. *Surprised by Grace: God’s Relentless Pursuit of Rebels*. Crossway Books. 2010, p.16

In one sense, the whole bible is “the gospel.” In fact, one version of it is called “**The Good News Bible.**”

However, when Jesus said “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel” (Mark 16:15) He was referring to a specific message from *within* the bible. I call this the sharply defined New Testament gospel message.



The gospel (i.e. the Bible) has three aspects:

- **The works** of the gospel
- **The effects** of the gospel
- **The words** of the gospel

For example, when I dig a water well for the poor in a third world country, my digging is a work of the gospel. When the poor start to receive fresh water from the well and their thirst is satisfied, this is an effect of the gospel. However, the people in the village where I dug the well have still not heard the words of the gospel.

We could say the works are the actions of Christians, the effects what results from the actions of Christians, and the words a carefully-crafted salvation message. When Jesus commanded “*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel*” (Mark 16:15) He was referring to the words, not the works or effects.

In the next chapter I elaborate on the truth that the gospel has these three aspects. In this chapter, I am going to focus on the words of the gospel. So come with me and let’s explore this together.

A Christian and a non-Christian were having a conversation along the following lines:

Christian: “We need a bridge between us and God.
That bridge is Jesus.”

Non-Christian: “But why do I need a bridge? If God is love and all powerful, why doesn’t He just extend His all-powerful arm down from heaven and whisk us up there to be with Him?”

Christian: “Because our sins have separated us from Him.”

Non-Christian: “What do you mean by ‘sins’?”

Christian: “All the wrong things we do in our



lives.”

Non-Christian: “Hang on a minute. Sometimes my neighbours have parties.

They know

I’m not perfect, but they invite me to their party in spite of my imperfections. They don’t cut me off, because they’re loving people. So why would God reject me because of my ‘sins?’ By accepting me unconditionally, surely my neighbours must be more loving than God?”

Christian: “Jesus died on the cross to show us His love and to make a way for us to be forgiven and to get to heaven.”

Non-Christian: “But I don’t see why anyone had to die on a cross. Why isn’t God just like my loving neighbour who just invites me in? Like I said, if God is all powerful and loving, He could just haul us all into heaven when we die! Your explanation doesn’t make sense.

Christian: “Mmmmm.....”

What can we learn from this about evangelism? First, it’s easy to be misunderstood. Christian terms and concepts, not properly explained can easily confuse non-Christians. Secondly, we ought to be sure about the content of our message. **Dr Billy Graham** found there was much confusion in the Church today about the message of evangelism – a fact which “*should send us back to our Bibles,*



*carefully and prayerfully studying to uncover the heart of God’s message to an unbelieving world.”*² Like an animal driven to extinction, some commentators believe the essential gospel preached by the Early Christians has been lost.



“*Is your preaching so wimpy it would never trouble a religious hypocrite?*”

Dr James White

Is the following man right...?

One such writer is **Dr James White**, Director of Alpha and Omega Ministries, a Christian apologetics organisation based in Phoenix, Arizona. He thinks much of what we preach today has lost its bite and substance. I hesitated to include this quote, because it appears so aggressive, but is he right?



“We will be less likely to proclaim a message we are unsure about.”

“The question I have to ask of many who stand behind pulpits today is this: is your preaching so wimpy it would never trouble a religious hypocrite? Do you pull back on those elements of God’s truth that are the most offensive to the natural man because you do not wish to see that disdainful look, that annoyed shaking of the head? Do you so trust the ministry of the Spirit to make the Word of Christ come alive in the hearts and minds of Christ’s sheep, that you do not need to worry about those who will find offence at His truth? Or have you embraced the spirit of the age which places man’s fragile emotions upon the seat of prominence, and has bought into the idea that to be loving means to never give offence to anyone... well, except God. Do you offend Him by thinking yourself so wise you can edit out what should no longer be in the gospel in our day? ...think about it.”³ Is this too harsh? Or is **Dr White** issuing a valid exhortation to jealously guard the content of the Biblical gospel?

International evangelist **Greg Laurie** says it is important to know the content of the gospel for two important reasons:

“(1) We want to make sure that we have heard the true gospel and have responded to it, lest we have a false hope concerning a salvation we think we have; and (2) Jesus told us to ‘go into all the world and preach the gospel’ (Mark 16:15). Those words are not addressed merely to pastors, teachers, evangelists, and missionaries; they are addressed to every follower of Jesus Christ. We cannot be disengaged or disinterested in this subject, for people’s eternal



destinies hang in the balance. What would you think of a surgeon who just started cutting away at a patient without really knowing what he was doing? One mistake, and that person would be disabled for life or could even die on the operating table. Yet this message we bring has even more far-reaching consequences – for there are eternal ramifications. Still, so many are sloppy in this area.”⁴

Greg Laurie is right. We need to know the content of the gospel we are to proclaim. Other gospels do not have saving power. The enemy knows this. He has done his best to either confuse us about the content of the gospel, or hide its content from us. His motive? He knows we will be less likely to proclaim a message we are unsure about. In not proclaiming it, non-Christians will not hear it and, not hearing it, “*the power of God for their salvation*” (Romans 1:16) will be kept from them. Hence when we fail to carefully define the gospel, we lose vital ground in the war for souls.

Seven other good reasons to take care in defining the gospel.

Between 1999 and 2013 I spent many hours in university and Bible College libraries seeking to answer the question, “*What is the gospel?*” I did this for several reasons:

1. In Galatians 1:6-9, Paul warned the early Christians sternly that if they preached “another” gospel they would be eternally condemned. I reasoned that if my life passion was to mobilise the Church



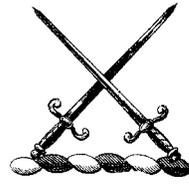
“The Church cannot evangelise unless she is certain of her evangel.”

Dr Leighton Ford

- around the world to proclaim “the gospel,” then I had better get it right. If I did not do my homework I would risk bringing my students and myself under the same condemnation.
2. Many “other” gospels are already being preached today. I did not want to add another to the list.
3. I was aware of the danger of personal bias. All of us read and interpret the Bible through the lens of our own background and experiences, and I would be unwise to pass on to other Christians

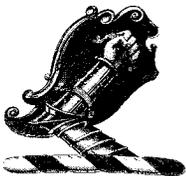
4 Greg Laurie. *How To Share Your Faith*. Tyndale Books, 1999, p.48

a gospel based solely on my own thinking. I needed to check my understanding against the findings of trusted scholars.



4. I wanted those whom I trained to succeed, so I could ill afford to pass on any other gospel than the one God would work through to win souls.⁵ I yearned to see not just God glorified and souls saved, but also Christians released into abundant fruitfulness so God could use them to save people through the gospel.
5. I did not want to fail Jesus. As we saw earlier, when Jesus said “*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to all creation*” (Mark 16:15) He wanted us to deliver to non-Christians a carefully-crafted and well-defined salvation message. If I did not commit myself to finding out what this was, I would be in danger of disappointing my Saviour.
6. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul exhorted his young disciple Timothy to “*do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*” God calls us to accuracy.
7. I wanted to empower evangelists biblically. In Ephesians 4:11-12 we are told evangelists are not to do all the evangelism themselves. Their main task is to show *everyone in the Church* who does not have “the gift of evangelism” how to proclaim or spread the gospel. If the evangelists themselves cannot define it, they will be unable to show other Christians what to say. When this happens, evangelism at the local level atrophies.

Dr Leighton Ford, past Vice President of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has said, “*the Church cannot evangelise unless she is certain of her evangel [i.e. the gospel message].*”⁶



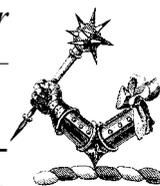
What I found...

Evangelist **Greg Laurie** said: “*The gospel in a nutshell is that Christ died for our sins, was*

5 This is not saying that evangelism is to be equated with winning souls. When the gospel is truly proclaimed, souls will be won, but very often it will not be the one who did the proclaiming who sees the conversion. (e.g. see John 4:37-38).

6 Leighton Ford. *The Christian Persuader: A New Look At Evangelism Today*. Harper and Row, 1976, p.24

buried, and was raised on the third day. There are other elements I could mention, but that is the cornerstone – the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁷



Charles Spurgeon (1834-92), England’s best-known preacher for most of the second half of the nineteenth century, was asked to summarise the Christian faith in a few words. He said, “*Jesus died for me.*”⁸ Theologian and author, **J.I. Packer** writes: “*In short, the Good News was just this, that God has executed His eternal intention of glorifying His Son by exalting Him as a great saviour for great sinners. Such was the gospel Paul was sent to preach.*”⁹

The Dean and Professor of Theology of Missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, **Tite Tienou**, proposed two distinctive features of the gospel message:

“1. *The author of the gospel is God.*

2. *The core of the message is saving grace. The gospel is neither a plan devised by people nor a programme crafted by clever thinkers,*” he said. “*It is as dependable as God Himself. It is the good news that God, the ruler of the universe, is in the business of extending His saving grace to humans.*”¹⁰

But what, specifically, is the content of this “*saving grace to humans*” message from God?

D *iscovering the content of the gospel.*

Many Bible scholars have tried to answer this question.

What follows is a summary of my findings.



The theologian and New Testament scholar **C. H. Dodd** said the gospel was a fixed message with six points.¹¹

1. The age of fulfilment has dawned.
2. This has taken place through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.
3. By virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted

7 Greg Laurie. *How To Share Your Faith*. Tyndale Books, 1999, p.43

8 Cited in: Greg Laurie. *How To Share Your Faith*. Tyndale Books, 1999, p.43

9 J.I. Packer. *Evangelism And The Sovereignty Of God*. IVP, 1999, p.47

10 Tite Tienou. *This We Believe: The Good News Of Jesus Christ For The World*. Zondervan, 2000, pp.176-77

11 Cited in Michael Green. *Evangelism In The Early Church*. Highland Books, 1984, p.63

to the right hand of God as Messianic head of the new Israel.

4. The Holy Spirit in the Church is the sign of Jesus' present power and glory.
5. The Messianic age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Jesus Christ.
6. The *Kerygma*¹² always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, and the promise of salvation.

Commenting on **Dodd's** understanding, **Dr Michael Green** said this view had found widespread acceptance in the English-speaking world, and scholars such as A.M. Hunter, J.O. Sanders, F.V. Wilson, C.S.C. Williams and F.F. Bruce had accepted it in broad outline.¹³

Another renowned author and scholar, **Dr Bo Reicke**, argued that the early apostolic preaching of the gospel followed a three point pattern:

1. **Thesis:** Jesus was the Servant of the Lord.
2. **Proofs:**
 - a. His life showed Him to fulfil these titles.
 - b. Scripture bore witness to Him.
 - c. He was raised from the dead.
 - d. The miracles demonstrated the power of His resurrection.
3. **Conclusion:** Everyone must turn to the Lord, including the Gentiles.¹⁴

Floyd Filson¹⁵ and **T.F. Glasson**¹⁶ broke the gospel into five points, other writers three¹⁷ and one seven.¹⁸

So where is "the gospel" defined in the Bible?

Theologians, evangelists, and leaders at



12 *Kerygma* is a term scholars use to describe the essentials of the gospel message.

13 Michael Green. *Evangelism In The Early Church*. Highland Books, 1984, p.293

14 Cited in Harry L. Poe. *The Gospel And Its Meaning*. Zondervan, 1996, p.24

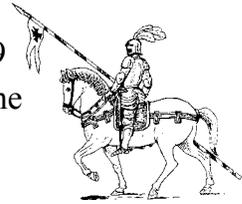
15 F.V. Filson. *Jesus Christ The Risen Lord*. Abingdon Press, 1956, p.41ff

16 T.F. Glasson. *Hibbert Journal*. Allen & Unwin, London ,1953, p.129ff

17 A.M. Hunter. *The Message Of The New Testament*. The Westminster Press, 1945, p.29

18 B. Gartner. *The Areopagus Speech And Natural Revelation*. Uppsala: CWK Gleerup, 1955, p.26ff

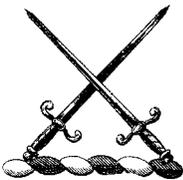
the Lausanne Conference in 1974 defined the gospel on the basis of two texts: Acts 2:22-39 and 1 Corinthians 15. They concluded it had the following content:



1. At its very simplest, the gospel is Jesus.
 - i. His death and resurrection.
 - ii. His birth, life, words and works.
 - iii. His reign and return.
2. The apostles focused on the death of Jesus for our sins and on His resurrection from death.
 - i. Jesus Christ died for our sins, to bear our condemnation and secure our justification.¹⁹
 - ii. He was raised to prove that His sacrifice for sin was accepted and that He had not died in vain.
3. He is the historical biblical Jesus, the Christ of the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments.
4. Jesus is now the reigning Lord. As such, He offers:
 - i. Forgiveness of sins.
 - ii. The gift of the Holy Spirit.
5. To receive these gifts we must repent and believe.
6. Baptism.

The Lausanne Covenant Documents called this outline “*the irreducible minimum of the apostolic gospel.*”²⁰

Dr Millard Erickson, Research Professor of Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary: “*The essential points of the gospel are Jesus Christ’s status as the Son of God, His genuine humanity, His death for our sins, His burial, resurrection, subsequent appearances, and His future coming in judgment.*”²¹



19 What is justification? Many metaphors could describe it. Here is one. It was the custom of kings and chiefs to keep a book or roll of their subjects. The book had two lists. One was the list of those who were true, good and loyal subjects. The other was the list of those who were disobedient, rebellious, and disloyal and who deserved nothing but punishment. Paul’s picture (in 2 Corinthians 5:19) was that our names were on the roll of those who deserve punishment, but, because of what Jesus did, our names were taken from that roll and put on the roll of those the king loved.

20 John Stott (Ed). *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents From The Lausanne Movement 1974 – 1989*. Foreword by Billy Graham. Paternoster Press, 1996, pp.20-21

21 Millard Erickson. *Christian Theology*. Baker Books, 1988, p.1063



“Where is the centre of historic Christianity in terms of theology and significance? When you add up all the doctrines, statements, creedal pronouncements and attempts at systemisation, what do you have? Take the Bible, go to the New Testament, turn to Romans, find chapter 3, locate verses 21-26, and focus in on verse 24. There you have the central teaching of the Bible on the Christian faith.”

Murray Harris

T*he epicentre of the gospel? Justification by faith.*

Dr Don Carson, Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, edited a book called *Telling the Truth: Evangelising Post-Moderns*.²² One of the contributing authors, **John Nyquist**, asserts the epicentre of the gospel we are to proclaim is found in Romans 3:21-26:

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This

righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – He did it to demonstrate His justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

Nyquist comments on this passage: *“Martin Luther called Romans ‘the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel.’ He believed every Christian should know it ‘word for word, by heart, and occupy himself with it every day as the daily bread of his soul.’ In the margin of Luther’s Bible, he referred to this passage, where Paul speaks of justification by faith, as the*



“God the Father sees you and me as perfect, having only ever done what is right – the same way as He sees Jesus.”

‘chief point and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.’”

Leon Morris, in his commentary, suggests this passage may be *“possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”*



Murray Harris, retired Professor of New Testament Exegesis at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and former Warden of Tyndale House in Cambridge, offered this simple logic about the passage from Romans on the occasion of his last faculty devotional before retirement in 1997: *“Where is the centre of historic Christianity in terms of theology and significance? When you add up all the doctrines, statements, creedal pronouncements and attempts at systemisation, what do you have? Take the Bible, go to the New Testament, turn to Romans, find chapter 3, locate verses 21-26, and focus in on verse 24. There you have the central teaching of the Bible on the Christian faith.”*²³

The gist of Romans 3:24 is that *through grace Jesus justifies us*. What, then, is *justification*? Theologian **Louis Berkhof** defines it as the *“legal act of God by which He declares the sinner righteous on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.”*²⁴

What was the heart of the Christian gospel for **John Wesley**? It was *sola fide*, justification by faith alone.²⁵

Historian and scholar **Laurence Bates** comments on what Martin Luther considered the heart of the gospel: *“Martin Luther dealt the symbolic blow that began the Reformation when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, on 31st October, 1517.”*²⁶ That document contained an attack on papal abuses and the sale of indulgences by church officials. But Luther



“If we are not proclaiming the New Testament gospel, we cannot expect the fulness of God’s blessing to follow its delivery.”

23 *ibid*, pp.167-68

24 Louis Berkhof. *A Summary Of Christian Doctrine*. Banner of Truth, 1938 rp1962, p.128

25 Cited in: Robert E.Coleman. *Nothing To Do But Save Souls*. John Wesley’s charge to his preachers. Wesley Heritage Press, 1994, p.61

26 To read all the 95 theses, go to [http://www.historyguide.org/earlymod/95 theses.html](http://www.historyguide.org/earlymod/95%20theses.html)

himself saw the Reformation as something far more important than a revolt against ecclesiastical abuses. He believed it was a fight for the gospel. Luther even stated that he would have happily yielded every point of dispute to the Pope, if only the Pope had affirmed the gospel. And at the heart of the gospel, in Luther's estimation, was the doctrine of justification by faith – the teaching that Christ's own righteousness is imputed to those who believe, and on that ground alone, they are accepted by God."²⁷

Defining justification, the late **Dr William Barclay**, a leading Greek scholar, writes: "It means that God, even when we have done wrong, still treats us and still loves us as if we had done nothing but right."²⁸

This means that through Jesus, God the Father sees you and me as perfect, having only ever done what is right – the same way as He sees Jesus. So, as we seek to define the gospel we are to proclaim to non-Christians, justification by faith should be at its very core. Sadly, many other topics other than justification dominate the many false gospels being preached today. For example:

Come to Jesus. He will...

1. Fix whatever problems you have.
2. Give you purpose and destiny.
3. Heal you, your marriage, your business, and your relationship failures.
4. Help you have a better quality of life.
5. Fill the God-shaped vacuum in your heart.
6. Give you success and help you lose weight.
7. Make you financially rich.
8. Help you find your lost budgie.

As always, there are often slivers of truth, to one



"Instead of the faithful proclamation of the gospel, evangelism becomes a pathetic exhortation to bad men to be good and (more often) good men to do better."

Dr John Stott



27 <http://www.educ.msu.edu/homepages/laurence/reformation/Luther/Luther.htm>

28 William Barclay. *Ambassador For Christ*. The Saint Andrew Press, 1973, p.166

degree or another, in these false gospels. The great problem with the false gospels above is that the core of the genuine gospel, justification by faith, is missing. The extent of our deviation from this core will determine the extent of the loss of Holy Spirit power in our messages. If we are not proclaiming the New Testament gospel, we cannot expect the fulness of God's blessing to follow its delivery. So the epicentre of the gospel is justification by faith and the crown and glory of it is Jesus Christ. **Dr John Stott** warns against the dangers of formulating the content of the gospel merely on the basis of our own experience and opinion:

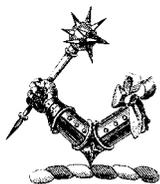


“We are not to preach a vague Christ but a precise and particular Christ, namely the Christ of the New Testament. There is no other Christ to preach. The gospel is about Christ who came to save us. It is tragic beyond words that the Church has frequently diluted this high and holy purpose of God to save men through Christ. Instead of the faithful proclamation of the gospel, evangelism becomes a pathetic exhortation to bad men to be good and (more often) good men to do better, or an attempt to induce people to come to church and worship, or to apply Christian principles to industry, or even to find the highest common factor between Christian faith and non-Christian faiths so that we minimise the differences and join in corporate devotion.”²⁹

So evangelism has much more in mind than attempting to make bad people good, and good people better. It is about Jesus Christ who came to reconcile people to Himself.

Summary so far...

1. The author of the gospel is God.
2. The core of the message is saving grace or justification by faith.
3. The Lausanne Covenant's definition of the gospel represents the broadest sweep of recent scholarship.
4. There is scope for creativity and versatility in preaching this essential gospel content.



5. Many scholars would agree with the conclusions of the Lausanne Covenant, that the gospel we are to proclaim to non-Christians can be defined. Yes, we have a precise body of truth about salvation through Jesus Christ to communicate. The gospel, as Jesus used this phrase in Mark 16:15, can rightly be described as a carefully-crafted salvation message from within the Bible.



“We Christians are a sub-culture with our own language and customs.”

The essential gospel in outline...

I sought to distil the research, and came to the conclusion that any gospel message we present to non-Christians must cover **FOUR ESSENTIAL AREAS OF CONTENT:**

- *Why we must be saved.*
- *How Jesus can save us.*
- *What we must do to be saved.*
- *The cost of becoming a disciple.*

This outline is sufficiently general so as not to constrain evangelism, yet sufficiently well-defined as to ensure critical content is covered.

Now we know the essential gospel outline, is that it? No, for the gospel is a message to be proclaimed, and there are five crucial communication issues which we must discuss before we move onto the next chapter. We need to understand:

1. We Christians are a sub-culture with our own language and customs.
2. The truths of the gospel must delivered in the right order.
3. That non-Christians must know they are completely lost and doomed before they will fully appreciate the love of Jesus.



“If we want to truly succeed with proclaiming the gospel to non-Christians today, we must define all our terms carefully, stay clear of religious jargon, and assume non-Christians know absolutely nothing about our subject.”



4. That most non-Christians are hungry to hear the gospel.

5. Evangelism is a discipline of faith.

GOSPEL COMMUNICATION ISSUE GONE: We Christians are a sub-culture with our own language and customs.

When we go into the non-Christian world and proclaim the gospel we must presume that our audience has never read a bible or entered a church. Many of the terms and concepts in the gospel message will be completely new to them, and the words foreign.

For example...

For example, to satisfy the first essential area of content we could simply say, *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”* But is that really helpful to non-Christians? For



“Knowing the Bible solves the problem of what to say. Knowing the non-Christian culture around us solves the problem of how to say it.”

example, what is *“sin”* to a non-Christian? What is the *“glory of God”*? And, for that matter, what does *“fallen short”* mean? *“And what does falling short have to do with me?”* a non-Christian might ask. *“And*

what God have I fallen short of? Buddha? Krishna? Allah?”

Here is another example of how we could miscommunicate these critical truths. To explain why we must be saved we might say, *“because we are sinners.”* To explain how Jesus can save us we might say, *“He died on the Cross.”* Similarly, regarding *“what we must do to be saved,”* we might answer ... *“Repent.”* To explain the cost of becoming a disciple, our answer might be, *“Take up your cross and follow Jesus.”*

Taking care to define our terms...

These answers may satisfy the criteria, and be theologically correct, but they don't explain and clarify the gospel for a non-Christian, making it easy for them to understand.



If we want to truly succeed with proclaiming the gospel to non-Christians today, we must define all our terms carefully, stay clear of religious jargon, and as I have said, assume non-Christians know absolutely nothing

about our subject. We do all this because we want them to truly understand the message. In the Parable of the Seed and the Sower (e.g. Matthew 13:1-32) the person who bore fruit was the one who heard the gospel **and understood it** (Matthew 13:23).

Helping them understand is our job. Bringing belief is God's job. Let's not get these two job descriptions mixed up.

The discussion at the start of this chapter between the Christian and the non-Christian illustrates the care we must take if we want to be effective in evangelism. The non-Christian in that conversation wanted to know why God could not just haul us into heaven if He truly loves us – and why sin is such a big deal if it is simply part of human nature.

Some gospel presentations and tracts circulating today potentially satisfy **THE FOUR ESSENTIAL AREAS OF CONTENT** outlined above, and *Christians* could understand them, but for many non-Christians they don't make much sense at all. In other words, the person who wrote them is out of touch with the culture of the audience for whom they were written.

Evangelism is about truly understanding how non-Christians think **and** how God thinks.

Understanding the way God thinks determines the content of our message. Understanding how non-Christians think determines how we present it. With this thought in mind Paul writes: *"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel..."* (1 Corinthians 9:22-23).

Knowing the Bible solves the problem of what



"Understanding the way God truly thinks determines the content of our message. Understanding how non-Christians think determines how we present it."



to say. Knowing the non-Christian culture around us solves the problem of how to say it.

We must anticipate how non-Christians could misunderstand what we are trying to communicate. So many presentations of the gospel, either spoken or written, are constructed by Christians who have little knowledge of how non-Christians think because they are not regularly evangelising. They *think* they know how non-Christians think but really they do not know.

For example, a tract I recently reviewed said – in answer to the first question of why we must be saved – *“We have all done wrong things like lying, cheating, stealing, hating etc.”* But does this really explain why we must be saved? Many non-Christians would retort, *“Everyone does these things. They’re just natural! Why would God cast me into hell for doing these things. A loving parent wouldn’t*



“Before you print your next run of gospel tracts, why not test a few samples on some non-Christian strangers? Ask them to critique them honestly and tell you if they make sense.”

do that. So, are my parents more loving than God?” To hit home, lying, thieving, cheating, stealing etc must be communicated as behaviours which break divine laws. And what must precede this truth is that we live in a moral universe

which was created by a God who is perfectly just. And because He is perfectly just, He must punish lawbreakers.

These are serious questions to consider as we seek to communicate the gospel meaningfully.

So far we have discussed only the first essential area of gospel content (i.e. *“why we must be saved”*). The other three areas require as much care and consideration – if we want to communicate the gospel effectively.

A *sk non-Christians to critique your tracts...*

Before you print your next run of gospel tracts, why not test a few samples on some non-Christian strangers? Ask them to critique them honestly and tell you if they make sense. Then ask



them four questions: “From the tract you have just read, can you tell me:

- Why we must be saved?
- How Jesus can save us?
- What we must do to be saved?
- The cost of becoming a disciple?

But proclaiming the gospel is not just about fully appreciating that Christians are a sub-culture with unique language and customs. It’s also about unpacking the right truths in the right order. This is the second crucial communication issue we need to discuss.



GOSPEL COMMUNICATION ISSUE TWO: The truths of the gospel must be delivered in the right order.

It’s crucial to unpack the truths of the gospel in the right order.

For example, the reason God cannot haul us into heaven is that He is holy and just. In this respect He is utterly different from my neighbour. This is why, with the tools we have developed, we start our gospel presentation with an explanation of the holiness of God. It was Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones who said “*So evangelism must start with the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the demands of the law, the punishment meted out by the law and the eternal consequences of evil and wrong-doing.*”³⁰



We must presume non-Christians will not know what “holy” means, and so we define it. After this, we explain what is being saved, hence a discussion of the difference between body and soul. We don’t presume non-Christians know they have a soul, and so, we define the soul. Then follows a discussion of where the soul³¹ goes at death, either to heaven or to hell.

What creates the need to be saved in

30 Dr Maryn Lloyd Jones. *Studies On The Sermon On The Mount. (vol. one)* Inter Varsity Press, 1959. p.235.

31 We do not go into a discussion of the difference between the soul and the spirit at this stage, as this would unnecessarily complicate the message. Non-Christians can learn about these differences after they are saved and assimilated into a church.

the first place comes next, which is where original sin and Law breaking is detailed. We use “The Law” at this point, because God works through it to awaken people to their need to be saved (e.g Galatians 3:24; Romans 7:7). From here until the end of the presentation of the gospel, the same care and thought is needed at each point.

What’s important to grasp here is that an effective presentation of the gospel will build truth upon truth in a carefully thought through, logical, easy-to-follow sequence.

To view a presentation of this gospel message, please visit www.biblein11.com. To see how a church is using this gospel video please visit www.biblein11.org/tpbc. It’s very easy to implement the same concept in your church.

No discussion about the importance of delivering the truths of the gospel in the right order is complete without mention of the crucial function of “The Law” in evangelism. This is our third gospel communication issue.

GOSPEL COMMUNICATION ISSUE THREE: Non-Christians must know they are completely lost and doomed before they will fully appreciate the love of Jesus.

If non-Christians do not know first and foremost that they are lost, they will see no need for a Saviour. This being so, any effective gospel presentation will cover “The Law” very early on.

Dr Francis Schaeffer in his book **Death in the City** asks:



“I don’t want to give the impression that they are not interested in spiritual things. The truth is, they are really interested.”

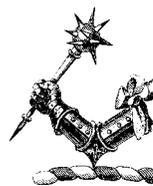


“Christianity has nothing to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need forgiveness.”

C.S. Lewis

“What would you do if you met a really modern man on a train and you had just an hour to talk with him about the gospel?” **Schaeffer** says, *“I would spend forty-five or fifty minutes to really*

show him his dilemma; to show him that he is even more dead than he thinks he is; that he is morally dead because he is separated from the God who exists. Often it takes a long time to bring a person to the place where he understands the negative. And unless he understands what's wrong, he will not be ready to listen to and understand the positive."³²



C.S. Lewis said much the same thing.

“Christianity has nothing to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need forgiveness. It is after you have realised that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the Law, and that you have broken that Law and put yourself wrong with that Power. it is after all



“I have learned that most people, if not all, are basically hungry for God, even though they show little sign of this on the surface.”

David Watson

*this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk. When you have realised that our position is nearly desperate you will begin to understand what the Christians are talking about.”*³³

These are the first three issues concerned with effectively communicating the gospel. But there is a fourth, and this one you'll find really encouraging. When I said that most non-Christians have never read a bible or entered a church, I don't want to give the impression that they are not interested in spiritual things. The truth is, they are really interested. Let me explain.

GOSPEL COMMUNICATION ISSUE FOUR: **Most non-Christians are hungry to hear the gosepl.**

After thirty years as an evangelist specialising in personal evangelism, I have concluded we tend to *overestimate* how much non-Christians know (we use words, phrases and concepts with which they are not familiar and we often fail to carefully define all our

32 <http://www.brfwitness.org/Articles/1978v13n4.htm>

33 C.S Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. Harper Collins. 1997. p26

terms³⁴) and we *underestimate* how much they want to know.

By this I mean that they are genuinely interested in God, heaven, hell, and spiritual issues. This is not the impression of the lost which circulates in most churches today. Like the 10 spies who

returned from the promised land with a negative report, we “talk up” how bad the world “out there” is, and how non-Christians are not interested us, our message, or our God. In my experience, nothing could be further from the truth.

After reaching tens of thousands of non-Christians with the gospel, my impression is that non-Christians are designed by God to hear *the* gospel. It is in their very DNA. Like moths drawn to a flame, the vast majority “connect” with this message when they hear it. For them, the gospel registers as relevant, interesting and important.



The late **David Watson**, one of Great Britain’s most successful and effective evangelists, reflected on what he had learned from many years of frontline evangelism about the state of the soil in the hearts of most non-Christians: *“I have learned that most people, if not all, are basically hungry for God, even though they show little sign of this on the surface.”*³⁵ From my own experience



“We have to remember the truth expressed by Augustine in that well-known saying, ‘O God, Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.’”

Rev. J.D. Jones

34 And non-Christians are too polite and gracious to tell us they don’t understand what we are talking about!

35 David Watson. *I Believe In Evangelism*. Hodder and Stroughton, 1976, p.101

I would agree.³⁶ With the right training in evangelism, and a good attitude, you too can have the same testimony as David Watson.

On the subject of non-Christians being designed by God to hear the gospel, the **Rev J.D. Jones** writes: *“Let us never forget that the heart of man is made for the reception of the Divine Word. We say that the heart of man is ‘desperately wicked’ (Jeremiah 17:9) and that is true. We have to remember the truth expressed by Augustine in that well known saying, ‘O God, Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.’”*³⁷



The small numbers who reject the gospel have usually been damaged by a bad church experience or by the poor behaviour of a Christian.³⁸ They are not born with a disdain for God and Christianity – it is developed.

The final gospel communication issue I wanted to touch on as I bring this chapter to a close is the issue of the relationship between evangelism and faith.

GOSPEL COMMUNICATION ISSUE FIVE: **Evangelism is a discipline of faith.**

When we go into the world and proclaim the gospel, we do so by faith. What does this mean? It means that we evangelise believing

36 For this reason, I cannot agree with the idea proposed by some that we ought to “look for what God is already doing and then join in.” If this means what I think it means, there are three assumptions here with which I contend. First, this idea presumes that God is not working in the lives of some people, which I cannot accept. Through conscience and creation He is always working in all people. Furthermore, many people around the world are praying general prayers for the lost, and God is answering those prayers. The hearts of all lost people are being softened through these prayers. Secondly, it assumes that we will easily be able to recognise where He is working. In evangelism, when I am observing a crowd, and considering to whom I will give the gospel, I am not enough of a spiritual giant to be able to x-ray the hearts of each person to “see where God is working and then join in.” Yes, the Spirit does sometimes lead, but often I simply choose the person who looks like they have time for a chat. It is not until I actually open discussion that I will have any idea of what He has been doing and where they are at with Him. Finally, the idea assumes that if I don’t see God working, I don’t need to do anything. This is not at all what Jesus taught. He specifically commanded us to be proactive with our evangelism. We are to “go to all” (Mark 16:15) rather than “look for what God is doing, then join in.” Conclusion: the idea to “look for what God is doing, then join in” is being used by the enemy to hinder evangelism.

37 J.D Jones. *The Gospel According To Mark. 1-6*. London Religious Tract Society, 1913, pp.149-152

38 This does not mean we have to be perfect before God can work through us. I talk extensively about this in chapter 11. Do not be discouraged when you feel like a weak, puny, pathetic Christian. Do the work of God anyway with all your heart, and He will make you stronger and better - as you go!

that God will honour His Word by growing the seed of the gospel that we plant. It means we put our trust and hope in the God who formulated the message and in the Holy Spirit to convict the person listening. It means believing that God will use us, and that the person listening will receive our message by faith and believe. Thinking in this way pleases God for the Bible clearly says, *“It is impossible to please God without faith”* (Hebrews 11:6).

And if we don’t see the fruit personally, we can believe, by faith, that someone else, somewhere, sometime, will. We can be sure that if we plant *the* seed, over time, the Holy Spirit will at the very least bring conviction and then in many instances conversion.³⁹

Let’s never forget the indispensable need to move in faith as we set out to evangelise the world. *“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you”* (Luke 17:6).

Ask God to fill you with faith as you move out into the world with His precious gospel in hand.

If you want to hear a truly amazing testimony of the faith one man had in God to grow the seed of the gospel he planted, and how he saw God deliver in the most remarkable way, please visit the home page our web site www.esisite.com and listen to the Mr Genor audio testimony. As you listen to this testimony, you’ll literally feel faith rising within you!

Now, let’s bring this chapter to a conclusion.

Conclusion

Make no mistake. The enemy does not want you to know all that I have communicated in this chapter. For once you know the content of the gospel, you’ll have the recipe in your hands to make a divine message which God will work through to divinely save people.

Next you need to act upon the five crucial communication issues I have raised concerning the delivery of this message.



³⁹ In chapter 11, I discuss in detail how ‘evangelism’ works and how God grows the seed of the gospel once it has been planted.

Then you will be able to proclaim it, announce it, share it, teach it and spread it effectively for the glory of God. Wow!

Evangelists with the Ephesians 4:11-12 gift - you'll be able to transfer precious truth to other Christians, and in doing so, release them to help evangelise the world. In turn, millions of non-Christians will, for the first time, begin to hear or read the gospel clearly and understand it. Through your training and equipping efforts, the gospel will become for them "*the power of God for salvation*" (Romans 1:16).⁴⁰

If we in the Church are sure the gospel can be defined, and we define it biblically, we will be in a perfect position to out-manoeuvre the enemy in a strategic aspect of the battle for souls. We'll transition from being part of the problem to being part of the solution. We'll help reverse the appalling truth that only 2% of believers in the West engage in evangelism.

Summary

- The gospel message can be defined.
- The gospel has three aspects: the works of the gospel, the effects of the gospel, and the words of the gospel.
- The author of the gospel is God.
- The core of the message is saving grace or justification by faith. If you hear "the gospel" being proclaimed and this is not the core of the message, it's not "the gospel" which is being proclaimed.
- To say "we have proclaimed the gospel" we must have covered certain content:
 - Why we must be saved
 - How Jesus can save us
 - What we must do to be saved
 - The cost of being a disciple
- There are five crucial issues which concern the communication of the gospel.

40 ESI can train you and your church to proclaim the gospel. There are many other excellent evangelism ministries which can also assist with training. e.g. Evangelism Explosion; Living Waters; OAC Ministries; Matthias Media, Train To Proclaim in Brisbane, Australia are just some. A search can be done on the internet to find your local contact.

1. Christians are a sub-culture with our own language and customs.
 2. The truths of the gospel must be delivered in the right order.
 3. That non-Christians must know they are completely lost and doomed before they will fully appreciate the love of Jesus.
 4. That most non-Christians are hungry to hear the gospel.
 5. Evangelising is a discipline of faith.
- All human beings are designed by God to be receptive to the gospel. In fact, in the vast majority of cases, they are hungry for it.
 - It is not enough to proclaim the gospel. We must do all we can to help non-Christians understand it.
 - **ACTION POINT:** Teach the people in your church the four essential areas of content of the gospel message. Teach them the three different aspects of the gospel. These are *fundamental truths* every Christian must know.
 - **ACTION POINT:** Help others come to an awareness of the serious issues raised in this chapter. Please can you email everyone on your address book and encourage them to do the same. Send them a PDF file of this chapter by writing to julian@esisite.com.

Given we now know the essential content of “the gospel,” next I want to show how the enemy has assaulted the truth of what you have just read in this chapter. His attack on this phrase “the gospel” is nothing less than ferocious. Come with me to the next chapter and I’ll show you what I mean...