

## **Clarifying the Gospel we are to Speak to Non-Christians**

I believe God wants his people to speak his gospel to non-Christians. I'm thankful that I was influenced toward doing so early in my Christian life. I'm not a great or natural evangelist by any means, but I do believe it's important and have practiced it. Most of my evangelism over the years has not been the spontaneous, conversational type but rather teaching Bible studies with non-Christians. Unfortunately, I've had periods when I lost focus on it, but sharing the good news with non-Christians has been on my radar and part of my practice for most of the last fifty years.

I also read and study the Bible a lot personally. I'm not satisfied with traditional or pop level understandings of Christian matters. Instead, I seek to cultivate the noble character of the Jews at Berea who examined the Scriptures daily "to see if these things were so." Much of my reading and study over the years has focused on the gospel and evangelism. Since we are stewards of the gospel and required to be faithful (1 Corinthians 4:1-2), I have continuously sought to clarify the message God wants us to tell.

As a result, my understanding of that message is drastically different today from my first memory of it. It is also somewhat distinct from the message I see many other Christians and churches presenting to non-Christians. In this article I want share what I've learned about the gospel from my study and practice of evangelism over the last half century. I will describe the message I now speak to those outside Christ and also tell how and why I came to understand it as I do. My hope is that this will encourage ongoing prayerful study and friendly discussion about the gospel message that will, in turn, lead to more clarity and more actual evangelism.

### **My Understanding of the Gospel in Past**

When I was in Junior High, I carried a King James New Testament in my pocket and went around the playground accosting my fellow students. I still remember the essential "gospel" I spoke: You need to get baptized so you can be saved (Mark 16:16).

I also remember being encouraged briefly when Ronald Speers, one of the cool kids, started quoting that passage to others. Only later did the

gleam in his eye reveal that he was merely relishing a sanctioned opportunity to say what we all considered to be a swear word. "He that believeth not shall be damned."

I'm sure there were kids on that same playground who were advocating drastically worse things than I was. And, regardless of what you think about the ending of Mark's Gospel, I still believe baptism and salvation are a part of God's plan. But it is vividly clear to me now that my Junior High understanding of the gospel was severely lacking. It contained precious little of the gospel that is mentioned in the verse just prior to my proof text.

Sometime during High School or College I came to a second understanding of the gospel, based on the great passage in 1 Corinthians 15. Like others I had heard, I read vv. 1-4 and concluded the gospel is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. I now realize that is not exactly what the passage says, but still, this understanding was closer than my Junior High version. I remember teaching some non-Christians this gospel during college, but I don't remember exactly what I said about it.

After college I participated in a training program that taught me a third understanding of the message we are to speak to non-Christians. We were encouraged to study with people straight through the Gospel of Mark to help them see Jesus. Over the next three decades I honed this approach and walked through Mark with a good many people, focusing on who Jesus is and what he wants from us. When we approached the end of Mark's Gospel, we would read chapters 14-16 all at once and talk about the meaning of Jesus' death, both from Mark and other passages. There was some overlap here with my previous understanding, based on 1 Corinthians 15. A number of people became Christians over the years as a result of this "Jesus" gospel.

As in the case of my Junior High message, there are certainly a lot worse things one could be communicating to others than showing them Jesus in Mark. There is in fact great value in doing this, and I would still walk through Mark with non-Christians today, after first telling them some other things. Yet I had been concerned from the beginning about how long this approach takes to get to the point where a person can make a decision about following Jesus, and after many years this concern intensified to the point that I moved on to a fourth view of the message we are to speak.

I developed this new approach in my fifties. It consisted of five lessons for teaching non-Christians, based on my understanding of the good news at the time. The lesson topics were:

1. God's nature (specifically that he is both just and merciful)
2. Sin (we have all sinned, are guilty and will be judged)
3. Christ (Jesus died for our sins; later I also added his resurrection)
4. Response (we need to believe in Jesus, repent of our sins, confess Jesus as Lord, and be baptized in Jesus' name)
5. Blessings (we will be saved and forgiven, receive the Holy Spirit, and be added to the church)

I also wrote a companion pamphlet called, "How Can a Person be Saved?," which revealed my purpose for these lessons. I wanted to show people how to be saved. Some of us gave away a good many of those pamphlets. I also taught my lessons to a number of people, and several of them were indeed saved.

I was not consciously aware of being influenced by others in choosing or sequencing my five topics, although I may have been. I now realize this overall approach has some similarities to a common way people share the gospel with non-Christians today:

1. Sin (similar to my #2)
2. Grace (similar to my #3)
3. Response and blessings (similar to my #s 4 & 5)

I recently reviewed the materials of my fourth approach, and I still think there is much good in them, especially in the details I included about each of the five topics. They seem to me to represent the Scriptures well. Still, as I have continued to read, think, pray, and evangelize, I have felt the need to formulate and present the message differently yet again. The approach I have now adopted is somewhat different from the fourth one mentioned just above, and, as mentioned in the beginning, it is somewhat different from the way many people describe and speak the gospel to non-Christians. Before I describe my current approach and the way it differs from others, let me explain the thinking that led to this change.

## Realizations about the Gospel

I have come to several realizations about the gospel over the years that shape how I now understand it and speak it to non-Christians. To keep this from getting too long, I have not tried to demonstrate each point fully.

1. *The gospel means something instead of meaning everything.* Gospel does not refer to the whole Bible or entire Christian message. It has a more specific content, related to the death and resurrection of Jesus.
2. *There are multiple passages that give insights about the gospel.* I recently paged through my New Testament and found at least fifty passages that tell us something about the gospel (some examples are Mark 10:45; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 2:22-41; Romans 1:1-4; 3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Ephesians 2:1-10; Colossians 1:21-23; 2 Timothy 1:8-11; Titus 2:11-14; 3:3-8; Hebrews 9:11-14). Clearly, the gospel is really important.
3. *There are differences in the way the various passages describe the gospel.* A simple comparison of some of the passages listed in #2 will show this. For example, read Romans 1:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and jot down *only* what is *actually stated* about the gospel in each. It will be clear they do not state it the same. The differences are not contradictions, however, but are a matter of details and emphasis.
4. *There is no single, definitive statement of the gospel in the New Testament.* We may like or relate to one particular passage more than others, but none of them claims to be the single definitive statement. God has not given us one. Instead, he has seen fit to give us many passages that describe many different aspects of the gospel.
5. *One important reason for the differences in the way the passages talk about the gospel is the different purposes of the authors as they address the different needs of their audiences.* There may be other reasons for the variety as well, such as the background and experiences of the writers, but needs and purpose definitely explain some of the differences. This is clear when you read each gospel passage in its context. When I was younger, I deemed 1 Corinthians

15:1-4 the definitive definition of the gospel and pulled it out of its context. It is telling that I used to stop reading at the end of verse 4, which is not even the end of a sentence. As a result, I completely omitted the part of the gospel that Paul emphasizes the most, namely the post-resurrection appearances of Christ (vv. 5-8). Paul mentions six of them, more than in any other passage. He also devotes more space to them than any other part of the gospel. Today, reading the passage in context, I realize Paul's purpose is not to provide a definitive statement of the gospel but to correct misunderstandings the Corinthians had about the resurrection (v. 12). There is still much we can learn about the gospel from this passage, but we need to keep in mind that this statement of the gospel is different from some of the others and is especially well suited for Paul's purpose of correcting a misunderstanding in the church at Corinth. Similarly, in context, that great gospel passage in Ephesians 2:1-10 seems to be designed to help Gentile Christians remember where they came from and give them a greater appreciation of what they have in Christ. Of course, we won't always be able to discern the needs of the audience or the exact purpose of the author, and sometimes our conclusions will need to remain tentative. Other times, though, we will be able to discern them pretty well. The writer's purpose and the recipient's needs are part of the reason for the variety in the way the gospel is described.

6. *We handle Scripture especially well when we talk about the gospel in a way that fits the needs of the people we are addressing.* This is an extension or application of the previous point. Sometimes we may do this instinctively, but we can also learn from the various ways the writers described the gospel to meet the differing needs of their audiences. For example, Philippians 2 shows that, when addressing self-centered people who are having trouble getting along (vv. 1-4), it is fitting to tell the gospel in terms of Christ's humiliation followed by his glory (vv. 5-11). 1 Corinthians 1-4 shows that, when addressing people who are divided due to pride and an unhealthy interest in eloquence and wisdom, it is wise to tell the gospel in a way that emphasizes the cross and crucifixion (1 Corinthians 1:17-18, 23; 2:2). 1 Peter 2 shows that, when addressing people who are suffering unjustly, it is appropriate to remind them of aspects of the gospel related to Jesus' unjust suffering (1 Peter 2:18-25).

7. *Both Christians and non-Christians need to hear the gospel.* I'm going to assume it is clear that non-Christians need to hear it, but the examples in points #5 and #6 above show that Christians need to hear the gospel too, though for different reasons. The reason the Corinthians needed to hear the gospel before they were Christians (approx. AD 50-51) was so that they would recognize that "the Christ was Jesus" (see Acts 18:5) and be saved, but one reason they needed to hear the gospel after they were Christians (approx. AD 53-57) was so that they would correct their mistaken ideas about resurrection (as in #5 above). If we remember that most of the gospel passages in the Letters are describing how it relates to *Christians*, it will help us read in context and may help us see why it is described as it is.
  
8. *Based on all of the preceding, I believe the best source for clarifying the message we are to speak to non-Christians is the passages in Acts that are describing evangelism.* One of Luke's primary purposes in writing Acts was to show the way the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Rome. As he relates the story, he gives at least seven examples of the message actually being proclaimed to non-Christians (chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 13, 17) as well as multiple one line summaries of it (5:42; 8:12, 35; 9:20, 22; 11:20; 16:31; 17:3, 7 and many more). Though some scholars question the historicity of the records, conservative scholars usually conclude that Acts preserves at least the gist of what was actually said. The Spirit inspired Luke to record examples of what the early proclaimers said to non-Christians on various occasions. As such, the sample sermons and summaries are a particularly good source for understanding the message we are to speak to non-Christians today.

## **How I Now Speak the Gospel to Non-Christians**

Based on the realizations above, I have come to a fifth understanding of the message God wants us to tell non-Christians and have organized a way of communicating it. In doing so, I am trying to handle Scripture wisely and follow its guidance, without being a stickler or legalist. This is a culmination of my reading, study, prayer, and practice of evangelism over the last fifty years. I believe it is a faithful way of sharing the good news, although I expect to continue to hone it as I discuss it more with other believers and share it with more non-Christians. Here it is in outline form:

- A. Jesus' Ministry. God attested to Jesus as being Someone Special by enabling him to do miracles.
- B. Jesus' Death and Resurrection. The Jews in Jerusalem didn't recognize who Jesus was so they killed him, but God raised him from the dead.
- C. Jesus' Identity. Jesus' death and resurrection were part of God's plan, written into the Old Testament Scriptures, and these great events show him to be both Lord and Christ. His supreme identity is the key point of the message, and it is communicated not only by the words Lord and Christ but also the words glorified, Servant (as in the Servant Songs of Isaiah), Holy and Righteous One, Author of life, Prophet, Cornerstone, exalted, Leader, Savior, Judge, and Son.
- D. Good News/Blessings. Because of who Jesus is, he can save us, not only in the narrow sense of forgiving us but also in the broader sense. This includes such things as giving us his Spirit, delivering us from this corrupt generation, adding us to his church, giving times of refreshing, speaking to us as the Prophet, blessing us by turning us from our wicked ways, giving us peace, justifying us / making us right with God, and giving us a way to avert condemnation in judgment.
- E. Response. Call people to respond drastically to this good news by actually repenting of their sins and their deficient dispositions toward God, trusting in Jesus, and being baptized in his name. In Acts, and therefore also in my approach, the order of Good News/Blessings and Response is sometimes reversed and sometimes is also intertwined.

### **Differences Between My New and Former Approach**

1. My purpose now is not to explain, "How Can a Person be Saved?", as my pamphlet said. Rather, it is to tell the news of something profound that God has done. The seven evangelistic messages in Acts include about thirty examples of "God" + an action verb that emphasize his work in Christ (2:22-23, 32-33, 36; 3:13, 15, 18, etc.). There are also about ten passive verbs or other ways of describing God's work (4:11; 2:23; 10:36). What God has done is remarkable and profound and calls for a drastic response. Those who respond accordingly will receive

salvation, so salvation is still a part of the message and is certainly what I hope for. But salvation is not my primary purpose. The messages in Acts were not explanations of how salvation works but proclamations of God's work.

2. In keeping with the new purpose, the overall structure or outline of the message is also different from before. The new outline still includes major points on the Response and the Blessings. It also still has Jesus' death as a major topic, though a strong emphasis on his resurrection has been added to this. Other differences are that my new approach begins with a new point about Jesus' miracles, instead of beginning with sin. Sin is no longer one of the primary points, although I do still talk about it under the Response. The new approach also adds a major point on the identity of Jesus. If I were talking to people who had a woefully inadequate view of God, I would modify the outline above by inserting a prior topic on God's nature as Creator, Sovereign, and Kind (based on Paul's example in Acts 17:22-31; 14:15-17).
3. Though it is not obvious from my outline, I now conceptualize the message as a whole in terms of preaching the good news of the kingdom. God promised he would establish a kingdom that would last forever (Daniel 2:44). Jesus himself preached the kingdom (Matthew 4:17, 23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43-44), trained the twelve and the seventy-two to preach the kingdom (Matthew 10:5-7; Luke 9:1-2; 10:9), and then continued to teach his apostles about the kingdom after his death and resurrection (Acts 1:3). The statements in Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31 show that the early proclaimers did indeed preach the kingdom. These statements suggest that kingdom is a good way of summarizing the message, the details of which include the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thinking of the message in terms of kingdom helps integrate the Old Testament, Jesus, Acts, and even the Letters. It also reminds us of some big picture matters we might otherwise neglect, including the kingship of Christ and the need for loyalty and submission to him.
4. I now talk about Jesus' ministry differently than before. Previously I either did not talk about it at all or added a supplemental lesson to give people an overview of his life. My purpose in talking about Jesus'

ministry now is not for background but to point out that God attested to Jesus as Someone Special by enabling him to do miracles (Acts 2:22; 10:37-38). Jesus' ministry is not only a good way to get started telling the message but also introduces the vital theme of his identity.

5. I talk about Jesus' death differently. The point the proclaimers in Acts made about Jesus' death is that the Jerusalem Jew's killing of Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures and so indicated that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 3:18; 13:27-33, 38-39; cf. Luke 24:25-26, 44-47). They also described his death as a rejection of who Jesus really is. This contrasts with God's vindicating him by raising him from the dead (see point #6 below). Both of these points serve their primary purpose of showing who Jesus is (see below on #7). Previously my point about Jesus' death was that it was for our sins. This is clearly an important truth, and we may be surprised to learn that the evangelistic messages in Acts do not mention it. This bothered me for a while, and I tried to reason that surely they must have said it and Luke just didn't record it. That is possible, and 1 Corinthians 15:3 indicates that Paul did preach this truth at Corinth. Yet since Luke didn't mention it a single time in the part of Scripture most focused on evangelistic messages, it does not appear that it was a primary emphasis of the early proclaimers. Conservative New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie, wrote, "It may be wondered why the Acts account of early Christian preaching provides so little information about the atoning significance of Christ's death. It must be supposed that the proclamation of the cross and resurrection was regarded as a sufficient basis for the message of forgiveness, without the necessity, on the initial preaching of the gospel, to give the rationale" (*New Testament Theology*, pp. 462-463). The records we have of their actual messages indicate that they emphasized the general point of salvation in Christ instead of the specific point that Jesus died for our sins. Note well, however, that the early evangelizers did indeed say much about the forgiveness of sins and salvation, and they made it clear that these come from Christ and Christ alone (Acts 2:38; 3:18-19; 4:12; 10:43; 13:38).
6. I talk about Jesus' resurrection very differently. At first I either omitted it or assumed it. When I began to realize how much the early spokespersons in Acts emphasized it (2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:2, 10, 33;

5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 34, 37; 17:18, 31), I started including it in the third lesson of my former approach. Even then, however, I did not emphasize it properly because I didn't see how it fit in. I now realize that God's raising Jesus from the dead shows who he is. The clearest example of this in Acts is when Peter argues extensively for the resurrection (2:24-35) and then, based on it, states his conclusion (indicated by "therefore") that Jesus is "Lord and Christ" (2:36). Paul stated this same principle to Christians in Rome when he said Jesus, "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" (Romans 1:4). Like his death, the resurrection of Jesus fulfills of Scripture and so it points to his unique identity. It seems to me that the very narration of the events also reveals the meaning of the resurrection: Jesus did miraculous deeds which indicated he was the Christ, but then he was rejected and killed most shamefully which suggested he couldn't be the Christ, but then God raised him from the dead showing he IS the Christ! The leads directly to the next point.

7. I talk about Jesus' identity very differently now than before. Before, I omitted it, assumed it or mentioned it only briefly. I now think the identity of Jesus is central point we are driving toward (2:38; 3:18; 4:11; 5:31, 42; 8:5; 9:20, 22; 10:36, 42-43; 13:32-39; 17:3; 18:5, 28; 26:23). In Acts his identity is communicated by his resurrection, by the Scriptures, and by the different terms listed in point C. of my new approach above. The repeated proclamation that Jesus is the "Christ" includes the ideas of Messiah, Anointing, and Kingship and so reveals his identity. And, importantly, it is because of who Jesus is, his identity, that he can forgive, save, bless, give peace and much more.
8. I still talk about forgiveness and salvation, but I now also talk about a wider range of blessings. "Salvation" is sometimes used more narrowly as a synonym for forgiveness (Luke 1:77), but sometimes it also includes much more. We don't know whether Peter was using the term in the narrow or broad sense in his great statement in Acts 4:12, but we do know he is describing more than forgiveness when he says, "save yourself from this crooked generation" (2:40). A careful reading of what he wrote later about salvation in 1 Peter 1:3-12 indicates that the salvation that was preached to those he was writing to includes the

broader blessings that the prophets had said God was going to give in the Messianic age, such as deliverance, peace, obedience, the Spirit, righteousness, etc. Note that all the blessings listed in point D in my new outline above are specifically mentioned in the evangelistic messages in Acts. Note, too, that it includes some blessings that may not seem attractive to us initially (for example 3:26).

9. I still call people to repent, trust in Christ, and be baptized in his name. My new understanding of the importance of the identity of Christ as king and the message of the kingdom reminds me that these responses are not a check-list but rather are a total, wholehearted response to the King, whereby we pledge utter loyalty and fealty to him. The call to repentance in Acts was not only for people with no regard for God whatsoever but also for people with wrong or even merely inadequate ideas about God (Acts 17:22-30). This reminds me that everyone needs to drastically change their attitude and disposition toward the Sovereign God of the universe. Acts also shows that the necessity of repentance, faith, and baptism do not contradict the “good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24; cf. 15:11). Also, as in Acts, I sometimes tell the blessings first and then the response, sometimes vice versa, and sometimes mix it all together.
  
10. I’ll combine the related points of “form” and “time” into a single point to give us an even number of ten. The *form* of my previous approach was definitely teaching and explaining. Teaching is indeed one of the many verbs used in Acts to describe the form of their speaking. The primary forms, however, are indicated by the many references to verbs of proclaiming, telling good news, and bearing witness. These forms fit well with a number of things mentioned above, including the overall purpose—announcing the news of what God has done (#1). So, when I tell the message now, I tell it as news or an announcement of an amazing work of God. It still takes place in a small, conversational setting, but it’s more a matter of proclamation than explanation. The difference between this and what I used to do is something like a family member enthusiastically announcing the news of the birth of a child as opposed to a doctor analytically explaining how labor and delivery work. Further, the *time* it takes to lay out the message this way is reduced from five weeks to about fifteen minutes.

I tell the entire narrative of A-E above in one sitting. After that, or on other occasions, more depth and detail is needed. Remember, Paul sometimes spoke at the same synagogue multiple weeks in a row (13:42, 44; 17:1-3). On those later occasions, after the initial proclamation of the message, teaching or explanation may be more appropriate forms to use, although I will still proclaim the overall message and the need to respond to it.

## **Summation**

It seems to me that the approach described above, based especially on the divine wisdom in Acts, is a faithful way to proclaim the message to non-Christians today, although I expect I will be tweaking some details as I continue to learn. I hope what I have shared here will promote additional study, collegial discussion, and, above all, more actual evangelism.

Not only do I believe this understanding is faithful and pleasing to God, I also think it might help address a practical concern, namely, the malaise and mediocrity in the church. If we give people a foundation of the death, resurrection, and identity of Christ, and call them to a drastic response of repentance, faith, and death with Christ, I think they will be less inclined to become consumer Christians, always focused on what's best for them. I've even wondered if evangelistic presentations that have a primary focus on salvation, defined especially in terms of forgiveness and heaven, may be giving people an incomplete foundation that contributes to the tendency to look for great deals at minimal cost their entire Christian life. We certainly don't want to encourage people to become gold diggers with God. The message and approach in Acts will help arrest this tendency.

Finally, Acts also shows what we all know but still struggle with, namely, it is imperative that we continue to teach and nurture new believers (Acts 2:42; 6:1-7; 8:14-17, 25; 11:22-26; 14:21-23; 15:30-35, 36; 16:40; 18:27-28; 20:17-38). They "have been" saved (Ephesians 2:5, 8) but also "are being" saved (1 Corinthians 1:18; 15:2; 2:15) and so must "grow up into salvation" (1 Peter 2:2) so that they "will be" saved (Philippians 1:28). Coming full circle, one thing our follow-up teaching should definitely include is more of the depth and richness of the gospel that we find in the Letters, including the profound truth that Christ died for our sins.