



What is the gospel?

By W. Robert Godfrey

Many Christians, churches, and organizations regularly use the word gospel to describe their convictions. Theological controversies have occurred and do occur over the meaning of the gospel and who preaches it faithfully. What does that familiar word gospel mean? The best way to answer that question is to turn to the Bible.

In the Greek New Testament, the noun euangelion (“gospel”) appears just over seventy times. Since, in one sense, the whole New Testament is about the gospel, we might have expected the word to have been used more frequently. Even more surprisingly, its use varies greatly among the authors of the New Testament books. Paul uses the word more than three times as often as all the other authors combined. Most of the other uses are found in Matthew and Mark, with very few, if any, in Luke, John, Peter, and James.

The word gospel most simply means “good news.” The word is not unique to the Christian message, but it was also used in the pagan world to refer to a good announcement. In the New Testament, it refers to the good news of Jesus the Savior. Often, it is used with the assumption that the reader knows what the word means.

As we look more closely at the ways in which gospel is used in the New Testament, several points come through strongly.

First, we often find the phrase “the gospel of God.” This phrase stresses the source of the gospel as a gift from God. The gospel is of divine, not human, origin.

Second, the character of the gospel is specified in several ways: the gospel is true (Gal. 2:5, 14; Col. 1:5), gracious (Acts 20:24), and glorious (2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Tim. 1:11).

Third, we see two responses to the gospel. The primary response is faith (Acts 15:7; Eph. 1:13). But obedience is also a response (1 Peter 4:7; Rom. 1:5; 10:16; 16:26; 2 Thess. 1:8). (Paul’s use of the idea of the obedience of faith in Romans has an element of irony as he responds to those who have accused him of antinomianism, being against the law.)

Fourth, we see several results of the gospel. The gospel, of course, brings salvation (Rom. 1:16; Eph. 1:13). It also brings the kingdom (Matt. 4:23; 9:35, 24:14). It evokes hope in the people of God (Col. 1:23). The gospel is also a motivation to sanctification (Mark 8:35; 10:29; 2 Cor. 9:13; Eph. 6:15; Phil. 1:27).

All of these ways in which the word gospel is used point to its content, but there are also passages in the New Testament that are explicit as to its content. In examining these texts, we discover that sometimes the word gospel refers broadly to all aspects of the salvation and new life that Jesus gives His people, and sometimes it is used narrowly to refer to what Jesus does for us outside of us. In other words, sometimes the term gospel refers broadly to Jesus' work of justification and sanctification for and in His people, and sometimes it refers narrowly to Jesus' work of justification. Another way of putting this distinction is that sometimes the word gospel refers broadly to all the New Testament fulfillment of what was promised in the Old Testament, and sometimes the term gospel is used narrowly of Jesus' doing in contrast to our doing of the Law.

An example of the broader sense of the word gospel can be seen in Mark 1:1, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This use of the word gospel seems to refer to everything that Mark tells us about the teaching and work of Jesus. We see another broad use in Revelation 14:6–7:

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

Here the gospel is the call to repent and worship God.

More often, the term gospel is used narrowly and its content is specified. We see this in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you — unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Here, the gospel is the message of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus.

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In another place, Paul writes of “the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted,” and he specifies what that gospel is:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim. 1:11, 15–16)

Here, the gospel is the saving work of Christ for sinners.

Paul writes similarly in 2 Timothy:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. . . . Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel. (2 Tim. 1:8–10; 2:8)

This narrow use of the word gospel was very common in the writings of the sixteenth-century Reformers. We can see this in the thought of John Calvin:

The word of faith is put by metonymy [using the name of one concept for another concept to which it is related] for the word of promise, i.e. for the Gospel itself, since it is related to faith. The contrast between law and Gospel is to be understood, and from this distinction we deduce that, just as the law demands work, the Gospel requires only that men should bring faith in order to receive the grace of God.

It is also clear in Zacharias Ursinus. Near the beginning of his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus divides all of doctrine into law and gospel:

The doctrine of the church consists of two parts: the Law, and the Gospel; in which we have comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures. The law is called the Decalogue, and the gospel is the doctrine concerning Christ the mediator, and the free remission of sins, through faith.

Such reflections on the gospel have remained common in Reformed theology, as we see from this long, fascinating quotation from the great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck:

But the word of God, both as law and gospel, is the revelation of the will of God, the promulgation of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. . . . Although in a broad

sense the terms “law” and “gospel” can indeed be used to denote the old and the new dispensation of the covenant of grace, in their actual significance they definitely describe two essentially different revelations of divine will [Bavinck here cites many New Testament proof texts]. . . . In these texts law and gospel are contrasted as demand and gift, as command and promise, as sin and grace, as sickness and healing, as death and life The law proceeds from God’s holiness, the gospel from God’s grace; the law is known from nature, the gospel only from special revelation; the law demands perfect righteousness, but the gospel grants it; the law leads people to eternal life by works, and the gospel produces good works from the riches of the eternal life granted in faith; the law presently condemns people, and the gospel acquits them; the law addresses itself to all people, and the gospel only to those who live within its hearing.

How clear, distinct, biblical, and precious is this presentation of the gospel.

The church needs to preach the gospel in both its broad and narrow senses. The Greek word for gospel has given the English-speaking world the word evangelism. True evangelism, according to the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:18–20, is a matter of making disciples: first, in the narrow sense of calling men and women to believe in Jesus and, second, in the broad sense of teaching them to observe all things that Jesus has taught His people. For the sake of the gospel, let’s all promote true evangelism.