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INTRODUCTION

Many have commented on the fact that the church in the Western world is going through a time of remarkable fragmentation. This fragmentation extends to our understanding of the gospel. For some Christians, “the gospel” is a narrow set of teachings about Jesus and his death and resurrection that, rightly believed, tip people into the kingdom. After that, real discipleship and personal transformation begin, but none of that is integrally related to “the gospel.” This is a far cry from the dominant New Testament emphasis that understands “the gospel” to be the embracing category that holds much of the Bible together, and takes Christians from lostness and alienation from God all the

way through conversion and discipleship to the consummation, to resurrection bodies, and to the new heaven and the new earth.

Other voices identify the gospel with the first and second commandments—the commandments to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves. These commandments are so central that Jesus himself insists that all the prophets and the law hang on them (Matt. 22:34–40)—but most emphatically they are not the gospel. They are law.

A third option today is to treat the ethical teaching of Jesus found in the Gospels as the gospel—yet it is the ethical teaching of Jesus abstracted from the passion and resurrection narrative found in each Gospel. This approach depends on two disastrous mistakes. First, it overlooks the fact that in the first century, there was no “Gospel of Matthew,” “Gospel of Mark,” and so forth. Our four Gospels were called, respectively, “*The Gospel According to Matthew*,” “*The Gospel According to Mark*,” and so forth. In other words, there was only one gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew,

Mark, Luke, and John. This one gospel, this message of news that was simultaneously threatening and promising, concerned the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the long-awaited King, and included something about his origins, the ministry of his forerunner, his brief ministry

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of teaching and miraculous transformation, climaxing in his death and resurrection. These elements are not independent pearls on a string that constitutes the life and times of Jesus the Messiah. Rather, they are elements tightly tied together. Accounts of Jesus's teaching cannot be rightly understood unless we discern how they flow toward Jesus's death and resurrection. All of this together is the *one* gospel of Jesus Christ, to which the canonical Gospels bear witness: the Gospel *according to* Matthew, *according to* Mark, and so forth. To study the teaching of Jesus without simultaneously reflecting on his passion

and resurrection is far worse than assessing the life and times of George Washington without reflecting on the American Revolution, or than evaluating Hitler's *Mein Kampf* without thinking about what he did and how he died. Second, we shall soon see that to focus on Jesus's teaching while making the cross peripheral reduces the glorious good news to mere religion, the joy of forgiveness to mere ethical conformity, the highest motives for obedience to mere duty. The price is catastrophic.

Perhaps more common yet is the tendency to assume the gospel, whatever that is, while devoting creative energy and passion to other issues—marriage, happiness, prosperity, evangelism, the poor, wrestling with Islam, wrestling with the pressures of secularization, bioethics, dangers on the left, dangers on the right—the list is endless. This overlooks the fact that our hearers inevitably are drawn toward that about which we are most passionate. Every teacher knows that. My students are unlikely to learn all that I teach them; they are most likely to learn that about which I am most excited. If the gospel is merely assumed, while relatively

peripheral issues ignite our passion, we will train a new generation to downplay the gospel and focus zeal on the periphery. It is easy to sound prophetic from the margins; what is urgently needed is to be prophetic from the center. What is to be feared, in the famous words of W. B. Yeats in “The Second Coming,” is that “the center does not hold.” Moreover, if in fact we focus on the gospel, we shall soon see that this gospel, rightly

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understood, directs us how to think about, and what to do about, a substantial array of other issues. These issues, if they are analyzed on their own, as important as they are, remain relatively peripheral; ironically, if the gospel itself is deeply pondered and remains at the center of our thinking and living, it powerfully addresses and wrestles with all these other issues.

There are many biblical texts and themes we could usefully explore to think more clearly

about the gospel. But for our purposes we shall focus primarily on 1 Corinthians 15:1–19.

¹ Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God

I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. ¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

I shall try to bring things to clarity by focusing on eight summarizing words (six of which were first suggested by John Stott), five clarifying sentences, and one evocative summary.



EIGHT SUMMARIZING WORDS

What Paul is going to talk about in these verses, he says, is “the gospel”: “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the *gospel* I preached to you” (v. 1). “By this *gospel* you were saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you” (v. 2). Indeed, what Paul had passed on to them was “of first importance”—a rhetorically powerful way of telling his readers to pay attention, for what he is going to say about *the gospel* lies at its very center. These prefatory remarks completed, the first word that appears in Paul’s summary is “Christ”:

“I passed on to you as of first importance that *Christ* died for our sins” and so forth. That brings me to the first of my eight summarizing words.

1. The Gospel Is Christological; It Is Christ-Centered

The gospel is not a bland theism, still less an impersonal pantheism. The gospel is irrevocably Christ-centered. The point is powerfully articulated in every major New Testament book and corpus. In Matthew’s Gospel, for instance, Christ himself is Emmanuel, God with us; he is the long-promised Davidic king who will bring in the kingdom of God. By his death and resurrection he becomes the mediatorial monarch who insists that all authority in heaven and earth is his alone. In John, Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6), for it is the Father’s solemn intent that all should honor the Son even as they honor the Father. In the sermons reported in Acts, there is no name but Jesus given under heaven by which we must be saved. In Romans and Galatians

and Ephesians, Jesus is the last Adam, the one to whom the law and the prophets bear witness, the one who by God's own design propitiates God's wrath and reconciles Jews and Gentiles to his heavenly Father and thus also to each other. In the great vision of Revelation 4–5, the Son alone, emerging from the very throne of God Almighty, is simultaneously the lion and the

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lamb, and he alone is qualified to open the seals of the scroll in the right hand of God, and thus bring about all of God's matchless purposes for judgment and blessing. So also here: the gospel is Christological. John Stott is right: "The gospel is not preached if Christ is not preached."

Yet this Christological stance does not focus exclusively on Christ's person; it embraces with equal fervor his death and resurrection. As a matter of first importance, Paul writes, "Christ died for our sins" (15:3). Earlier in this letter, Paul does not tell his readers, "I resolved

to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ”; rather, he says, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ *and him crucified*” (1 Cor. 2:2). Moreover, Paul here ties Jesus’s death to his resurrection, as the rest of the chapter makes clear. This is the gospel of Christ crucified and risen again.

In other words, it is not enough to make a splash of Christmas, and downplay Good Friday and Easter. When we insist that as a matter of first importance, the gospel is Christological, we are not thinking of Christ as a cipher, or simply as the God-man who comes along and helps us like a nice insurance agent: “Jesus is a nice God-man, he’s a very, very nice God-man, and when you break down, he comes along and fixes you.” The gospel is Christological in a more robust sense: Jesus is the promised Messiah who died and rose again.

2. The Gospel Is Theological

This is a short-hand way of affirming two things. First, as 1 Corinthians 15 repeatedly affirms, *God* raised Christ Jesus from the dead (e.g. 5:15). More broadly, New Testament documents insist