

BACKGROUND READING

THE GOSPEL

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In just the opening 17 verses of Romans, Paul uses the word “gospel” no fewer than 6 times: Paul...set apart for the gospel of God (Ro 1/1); the gospel he promised beforehand...regarding his Son (v2f); God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son (v9); I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome (v15); I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (v16); For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed (v17).

In all, the word appears 96x in the (NIV) NT, which describes it variously as: the gospel of God, the gospel of God’s grace, the glorious gospel of the blessed God, his gospel; the gospel of Christ, the gospel about Jesus Christ, the gospel of our Lord Jesus, the gospel of/regarding his Son; the gospel of the kingdom, the gospel of your salvation; the mystery of the gospel, the message of the gospel; the light of the gospel, the truth of the gospel; the faith of the gospel, the work of the gospel, the cause of the gospel; my/our gospel (vs a different gospel); the/this gospel.

The word “gospel” is so much part of our life and vocabulary that it can easily lose its meaning or power. Even the world uses it, as a synonym for truth/trustworthiness: ‘that’s the gospel truth’, ‘his word is gospel’.

But what does it mean? Literally, good news. 87 out of 96 occurrences of the word “gospel” translate either the Greek noun *evangelion* (occurs 76x, translated “gospel” 70x and “good news” 6x) or the verb *evangelizo* (occurs 54x, translated as “announce/bring/preach/proclaim/tell the gospel / good news”) or both.

[The related noun *evangelistes* (appears 3x) is translated on each occasion as “evangelist/s”. And from this same Greek word, *evangelion*, we get not only the English word evangelist, one who tells the good news, but evangelical, beliefs based on the good news.]

There is a wider and a narrower meaning to this word, “gospel” (cf. main and starter motor): [wider] the whole body of NT truth/teaching, the totality of God’s saving work for and in man (it’s all good news, isn’t it?); [narrower] the kernel at the centre of that truth, the ‘starter’ message that brings us into that salvation.

In this series, I want to speak into aspects of this latter, narrower meaning of the word gospel.

Note that in doing so I am not attempting to preach the gospel to you or to give you an outline of the gospel for your preaching of it to others. By default, I may do either or both; but most of you already know the gospel (have an outline of it) and you may well be far more skilled than me at preaching it.

My purpose is a theological reflection on the different components of the gospel, particularly on those parts sometimes neglected in contemporary presentations of the gospel – a prophetic correction of those aspects where we may have allowed our understanding of the gospel to be too much shaped by contemporary culture (or even contemporary church-speak) and the spirit of the age – and so to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the gospel and ensure that what we believe and broadcast is the *biblical* gospel – complete, balanced and marvelous. Why do this? (i) Return us to the plumb-line of truth; (ii) celebrate our God, his good news and our salvation; (iii) equip us to share it; (iv) immunize us against defective gospels being preached in our day. In short, for our Word (truth v error), our worship and our witness.

There have been many well-known, much-used gospel outlines over the years. Most of them have sought to present the good news in 4 (The 4 Spiritual Laws, the 4square Gospel) or 5 points (Evangelism Explosion).

I think it needs 5 points to tell the ‘full gospel’. So here is a theological reflection cum prophetic observation on each of the 5 components of the gospel.

[In the pages that follow, what one might share as part of the gospel is in black; my comments are in purple.]

1 THE PLAN: GOD’S LOVE

Why did God create man and the cosmos? Not out of need for love/fellowship or to demonstrate/realise his Deity. There is no answer, except that he freely desired and chose to create a creature in his image with whom he could share his love, goodness and blessedness. [see my Doctrine Survey ch3.2y & 3.3, p28]

JE 31/3 *I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.*

RE 4/11 (KJV) *for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they are and were created.*

What God later told Israel was the reason for his creating and choosing them, could (with due qualification) be taken as what he ‘said’ to the whole human race at creation (before the Fall): For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you...to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affections on you and choose you because you were numerous...But it was because the Lord loved you... (Dt 7/6ff)

Similarly, with even more careful qualification, his words to the Jewish exiles in Babylon could be taken as expressing his heart and plan for all mankind at creation, before the Fall: ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ (Je 29/11) Of course, this is *not* the whole story, *not* what he is saying to all men today. It wasn’t even what he was saying to all Israel in Jeremiah’s time: I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the Lord...For I am watching over them for harm, not for good (Je 21/10, 44/27). We do not speak truth (the gospel) if we say/imply this or leave room for people to interpret our message to mean this. As we will shortly see, the current state of affairs between God and man is very different. Nevertheless, this good intention of God towards those that belong to him (once justified by and reconciled to him) is representative of what his plan was for all mankind when he created them.

So God created, and initially the plan was realised (Ge 1-2): God-like man knew and walked with God, enjoying his presence and blessing; he reflected and represented God on the earth, bringing his rule (dominion) to the whole earth. Had he never sinned, his life and this paradise would have lasted forever.

The gospel / good news of God starts then with his loving plan for man: relationship, partnership, covenant! I will be your God and you will be my people. I will live and walk with you and you with me – forever!

It is best and right to start the gospel here and not with man’s sin (the problem that needs solution) – as do both 4SL (Law 1: God loves you and has a plan for your life) and 4SG (). I shall very shortly emphasise the critical importance of #2 (Man’s Sin) to the true gospel. But if you start with man’s sin, there is ‘nowhere to go’ once you remove the problem – what then for man? You solve the problem but to what effect, for what purpose? God’s good news, the eternal plan and picture, doesn’t start with a negative but a positive, and works through a negative back to that positive: the gospel is a rescue or restoration story.

It’s good to show people at the outset God’s original plan and intent – (like his will in Ro 12/2) his “good, pleasing and perfect” plan. Immediately they are given some idea of what he is like, what he intends for them, and their hearts may be opened to the story that follows.

2 THE PROBLEM: MAN’S SIN

It is this component of the gospel that is most neglected (downplayed or wholly bypassed) in many gospel outlines and much gospel witness today. Even the evangelical church has allowed itself to be more influenced by western humanism, eastern mysticism and proud human nature than it realises. It is contended that we shouldn’t preach this part of the gospel in our day as it’s ‘offensive’, or that we should replace the word “sin” with some other word (e.g. guilt, shame) as “sin” is not a concept understood in our secularised society. In illustration of this trend: the gospel booklet used most widely in the English-speaking world for 25 years, Norman Warren’s *Journey into Life* (1964), used the word sin 41x and explained it clearly; the 1991 booklet used most widely since (I do not want to mention its name or author as it is otherwise a good booklet and its author a good man whom God has used greatly) only mentions the word “sin” 2x (one of which is a biblical quotation and so unavoidable) and doesn’t explain it.

In response to this trend and these arguments, let me say the following:

- (1) Talking about (confronting people with) sin is offensive? Truth (often) offends before it sets free! And people have always found this truth offensive. Everyone who was self-righteous, who sought to justify themselves before God, was offended by Jesus. Nothing has changed. It’s those who knew their own sinfulness who loved this ‘friend of sinners’. None of us should be happy to cause *unnecessary* offence because of our personality or behaviour, but if you’re not willing for truth from your lips sometimes to give offence, I’m not sure you can be a faithful messenger (of the gospel).

- (2) We should use some other word that is more easily understood in today's world? There is no other word which accurately and adequately replaces "sin". "**Shame**"? Not everyone experiences shame; if they do, they don't feel shame about the same things or to the same extent; they may not feel shame about the right things (and vice-versa); they may feel shame only superficially; people can be taught not to feel shame (by contrary belief or ethical systems, popular culture and peer pressure, psychology and therapy/counselling); we can be relieved of shame when the person we've offended forgives us – but we may still be unforgiven by God. Shame can (indeed, should) be one of the *consequences* of sin (cf. Adam & Eve) but is not sin itself; shame is a subjective feeling whereas sin is an objective fact; shame is far less serious than sin. "**Guilt**"? While guilt can be an objective fact as well as a subjective feeling (and the former is, and the latter should be, a consequence of sin), all the other arguments against "shame" apply here too. Worst of all is the downgrading of "sin" to "**mistake**". If I take a wrong turn while driving, or pick the wrong product from the grocery shelf, that's a mistake; if I plunge a knife into someone (in action or word), that is *not* a mistake! At most, it may be helpful with some people to start by talking about shame or guilt as something they can identify with – as long as we go on to talk about the reality, seriousness and objective fact of sin behind it.
- (3) "Sin" is not a word commonly used or understood in today's society? How about doing what the first preachers of the gospel have done in every pagan context throughout church history: just explain it! It is not difficult to describe or demonstrate sin to any honest person. All true seekers will recognise – in the world and themselves – what we're talking about. We only have to point them to the world around us (look in the newspaper); more to the point, we only have to get them to take an honest look at their own hearts and lives (look in the mirror). If they're still not convinced of their sin and consequent guilt before God, take each commandment and ask your hearer(s) if they've ever broken any of them (according to Jesus' words in Mw 5). Very quickly you establish that every one of us is a covetous, thieving, adulterous (etc) murderer!

"Sin" is the unique and irreplaceable Bible word describing man's present state and condition. We can seek to make this truth accessible to our context but there is no way of bypassing it and no room for diluting it. Beware of pseudo-spiritual, worldly-wise arguments that we should back off proclaiming man's sin & need.

A friend told me about his witnessing to a girl. All that she had heard from several Christians previously was, 'God loves you'. Her response equated to, 'Well, that's nice; I'll take what he offers if and when I feel I need or want it.' But when my friend told her about God's judgement resulting from sin, her response was altogether different: 'This is serious – I've got to do something about it – who or what can help me?'

Even worse was what a church leader wrote in the literature we were meant to use in a joint outreach to our city: "God loves you...He is not angry with you." At best, this is a half-truth; at worst, it denies truth. God *is* angry with sinful humanity, justly and righteously angry towards us and our sin: Paul began his great teaching on the gospel with God's wrath at and judgement on the wickedness of man (Ro 1/18 – 3/20). This is a seductive but dangerous statement. It introduces people to a half (false) God and therefore a half (false) salvation; it is 'another gospel'. It is calculated to lead to superficial salvations and consequent falling away: when God is merely a nice option rather than the only rescue on a doomed flight, our 'commitment' cannot be anything but superficial and based on wrong or inadequate motives – cf. parachute illustration. It's not that we nec.y dwell on God's anger in sharing the gospel (we may barely mention it) but to actually deny it!

The centre of the gospel is elsewhere, but this second component is the necessary preparation for that centre. In fact, without it there *is* no gospel! And this is the only gospel we're commissioned to preach. We need to demonstrate just how serious our predicament is and how much we need salvation. The Holy Spirit may have already brought this conviction (Jn 16/8 cf. Lk 7/37f); if not, we must trust that he does so as we speak to our hearer(s) about The Problem: Man's Sin. Only when we see ourselves as we truly are (as God sees us) are we ready to hear the rest of the gospel and able to receive it as we should.

But man fell, he sinned. Man's relationship with God (and his fellow man), the image of God in him, God's loving and good plan for him, and creation itself, were fractured.

a) What is Sin?

- (i) Sin is proud, rebellious independence from God (wanting to be [like / equal to] God)

GE 3/5 *the serpent said, ‘...you will be like God.’ (Cf. Is 14/13f: You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God...I will make myself like the Most High’; Ek 28/17: Your heart became proud; 1 Jn 2/16: the boasting of what he has and does [KJV: the pride of life] comes not from the Father but from the world.)*

IS 53/6 *We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.*

(ii) **Sin is lawlessness** – when we abandon God’s law for us, lawlessness must be the inevitable result.

1 JN 3/4 *Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. (Cf. Ps 2/2f: The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains’, they say, ‘and throw off their fetters’; 2 Pe 2/7f, 3/17: the filthy lives of lawless men...lawless deeds...the error of lawless men; in 2 Th 2/3, 7ff the antichrist is called the man of lawlessness.)*

(iii) **Sin is falling short** – every human being who has ever lived falls short of what God intended & requires

RO 3/23 *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Gr. ‘miss the mark’)*

JA 2/10 *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*

(CF. MW 5/48) *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect; 1 Pe 1/15f: But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy because I am holy.’)*

ILLUSTRATIONS omelette with one bad egg; ‘just’ 3 sins a day (= 1095 each year, 87,600 in average lifetime)

b) The Effects of Sin

(i) **Sin separates**

IS 59/2 *your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. (Cf. Ha 1/13: Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.)*

This separation is from both sides: sin leads to shame and guilt, so we hide from God (Ge 2/25 vs 3/6-10).

(ii) **Sin enslaves** (and spreads)

JN 8/34 *Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.’*

RO 7/14,23 *I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin...a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.*

Anyone who has ever wanted to do right but couldn’t, would be able to identify with Paul’s cry in v14-24.

And we all know that when we think we can sin in just a ‘little’ way, it quickly spreads.

(iii) **Sin stains** (spoils, corrupts)

TT 1/5 *To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. (Cf. Jx 23: the clothing stained by corrupted flesh)*

Every part of our being (body, mind, emotions, will, etc) has been corrupted by sin.

Sin diminishes us – it fractures the image of God in us and tarnishes our glory.

c) The Consequences of Sin

(i) **Judgement** – God’s righteous, just and necessary judgement on sin, evil and everything that opposes him

GE 18/25 *Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*

EX 34/6F *The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes...*

PS 130/3 *If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand?*

ILLUSTRATION lenient human judge

(ii) **Death** – spiritual death immediately (x), physical death eventually (y), second death (hell) ultimately (z)

X GE 2/17 *you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die. (cf. Ep 2/1: As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins)*

Y RO 5/12 *sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned (cf. 1 Co 15/21f: For since death came through a man...For as in Adam we all die)*

Z RE 20/14 *Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (cf. v6)*

IN SHORT Ro 6/23a: For the wages of sin is death...

(iii) **Powerlessness** – man is powerless to do anything about his predicament: he cannot save himself

RO 5/6A *when we were still powerless*

This is what all religions claim they can help us to do – but no religion can, for we cannot save ourselves.

IN SUMMARY The 2nd part of the gospel, then, is that all men have sinned, are separated from God, enslaved, stained, dead, facing God's just judgement (culminating in hell) and are powerless to do anything about it.

This doesn't sound like *good* news! But it is a vital and necessary part of it. Without it, what follows is not good news but (at best) only news; at worst, no more than interesting but ultimately optional information. The central part of the gospel (#3) is good news (only) because there is first *bad* news. It is this bad news that gives the gospel urgency, relevance, attractiveness and power. Downplay, dilute or dismiss this component and you remove the appeal and force of everything you say after.

And we must go further: the gospel must first be bad news for (those who imagine themselves to be) 'good' people before it can be good news for bad people (which all of us are). So many of us think we are good people and so not really in need of the good news bought to us. But the Bible is quite clear: They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no-one who does good...All have turned aside [Everyone has turned away], they have together become corrupt; there is no-one who does good, not even one (Ps 14/1,3 || 53/1,3); There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins (Ec 7/20). See how Paul heaps up these and other quotations in Ro 3/9-20, so that every mouth maybe silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. So the gospel must first open our eyes to the bad news in order for it to be good news.

This is what CS Lewis stated so powerfully in *Mere Christianity*: p37f [but see all of Bk I Ch 5, p34-38].

IN CONCLUSION God had a loving plan for us but now, Like the rest, we are by nature objects of wrath (Ep 2/3), without hope and without God in this world (v12). Is there *any* hope for me, for doomed humanity?...

3 THE SOLUTION: JESUS' CROSS

Unlike the 1st & 5th components of the gospel which are sometimes omitted, and #2 which is often diluted or downplayed in contemporary gospel presentations, #3&4 are usually communicated reasonably well. I thus share my material on these components merely as a complement to that which you already know and use. I give far more detail than one can normally use in any gospel witnessing situation, but having a fuller grasp of the profound truths involved may help you to distill and communicate their essence more effectively.

The 1st & 5th components are the suitable start and end points of the gospel, but components 2-4 are it's main thrust. Of these, the 3rd is the centre of the gospel, its key and pivot.

The cross is a subject of inexhaustible truth and wonder, and whole books can (and have) been written about it. But when sharing the gospel, one can only hope to communicate the essence of its meaning.

One way of doing this is by demonstrating the logical progression of the 6 points below. First, one highlights the 'dilemma' God faces implicit in the first two components: he has a loving plan for man but must punish man for his sin. Then one introduces Jesus; that he is both human and divine is key to him being able to do what he did. Next you hang the backdrop of the OT sacrifices to shed light on what Jesus' death was about. Then you paint his death as the perfect and final sacrifice, before going on to outline the main feature of his death (a substitutionary atonement) and its chief consequence (the double exchange –God's dilemma solved)

Introduction

Man cannot save himself but God can! Man is powerless to do anything about his predicament but God isn't! God can do something – and does!

God continued to love man and put into operation a plan of salvation which would allow man to be restored to righteousness and a relationship with God. The centre of this plan was Jesus and his death on the cross.

(i) God's 'dilemma'

In his holiness, God must punish sin; the debt of sin must be paid: man must die (each for his own sin)!

But God loves man and doesn't want any to perish but all to be saved.

2 PE 3/9B *He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance.*

1 TI 2/4 *God our Saviour, who wants all me to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

HO 11/8F *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like*

Admah? How can I make you like Zeboim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.

So God the Father sends God the Son to die in man's place.

JN 3/16F *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

RO 5/6FF *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

(ii) Jesus, the God-man

God the Son became a man, Jesus, who was both human & divine, son of God & son of man, the God-man.

JN 1/1,14,18 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*

And having laid aside his divine majesty and taken on human form, he was obedient to death on a cross.

PP 2/6FF *Christ Jesus who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.*

(iii) The Old Testament sacrifices

The animal sacrifices God's people had to offer in the OT to atone for sin explain Jesus' sacrifice for us.

LE 17/11,14 *For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life...the life of every creature is its blood.*

The proper penalty for sin is death: life must be taken. Because the life of a creature is in the blood, it is only when blood is shed that life is taken. Thus, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (He 9/22)

Of course, no amount of sacrificed animals could really atone for man's sin because an animal life is not of the same value as a human life (it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins: He 10/4).

But God graciously accepted these sacrifices as indicators of the sinner's repentance – they effected a stay of execution on man because God knew that a sacrifice which really *did* pay for human sin was coming.

RO 3/25B *in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished...*

(iv) Jesus' sacrifice

None of us can give our lives in payment for another's sin because we all have to die for our own sin.

PS 49/7FF *No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him – the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough – that he should live on and not see decay.*

But Jesus had no sin of his own for which he had to die.

HE 4/15B *we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are – yet was without sin.*

He was thus free to die in the place of another.

JN 15/13F *Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends...*

But since he was also God, his divine life (*his blood shed and life taken*), worth an infinite number of human lives, is price sufficient to pay the debt of the sin of all men (hunting illustration).

JN 1/29 *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'*

1 Jn 2/2: He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world

Almost the last thing Jesus said on the cross was, *It is finished* (Jn 19/30). This wasn't Jesus informing the crowd he was about to die or expressing relief that his sufferings were nearly over. He spoke a single word, a common commercial word of the time, which a debtor would shout out in joy when he paid the last instalment of a large, long-standing debt. The word was *tetelestai*, and it meant 'the debt is paid in full'. The debt of sin, owed to God by the entire human race, had been settled by the death of the God-man, Jesus.

(v) *A substitutionary atonement*

Jesus' death on the cross was thus a substitutionary atonement. It was *substitutionary* because he died in our place, as our substitute; the punishment that should have fallen on us fell on him. And it was an *atonement*: an atoning sacrifice is one which turns aside God's wrath; Jesus turned God's wrath aside from us (for whom it was destined) by taking it upon himself.

RO 3/25A *God presented him as* a sacrifice of atonement (* NIV fn: as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin)*

IS 53/4FF *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Cf. v8: for the transgression of my people he was stricken; v10: the Lord makes his life a guilt offering; v11: he will bear their iniquities; v12: he bore the sin of many.)*

ILLUSTRATIONS judge who must pass sentence but chooses to pay penalty; father who closes drawbridge on son

(vi) *A double exchange*

Moreover, a double exchange takes place: God puts our punishment on him and gives us his righteousness.

2 CO 5/21 *God made him who had no sin to be sin [a sin offering] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (Illustration: record book of sins)*

God can now be *both* just in punishing sin *and* loving in forgiving (justifying) the sinner. His 'dilemma' is resolved: he is able to maintain his love to man without ignoring or 'winking at' sin, pretending it doesn't exist or isn't serious. Because the full penalty for our sin has been paid, he can remove our sin from our record. God can justly justify us and righteously declare us righteous.

RO 3/26 *he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies...*

And because our righteousness has been restored, our right-standing with God lost so long ago, we can be reconciled to God, and again be his children and have relationship with him, as God originally planned.

2 CO 5/18F *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.*

1 TI 2/5F *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom* for all men... [* the price that needed to be paid for their freedom]*

Conclusion

This is good news indeed – in all eternity and in all the universe, there is none better! God, who had a loving plan for man, and whose plan was all but destroyed by man's sin, has found a way to justly punish man's sin but lovingly redeem (save) man. That solution is Jesus and his death on the cross.

If the narrower meaning of “gospel” is the kernel at the centre of the whole body of Bible truth and teaching (the ‘starter’ message that brings us into salvation and the totality of God’s saving work for and in us), then here we have reached the centre of the kernel, the very heart of the good news or gospel of God.

Postscripts

Two of the (if not *the* two) essential (core, non-negotiable, distinctive) doctrines of the Christian faith are contained in this heart of the gospel. (1) The humanity and divinity (hypostatic union) of Christ. A *man* had to die for (in place of) man, and take back the dominion given to man. But a fallen man could not have died for another (he would have had to die for his own sin) and a mere man (even if righteous) could not have died for the whole race. The cross required the perfect God-man. (2) Jesus’ death as a substitutionary atonement, by which he turned aside God’s wrath from us and obtained salvation for us. Beware any understandings of the cross which deny either of these 2 truths (e.g. that this death of a mere, albeit holy, man was an accident, a tragedy, [only] a revelation of God’s heart, or a moral example).

Similarly, two of the (if not *the* two) key attributes of God are also revealed in this heart of the gospel: the holiness of God and the love of God. If God was not love there would have been no incarnation and no cross: a (only) holy God would simply have executed man in just punishment for his sin. But equally if God was not holy there would have been no cross: a (only) loving God would not have sent his Son to suffer and die. Beware all representations of God that do not give full weight to both his love and his holiness: not only are they not true to Scripture as a whole but they make no sense of the cross.

4 THE RESPONSE: OUR FAITH

My comments in the opening paragraph of #3 above apply here too. In this component, the main 4 points one wants to communicate are: [i] the gospel demands a response (although Jesus atoned for the sins of the whole world, salvation is not automatic and not everyone is saved); [ii] there is only one key that opens the door to salvation, and there is only one thing we have to ‘do’ to be saved: faith in Jesus (this despite other actions sometimes being mentioned alongside faith or other words being used to describe this response); [iii] what saving faith is vs isn’t; [iv] we are therefore saved by grace through faith, not by works. Lastly, one can give some guidance on how to respond and, if appropriate, an opportunity to do so.

God has provided a solution to the problem of man’s sin [#2]: Jesus and his death on the cross [#3]. This solution enables God to realise the loving plan for and with man that he had when he created him [#1].

His salvation is available to all men. But does this mean that all men are therefore automatically saved, regardless of their choice or response to this solution (or, indeed, even of their knowledge of it)?

The Bible makes it emphatically and repeatedly clear that not all men are saved, despite God’s solution.

MW 7/13F *Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate & narrow is the road that leads to life, & only a few find it.*

LK 13/24 *Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many will try to enter it and will not be able to.*

God’s solution demands a response. We cannot continue to walk in rebellion against God and expect to be forgiven. Jesus died for all men (his blood pays the price for the sins of all men), but God’s solution only becomes effective in our lives when we choose it (unlimited atonement v limited salvation). Each person has to choose it for him/herself: no-one can respond for you (God has no grandchildren). And we have to respond in the way God has prescribed, not in a way of our own choosing (illustration: only one key fits).

There is one and only one thing we have to do to be saved, to make Christ’s death effective for us: *believe*.

JN 3/14FF *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

JN 5/24 *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*

JN 6/47 *I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.*

AC 16/30F *'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord J and you will be saved.'*

What saving faith is *not*: like believing in other historical figures; believing God for a particular thing (e.g. money); mere intellectual assent.

JA 2/19 *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder!*

What saving faith *is*: trusting in (throwing your full weight of dependency on) Jesus alone for your salvation.

ILLUSTRATIONS changing chairs; Blondin.

AC 4/12 *Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

Believe on Jesus as your Saviour, trust in what he did for you on the cross for your salvation.

The Bible sometimes mentions other actions alongside faith. However, these are not additional responses required for salvation but merely two sides of the one coin: they are things that go hand-in-hand with (are inseparably part of) believing.

[i] Repentance

MK 1/14F *Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'*

We do not believe on Jesus for forgiveness (salvation) without first recognising that we are sinners needing forgiveness (a Saviour). Repentance means simply to agree with God about our sin and want to turn from it. So repentance and faith go together as one indivisible and simultaneous response to Jesus and his cross (see Ac 2/37f [iii below] where “repent” is used as an alternative to “believe”).

[ii] Confession

RO 10/6,8FF *But the righteousness that is by faith says... 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

Confession of Jesus with our mouths (to God, ourselves & others) springs involuntarily and simultaneously from believing in him in our hearts – it is not a separate, additional thing we have to do to be saved.

[iii] Baptism

AC 2/37F *'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you...'*

Other Scriptures (and a study of baptism) will show that baptism is not something additional to faith we have to do for salvation but an act of obedience which should follow on from repentance and faith. For those who have believed on Jesus and made him Lord, the next thing they should do is get baptised – and Peter uses the phrase in this way. As does Mark, who makes it clear that it is our lack of faith that condemns us, not our lack of baptism (and thus that our faith that saves us, not our faith+baptism):

MK 16/16 *Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*

Likewise, the Bible sometimes uses alternative terms for faith, but these do not constitute required additional or permissible alternative responses to faith – they are just other ways of describing the same faith response.

JN 1/12 *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. ['receive' is equated with 'believe']*

Faith is the one and only response we can make to God's solution, the only thing we need to 'do' to apply Jesus' death for all men to us. But this means we are not saved by our works, by anything *we* can do. Ep 2/4f,8f: But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved...For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no-one can boast.

We are not saved by faith but ‘by grace’, i.e. we are not saved by ourselves but by God. We are saved only because his love, grace, mercy and kindness moved him to find and then provide a solution to our problem.

We are saved ‘by grace...through faith’, i.e. our faith is only the channel along which God’s salvation comes.

RO 6/23 *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Note not only ‘death’ vs ‘life’ but ‘wages’ vs ‘gift’ (cf. Ep 2/8). Salvation is a free gift: it cannot be earned or bought or deserved – by money, effort, religious observance, a good life or good works. This is the scandal of the gospel: it offends the pride of our fallen human nature which insists it can and must work/strive for, and so earn/deserve, salvation; it contradicts every religion and belief system of man, all of which say the same.*

Saving faith is trusting in Christ *alone* for salvation, not some of him + some of me (ill. Blondin with thread)

The only ‘work’ God wants us to ‘do’ for salvation is to believe: ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’ **JN 6/28F**

Of course, good works do play an important part in the life of those who believe and are saved, but we work out our salvation, not for it (Pp 2/12); we do good works in loving gratitude for a salvation already received, not in the hope of earning salvation **EP 2/10**

How then do I make a saving personal response to this gospel?

A = something to **Admit**: admit you are a sinner in need of a Saviour; agree with God; about your sin and desire to turn from it; i.e. confess and repent.

B = something to **Believe**: believe on Jesus as God’s Son who came to die in your place; trust in his blood shed on the cross as the full payment of the debt of sin you owed to God; put your total dependency on him and him alone for eternal salvation.

C = something to **Consider**: consider carefully if you are willing to give your life to Jesus. He is not only Saviour but Lord (owner and master): he comes into our lives on his terms, not ours. Jesus advised all those who wanted to follow him (for many only wanted to follow him in a superficial way) to first count the cost of what it would mean to do so before they made their decision (Lk 9/23-26&57-62, 14/25-35, 18/18-30). But if we have understood our need for a Saviour, we should be glad to give our all to him who can save us.

D = something to **Do**: give/commit your life to Jesus Christ; invite him in to be your Lord, Saviour & friend.

RE 3/20 *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

You can use your own words to do this or you may want to pray this simple prayer of commitment...

I said earlier that this component of the gospel (like #3) is usually communicated reasonably well. If there is sometimes a weakness, it is in these 2 areas:

1. People are not encouraged, or given time, to count the cost (or even told there is a cost) before being led into commitment. This often results in incomplete or insincere ‘conversions’. When the cost of following Jesus comes into play (as it inevitably will), when the claims of his Lordship come to bear, people who only had a superficial understanding of what being a Christian involved, or only had a selfish or half-hearted motivation in following him, will wobble in their commitment to him. Fortunately, some come through this wobble – they grow in understanding and wholeheartedness – and continue on to maturity. But many fall away. Reference again the parachute illustration: if people only come to Jesus for nice experiences, for life enhancement, or because they think he will remove all difficulties from their lives and give all the nice things, then they will abandon the parachute when this false expectation is disappointed. But if they know following Jesus will cost them everything, and yet they gladly embrace this because of their conviction of their sin and need for a Saviour, they are far more likely to remain steadfast in their faith.

2. We give the impression that all there is to becoming and being a Christian is praying ‘the sinner’s prayer’; after that you don’t have to do anything and you can just go on your way much as you did before. Without questioning the pivotal role such a prayer has in many conversions, it must be made clear that both becoming and being a Christian is a process (and that such a prayer is at most a critical crossover point in that process). There is a whole lifetime of change and growth, obedience and service, that follows that decision, and praying that prayer simply starts us off on this challenging but exciting journey [see below].

5 THE RESULT: SALVATION!

Many gospel outlines/presentations stop with ‘the sinner’s prayer’ at the end of #4. But it is helpful to complete the gospel message by showing what the result is for us if we do respond to the gospel. Where do we now stand with God (vs where we stood before)? This can greatly encourage the new believer as he/she begins to see all the amazing changes God has wrought in and for them.

I said that if we leave out #1, the gospel becomes just about solving a problem. Once solved, what then? Without #1, we have ‘nowhere to go’ once #2 is solved (by #3&4). But begin with #1 and we can return there in #5. In this way, #1 & #5 provide natural bookends (start and end points) to the gospel.

With #5 we have gone full circle: it is the outcome of #2-4 and returns us to #1. While we still have a lifetime to work out our salvation, and eternity to enjoy it, what has begun now is the deposit guaranteeing full payment of the good plan God had for man in creating him. The rescue and restoration is complete!

When we believe on Jesus and put our trust in him and his work for us on the cross, the most amazing things become true of us. In fact, we go through the most profound identity change we will ever experience (cf. The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power...and you will be changed into a different person: 1 Sa 10/6). We have made the most important, most wonderful and most life-changing decision we can/will ever make. So profound and multi-faceted is this change that the Bible has to use a whole range of expressions to describe it...

[It is of course both impossible and unnecessary to share all of these but we can choose some of them and use whatever Scriptures we find helpful. I have grouped the major NT themes into 11 headings.]

We have been / we now are / we now have...

Forgiven, washed, justified (declared righteous), sanctified (made holy [in position but not yet in condition])

Born again, made alive (v dead), renewed (regenerated)

Life, abundant life, eternal/everlasting life

Redeemed, ransomed

Reconciled, at peace with God (v enmity), brought near (v far off)

in Christ & Christ in, heirs of God

the Holy Spirit (were convicted & drawn by him before, and regenerated & in-dwelt by him at, conversion)

in the New Covenant (which the Son, as man for man, cut on our behalf with the Father and keeps perfectly)

included in (vs excluded from) the people of God (the church), a holy nation, a royal priesthood

a New creation (the old has gone)

Salvation – saved/delivered from sin/death/judgement/hell to life/blessing/heaven (a citizen of heaven)!

Postscripts

Finally, either at the time or soon after, there are 3 important postscripts that should follow any response to the gospel and that we should help the new believer with if we can.

(i) Assurance of Salvation

God wants us to be sure of our salvation (1 Jn 5/13). Assurance comes from the character of Jesus, the promise of the Word and the witness of the Spirit. Faith must be our engine, facts our coal truck (they feed our faith) and feelings the carriages pulled faith and facts (not the other way round).

(ii) Outworking of salvation

Salvation is not just saying the sinner’s prayer and then carrying on regardless (living your old life). Just as getting saved was a process, so is being saved. This is just the start: there’s a whole new life to grow into. Some change will be immediate/total; other change will be gradual/partial. Have high but real expectations.

Salvation is past (have been: justification), present (are being: sanctification) & future (will be: glorification)

Salvation from here on is becoming & living out in our state (on earth) what we are in our status (in heaven).

Moreover, Jesus is Lord, not just Saviour and Friend: we want to, and must, live as he wants us to.

And we can! We have the indwelling Spirit, who will enable us if we walk with him. (Pp 2/12f, 2 Pe 1/3-8)

(iii) First steps in salvation

Water baptism, baptism in the Spirit, prayer, the Bible, fellowship (the church), witnessing