

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Now that we know that evangelism is sharing the gospel, we need to define what the gospel actually is. Surprisingly, this is more difficult than you would think. There has been a lot of confusion concerning the content of the gospel. If you asked ten Christians, “What is the gospel?” you might get ten different answers.

Trevin Wax, author of the book, *Counterfeit Gospels*¹, maintains a list of gospel definitions on his website.² While these definitions come from evangelical Christians, they seem to differ in their exact focus. Some focus on individual salvation of souls. Some focus on the recreation of the universe. Others focus on God and his kingdom. Most are so long and complicated that they are hard to remember.

Here are two definitions that we can compare and contrast. The first is by a pastor, Alistair Begg:

Here’s the gospel in a phrase. Because Christ died for us, those who trust in him may know that their guilt has been pardoned once and for all.

What will we have to say before the bar of God’s judgment? Only one thing. Christ died in my place. That’s the gospel.³

Here is the second definition, by another pastor, Jim Belcher:

The gospel is at the center of all we do. The “gospel” is the good news that through Jesus, the Messiah, the power of God’s kingdom has entered history to renew the whole world. Through the Savior God has established his reign. When we believe and rely on Jesus’ work and record (rather than ours) for our relationship to God, that kingdom power has come upon us and begins to work through us. We witness this radical new way of living by our renewed lives, beautiful community, social justice, and cultural transformation. This good news brings new life. The gospel motivates, guides, and empowers every aspect of our living and worship.⁴

You’ll notice that Begg’s definition of the gospel focuses on the salvation of the individual. There are a number of elements of the biblical story that he doesn’t mention, such as creation, sin (though this is implied), the resurrection of Jesus, and the new heavens and new earth. Instead, he focuses on substitutionary atonement: Jesus, our perfect substitute, died in our place to atone for our sin. Belcher, on the other hand, does not mention Jesus’ death and resurrection (though these are implied when he talks of Jesus’ work), nor does he mention sin.

¹ Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011).

² The full document can be read at Trevin Wax, “Kingdom People,” <http://trevinwax.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Gospel-Definitions2.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2012).

³ Alistair Begg, “An Innocent Man Crushed by God,” in *Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 25.

⁴ Jim Belcher, *Deep Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 120-21.

Instead, he focuses on the kingdom of God and all that it entails: a new way of living, justice, and a transformation of the world.

I think that both of these messages are incomplete, but that is understandable, for reasons we will soon explore. However, before we try to define the gospel in a more comprehensive and clear way, let's think about why this is important.

For the sake of evangelism, we need to have a clear gospel message. If we don't have clear thinking on the gospel, our message will be muddled and confusing. Obviously, that will not help us if we want other people to know Jesus. However, if we don't have clear thinking about the gospel, more than our evangelism will suffer. If we don't have clarity about the gospel, it may be that we don't have a good understanding of the Bible. We may not have an accurate knowledge of who God is, who we are, and what he has done to redeem us. If we don't have a clear understanding of these key issues, our worship of God will suffer. According to Greg Gilbert, "An emaciated gospel leads to emaciated worship."⁴

If we are to understand the gospel message, we will have to open our Bibles and look carefully at the good news that God communicates to us in his holy book.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS

The best place to start is with Jesus. When Jesus began his public ministry, he started preaching the gospel. But what was that message? Mark tells us, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). That seems like a circular definition: "This is the gospel: believe in the gospel." What did Jesus mean?

It might be helpful to look at the very first verse of Mark: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark is indicating that his entire book is gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. The Greek word for gospel, *euangelion*, was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, as well as in the Roman Empire. In the Greco-Roman world, the term was used of victory in battle, which surely is good news for the victors. The birth of Caesar August (63 BC-AD 14) was hailed as "good news for the world." Roman emperors were elevated to god-like status and were viewed as saviors and deliverers for the Empire.

However, the Old Testament use of "good news" probably influenced the New Testament more than the Greco-Roman usage. This term is used five times⁵ in the second part of Isaiah. Chapters 40-66 of this book look forward to a time when Israel would come out of exile to Babylon, when Jerusalem would expand and be transformed, when sins would be forgiven, when Gentiles would enter into the city and even serve as priests, and when the whole earth would be renewed. At the beginning of this section, we read:

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

⁴ Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 20.

⁵ Isa. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
 and cry to her
 that her warfare is ended,
 that her iniquity is pardoned,
 that she has received from the LORD's hand
 double for all her sins.

Here we have a message of comfort, of peace, and pardon from sin. Verses 3-5 speak of the message that John the Baptist would deliver, as he prepared the way for the Lord Jesus. Then, in verses 9-11, we hear of good news.

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,
 O Zion, herald of good news;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
 lift it up, fear not;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 "Behold your God!"

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
 and his arm rules for him;
 behold, his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
 he will gather the lambs in his arms;
 he will carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead those that are with young.

The good news includes God gathering his covenant people out of blindness, prison, darkness, and exile (Is. 42:6-7; 43:6-7). It includes multiple promises of forgiveness (Isa. 43:25; 44:22; 52:15; 53:5-6) and salvation (Isa. 45:17; 46:13; 49:6; 51:5; 61:10). It is a message of free grace (Isa. 55:1-2). It leads to a glorious new Jerusalem (chapter 60); a time of Jubilee (chapter 61); an invitation of the Gentiles to become part of God's people and serve in the temple (Isa. 56:1-8; 66:18-23); and a new heavens and earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22).

When Jesus proclaims the gospel, he is indicating that the time that Isaiah envisioned has begun. Allow me to make this as simple as possible, before adding more details. Isaiah foresaw a time when Israel would come out of exile from Babylon. This was the result of Israel's disobedience and idolatry. But the true exile is the one from the Garden of Eden. All humanity has been exiled from God's presence because of sin. When Israel returned to the land, as we see in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, they were still struggling with sin. The true exile was not over. But when Jesus became a man and began his ministry, he announced that the true exile was ending. He would lead his people to the true promised land, the new heavens and earth. Since Christians are not there yet, even after salvation, they are still called exiles (1 Pet. 1:1, 17).

We are wandering through the wilderness in this life, trusting God for guidance and provision. This is Jesus' message. He is leading us out of exile and into the presence of God.

When Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is at hand, he is indicating that the Son of David, promised long ago (2 Sam. 7:12-16), has arrived. The kingdom and its ruler that Isaiah prophesied (Isa. 9:6-7) has emerged. The Son of Man of Daniel 7:13-14 has come. Even the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 has come to die for the people's sins.

Perhaps the clearest indication that Jesus has come to fulfill Isaiah's vision is found in Luke 4:16-21.

¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.

¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

At the synagogue, Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2, which speaks of good news being proclaimed to the poor. Amazingly, Jesus says that he fulfills this Scripture. Jesus certainly cared about the materially poor and the physically blind, but the Bible teaches us that, as sinners, we are all spiritually poor and blind. Jesus came to liberate us from sin, to inaugurate his kingdom, and one day he will come to judge all people and to recreate the universe. This is Jesus' message.

When Jesus resisted Satan's temptation and when he healed people and drove out demons, he showed that he was turning back the effects of sin and conquering Satan. Jesus spoke of his life as fulfilling "all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). His perfect obedience to God fulfilled the terms of the terms of the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus 19-24). And he indicated that his death would pay the penalty for sin (Matt. 26:27-28). He often spoke of grace, forgiveness, and justification by faith in his parables (Matt. 20:1-16; Luke 15:11-32; 18:9-14). He talked about a new world that would dawn one day (Matt. 19:28).

Mark, by beginning his gospel, seems to say that the whole story of Jesus—his life, his miracles, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection—is good news. "For Mark, the advent of

Jesus is the beginning of the fulfillment of the ‘good news’ heralded by Isaiah.”⁶ The whole story of the Bible finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

This information may help us Christians to understand the gospel better, but it won’t be as helpful for someone who doesn’t know anything about the Bible. This gospel story assumes many things, such as a knowledge of who God is and what he has done. It assumes the knowledge of Adam’s sin and the resulting curse. It assumes some knowledge of Israel’s history.

Our job is to communicate the following: A perfect, almighty, eternal God created everything. God therefore is King, who sets the terms for how he relates to his creation; he determines what is right and wrong. All humans beings have rejected God. We are fallen; we have sinned. We deserve God’s righteous judgment and condemnation. We are in need of salvation. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin and provides a way to be made right with God. We must respond in faith and repentance.

Most people don’t know all of this. Since most people do not know the entire biblical story, we can’t assume that they know God and what he is like. We can’t assume that they know anything about God’s commandments and our sin. If we are to tell people the good news of Jesus, we must give them a context for that news.

A HELPFUL DEFINITION OF THE GOSPEL

Mark Dever, the pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C., has a more useful definition of the gospel, one that gives us some context and an understanding of God’s plans for his creation.

Here’s what I understand the good news to be: the good news is that the one and only God, who is holy, made us in his image to know him. But we sinned and cut ourselves off from him. In his great love, God became a man in Jesus, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, thus fulfilling the law himself and taking on himself the punishment for the sins of all those who would ever turn and trust in him. He rose again from the dead, showing that God accepted Christ’s sacrifice and that God’s wrath against us had been exhausted. He now calls us to repent of our sins and to trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness. If we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we are born again into a new life, an eternal life with God.

Now that’s good news.⁷

Dever and the ministry he started, 9Marks, articulate the gospel in a way that is easy enough to remember. They present the gospel under four main categories: God, man, Christ, response. The God of the Bible, who is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, created everything, including us. Human beings, made in the image of God, fell into sin when the first

⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 24.

⁷ Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 43.

humans, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God. We are therefore under God's righteous judgment. The solution to this problem is Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man. He perfectly obeyed God the Father in his life and he absorbed the penalty for sin in his death on the cross, satisfying God's wrath. This is good news for all who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus.

God, man, Jesus, response. These four categories help us understand why Jesus is good news and how we can be part of the kingdom he came to establish. This is the gospel.

Right now, if you want, you can skip to page 47. However, if you want more information, I will explain each of these four categories (God, man, Jesus, response) in detail. You might consider the next several pages a resource to which you can turn for Scripture references and more in-depth teaching. Every Christian should know the content of the next several pages. Let's examine each category.

GOD

According to a recent Gallup poll, 92 percent of Americans say they believe in God.⁸ While that may sound promising, we know that the majority of the people around us do not believe in the God of the Bible. Yet 78 percent of Americans associate themselves with some form of Christianity.⁹ I wonder how these poll numbers would change if we started to define God the way the Bible does. I imagine the numbers would decrease radically.

When we speak about God to other people, we must be careful to describe him. We must assume nothing. We should ask, "Who is God?" This is a vital question. To come up with an answer, we will look at some of the important attributes of God. This list is not exhaustive, but it speaks of God's uniqueness, majesty, and power.

God is.

God is. Period. He has always existed and he will always exist. He is eternal (Ps. 90:2; Isa. 41:4; Rev. 1:8). He is not only eternal, he is self-sufficient. He needs no help; he is no man's debtor. When God revealed himself to Moses at Mount Horeb, he gave Moses his name: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14). His name is Yahweh, which can mean "I am" or "I cause to be." No one created God. Rather, God is the Creator of all things.

God didn't create the universe because he was terribly lonely. God is triune, which means the one God consists of three persons and three persons form one God: Father, Son, Spirit. They have always had perfectly united fellowship and love. God had no need to create others for the sake of companionship. Rather, creation is the overflow of this triune fellowship. I once heard it said, "It was not God for God to be alone."

God didn't create human beings because he needed help in any way. As I have maintained earlier, he created for his purposes, for his glory. D. A. Carson acknowledges this when he comments on Genesis 1. "The Bible does not begin with a long set of arguments to prove the existence of God. It does not begin with a bottom-up approach, nor does it begin with

⁸ Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147887/americans-continue-believe-god.aspx> (accessed January 13, 2012).

⁹ Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/151760/Christianity-Remains-Dominant-Religion-United-States.aspx> (accessed January 13, 2012).

some kind of adjacent analogy or the like. It just begins, ‘In the beginning God’ (Gen. 1:1).”¹⁰ Creation is not some cosmic accident governed by blind forces. It is the result of God’s eternal purposes.

God is triune.

As mentioned above, God is triune. *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible, but it is a useful term that describes this three-in-one God. The term Trinity was first used by the church father Tertullian (AD 155-220) to describe how God is revealed in the Bible.

The Bible clearly says that there is one God. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4; see also James 2:19). Yet we see three distinct persons of God. This does not mean that God is a human being. When we say “person,” we mean that God is not an impersonal force. He thinks, he feels, and he speaks; therefore, we think and feel and speak.

The three persons of God are seen clearly at Jesus’ baptism: Jesus is in the water with John, the voice of the Father resounds from heaven, and the Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove (Matt. 3:13-17). Jesus tells his disciples to make disciples and baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). In Paul’s letters, the three persons of the Trinity are referred to in passages like Galatians 4:4-6 and Ephesians 1:3-14.

God the Father is, quite obviously, God, and no one has ever doubted the Bible’s teaching on that issue. Jesus is God, as revealed by Thomas’s declaration, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28) and many other passages (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 2:9; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8, among others). The Spirit is also declared God (Acts 5:3-4; 2 Cor. 3:16-18) and clearly shares the attributes of God: he is eternal (Heb. 9:14); he had a role in creation (Gen. 1:2); he is powerful (Mic. 3:8; Acts 1:8; Rom. 15:13, 19), all-knowing (Isa. 40:13-14; 1 Cor. 2:10), and omnipresent (Ps. 139:7).

It is hard for some people to understand the Trinity, but we shouldn’t feel embarrassed about this doctrine. Many people struggle to compare the nature of the Trinity to something within creation, by way of an analogy. The Trinity is like a transparent pyramid, or the three states of water—liquid, solid, and gas—some will say. But all analogies will break down, because it’s impossible to compare God to his creation, and everything besides God that we try to compare him to is part of his creation. He is the one thing or person in this universe that is not created, so he is completely unique.

God is creator.

The Bible clearly states that God created all things. This is clear from Genesis 1 and 2 and many other passages in Scripture. John 1:3 says, “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Clearly, God created all things. Hebrews 11:3 indicates that God created everything *ex nihilo*, out of nothing: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” God spoke creation into existence (Ps. 33:6, 9).

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 18.

Scripture also tells us that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit played a role in creation. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” God the Father created all things *through* the Son. This is clear in John 1:1-3 as well as Colossians 1:15-16. Genesis 1:2 tells us “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” It is best to think of God the Father creating all things *through* the Son *by the power of* the Spirit.

God’s status as creator is one of the many reasons why we worship him. This is what the elders in heaven say of God:

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.” (Rev. 4:11)

We will discuss later the many theories of creation. This will be a point at which many will doubt the gospel message, because the idea of a personal, intelligent creator is commonly rejected. When you share what the Bible says about God, and people question the doctrine of creation, you can ask them some questions: If there is no God, then how did the universe start? If you believe in the Big Bang, then can you tell me who or what started it? Where did the material come from? Most people have no grasp of evolutionary theory, intelligent design, or other theories of the origin of the universe. Simply tell them what the Bible says.

God is King.

God is the sovereign King over his creation. He made everything; therefore, he owns everything. Many passages speak about God as the ruler of his creation.

⁶ Sing praises to God, sing praises!

Sing praises to our King, sing praises!

⁷ For God is the King of all the earth;

sing praises with a psalm! (Ps. 47:7)

¹ The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty;

the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt.

Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.

² Your throne is established from of old;

you are from everlasting. (Ps. 93:1-2)

³ For the LORD is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;

the heights of the mountains are his also.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land. (Ps. 95:3-5)

God is the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16) who works all things according to his sovereign will (Eph. 1:11).

God is all-powerful.

It should be obvious by now that God is able to do all things. He is omnipotent. He is the Lord God Almighty (Rev. 4:8). In the Old Testament, we find rhetorical questions such as, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Gen. 18:14; see also Jer. 32:27). The answer, of course, is, “No!” God does whatever he pleases (Ps. 115:3). Nothing is impossible with him (Matt. 19:26). He controls the weather—parting the Red Sea (Exod. 14), making the sun stand still (Josh. 10), calming the waves of a sea (Mark 4)—and he causes nations and their kings to rise and fall (Dan. 2:21), as seen in his ability to use Assyria, Babylon, and Cyrus/Persia for his purposes.

God is all-knowing.

God is omniscient. There is nothing he doesn’t know. He knows everything—past, present, and future. See Psalm 139:1-6; 147:4-5; 1 John 3:20. He knows what is in our hearts and minds (Jer. 20:12; Rev. 2:23).

God is all-present.

God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. This does not mean that he is in every rock or tree (that would be pantheism). Rather, his presence is everywhere. There is no place where he is not. See 1 Kings 8:27-29; Psalm 139:7-12; Jeremiah 23:23-24.

God is all-wise.

God is portrayed in the Bible as the source of all wisdom and all truth. In fact, Jesus is both truth (John 14:6) and wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24, 30). The Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:7; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6). God’s ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). His understanding goes far beyond what we can measure or imagine (Ps. 147:5; Isa. 40:28). After writing a passage in Romans that is difficult to understand, Paul writes:

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

God is good and perfect.

There is a refrain, oft-repeated in the Old Testament: “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” (1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13; Pss. 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1; Jer. 33:11). This idea is also in the New Testament. Jesus says that only

God is good (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). Furthermore, God is perfect (Matt. 5:48). He bestows every good gift and does not change or act duplicitously (James 1:17; Mal. 3:6; 1 John 1:5).

God is merciful, gracious, and loving.

John famously declares that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). God is love because there never was or will be a time when he didn’t love or will not love. Before creation, he wasn’t jealous or wrathful, and after the end-time judgment, he will have no need for wrath or jealousy. God is the author of love, so it is not surprising that it is part of his character. In the book of Exodus, God tells Moses who he is:

⁶ The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exod. 34:6-7)

God is holy, righteous, and just.

The last passage brings us to something very important. God is holy, which means that he is other, set apart, unique. “To say that God is holy is to ascribe a uniqueness to him that is almost incomprehensible. It indicates that he is set apart from all that is creaturely and corrupt, that he is distinct from this physical and fallen world.”¹¹ Habakkuk 1:13 says that God is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong.” He cannot leave sin unpunished. This is because he is righteous and he is the Judge of the earth (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 7:11). His judgment is sure (see Rev. 16:4-5). A good, righteous judge must convict the guilty. And God is no mere judge; he is King, Judge, and Lawgiver (Isa. 33:22). He who rules, who gave the laws, must also judge breaking of his law strictly. This situation creates quite a dilemma. After all, how can a God who is merciful, gracious, and forgiving also be a God who punishes sin justly?

God is beautiful.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Psalm 27:4.

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

Of course, David asked God for many things, but above all, he wanted to be in God’s presence forever, so that he could gaze upon God’s beauty and inquire of him. God is beautiful. Imagine the most stunning sunrise or sunset you have ever seen. God is more beautiful than that. He is greater than his creation. We get a sense of his majesty and beauty in Revelation 4-5 and 21-22.

¹¹ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 43.

When we tell people about God, we should mention his uniqueness, his power, and his holiness. We should also emphasize the winsome qualities of God, such as his love, his beauty, and his desire for a relationship with us.

If we are going to tell people the gospel, we have to tell them who God is. We may not have time to give a full list of his attributes, but we should tell people that God is the creator, he is King, and he is good and just. Therefore, he does what he pleases and what he pleases is perfect and right. To rebel against such a God is the heart of folly.

MAN

“Man” doesn’t just refer to men. It refers to mankind, or humankind. Just as we must define God, we also must define people. Who are we? The Bible indicates both positive and negative aspects of humanity.

Humans are made by God and made in his image.

God created us. Genesis 1 indicates that we are the height of creation. This is acknowledged in Psalm 8:3-8 as well. Human beings are not mere animals. They are made in the image of God. We are therefore like God in some ways, and we were made to reflect God’s glory in his creation. Human beings were created to know and worship God.

As stated earlier, we are made in the image of God. This means that we are made to reflect God’s glory in the world. But we are also made like God. Like God, we are intelligent, we possess emotions, and we relate to others. We also have the capacity to create, to love, and to do noble things. This comes from God.

Human beings were also made to reign under God’s rule. Adam and Eve, the first humans, were supposed to be God’s vice-regents, having dominion over the earth. But they would only reign insofar as they obeyed God’s commands. Humans were never meant to be independent from God or autonomous.

Humans rebel against God.

Of course, we know how the story goes. Adam and Eve disregarded God’s clear command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They chose to believe the lies of Satan instead of God’s word. They wanted to be like God. Because of their sin, they were exiled from God’s presence and the whole creation fell under a curse. Every one of us has been born “east of Eden,” and “in” Adam. We are, by nature, sinful. Paul says that all human beings, before becoming Christians, are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3).

In his book on idolatry, Greg Beale writes, “God has made humans to reflect him, but if they do not commit themselves to him, they will not reflect him but something else in creation. At the core of our beings we are imaging creatures. It is not possible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in creation.”¹² Everyone has to worship something, and if we’re not worshipping God, we’re worshipping idols.

¹² G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 16.

Our sinful nature leads us to deny God, worship idols, and pursue sin. Paul describes this pattern in Romans 1:18-32. Rejection of God leads to futile thinking, idolatry, and all manner of sin. Because we all have some knowledge of God, from observing his creation, we are responsible for our rebellion against God. Paul tells us that God’s creation reveals “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20). God has also given us consciences, which give us a general sense of right and wrong (Rom. 2:15). The “preacher” of Ecclesiastes says that God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Eccles. 3:11), so that we all have a sense that there is more to reality than this life. This knowledge of God makes us responsible for the sin we commit. We all have actively and conscientiously rebelled against God.

Humans sin.

At this point, we should discuss what sin is. The Bible describes it as missing the mark, transgressing a boundary God set in place, or even as lawlessness. However, at the heart of sin is a broken relationship with God. Greg Gilbert writes, “It’s the breaking of a relationship, and even more, it is a rejection of God himself—a repudiation of God’s rule, God’s care, God’s authority, and God’s right to command those to whom he gave life. In short, it is the rebellion of the creature against his Creator.”¹³ When we sin, it shows how little we value a relationship with God.

Our sin is more than just a matter of individual wrongdoings. Our hearts are sinful, and our sinful actions are merely the overflow of our hearts. We don’t just need atonement for individual deeds, we need to be cleansed and we need new hearts, to desire God and obey him.

Lest anyone think that he or she is exceptional and is without sin, both our experience and the Bible prove otherwise. Our own experience should tell us how many times we have failed and broken standards, whether those standards were our own or other’s. The Bible’s own witness is quite clear: all have sinned.

Paul tells us quite clearly in Romans 1 that all Gentiles have sinned. In Romans 2, he tells us that all Jewish people, those who had the Law of the Old Testament revealed to them, were just as sinful as Gentiles. He confirms that both Jews and Gentiles are sinners by putting together a string of Old Testament quotes in Romans 3:9-18. “None is righteous, no, not one . . . no one seeks for God. All have turned aside . . . no one does good.” The fact that everyone sins is recorded in other parts of the Bible. Solomon, in his prayer at the temple’s inauguration, confessed that “there is no one who does not sin” (1 Kgs. 8:46). Ecclesiastes 7:20 states, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” A few verses later, we read, “See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (Eccles. 7:29). John writes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Sin has consequences.

There are consequences for this sin. For Adam and Eve, it was the exile from the Garden of Eden and the promise of physical death. For Israel, it was exile from the land and destruction.

¹³ Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?*, 48.

Removal from the land represents removal from God's presence. And the ultimate removal from God's presence is hell. Far worse than physical death, this is the "second death" described in Revelation 20:14 and 21:8. The wages of sin, indeed, is death (Rom. 6:23).

The first and greatest consequence of sin is alienation from God. Because of our sinfulness, we cannot be in direct relationship with God. We cannot be directly in his presence. This is what Isaiah says about the situation:

¹ Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,
or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;

² but your iniquities have made a separation
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.

¹² For our transgressions are multiplied before you,
and our sins testify against us;
for our transgressions are with us,
and we know our iniquities:

¹³ transgressing, and denying the LORD,
and turning back from following our God,
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words. (Isa. 59:1-2, 12-13)

The human heart realizes this separation from God on some level. According to John Stott, "There is a hunger in the heart of man which none but God can satisfy, a vacuum which only God can fill."¹⁴ Augustine, in his *Confessions*, writes, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee." Every person has a longing that cannot be filled by the things of this world. We all have some vague sense that this world, in its current state, is not our home. This feeling has been observed by Christians such as C. S. Lewis and by non-Christians such as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Our separation from God requires us to have a mediated relationship with him. The worship of the Israelites was mediated through the Levitical priesthood. In fact, their whole worship system at the tabernacle and temple was a symbol of their sin. There was a physical barrier between them and God. God dwelled in the Most Holy Place and only the high priest, the human mediator, was able to enter into God's presence, and only one time each year, on the Day of Atonement. A thick curtain or veil separated this area from the rest of the temple. Because of their sin, the Israelites had to offer animal sacrifices. The animals stood in place of the sinful Israelites, who would symbolically cast their sins on an animal and kill it, illustrating that the penalty for disobeying God was death.

The second consequence of sin is alienation from others. It is no accident that soon after Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, one of their sons, Cain, killed the other, Abel. Our sin

¹⁴ John Stott, *Basic Christianity*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 94.

results in broken relationships with each other. This explains why, even in the best human relationships, there is tension and fighting.

The third consequence of sin is our inner sinfulness. We are corrupt and we become slaves to sin. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). According to Paul, prior to conversion, Christians were enslaved by sin (Rom. 6:17, 20). No one is an absolutely free agent. If we are not “slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:18), we will be enslaved by our sin. This explains addictions and our tendency to return to our foolish ways, like a dog returns to its vomit (Prov. 26:11; 2 Pet. 2:22). We need to be liberated from this bondage to sin and given a new nature.

The Bible’s doctrine of humanity best explains who we are.

It is worth noting that what the Bible says about us best explains who we are. Human beings are noble creatures capable of performing wonderful acts of love. We are capable of creating marvelous things. Even non-Christians are capable of sacrificial love and generosity. But we are also violent, petty, self-centered, and capable of the most monstrous acts. Christianity acknowledges that humans are made in the image of God, and that God’s initial creation was good (Gen. 1:31). Even though sin has entered the world, and all of creation is under a curse, everything—including us—is not as bad as it could and should be. This accounts for why humans are both bad and good. Dinesh D’Souza writes, “Humans are, in their inner depths, cauldrons of good and evil mixed together.”¹⁵

Telling people about sin.

If we are to tell people the gospel, we must tell them the uncomfortable news of sin. One effective way to show up our sin is to go through the Ten Commandments. I remember reading them with a young man and asking, “Which of these *haven’t* you broken?” He said, “Well, I’ve never killed anyone, and I haven’t committed adultery.” Then I read to him a bit of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says that hating someone makes a person just as guilty as if he committed murder (Matt. 5:21-23), and where Jesus says that having lustful intent is just as bad as adultery (Matt. 5:27-28). The young man became rather quiet after that.

We should also indicate in our message that there is a penalty for sin. Those who are not reconciled to God face eternal punishment in hell. Jesus taught many parables about final judgment (Matt. 13:24-30, 47-50; 25:31-46; Luke 16:19-30). Other passages that describe the final judgment include 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12 and Revelation 14:14-20; 19:11-16; 20:11-15. It is necessary to deliver the bad news—God is judge and we are guilty of sin—before we get to the good news of Jesus.

JESUS

Fortunately, our message is not all gloom and doom. It is necessary to deliver the bad news first (or else there wouldn’t be any good news), but now we come to the Good News.

¹⁵ Dinesh D’Souza, *What’s So Great About Christianity* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2007), 261.

³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal. 4:3-7)

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom. 5:6-11)

Of course, we could consider many other passages that reveal some aspect of the good news: that God sent his own Son into the world to pay the penalty for sin, so that those who put their faith in him and repent of sins can be reconciled to God and saved from condemnation. Let’s consider who Jesus is and what he did by starting from the beginning.

God had a plan before creation to save people and bring glory to himself.

One of the things that the New Testament reveals is that Jesus was God’s Plan A, not Plan B. From before the foundation of the world, God planned to save people through the atoning death of Jesus. We find this in passages like Ephesians 1:3-6; 2 Timothy 1:9; and Revelation 13:8; 17:8. Ephesians 1:3-14 reveal that God’s plan is grounded in love, and that he made it to bring himself glory. That is, God’s grace is motivated by his great love, and his grace brings him glory by showing how inexpressibly awesome he is.

Jesus’ incarnation was prophesied many times and in many ways in the Old Testament.

Right after Adam and Eve’s sin, God made a promise while cursing the serpent. He told the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Theologians consider this the first hint of the gospel in the Bible. As one reads through the Bible, one encounters many hints of a coming anointed one, the Messiah, who will make things right by ruling his people and paying the penalty for sin. Other passages include Genesis 49:10; Numbers 24:17; Deuteronomy 18:15-19; 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Psalms 2; 8; 22; 72; 110; Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-5; 40:10-11; 42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:12-53:12; 61:1-4; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Daniel 7:13-14; Hosea 11:1; Micah 5:2; Zechariah 6:12-13; 9:9; 10:4; 12:3; 14:4; and Malachi 3:1-3. Indeed, the whole Old Testament anticipates the incarnation of Jesus.

Jesus is the true Son of God.

One of Jesus' many titles is, of course, Son of God. We all know this and we have referred to him in this way. But what does that title mean?

There has been some confusion about this title, partly due to a less-than-ideal translation of a single Greek word. If we look at the King James Version or the New King James Version, we will see that four times in John's gospel (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), Jesus is referred to as "the only begotten Son of God" or something similar. "Begotten" is the past participle of "beget," which can mean to give birth to or sire, though it can also refer to acquiring through effort. If we hold to this word, we might wrongly believe that God the Father somehow sired Jesus. We know this is not true (though this is what the Mormons believe).

In the KJV and NKJV, "the only begotten" is a translation of the Greek word *monogenous*, a form of *monogenēs*. This word means "only, one of a kind, unique." Therefore, John 3:16 in the English Standard Version (quoted throughout my writing) reads, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" The NIV translates this as "one and only Son," as does the Holman Christian Standard Bible. Jesus is the only, unique, one-of-a-kind Son of God, though he was never made. He has always existed.

Perhaps we would have a better understanding of this title if we saw how it was applied to other people in the Bible. Adam, the first human being, is called the son of God (Luke 3:38). Adam was supposed to obey God, his Father. As long as Adam obeyed, he would receive his inheritance. Of course, Adam failed to obey, and that father-son relationship was broken. Israel is also called the son of God in the Bible, collectively (Exod. 4:22-23; Hos. 11:1) and individually (Deut. 14:1). As a nation, Israel was supposed to do the Father's work by obeying his commandments. Of course, Israel failed, too.

Therefore, God sent his true Son, his one and only, unique and beloved Son, Jesus, to do his will. The fact that Jesus is called Son indicates a relationship with the Father. Jesus is the obedient one who listens to the Father and does his bidding. As Jesus himself said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). Jesus' obedience, particularly when contrasted with Adam's disobedience, Israel's disobedience, and our disobedience, is a significant part of his work. When tempted in the wilderness by Satan, Jesus obeyed God by recalling his word. He lived a sinless life, as noted several times in the Bible (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 9:14; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5). He fulfilled the terms of the Sinaitic covenant, which Israel could not do. He perfectly obeyed his conscience, which Gentiles cannot do. He was even obedient to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). His death makes it possible for us to be adopted as sons of God.

The Word became flesh.

We must be clear about a few things: Jesus is God, he has always existed, and God the Father created everything through Jesus. When Jesus was born as a baby, he became a human being, even though he has always existed. We call this the incarnation. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Jesus came to save.

As Paul writes in Galatians 4, Jesus came to redeem sinners, to purchase their freedom with his death on the cross. Jesus described his mission in terms of redemption and salvation. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

Jesus is the true sin-bearer.

After sin entered the world, God graciously allowed people to present animal sacrifices to him, to atone for sin. As early as Genesis 4, humans were presenting sacrifices to God. Later, after Israel was established as a nation, God gave his people many rules for presenting sacrifices. These rules are mostly found in the book of Leviticus. The idea is a fairly simple one: the people sinned against a holy God. Therefore, they deserved to die. Leviticus 5:17 says, “If anyone sins, doing any of the things that by the Lord’s commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it, then realizes his guilt, he shall bear his iniquity.” As you read through the Law of the Old Testament, you soon realize that the penalty for sin is death. However, God allowed them to symbolically transfer their sins to an animal, and kill the animal in their place. The animal would then bear the sin. It was a substitute for the one who sinned, a life for a life. Leviticus 17:11 says, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.”

On the Day of Atonement, which occurred once a year, the high priest would make atonement for the people of Israel. He would make sacrifices for his own sin, since he was sinful like everyone else. Then he would sacrifice a bull and a goat and take some of the blood and sprinkle it on the mercy seat, the cover of the ark inside the Most Holy Place. “Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins” (Lev. 16:16a). He would also symbolically place the sins of the people on a goat and release it into the wilderness, outside the camp of the Israelites (Lev. 16:21). This was the original scapegoat. “The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself” (Lev. 16:22a).

This system of animal sacrifices was not God’s final plan for atonement. As the book of Hebrews shows, the system was flawed. Animals were standing in for people. The sacrifices had to be offered repeatedly. Even the high priest, the mediator, was sinful and had to offer sacrifices for himself. This presents a problem, because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22), and yet “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4).

The answer to this problem, of course, is Jesus. He is the true sin-bearer. John the Baptist acknowledged that when he cried, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Paul calls Jesus “our Passover lamb” (1 Cor. 5:7) and Peter refers to “the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). Clearly, Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, the one that all the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament anticipated. Peter writes quite clearly about what Jesus did on the cross: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds

you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). This passage is significant, because Peter is referring back to Isaiah 53.

Approximately seven hundred years before Jesus’ incarnation, the prophet Isaiah wrote about what he would accomplish on the cross. It is worth quoting this passage at length.

- ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
- ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
- ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
- ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
- ⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
- ¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
- ¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,

because he poured out his soul to death
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet he bore the sin of many,
 and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:4-12)

This passage clearly refers to one who will bear the iniquities of the people. It is clearly about Jesus, who did not protest when he was arrested and led to Golgotha to be crucified, and who was buried in the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus poured out his soul to death (v. 12) when he shed his blood, the blood of the new covenant (Luke 22:20). The fact that Peter alludes to this passage when discussing Jesus' death comes as no surprise. This is what Peter writes:

²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:22-25)

There are many clear allusions to Isaiah 53 in this passage. The key part of Peter's message is verse 24: Jesus bore our sins on the "tree" so that we might die to sin, live to righteousness, and thus be healed. Peter uses the word "tree" in order to show that Jesus bore the curse of sin described in Deuteronomy. "And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God" (Deut. 21:22-23). Paul also refers to these verses from Deuteronomy: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Gal. 3:13). Jesus took the curse of sin, the penalty we rightly deserved, when he died on the cross.

We should also observe that Jesus is the true High Priest who mediates a relationship between God and man. (Again, the book of Hebrews describes this at length.) Jesus is sinless and a human; therefore, he is a perfect sacrifice. He is eternal and continually lives; therefore, his death can cover all sins—past, present, and future. His death was a "once for all" sacrifice.

It is vital that we talk about Jesus' death on the cross. In theological terms, this is called the atonement, because his death makes Christians at one with the Father. An entire strain of Christianity has minimized or even abandoned the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. In the middle of the twentieth century, Richard Niebuhr described such Christianity with these words: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."¹⁶ A form of Christianity with no mention of sin and the cross is not Christianity at all.

¹⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 193, quoted in Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 479.

On the cross, Jesus defeated evil.

So far, we have barely mentioned Satan or evil. The Bible maintains that there is a devil, who is served by many demons. Evil forces are at work in the spiritual realm and in this world. Jesus' death defeated them, though the total victory will not be won until he returns. Shortly before he died, Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out" (John 12:31). Paul tells us that on the cross, Jesus "disarmed the [demonic] rulers and authorities and put them to open shame" (Col. 2:15).

Jesus rose from the grave.

After Jesus died on the cross, he was buried in a tomb. But he didn't stay there. He rose from the dead on the third day in an immortal, glorified body, one that could never die again. Though other people come back to life in the Bible, they were revived (came back to life for a time), not resurrected (made alive, never to die again). Jesus was the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5).

Jesus had predicted his resurrection many times before he died (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). The resurrection proves that his words are true. His resurrection proves that he is God; his disciples worshiped him after he rose from the grave (Matt. 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52; John 20:28). Acts 2:24 says that death could not hold Jesus, who will one day destroy death (1 Cor. 15:25-27). Acts 17:31 says that Jesus' resurrection gives us assurance that he will one day come again to judge the world. Therefore, Jesus' resurrection proves he is God and a powerful judge.

Jesus' resurrection also says something very important about God's plans for his creation. Jesus enables his followers to be new creations, and one day he will return to make all things new. I will discuss this in more detail below.

Jesus' resurrection insures our justification. This is a vital aspect of the gospel. In Romans 4:24-25, Paul writes, "It [righteousness] will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." Justification means that we are declared just, or in the right. It is a legal term used for one who is declared innocent. According to theologian Wayne Grudem,

"By raising Christ from the dead, God the Father was in effect saying that he approved of Christ's work of suffering and dying for our sins, that his work was completed, and that Christ no longer had any need to remain dead. There was no penalty left to pay for sin, no more wrath of God to bear, no more guilt of liability to punishment—all had been completely paid for, and no guilt remained."¹⁷

This is the way that a pastor, Tim Keller, describes it.

"Jesus had risen, just as he told them he would. After a criminal does his time in jail and satisfies the sentence, the law has no more claim on him and he walks out free. Jesus Christ came to pay the penalty for our sins. That was an infinite sentence, but he must have satisfied it fully, because on Easter Sunday he walked

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 615.

out free. The resurrection was God’s way of stamping PAID IN FULL right across history so that nobody could miss it.”¹⁸

The resurrection is of such importance that Paul says, “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is futile” (1 Cor. 15:14). However, Paul and the apostles testify to the truth of the resurrection, which gives us eternal hope.

Jesus satisfied the wrath of God and reconciles Christians to God.

God hates sin and must punish it. The Bible even says that he hates sinners (Pss. 5:5; 11:4-5; Hos. 9:15). The phrase, “God hates the sin but loves the sinner” does not come from the Bible, but seems to come from a statement made by Gandhi in his 1929 autobiography: “Love the sinner but hate the sin.”¹⁹ Yet God loved the world—collective sinful humanity—and therefore he sent his Son in order to save sinners from his wrath and reconcile them to himself. Therefore, Jesus’ death is called propitiation (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), an act that makes God propitious, or favorably disposed, to those who believe in Jesus. Jesus’ death satisfied God’s wrath, so that those who believe in Jesus will not face his wrath on the day of judgment. (To be clear, those who do not believe in Jesus will still face God’s wrath, as we see in John 3:36 and in multiple places in the book of Revelation.)

Jesus’ death and resurrection reconcile us to God (Rom. 5:11; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20). This is why we call Jesus’ death the atonement, which simply means *at-one-ment*. Those who believe in Jesus have their relationship with God, once broken by sin, restored.

Through Jesus, Christians have a personal relationship with God.

One amazing aspect of the gospel is that Jesus enables his followers to know God in a personal, intimate way. Christians can rightly call God their Father. They can call Jesus their friend (John 15:13-15) and brother (Heb. 2:11-12). Christians can know their Maker and the Lord of the universe.

Jesus makes Christians righteous, and this is a gift of God’s grace.

Unlike other religions, Christianity states that human beings cannot have a right relationship with God through obedience or good deeds. Rather, acceptability to God is based on the perfect obedience and work of Jesus. And since the perfect Son of God died to pay the penalty for sin, those who believe in him are considered “in the right,” or righteous. They are justified, essentially another way of saying “declared righteous.” Though every human being is, in fact, guilty of sin, those who trust in Jesus are declared innocent. We have already looked at Isaiah 53. Verse 11 states that the suffering servant will “make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

On the cross, Jesus paid our debt, satisfying God’s holy justice. Our own righteousness could never atone for our sins. Isaiah 64:6a says, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” No matter how good anyone is, the

¹⁸ Timothy Keller, *The King’s Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 219.

¹⁹ Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 258.

presence of sin makes that person unclean. If our righteousness cannot satisfy God, then we need the perfect righteousness of Jesus to satisfy him. On the cross, Jesus took our sin so that we could be righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). This is a free gift, not one earned by our works (Rom. 5:16-17). Those who confess their sin and trust in Jesus for righteousness will be justified (Luke 18:9-14). This gift must be received by faith.

Righteousness is a declaration made now. Christians are in the right, clothed in Christ and his own righteousness. Other important passages regarding justification include Romans 3:21-26; Galatians 2:15-16; Philippians 3:8-9; and Colossians 2:13-14, among many others.

The entire experience of salvation, from Jesus' death and resurrection, to an individual's faith, justification, sanctification (the process of being made holy), and glorification (the final stage of salvation, in which Christians receive perfect, immortal bodies and dwell in perfect harmony in a perfected, sinless new creation) is the gift of God. Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Jesus makes us clean and holy.

Related to justification and righteousness is the aspect of becoming clean and holy. Sin has made everyone unclean and unholy. In order to be right with God, and to have a relationship with him, we need to be cleansed from our sin and sanctified. One of the clearest pictures of being made clean and holy comes from the Old Testament.

¹ Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. ² And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" ³ Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. ⁴ And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." ⁵ And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by. (Zech. 3:1-5)

In this passage, Joshua, the high priest, stands before God in filthy garments. Satan is at hand, ready to accuse Joshua of his sin. The angel of the LORD (a special representative of God, perhaps the pre-incarnate Jesus himself) gives Joshua pure clothes and announces that his iniquity—his sin—has been taken away. This is what Jesus does for those who believe in him.

According to Hebrews, Jesus' blood purifies Christians and makes them holy (Heb. 9:11-14; 10:10, 19-22).

Jesus saves Christians so that they can do the good works God has planned for them.

It is important to remember that salvation is not the end goal. God's glory is always the ultimate goal. But in order to glorify God, we need to be reconciled to him. Salvation is the beginning of a relationship with God. Once that relationship has begun, God expects us to do

things for him. We must remember to read Ephesians 2:10, not just the two verses that precede it. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” In Galatians 2:20, after explaining that justification is by faith, not by works, Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Jesus wants to accomplish God’s purposes through those he has redeemed.

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to those who believe.

Before Jesus died, he promised his disciples he would send the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-31). After his resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples the Spirit (John 20:22). At Pentecost, Jesus poured out his Spirit on a larger group of disciples in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-13). The Spirit enables Christians to believe, by giving them new hearts, so that they can follow Jesus.

In fact, we can say that the Holy Spirit is the one who causes us to believe and to be born again. Jesus said that people need to be “born of the Spirit” to enter the kingdom of heaven (John 3:5-6). The Spirit gives Christians life (John 6:63). Titus 3:5 says that we are saved by the regeneration that comes through the Holy Spirit.

At the time of faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of Christians (Eph. 1:13-14). According to those verses, the Holy Spirit is also a guarantee of our salvation. He assures us that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16).

The Spirit makes Christians more and more holy. This process is known as sanctification. Romans 8:29 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 indicate that Christians will be conformed to the true image of God, which is Jesus. This is what the latter verse says: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Christians are supposed to live by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14), who guides us as we follow Jesus. He produces his righteous fruit in us (Gal. 5:22-23). Though we are declared righteous when we believe, we grow into actual righteousness as the Spirit makes us increasingly holy.

The activity of the Spirit in our lives is a very important part of Christianity. Jesus’ death takes care of one major aspect of sin: our separation from God. The Spirit takes care of a second problem of our sin: our internal corruption. As he changes us, we start to be less self-centered and more Christ-centered. It is important to know that salvation is a supernatural event, one that God works through Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

Jesus builds his church.

Jesus told Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). When Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, he built his church. The church is the body of Christ, the instrument through which Jesus does his will on earth. It is the temple of God, where God dwells with his people, where people come to worship God and find forgiveness for sins. The third negative consequence of sin is alienation from each other. This results in broken relationships. Jesus gives us a way to be reconciled not only to God, but also to

each other, as we live together in love. We are not only saved to good works, but we are saved into a community of other believers. It is important to stress that we must come to God individually through faith, but when we are made new creations, we become part of the church.

Jesus gives abundant, eternal life.

Jesus gives life. We cannot overstress this point. He said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b). Life following Jesus is better. But this life is not just here and now, it is endless. Read the words of Jesus: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

Jesus makes all things new.

Believers in Jesus are regenerated, born again. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Paul also tells Christians that God “made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5; cf. Rom. 6:4, 8; Col. 2:12). This is a spiritual reality now, though when Jesus returns, there will be a physical resurrection for all believers and a recreation of the universe.

The physical resurrection of all believers is described in 1 Corinthians 15:23, 51-57; Philippians 3:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; and Revelation 20:12-13. Christians will at this time receive immortal, glorified bodies. Salvation is generally viewed as past, present, and future. Christians are justified at the time of belief, they become more holy in their lives, and they will be glorified at the resurrection of the dead.

One of the most exciting aspects of the whole gospel story is that Jesus will recreate the entire universe. The promise of a new heavens and new earth is found in the Old Testament (Isa. 65:17; 66:22) and the New Testament (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). There is some debate as to whether the current world will be destroyed (suggested in 2 Pet. 3:10-12) or simply refined and transformed. Either way, the new creation will be perfect, without sin and the consequences of the curse: death, disease, mourning, crying, pain, hunger, or thirst. “No longer will there be anything accursed” (Rev. 22:3). Even better, Christians will be in the direct presence of God. “They will see his face” (Rev. 22:4).

Jesus will judge the living and the dead.

When Jesus returns, it will be a time of joy for those who believe in him. But for those who reject him, there will be judgment. Jesus will judge everyone, both the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; see also 17:31; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Jesus is the only way.

In our pluralist society, it is not popular to say that there is only one way to God and heaven, but this is exactly what the Bible says. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Peter said, “This Jesus is the stone that

was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11-12). Somehow, some people who profess to be Christians don’t get this right, claiming that adherents of other religions worship and pray to the same God, and that all religions lead to the same place. This is nonsense. Christian worship and prayer is mediated through Jesus to the Father. If a person does not believe in Jesus, he or she has no relationship with God.

RESPONSE

The only proper response to the good news of Jesus Christ is repentance and faith. Repenting and believing are two sides of the same coin. One is a turn away from sin, and the other is a turn towards Jesus. According to J. I. Packer,

Faith and repentance are both acts, and acts of the whole man. Faith is more than just credence; faith is essentially the casting and resting of oneself and one’s confidence on the promises of mercy which Christ has given to sinners, and on the Christ who gave those promises. Equally, repentance is more than just sorrow for the past; repentance is a change of mind and heart, a new life of denying self and serving the Saviour as king in self’s place.²⁰

Repentance

Repentance is not popular, but it certainly is biblical. Both John the Baptist and Jesus asked people to repent (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). When Peter preached in the book of Acts, he mentioned repentance.

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

¹⁹ “Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, ²⁰ that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.” (Acts 3:19-21)

Paul was no different. He also spoke of repentance.

³⁰ “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31)

²⁰ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 70-71.

¹⁹ “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,
²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.” (Acts 26:19-20)

Repentance is necessary because being saved from condemnation and becoming a Christian is a radical change. It requires turning from our sin and our deep-rooted selfishness and turning to Jesus and following him. The Bible does not leave any room for such a thing as an unrepentant Christian. (If you have any doubt, read 1 John, particularly 2:4-6; 3:4-10).

For the Christian, repentance is a way of life. This is best illustrated by two quotes from Christians of the past. The first comes from Martin Luther, a former Catholic priest who helped start the Protestant Reformation when he posted his famous *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. The first thesis states: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying ‘Repent ye, etc.’, meant the whole life of the faithful to be an act of repentance.”²¹ The second quote comes from John Owen, the seventeenth century British theologian: “Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.”²²

Faith

Turning from sin is only part of the equation. We need to turn to Jesus and believe in him to be saved. When Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, a tremendous earthquake shook the prison and opened all its doors. The jailer asked them, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30-31). In order to be saved, to have forgiveness of sins and eternal life, one must believe in Jesus.

I like to think of believing as loving, trusting, and obeying. We love Jesus for who he is and what he has done, and this love means that our hearts are turned towards him. We trust him for salvation, knowing that his death on the cross paid the penalty for our sin and makes us reconciled to God. We obey him, because this is the natural overflow of repentance and love (see John 14:15, 21, 23). After all, the gospel is something that is not only believed, but obeyed (2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17). A proper response to the gospel requires action.

Another way to understand faith is to look at Abraham, the father of all who believe. Even though Abraham and his wife Sarah were very old, Abraham believed God’s promise that he would be the father of a multitude. Give their age, this promise would require a supernatural birth (of Isaac, who fathered Jacob, who fathered Judah, etc., which led to the birth of Jesus). This is what Romans 4:20-22 says about Abraham and his faith:

²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to

²¹ Martin Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, in Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 206.

²² John Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, in *The Works of John Owen.*, vol. 6, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 9.

do what he had promised.²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”

Abraham believed in God’s promise to do the seemingly impossible. His faith made him willing to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, because he trusted in a good outcome (Gen. 22; Heb. 11:17-19). He believed that God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). Therefore, his faith was counted righteousness. Everyone who has such faith will be counted righteous (Rom. 4:23-25).

The Bible also indicates that such a faith will naturally result in good fruit, or good works. James, who also uses the example of Abraham, tells us that “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17). He does not mean that we are justified by our works, which is impossible. He means that true faith results in a transformation of life, one that will naturally lead to good works. In the words of Mark Dever, “To be a Christian is to have your life transformed by God.”²³

It is vital that we explain repentance and faith when we share the gospel.

Confession

We should also tell people that confessing our sins in faith leads to forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:7-9). When we come to Jesus, we step into the light, which exposes our sin for what it is. When we believe what the Bible says about God, our sin, and Jesus, we can be forgiven of all sin and unrighteousness. (Psalm 51 is a perfect example of confession and repentance.)

If a person believes that this gospel message is true and is ready to repent, we can help them in this process. We should never be manipulative, but if they sincerely believe and want to know what to do next, we could advise them to talk to God by praying and confessing their sins. I’m not a fan of rote prayers, but there are times when such a prayer might help someone who has no concept of how to pray. If you do help someone pray, tell them that a prayer is not magical, and that the only thing that will bring about salvation is true faith and repentance, not mere words.

John Stott recommends this prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, I acknowledge that I have gone my own way. I have sinned in thought, word and deed. I am sorry for my sins. I turn from them in repentance.

I believe that you died for me, bearing my sins in your own body. I thank you for your great love.

Now I open the door. Come in, Lord Jesus. Come in as my Savior, and cleanse me. Come in as my Lord, and take control of me. And I will serve as you give me strength, all my life.

*Amen.*²⁴

²³ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 132.

²⁴ Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 162-63.

The Cost of Discipleship

When we share the gospel, we should indicate something of the cost of following Jesus. There are innumerable, infinite benefits of Christianity, but there is cost involved as well. We would do well to listen to Jesus on this matter.

²⁶ “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26-33)

²³ And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:23-25)

“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Jesus’ words are, as always, strong. When he says we must “hate” our family and our very lives, he is comparing our love for him with our love for others. We must love Jesus so much, that all other loves look like hate in comparison. (In Matt. 10:37, Jesus indicates that those who love their family more than him are not worthy of him.) When he says we must renounce all that we have, this does not necessarily mean we have to give everything away. But we must be willing. To become a Christian is to realize that Jesus is Lord over every area of our lives. There is nothing we have that is not rightly his. Stott writes, “To make Christ Lord is to bring every department of our public and private lives under his control.”²⁵

Becoming a Christian means a death to our own selfish agendas. Paul, who had perhaps the most dramatic conversion in history, wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). In case we think this type of self-denial applies only to Paul, he later adds, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24).

²⁵ Ibid., 142.

We should never give anyone a false impression of being a Christian. It is not always an easy life. According to Stott, “If you want to live a life of easygoing self-indulgence, whatever you do, do not become a Christian.”²⁶

Being a Christian

Finally, we should encourage anyone who wants to become a Christian to read the Bible regularly, pray, and go to church. Perhaps the best place to start in the Bible is with one of the gospels. Reading the Bible is the way that God speaks to us. Praying is how we speak to him. And to be a Christian, one must be part of a local church, which provides teaching, encouragement, a place to serve, and accountability. Of course, if you share the gospel with someone who wants to know more, you can always invite that person to join you in attending church the next Sunday.

THE GOSPEL IN NON-THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

The preceding information is for your benefit, Christian. In order to share the gospel, you need to know its content. I wrote at length because there have been many distortions of the gospel, even by pastors.

Do you need to share everything I have written over the previous twenty-plus pages? No. You will need to find a way to communicate the core concepts of God, man, Jesus, and response in language that people will understand. I would encourage you to write out your own easy-to-understand gospel presentation. For my attempt, see the next page.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How can you present the gospel message in a clear, concise way?

How can you communicate the gospel message in a creative way? Think about presenting these gospel truths in the form of a story, similar to Jesus’ parables.

Could you share the gospel by telling the story of a King and his kingdom, or a master and his servants? Think about the parables in Matthew 18:21-35; 20:1-15; 21:33-41; 22:1-14; 25:14-30.

Could you share the gospel by telling the story of a Father and his children? Think of the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32?

Could you share the gospel by telling a story of a rescue mission, in which the owner searches for his lost possessions? Think about the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in Luke 15:3-10.

²⁶ Ibid., 150.

A GOSPEL SUMMARY

Christianity is the story of God, who is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, good, perfect, and loving. He created everything in order to be known. When he created the universe, including our planet and everything on it, he made it good.

Christianity is also the story of human beings, who were made to know God and to reflect his greatness. We were made to be like God, and in some ways we are, but we have all rejected him and rebelled against him. Even though we see the evidence of God in all of nature, we do not seek him or listen to what he says. Because the first human beings disobeyed God, nothing is the way God originally intended it. Because we disobey God, our lives are hard, we fight with each other, we get sick, and we die. And because we disobey God, he has the right to punish us. He is a perfect judge, and the evidence shows that all of us deserve punishment, which means eternal separation from God and anything good.

Christianity is, finally, the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Because he is God, he is also eternal, but he became man when he was born of the virgin, Mary. Unlike us, he lived a perfect life, obeying God the Father, and loving others. Though we deserve punishment, Jesus took our punishment for us when he died on the cross. Crucifixion was a horrible, painful death that the Roman Empire used for criminals. Jesus, our substitute, died such a horrible death because our disobedience to God had to be punished.

The good news of Christianity is that everyone who turns from their rebellion against God and loves, trusts, and obeys Jesus is forgiven of all wrongdoing. Everyone who believes this message is declared innocent by God. Everyone who believes this message will one day live forever in a perfect world, which Jesus will one day create when he returns.

In order to be part of this good news, you must stop living for yourself and start living for God. This starts with believing that God is who he says he is in the Bible. It starts by trusting that Jesus' death pays the price for everything wrong you have ever done. And it starts when you follow him. This means learning about him by reading your Bible. It means praying to God and having a personal relationship with him. And it means becoming part of a community of other believers, a community we call church.

Being a Christian is not always easy. It means our lives will be permanently changed. God changes us by giving us the Holy Spirit, the third person of the one true God. The Spirit changes us from the inside out, by giving us new hearts, by guiding us, and by helping us follow Jesus.

There is nothing better and nothing truer than to know and love the God who made you and was willing to die for you.

A GOSPEL OUTLINE: FIRST STEPS TO GOD

The following gospel outline was developed for students and staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. It appears in *Speaking of Jesus*, an excellent book on evangelism by Mack Stiles.¹ He recommends placing it the flyleaf of your Bible.

God

- God loves you (John 3:16).
- God is holy and just. He punishes all evil and expels it from his presence (Romans 1:18).

People

- God, who created everything, made us for himself to find our purpose in fellowship with him (Colossians 1:16).
- But we rebelled and turned away from God (Isaiah 53:6). The result is separation from God (Isaiah 59:2). The penalty is eternal death (Romans 6:23).

Christ

- God became human in the person of Jesus Christ to restore the broken fellowship (Colossians 1:19-20). Christ lived a perfect life (1 Peter 2:22).
- Christ died as a substitute for us by paying the death penalty for our rebellion (Romans 5:8). He arose (1 Corinthians 15:3-4) and is alive today to give us a new life of fellowship with God, now and forever (John 10:10).

Response

- I must *repent* for my rebellion (Matthew 4:17).
- I must *believe* Christ died to provide forgiveness and a new life of fellowship with God (John 1:12).
- I must *receive* Christ as my Savior and Lord with the intent to obey him. I do this in prayer by inviting him into my life (Revelation 3:20).

Cost

- There is no cost to you; your salvation comes to you freely (Ephesians 2:8-9).
- But it comes at a high cost to God (1 Peter 1:18-19).
- Ultimately your response is a life of discipleship (Luke 9:23-24).

¹ J. Mack Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 190.

WHAT THE GOSPEL ISN'T

We should briefly discuss what the gospel is not. Since there is so much confusion about the gospel message, this is necessary.

One way to think about what the gospel message is, and is not, is to consider Paul's statement in Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." This statement will reveal what is, and what isn't, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

WE ARE NOT THE GOSPEL

This should go without saying, but, alas, it cannot. I have heard such statements as "you [Christian] are the gospel." This is nonsense. Paul does not say, "For I am not ashamed of myself, for I am the power of God for salvation." We are not the good news. We are messengers of the good news and ambassadors for Christ, but we are not the good news itself. Failure to understand this point will hamper our evangelism from the very beginning, because we won't think it is necessary to share the gospel message. We will simply hope the gospel rubs off on others as we live our lives. However, being good people, and even giving and loving sacrificially, won't tell people who Jesus is, what he did, and why he did it.

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, two pastors, share some wise words. "Francis of Assisi is alleged to have said, 'Preach the gospel always; if necessary use words.' That may be a great medieval sound bite, but it falls short of what the Bible teaches about evangelism." "The gospel is good news—a message to be proclaimed, a truth to be taught, a word to be spoken, and a story to be told."¹

THE GOSPEL IS NOT MORALISM

Moralism is, in a way, its own religion. It is being moral for morality's sake. Much worse, it is trying to justify oneself before God by being moral (though usually not by following all the Bible's commands, such as giving to the poor, loving one's enemies, and renouncing pride and materialism). The gospel message is not "be a better person" or "try harder." The gospel tells us we can't be good enough to earn God's favor, no matter how hard we try.

Of course, we all want a more moral society. It would make life easier. However, we could have a "moral" society in which men and women do not honor God or even acknowledge his existence. (Just think about the Pharisees and their legalism.) True morality occurs when God, by way of the gospel, transfers people from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

¹ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 54.

THE GOSPEL IS NOT A POLITICAL OR NATIONALISTIC MESSAGE

A word of warning: when we share the gospel, we are not advocating a political party or position. We are not telling people how to vote. We are not telling people that Christianity equals patriotism. Political and nationalistic causes are not perfect and they are not eternal, unlike the perfectly true and eternal gospel message. Whenever we mix the gospel with other causes, we end up watering it down and giving people a false impression of Christianity.

“JESUS IS LORD” IS NOT THE GOSPEL

Some people think that the gospel message can be summarized as “Jesus is Lord” or “Jesus is the true King.” These statements are true, but they are not good news for everyone. For those who are not yet Christians, the thought that Jesus is Lord should be terrifying.

Let me provide an example. Say that shares of Apple stock rise ten percent in one day. This is good news, but not for everyone. It is only good news for those who own Apple stock. For others, it is not good news. Similarly, the fact that Jesus is the true ruler of the universe is only good news for those who follow him.

CREATION-FALL-REDEMPTION-CONSUMMATION IS NOT THE GOSPEL

Many astute theologians summarize the story of the Bible in four words: creation, fall, redemption, consummation (or recreation). God created, humanity fell when sin entered the world, Jesus redeems, and eventually Jesus will come again and God will consummate, or complete, his plan for his creation. This story happens on the universal level (the four main “plot points” of the Bible mentioned above), but it also happens on the local level (example: God creates Israel through Abraham, they fall into sin, God “saves” them through a judge or other leader, and brings them into peace in the Promised Land).

These elements of the Bible story parallel our main points of the Gospel. But if we simply tell the story, we may not be calling people to repentance and faith. Greg Gilbert explains: “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.”² We need to tell people how to be a part of this wonderful story.

KEEP THE CROSS AT THE CENTER OF THE GOSPEL

There has been a temptation to push the death and resurrection of Jesus to the side of the gospel story. We must never do this. The cross is the center of the Bible, the center of God’s plans, and the center of all history. Without Jesus’ death and resurrection, there is no good news. Never assume that people know about Jesus’ death and resurrection. Don’t assume that they know why Jesus died. Make sure you lift high the cross, and explain what it means. Tell people

² Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 106.

that everyone (yes, even you) are sinners in need of salvation. Tell them that Jesus came to die because we can't save ourselves.