

What Is the

Gos•pel? (gōs'pəl)

Greg Gilbert

Foreword by D. A. Carson

*What Is the Gospel?*

Copyright © 2010 by Gregory D. Gilbert

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Dual Identity Design

Interior typesetting: Lakeside Design Plus

First printing 2010

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved. The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica. Use of either trademark requires the permission of Biblica.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-1500-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-1501-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-1502-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2460-8

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gilbert, Greg, 1977–

What is the Gospel? / Greg D. Gilbert ; foreword by D.A. Carson.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-1500-2 (hc)

1. Theology, Doctrinal—Popular works. I. Title.

BT77.G44 2010

230—dc22

2009030583

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	
14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

# CONTENTS

Series Preface	11
Foreword <i>by D. A. Carson</i>	13
Introduction	15
1 Finding the Gospel in the Bible	23
2 God the Righteous Creator	37
3 Man the Sinner	47
4 Jesus Christ the Savior	59
5 Response—Faith and Repentance	71
6 The Kingdom	85
7 Keeping the Cross at the Center	101
8 The Power of the Gospel	113
Special Thanks	123
Scripture Index	125



# FOREWORD

**More than thirty years** of teaching theological students have shown me that the most controverted questions they ask vary from generation to generation—and the same is true of the broader Christian public. At one time you could guarantee a heated debate by throwing out the question, What do you think of the charismatic movement? or Is inerrancy worth defending? or What do you think about seeker-sensitive churches? It is easy enough to find people willing to discuss these questions today, but there is usually little heat left in them and not much more light. Today the question most likely to light a fuse is—as the author of this volume points out—What is the gospel? One might usefully add that question’s first cousin, What is evangelicalism?

That these questions engender mutually exclusive answers, often dogmatically defended with only a minimum of reflection on the Bible, is, quite frankly, alarming, because the issues are so fundamental. When “evangelicals” hold highly disparate opinions about what the “evangel” is (that is, the “gospel,” for that is what “evangel” means), then one must conclude either that evangelicalism as a movement is a diverse phenomenon with no agreed gospel and no sense of responsibility “to contend for the faith” that the Lord has “once for all entrusted” to us, his people (Jude 3 NIV), or that many people call themselves

“evangelicals” who do not have any legitimate right to do so because they have left the “evangel,” the gospel, behind.

Enter Greg Gilbert. This book does not so much claim to break new ground as survey afresh some old ground that should never have been ignored, much less abandoned. The clarity of Greg’s thought and articulation is wholly admirable. This book will sharpen the thinking of not a few mature Christians. More importantly, it is a book to distribute widely to church leaders, young Christians, and even some who have not yet trusted Christ who want a clear explanation of what the gospel is. Read it, then buy a box of them for generous distribution.

D. A. Carson

## KEEPING THE CROSS AT THE CENTER

**At one point** in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the hero of the story, Christian, finds himself talking with two sketchy fellows named Formalist and Hypocrisy. Like Christian himself, they insist, they are on their way to the Celestial City, and they're quite certain they'll make it because many in their country have gone this way before.

Of course, the names give it away. Formalist and Hypocrisy aren't going to make it to the city at all.

The first time Christian sees the two men, they are tumbling over the wall that runs alongside the narrow path Christian is on. He of course recognizes that this is problematic, since he knows that the only legitimate way into the narrow path was through the Wicket Gate, which in the story symbolizes repentance and faith in the crucified Christ.

Christian, never afraid to go straight to the point, presses the two men on the matter: "Why came you not in at the gate?" The men quickly explain that the people of their country think the gate is too far away, and so they decided long ago "to make a short-cut of it." Besides, they argue,

If we make it onto the path, what's it matter which way we got in? If we are in, we are in. You are on the path, and you came in at the gate; we are on the path, and we climbed over the wall. So how are you any better off than we are?

Christian warns the men that the Lord of the city has decreed that everyone who enters the Celestial City must enter the narrow path through the gate, and he shows them a scroll he was given there, which he must present at the gate of the city in order to gain entrance. "I imagine," Christian says, "that you lack this, because you didn't come in at the gate."

Bunyan's point was to show that the only way to salvation is through the Wicket Gate—that is, through repentance and faith. It's not enough to be navigating the path of the Christian life. If a person doesn't come in through that gate, he is not truly a Christian.

### ***A Bigger, More Relevant Gospel?***

That's an old story, but it's an even older point that Bunyan was making. Since the very beginning of time, people have been trying to save themselves in ways that make sense to *them*, rather than listening and submitting to God. They have been trying to figure out how to get salvation to work—how to get the *gospel* to work—apart from the Wicket Gate, that is, apart from the cross of Jesus Christ.

That is no less true in our own day. Indeed I believe one of the greatest dangers the body of Christ faces today is the temptation to rethink and rearticulate the gospel in a way that makes its center something other than the death of Jesus on the cross in the place of sinners.



The pressure to do that is enormous, and it seems to come from several directions. One of the main sources of pressure is the increasingly common idea that the gospel of forgiveness of sin through Christ's death is somehow not "big" enough—that it doesn't address problems like war, oppression, poverty, and injustice, and really "isn't terribly important," as one writer put it, when it comes to the real problems of this world.

Now, I think that charge is altogether false. All those problems are, at their root, the result of human sin, and it is folly to think that with a little more activism, a little more concern, a little more "living the life that Jesus lived," we can solve those problems. No, it is the cross alone that truly deals once and for all with sin, and it is the cross that makes it possible for humans to be included in God's perfect kingdom at all.

Nevertheless, the pressure to find a "bigger," more "relevant" gospel seems to have taken hold of a great many people. Again and again, in book after book, we see descriptions of the gospel that end up relegating the cross to a secondary position. In its place are declarations that the heart of the gospel is that God is remaking the world, or that he has promised a kingdom that will set everything right, or that he is calling us to join him in transforming our culture. Whatever the specifics, the result is that over and over again, the death of Jesus in the place of sinners is assumed, marginalized, or even (sometimes deliberately) ignored.

### ***Three Substitute Gospels***

This decentering of the cross is happening subtly among evangelical Christians, it seems to me, in several different ways. A number of "bigger and better" gospels have been advocated in

recent years, and each of them seems to be gaining a significant following. Insofar as these “bigger” gospels make their center something other than the cross, however, I would argue that they are really less than the gospel, or no gospel at all. Let me give you three examples of this.

### “JESUS IS LORD” IS NOT THE GOSPEL

One of the most popular of these “bigger” gospels is the claim that the good news is simply the proclamation that “Jesus is Lord.” Much as a herald might enter a city and declare, “Caesar is Lord,” Christians are to herald the good news that it is Jesus who rules, and that he is in the process of reconciling the entire world to himself and bringing it under his reign.

Of course, the declaration that “Jesus is Lord” is absolutely, magnificently true! And that declaration of Jesus’ lordship is essential to the gospel message. So Paul says in Romans 10:9 that the person who confesses that “Jesus is Lord” will be saved, and in 1 Corinthians 12:3 he says that it is only by the Spirit of God that someone can affirm that truth.

But surely it’s not correct to say that the declaration “Jesus is Lord” is the whole sum and substance of the Christian good news. We’ve already seen how the earliest Christians said much more than that when they proclaimed the gospel. Yes, in Acts 2, Peter preached, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36). But before and after that statement is a full explanation of what Jesus’ lordship *meant*. It meant that this Lord had been crucified, buried, and resurrected, and it also meant that his death and resurrection, above all, had accomplished the “forgiveness of sins” for those who

would repent and believe in him. Peter did not just declare that Jesus is Lord. He proclaimed that this Lord had acted on behalf of his people to save them from God's wrath against their sin.

It should be obvious by now that to say simply that "Jesus is Lord" is really not good news at all if we don't explain how Jesus is not just Lord but also Savior. Lordship implies the right to judge, and we've already seen that God intends to judge evil. Therefore, to a sinner in rebellion against God and against his Messiah, the proclamation that Jesus has become Lord is terrible news. It means that your enemy has won the throne and is now about to judge you for your rebellion against him.

For that news to be good and not simply terrifying, it would have to include a way for your rebellion to be forgiven, a way for you to be reconciled to this One who has been made Lord. That's exactly what we see in the New Testament—not just the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, but that this Lord Jesus has been crucified so that sinners may be forgiven and brought into the joy of his coming kingdom. Apart from that, the declaration that "Jesus is Lord" is nothing but a death sentence.

## **CREATION-FALL-REDEMPTION-CONSUMMATION IS NOT THE GOSPEL**

Many Christians have outlined the story of the Bible using the four words *creation, fall, redemption, consummation*.

Actually that outline is a really good way to summarize the Bible's main story line. God creates the world, man sins, God acts in the Messiah Jesus to redeem a people for him-

self, and history comes to an end with the final consummation of his glorious kingdom. From Genesis to Revelation, that's a great way to remember the Bible's basic narrative. In fact, when you understand and articulate it rightly, the creation-fall-redemption-consummation outline provides a good framework for a faithful presentation of the biblical gospel.

The problem, though, is that creation-fall-redemption-consummation has been used wrongly by some as a way to place the emphasis of the gospel on God's promise to renew the world, rather than on the cross. Thus the creation-fall-redemption-consummation "gospel" is too often presented as being something like this:

The gospel is the news that in the beginning God created the world and everything in it. It was originally very good, but human beings rebelled against God's rule and threw the world into chaos. The relationship between humans and God was broken, as were people's relationships with each other, with themselves, and with their world. After the fall, however, God promised to send a King who would redeem a people for himself and reconcile creation to God once again. That promise began to be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ, but it will be finally completed, or consummated, when King Jesus returns.

Everything in that paragraph, of course, is true. But what I wrote there is not the gospel. Just like the proclamation that "Jesus is Lord" is not good news unless there is a way to be forgiven of your rebellion against him, so the fact that God is remaking the world is not good news unless you can be included in that.

Of course it's perfectly fine to use creation-fall-redemption-consummation as a way to explain the good news of Christianity. In fact, the categories "creation" and "fall" line up almost exactly with our categories of "God" and "man." The crucial point, though, comes at the category of "redemption." That's where, in order truly to proclaim the gospel, we must carefully explain the death and resurrection of Jesus and the response God requires of sinners. If we say merely that God is redeeming a people and remaking the world, but do not say *how he is doing so* (through the death and resurrection of Jesus) and *how a person can be included in that redemption* (through repentance from sin and faith in Jesus), then we have not proclaimed the good news. We have simply told the narrative of the Bible in broad outline and left sinners with their faces pressed against the window, looking in.

### **CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IS NOT THE GOSPEL**

The idea of seeing culture transformed through the work of Christians seems lately to have captured the minds of many evangelicals. I think that is a noble goal, and I also think that the effort to resist evil in society, whether personal or systemic, is a biblical one. Paul tells us that we are to "do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Jesus tells us we are to care for our neighbors, which includes those who are outsiders (Luke 10:25–37). And he also tells us, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Many transformationalists go further than that, however, finding the mandate to "redeem the culture" in the

very fabric of the biblical story. If God is in the business of remaking the world, they argue, then it is our responsibility to join him in that work, to gather the building materials of the kingdom, and to take significant strides toward the establishment of God's reign in our neighborhoods, our cities, our nations, and our world. "We must do what we see God doing," they say.

Let me go ahead and lay all my thoughts on the table. I have some serious biblical and theological reservations about the cultural transformation paradigm. I'm not convinced that Scripture places efforts at cultural transformation in quite the position of priority that many transformationalists call for. That's for several reasons. For one thing, I don't think the cultural mandate in Genesis is given to the people of God as such; I think it's given to human beings as a whole. I also don't think the general trajectory of human culture, either in Scripture or in history, is in a godward direction; instead, I think the trajectory of human culture on the whole, though not in every particular, is judgment-ward (see Revelation 17–19). So I think the optimism of many transformationalists about the possibility of "changing the world" is misleading and therefore will prove discouraging.

All that, however, is an enormous biblical-theological discussion, and it's not my main concern here. I actually think it's possible to be a committed transformationalist and at the same time be committed to keeping the cross of Jesus at the very center of the biblical story and of the good news. After all, it is the *forgiven* and *redeemed* people of God whom he would use to accomplish the transformation, and forgiveness and redemption take place only through the cross.

My main concern is rather something that I hope my evangelical transformationalist friends would heartily agree with. It is that far too often among some transformationalists, cultural redemption subtly becomes the great promise and point of the gospel—which of course means that the cross, deliberately or not, is pushed out of that position. You can see this happening in book after book calling for a greater emphasis on cultural transformation. The highest excitement and joy are ignited by the promise of a reformed culture rather than by the work of Christ on the cross. The most fervent appeals are for people to join God in his work of changing the world, rather than to repent and believe in Jesus. The Bible's story line is said to pivot on the remaking of the world rather than on the substitutionary death of Jesus.

And in the process, Christianity becomes less about grace and faith, and more a banal religion of "Live like this, and we'll change the world." That's not Christianity; it's moralism.

### ***A Stumbling Block and Foolishness***

At the end of the day, I wonder if the impulse to shove the cross out of the center of the gospel comes from the bare fact that the world just doesn't like the cross. At best they think it is a ridiculous fairy tale, and at worst, a monstrous lie. Really, that shouldn't surprise us. Paul told us it would be the case. The message of the cross, he said, will be a stumbling block to some and foolishness to the rest!

Add to that the fact that we really *want* the world to be attracted to the gospel, and you create enormous pressure on Christians to find a way not to have to talk about "bloody

cross religion” quite so much. I mean, we want the world to accept the gospel, not laugh at it, right?

But really, we should just face it. The message of the cross is going to sound like nonsense to the people around us. It’s going to make us Christians sound like fools, and it most certainly is going to undermine our attempts to “relate” to non-Christians and prove to them that we’re just as cool and harmless as the next guy. Christians can always get the world to think they are cool—right up to the moment they start talking about being saved by a crucified man. And that’s where coolness evaporates, no matter how carefully you’ve cultivated it.

Even so, Scripture makes it clear that the cross *must* remain at the center of the gospel. We cannot move it to the side, and we cannot replace it with any other truth as the heart, center, and fountainhead of the good news. To do so is to present the world with something that is not saving, and that is therefore not good news at all.

The Bible actually gives us very clear instruction on how we should respond to any pressure to let the cross drift out of the center of the gospel. We are to resist it. Look at what Paul said about this in 1 Corinthians. He knew the message of the cross sounded, at best, insane to those around him. He knew they would reject the gospel because of it, that it would be a stench in their nostrils. But even in the face of that sure rejection he said, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23). In fact, he resolved to “know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). That’s because, as he put it at the end of the book, the fact that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” was not just important, and not even just *very* important. It was of “*first* importance” (1 Cor. 15:3).



And what if that brings on the ridicule of the world? What if people respond better to a gospel tilted toward the renewal of the world instead of toward the death of Christ in the place of sinners? What if people laugh at the gospel because it's about a man dying on a cross? So be it, Paul said. I'm preaching the cross. They may think it's ridiculous; they may think it's foolish. But I know "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:25 NIV).

Paul made sure the cross was the central point of the gospel he preached, and we should do the same. If we let anything else become the center, we might as well be saying, "Here, let me give you a hand jumping over that wall. Trust me. You'll be fine."

“Provides a biblically faithful explanation of the gospel and equips Christians to discern deviations from that glorious message. How I wish I could place this book in the hands of every pastor and church member.”

**C. J. Mahaney**, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“This little book on the gospel is one of the clearest and most important books I’ve read in recent years.”

**Mark Dever**, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC

“This book will help you better understand, treasure, and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

**Joshua Harris**, Senior Pastor, Covenant Life Church, Gaithersburg, Maryland

“Greg Gilbert shows just how important it is to understand both the theological nature and the functional necessity of the gospel.”

**Tullian Tchividjian**, Senior Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

**GREG GILBERT** earned his BA from Yale University and his MDiv from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is assistant pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY / SOTERIOLOGY

 **CROSSWAY**  
www.crossway.org

