

# Jot & Tittle

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## **The Meaning of the Gospel**

by Dana L. Goodnough

The gospel is good news. In fact, that's what the word itself means, a good story or message.<sup>1</sup> The Greek term translated "gospel" is *evangelion*, from which we get our words "evangel" and "evangelism." The verb form, *evangelizo*, is the base for our word "evangelize." The gospel is the core message of the Christian faith. But what is that message?

### ***The Object of the Gospel***

What is the object of the gospel? The gospel is good news about . . . what? "The word *gospel* must be further defined by answering that question: good news about what? Even the New Testament uses the word *gospel* to mean various types of good news, so one has to describe what good news is in view."<sup>2</sup>

A careful analysis of the four Gospels reveals that each writer used the term "gospel" with a special nuance. "Each Evangelist uses these terms in a distinctive manner."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the way in which the other New Testament authors use the term "gospel" reflects a more complete understanding of that good news in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "The reader of the

Gospels must be wary of reading a post-Easter definition into the Evangelists' use of the term *gospel* (such as is found in Pauline writings, 1 Cor 15:1-4; Rom 1:2-4)."<sup>4</sup>

On some occasions the New Testament states the object of the gospel, indicating a variety of understandings about that good news. For example, the good news is described as the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 4:23), the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1), the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24), the gospel of God's Son (Roman 1:9), the gospel of God (Romans 15:16; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8, 9; 1 Peter 4:17), the gospel of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Galatians 1:7; Philippians 1:27; 1 Thessalonians 3:2), the gospel of your salvation (Ephesians 1:13), the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:8), and the gospel of the blessed God (1 Timothy 1:11). Admittedly, most of these descriptions probably refer to the same message.

The most significant distinction in the object of the gospel is the resurrection of Jesus, after which the object of the gospel became the redemptive work of Jesus instead of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The church's expression of the gospel will, therefore, heavily lean on its description in the New Testament epistles.

### ***The Content of the Gospel***

The New Testament epistles frequently refer to the gospel as a well known message, but the content of that message is seldom described in detail. "Two passages seem to give a brief summary of the evangelical message, namely, R 1:1 ff. and 1 C 15:1 ff."<sup>5</sup>

Romans 1:1-4 states that God promised the gospel through the prophets as recorded in the Scriptures. This gospel has as its focus God's "Son" who in His humanity "was a descendant of David" but was powerfully declared to be "the Son of God." This declaration of the deity of Jesus was affirmed by His "resurrection

from the dead.” Therefore, the gospel includes the deity, humanity, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

First Corinthians 15:1-8 provides another detailed description of the gospel. Paul says that the content of the gospel included the death and resurrection of Jesus. “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” Jesus’ death carried a highly spiritual and scriptural significance. Jesus died in our place. The evidence for the death of Jesus was His burial. The burial of Jesus is not an integral part of the gospel message, but a proof of that which is integral, namely Jesus’ sacrificial death.

The gospel also includes Jesus’ physical resurrection. Jesus “was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Both Jesus’ death and His resurrection are sanctioned by scriptural authority. The resurrection of Jesus forms the necessary flipside to His sacrificial death. Without the resurrection and the life it offers, Jesus’ death would have been ineffectual. After Jesus’ resurrection He appeared to a number of witnesses but these appearances are not integral to the message. They merely serve as evidence for the integral fact of Jesus’ resurrection.

Based on 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 the most basic expression of the gospel is that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised back to life. The death and resurrection form the core of God’s good news.

### ***The Response to the Gospel***

While Jesus’ sacrificial death and physical resurrection form the core of the gospel, these basic facts alone do not result in salvation apart from a human response. The New Testament uses several different terms to describe the appropriate response to the gospel.

Faith, or belief, is the primary way of expressing a positive response to the gospel. When asked by the Philippian jailer what he needed to do to be saved, Paul and Silas answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:32). Ephesians 2:8 says,

“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.” Faith (belief) is the necessary condition for salvation and the appropriate response to the gospel.

John 1:12 equates believing with receiving Jesus, stating, “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” It would be appropriate, therefore, to say that we can receive Jesus by faith, capturing both concepts.

In addition to believing and receiving, the New Testament also includes the idea of repenting as an appropriate response to the gospel. Peter challenged people to “repent” and “turn to God” in order to have their sins forgiven (Acts 3:19). Paul used similar terminology at times (Acts 17:30; 26:20). Repentance, therefore, is a valid term to describe faith, a turning from sin to God.

Some passages in the New Testament describe obedience as the proper response to the gospel (Acts 6:7; Romans 10:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). In these cases obedience is not a work that contributes to salvation but a faith response to the gospel.

The gospel is good news about the divine Son of God, Jesus, who died for our sins and rose from the dead. Christians should invite others to believe this message, receive Jesus, and turn to Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryrie, Charles C. *So Great Salvation*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Ryrie, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Broyles, C. C. “Gospel (Good News)” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, Editors. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 282.

<sup>4</sup> Broyles, p. 283.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich, Gerhard. “εὐαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγέλιον, προεὐαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγελιστής” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Gerhard Kittel, Editor. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Translator. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964, vol. II, p. 730.