

The Following is a portion of scholarly project compiled by Trey Talley, Th.M.

Chapter One:

IF LEFT UNDEFINED THE GOSPEL BECOMES OPEN TO INTERPRETATION.

Is the gospel open for interpretation? It seems that if you ask any ten Christians what the gospel is, you would get 10 different answers. The gospel has been redefined to mean many different things. The meaning of "the gospel" has strayed away from being a declaration of the saving work of Christ to mean just about anything a Christian person wants it to mean. It is no longer a clear, concise announcement. The definition has become extremely muddled and in some cases false.

Some Christians consider the gospel just a way of life, "gospel living." Instead of the gospel being a message to be believed, it becomes a more positive means to living. In redefining, they themselves become the gospel. No longer is it a truth statement, but it becomes a lifestyle. The emphasis becomes on living the best life possible in hopes that someone will notice and be convinced that the gospel living is truly the most positive way to live.

In reality this redefining of the gospel would put it in the same category as a self-help technique. If this is truly the gospel, then bookstores should place Bibles right beside weight loss books, drug rehabilitation books, and *Rich Dad Poor Dad*. Why not? If the gospel is just another method to bring happiness, discipline, and an increased morality to our lives than that is right where a Bible should be.

Others consider it a means of cultural reformation. Once again, instead of drawing attention to "archaic" beliefs such as sin and salvation, the theme of this gospel is to bring all of the practical benevolence of Christianity to the people. Outreaches and missions that emphasis on feeding the hungry, clothing the needy, building a house, organizing medical missions, and so on. This type of cultural reformation gospel is very popular amongst Christians. Actually non-Christians have no problem with this type of gospel. In fact this gospel has to be their favorite.

Just this month, I, as a staff member of a church, tried to partner with a local school to give 50 new coats to children who needed them. I contacted the school administrator and gave her our plan. In short, it involved our church buying the coats, the school identifying the ones who needed the coats, and giving them an invitation to come to one of our Christmas Musicals where they would receive the coats. However, after many emails and phone calls, the school countered our offer. They wanted the coats delivered to the school, and our church to remain a silent partner in the transaction.

We had a choice to make. Do we clothe people for the sake of clothing them, or do we focus on events where we can help socially and still communicate the gospel? We chose the second option. We love to help our community, but we will not become an organization that is helping just for the sake of helping. We want the gospel to be the driving reason for what we do.

The world loves it when churches turn into strictly philanthropic organizations. They will gladly accept our free stuff, but sometimes Christians forget that we are far more than just a philanthropic organization. Even if we fed and clothed every hungry person in the world, built every homeless person a 4-bedroom house, gave everyone perfect teeth, free medical care, and increased the average lifespan of all third world countries by 50 more years, without the true gospel being presented, they are still separated from God by sin and will spend eternity in hell. Yes, their comfort level during their short stay on earth might have been greatly elevated, but we can't forget about the eternal discomfort they are doomed for unless we tell them of Christ's redeeming work.

Chapter Two:

WHAT WAS THE GOSPEL PREACHED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

What is the gospel anyway? Some believe it is a lifestyle; however others would agree that it is something that needs to be believed. But, sometimes what that belief is comes down to nothing more than personal opinion. However, the gospel is not subjective truth. It is objective. It matters little what I feel that the gospel is: it matters greatly what God tells us the gospel is. This is why we have been given the Word of God, so that we may know what we should believe and be teaching.

If the Gospel that Jesus and the apostles were preaching was anything like the popular erred definitions mentioned earlier, there would have been no big deal. Why crucify a man who is just trying to live the best life he possibly can? Why stone a man to death because he is just trying to improve his culture? Obviously, no one would. But Christians were being tortured, sawed in two, crucified, stoned, and imprisoned because they had a specific message that a lot of people did not like to hear.

Think about it, if ever there was a time in history where there was pressure to be non-specific with the gospel or terminology regarding salvation, this was it. For instance in the pluralistic society of the Roman Empire, if the Christians would have just asked people to try to be good like Jesus was, then no big deal. Instead they were telling people that they were sinners, who needed a savior, and unless they believed in Jesus and his atoning work on the cross, then they would remain enemies of God. Now that can be controversial as Stephen quickly found out.

A quick over view of the book of Acts and the messages of Peter, Paul, and Stephen reveals that their messages were simply about Christ and what he had accomplished. The main thrust of the book of Acts is the preaching of the gospel. Here are a few examples:

“But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea” (Acts 8:30).¹

“and there they continued to preach the gospel” (Acts 14:7).

“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch” (Acts 14:21).

“that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7).

“And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10).

These men were singularly focused on preaching the gospel to people in order that it might be heard. No matter where they went, or who their audience was, they were committed to getting the gospel out. Why? Because it was “the power of God to salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

It is obvious to see that the gospel was extremely important, but what exactly was it? One thing that becomes immediately clear from a cursory reading of the aforementioned passages is that the gospel is communicated with speech. It is something that is being said, but what?

A brief word study goes a long way in settling on the right definition of the gospel. We get the English word gospel, or more precisely the word evangel, from the Greek word *euaggelion*, which simply means “good news.”² The word in Greek to define actively proclaiming the good news is

¹Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are the *English Standard Version (ESV)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008),

²Online Bible Concordances: Topical, Strong's, Greek and Hebrew, [strongnumbers.com/greek2/2098.htm](http://www.strongnumbers.com/greek2/2098.htm) – 7k, accessed January 28, 2012, <http://www.strongnumbers.com>.

euaggelizo.³ This is where we get the English word “evangelize.” With this in mind it becomes even clearer that the gospel is the good news, and the apostles were actively getting this good news to as many people as they could.

Chapter Three:

THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL

What exactly is this good news that becomes the imperative of the New Testament? The first apostolic message is a great place to begin. Peter gives us an example of what the gospel is with his message:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, losing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. . . This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. . . Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ 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 2:22-24, 32, 36-38).

Peter makes it clear that the gospel is the good news of Christ and what has been accomplished by him. He shows them their sin (the bad news), and then gives them the gospel (the good news), that their sins can be forgiven! What better news is there? Think about it. They killed the Christ. The prophesied Messiah came, and they killed Him. This is horrible, yet instead of punishing them God was willing to forgive them. Wow, now that is good news! Let’s look at a few other examples of evangelistic passages:

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain” (1 Cor. 15:1).

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,” (Rom. 1:1-6).

“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:22-25).

³Online Bible Concordances: Topical, Strong's, Greek and Hebrew, [strongnumbers.com/greek2/2097.htm](http://www.strongnumbers.com/greek2/2097.htm) – 10k, accessed January 28, 2012, <http://www.strongnumbers.com>.

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed” (1 Cor. 15:3-11).

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Of course this is not an exhaustive compilation of evangelistic declarations in the New Testament. However, it is enough to show that the gospel had a certain substance. It is a message, and not just any message about whatever a Christian wants it to be. It is a specific message about who Christ is and what he accomplished. This was a message that was so important; they were willing to give their lives to proclaim it.

Chapter Four:

THE LANGUAGE OF SALVATION USED IN ACTS.

It is extremely important for Christians to understand that the gospel is the announcement of good news from God, because it affects the way evangelism is carried out. When we understand what the gospel is, it alters what we say when we present it and how we describe a positive response towards it.

Keeping scripture as our primary source for defining the gospel is critical, but we should also look to scripture to find out what follows evangelism. Let's look a few passages that describe the moment of post-evangelism. The apostles had just given the good news. Now what? Surely they led the crowd in the Sinner's Prayer and asked Jesus to come into their hearts? Let's see what followed.

As previously listed, in the first apostolic sermon by Peter, he preaches a clear presentation of what Christ has done, and then tells the audience to “Repent...for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

Again in chapter three, Peter, after preaching the death burial and resurrection of Jesus tells his audience to “Repent therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19).

“But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand” (Acts 4:4).

“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 4:12).

“If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:17-18).

In Acts chapter 13, Paul goes through the history of the nation of Israel, to John the Baptist, to Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. He then tells them “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39).

“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48).

“Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’” (Acts 16:30).

By just quickly looking at a few verses, we begin to see that there was a specific message, or gospel, that was being proclaimed. That specific message must then be believed. And that this “believing” equaled salvation. It is extremely fascinating that the method of salvation was kept so simple. This same method was repeated over and over and over. The apostles proclaim the gospel, their hearers believed, and thus they were saved. The gospel message was the means God used to bring about salvation.

For sake of brevity, I limited the examples of this pattern to the book of Acts. However, other great terms like: believed, repented, justified, redeemed, atoned for, propitiated, reconciled, rescued, regenerated, and even saved are used to describe salvation in the Bible. Why these terms? Because they most correctly describe what happens as a person hears the gospel. God regenerates them, and by faith in Christ, they are saved. These words were, and still are, highly descriptive of what happens at salvation.

The words used to describe salvation in the Bible are, of course, inspired by God. This fact should be taken into mind when evangelizing. In an effort to make the gospel and the subsequent positive response to it culturally relevant, we often create an entirely different method of salvation or a terminology that is too far removed from Biblical examples.

Chapter Five:

THE LANGUAGE OF SALVATION USED TODAY.

Some believers describe a salvation to people that really has no substance. They do so in an effort to be culturally relevant, non-offensive, or out of a sheer lack of knowledge. When salvation is described as something other than what it truly is, then what is the fruit? If we change the word and the definition of salvation, is it even the same salvation of the Bible? The more common vernacular of asking someone if they are saved today is somewhat confusing and sometimes misleading. In some cases it can even be completely wrong. Let’s look at some popular questions and phrases that are supposedly used to describe salvation. Remember to ask, “Does this describe being saved from sin and rescued by Christ?” Or in other words, “Is this the same message that was being preached in the book of Acts?”

1. “Do you have a relationship with God?” What does this even mean? The fact of the matter is that everyone has a relationship with God. God knows everyone and everyone will always be in a relationship with Him. Now, what kind of relationship should be the

question. By nature we are enemies of God, and only through Christ can we be adopted as children of God.

2. "Have you asked Jesus into your heart?" This is another phrase that is extremely confusing. How exactly do you do this? Why would a person do such a task? Does he really come live in your Heart, and what does that even accomplish? This phrase does not describe who we are as sinners, or what Christ has done for us. It is not a good news declaration at all. Instead it describes something so odd that only seasoned Christians even know what is being implied. What is the heart? Try to explain this to an elementary school kid, and get ready for some serious confusion. While this phrase is one of the most popular, there is just no scripture to back it up.
3. Instructing a person to tell "Jesus to come into his life." Once again we have all heard this used before, but what does this convey to a person who has never been to church, and knows nothing of the Bible. How and why would a person tell Jesus to come into their life? Isn't he omnipresent anyway?
4. Asking someone "Do you want to become a Christian?" Another popular mistake of evangelism is to ask people if they want to become a Christian when it has not even been defined yet. A Christian is a person who has believed the good news. Therefore the good news should be preached first. Then, by the grace of God the person might believe, and thus regenerated, want to live as a Christian.
5. "Do you know Jesus personally?" Once again vague and bizarre to an unchurched person. The better question would be "Do you know what Jesus did?" "No, well let me tell you."
6. "Just say the sinners' prayer." Many evangelist, preachers, and Christian tracks imply that by repeating a prayer you can be saved. This method has become so popular I dare even say anything negative about in a crowd of Christians. However, we must remember that there is no Biblical record of a sinner's prayer. There is more to conversion than just getting someone to recite certain words in a certain order.

Some people put so much hope into these types of prayers, that the prayer itself becomes the means of salvation. A prayer can indeed be a reflection of what is happening in a person's life. However, the prayer must be from a person who has heard the gospel and truly believes even to be able to say some type of sinners prayer. In actuality which comes first? Is it salvation or the words of a prayer speaking about salvation? Truthfully, regeneration would have to occur before a person is even able to say such a prayer. By this point the prayer, instead of being the means of salvation, should be a prayer confessing and thanking God for his/her salvation.

David Platt in his book *Radical*, after providing the reader with the content of the gospel asks:

"So how do we respond to this gospel? Suddenly contemporary Christianity sales pitches don't seem adequate anymore. Ask Jesus to come into your heart. Invite Jesus to come into your life. Pray this prayer, sign this card, walk down this aisle, and accept Jesus as your personal Savior. Our attempt to reduce this gospel to a shrink-wrapped presentation that persuades someone to say or pray the right things back to us no longer seems appropriate.

That is why none of these man-made catch phrases are in the Bible. You will not find a verse in Scripture where people are told to "bow your heads, close your eyes, and repeat after me." You will not find a place where a superstitious sinner's prayer is even mentioned. And you will not find an emphasis on accepting Jesus. We have taken the infinitely glorious Son of God, who endured the infinitely terrible wrath of God and who now reigns as the infinitely worthy

Lord of all, and we have reduced him to a poor, puny Savior who is just begging for us to accept him.

Accept him? Do we really think Jesus needs our acceptance? Don't we need him?"⁴

Michael Horton believes the main reason for our change in soteriological terminology is due to the mixing of the gospel with many other aspects of Christianity. He explains:

"Principles for living, practical advice, secrets of victorious living, calls to discipleship, and instruction all fall under the category of law, whether they are offered sternly or gently, whether they are God's commands or our own. The point is not to jettison these words, but (a) to make sure they are God's words rather than our own, and (b) to recognize that even when they are God's, they are different from God's word of gospel; the good news that although we have not done any of the things we said we would do, Christ has been made our "righteousness, holiness, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30 NIV). The law tells us what God expects of us; the gospel tells us what God has done for us."⁵

Shane Rosenthal, M.A., Historical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary writes:

"Effective, Christ-centered, evangelism must therefore be based on the 'facts' of Christianity, not the 'effects.' When you think about this, it makes perfect sense. Just about any religion or ideology can make a difference in a person's life, and yet, all of these different belief systems cannot be simultaneously true. But if a religion is presented first of all as being true, then it has implications on everyone, not just those for whom it is helpful."⁶

Mark Dever, Senior pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church writes: "Biblically, evangelism is simply telling the evangel – clearly articulating the gospel of Jesus Christ and the claim that the gospel puts on people to repent and believe."⁷

If we stick to this gospel and Biblical terminology for what follows, then we are presenting a Biblically accurate view of the gospel and the proper response to it. We must be careful not to change the message or the method that has been handed down to us from Christ and the apostles. Instead, we should be checking our message and methods against the scripture to make sure we are not deviating. The gospel declaration and the call to believe is for all people, all cultures, across all time. How wrong of us to believe that the Biblical "way" is outdated. If we want to see real conversions, then it comes from presenting the real gospel.

I want to add a quick disclaimer. I have spoken with countless Christians, pastors, and evangelists who implore some of the modern terminology of salvation, previously mentioned, who actually mean well. They are not trying to be more relevant, light, or dishonest with the gospel. It is just what they have become accustomed to saying. I honestly believe there are many Christians who fall into this category. Their motives are pure. They mean well. They just have the wrong words to describe salvation. Perhaps, they actually mean to describe salvation, but to the unbelieving ear their words fall short. That is why it is so important for us to continually check our message and our methods to make sure they are still a copy of the original. It worked well then and it works well now.

David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2010), 37.

⁵ Michael Scott Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 125.

⁶ Shane Rosenthal, "When the Message Obscures the Message," Reformation Ink, 1995, Theological Training, accessed February 20, 2012, <http://homepage.mac.com/rosenthal/reformationink/classic.htm>.

⁷ Mark Dever, "Biblical Understanding of Evangelism," 9Marks, 2008, "Telling the Evangelist", accessed January 23, 2012, <http://marks.9marks.org>.