

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

by D. A. Carson – A Synopsis.

Donald A. Carson gave the first plenary address to the Gospel Coalition conference in May 2007. Here are listener notes from his sermon available online: [What is the Gospel?](#)

The fragmentation of the church in the west has led to a fragmented understanding of the gospel.

Common Misunderstandings of the Gospel:

- The gospel is said to be a narrow set of teachings about the death and resurrection of Christ, which rightly believed, “tip people into the kingdom.” After that come the real theological training and transformation, where discipleship and maturity take place. This view is much narrower than the biblical view, in which the gospel is the embracing category which holds much of the bible together, encompassing lostness and condemnation, through reconciliation and conversion, to the consummation and resurrection.
- The gospel is just the first and second commandments: love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus himself insists that all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. But while they are central, they are not the Gospel.
- The gospel is understood to be the ethical teaching of Jesus found in the canonical gospels, separated from his passion and resurrection. However, accounts of Jesus’ teaching cannot be rightly understood without seeing how they point forward to his death and resurrection. This view reduces the glorious good news to mere religion and duty.
- In the first century there was not the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, etc. It was “The Gospel” according to Matthew, “The Gospel,” according to Mark. One gospel, various perspectives.
- The gospel is assumed to be, and creative energy and passion is devoted to, other issues like bioethics, politics, evangelism, the poor, etc. Our listeners are drawn to what we are most passionate about. If the gospel is merely *assumed*, while relatively peripheral issues ignite our passion, we will teach a new generation to downplay the gospel and focus on the periphery, those matters of evangelism, justice, confronting Islam, etc. “It’s easy to sound prophetic from the margins, but harder to be prophetic from the center.”

The Right Understanding of the Gospel

The gospel by which you are saved is bound up in the fact that Christ died for our sins, was buried, raised on the third day, and appeared to many people - the apostles and others.

From [1 Corinthians 15:1-19](#), Carson gives a general outline of what he will say about the gospel. He will focus on eight summarizing words, five clarifying sentences, and one evocative summary.

Eight Summarizing Words:

1. The gospel is *Christological*. It is not bland theism or pantheism, but Christ-centered. John Stott: “The gospel is not preached if Christ is not preached.” Jesus is the only name by which we can be

saved. Jesus alone reconciles us to God. The gospel is not focused exclusively on Christ's person, but also on Christ's death and resurrection: Christ *died* for our sins.

2. The gospel is ***theological***.

First, the gospel is God-centered

- *God* sent the son.
- the Son did the *Father's* will
- *God* raised Christ Jesus from the dead.

Second, the cross is a historical event with theological weight.

- From the beginning, sin is an offense to God, and the one most offended by our sin is always God, and He is the One who must be appeased
- God is full of wrath against sin, and sinners stand under God's judgment. Christ's death propitiates that wrath so we can have peace with God: Christ died *for our sins*.
- *God's* purpose was for Christ to die and rise, not merely die; he died *for our sins*, and he rose *for our justification*
- *God's* wrath is against sin – in us. Our sin problem is *personal*. *God* pronounces the sentence of death against sin, which means death for *us*.
- And what makes God most angry is idolatry, the “de-godding” of God, the putting of something else in God's place. God is still jealous. **Repentance is necessary**, because the coming of the King brings judgment as well as blessing.

3. The gospel is ***biblical***. Christ died for our sins, *according to the scriptures*; He was buried and rose again on the third day *according to the scriptures*. What scripture Paul has in mind is not told to us. Carson lists several possibilities for what scripture might be in Paul's mind. Whatever it is, Paul tells us that this gospel is biblical: it is found in the Old Testament.

4. The gospel is ***apostolic***. Listen to the sequence of pronouns Paul uses in 1Cor 15:11, “Whether it was *I* (an apostle) or *they* (the apostles) this is what *we* (the apostles) preach, and this is what *you* believed. I, we, they, you. This Gospel is apostolic (Carson credits J.R.W. Stott for this sequence of pronouns). As Paul lists them, there were more than 500 witnesses to the resurrected Christ, but Paul repeatedly draws attention to the apostles. This resurrection gospel is what the apostles preach and what the Corinthians believed. The witness and teaching of the apostles is the gospel that all Christians throughout the ages believe.

5. The gospel is ***historical***.

- *First*, 1Cor 15 specifies both Jesus' burial and resurrection. Jesus' death is attested by his burial, and his resurrection is attested by his appearances. The death and resurrection are tied together in history.
- *Second*, the way we have access to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection is the way we have access to any historical event: through the record of those who witnessed the events. This is why witnesses are so important.
- *Third*, we must see that unlike other religions, Christian claims are irreducibly historical. The historical uniqueness of Christ is non-negotiable, not just the historicity of the man Jesus, but the historical claims of his death for our sins, his burial, and his resurrection. The Son entered history and there are historical events in Jesus' life that are essential to

Christianity. God does not give a revelation to Jesus which Jesus passes on; rather Jesus *is* the revelation of God. The revelation cannot be separated from Christ. To attempt to do so is incoherent. Part of the validation of faith is the truthfulness of faith's object. Paul says, "If Jesus has not risen, your faith is futile (v 17)."

- *Fourth*, we must face the fact that in contemporary discussion, the word *historical* may have different meanings. Some use "historical" only for events brought about by ordinary causes; by definition this excludes miraculous events. We insist that "historical" means events that took place in history, whether from natural causes or through God's supernatural intervention in power, operating in history.
6. The gospel is *personal*. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not merely historical events, or merely theological precepts. They set forth a way of *personal* salvation. This is the gospel, "which you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved...."
 7. The gospel is *universal*. The gospel is a comprehensive vision of a new humanity drawn from every tribe and nation. It is not universal in that it includes everyone without exception; but it is universal in the sense that it is for all groups, ethnic and otherwise. Christ is the new Adam (v. 22, 47-50), and this alludes to a comprehensive vision: people of every nation, tribe, etc.
 8. The gospel is *eschatological*.
 - First, some of the blessings believers receive today are blessings from the Last Day brought back to our time. Already, for instance, God declares us justified. This final declarative judgment is applied to us today. We look forward to an eschatological fulfillment of the transformation that has already begun in us.
 - Second, the gospel includes our final transformation. It is not enough to focus only on blessings that those who are in Christ enjoy in this age, for there are greater fulfillments yet to come.

Five Clarifying Sentences

1. **This gospel is normally disseminated in proclamation.** (preaching, heraldic ministry, "I preached to you.") Wherever there is mention of the gospel's dissemination, it is through preaching.
2. **This gospel is fruitfully received in authentic, persevering faith,** faith that continues and brings forth results. ("This is what you believed", and "if you hold fast...")
3. **This gospel is properly disclosed in a context of personal, self-humiliation.** When the gospel is received, there is no pride, but a sense of one's own worthlessness. People respond to it by becoming aware of their own insufficiency and helplessness. "I am not what I want to be, nor what I ought to be, nor what I will be, but by the grace of God I am what I am," John Newton. *Humility. Gratitude. Dependence on Christ, contrition* – these are the attitudes of the truly converted. "Proud Christian" is an unthinkable oxymoron.
4. **This gospel is rightly asserted to be the central confession of the whole church.** This is what Paul preaches everywhere. Of course what the church, or many churches are doing, is not necessarily right. Otherwise there would be no need for an Athanasius or a Luther. Hidebound tradition is not the gospel. But also be suspicious of churches who proudly flaunt how different they are from what has gone before.
5. **The gospel is boldly advancing under the contested reign and inevitable victory of Jesus the King.** This side of Jesus death and resurrection, all of God's sovereignty is mediated exclusively through kindly King Jesus. All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth... the name that is

One evocative summary: *All of this shows how cognitive the gospel is. It is propositional. It is to be understood, taught, and explained.*

Yet the gospel is not exclusively cognitive. It is also affective and active. The word of the cross is not only God's *wisdom*, which the world considers folly, but it is God's *power*, which the world considers weakness. Where the gospel triumphs, *lives are transformed*. The gospel works itself out in every aspect of a believer's life. This is done not by attempting to abstract social principles from the gospel, nor by imposing new levels of rules, still less by focusing on the periphery in the vain effort to sound prophetic; but precisely by preaching and teaching and living out the blessed gospel of our glorious Redeemer.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain (verse 58).

Sources:

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