

# THE GOSPEL IN DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION

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## CLIFF COLLEGE LECTURER ED MACKENZIE CONSIDERS THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION TODAY.

All Christians talk about the gospel, and all seek to share 'Good News', but what exactly does the Bible reveal about the nature of the gospel? And how might that gospel shape us today?

Whatever the gospel is, it is supremely important - Paul describes it as the 'gospel of your salvation' (Ephesians 1:13) - and so knowing its nature is vital for the church. In this article, I will unpack the nature of the gospel and suggest some ways in which it shapes discipleship and mission, both in the New Testament and today.

### WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

The gospel is not simply any kind of good news, nor is it even general Good News from God. Instead, the gospel refers to the announcement of God's work in Jesus, the way in which Jesus' life, death and resurrection bring about the reality of God's reign.

In the New Testament, the gospel has its roots in the teaching of Jesus, who proclaimed the 'Good News' that the 'Kingdom of God has come near' and invited people to faith and repentance (Mark 1:14-15). Through his teaching as well as his miraculous deeds, Jesus

revealed the nature of this kingdom, a topsy-turvy reality in which the poor are blessed, the pure in spirit see God, and those who suffer rejoice (Matthew 5:4-12).

In Luke 4:16-21 Jesus also identifies himself as the servant of Isaiah 61:1-2. Jesus is the one anointed by the Spirit to bring 'Good News to the poor,' release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18). Crucially, then, 'the gospel of the Kingdom' is closely linked to Jesus' identity and mission. Jesus invites people to follow him, as this is the way to the Kingdom (Luke 18:28-30). Jesus also points to his death and resurrection as playing a key role in God's plan (Mark 8:31-33) and invites his followers to lose their lives for his sake (Mark 8:35).

The apostle Paul uses the term 'gospel' more frequently than any other New Testament writer, both as a noun ('gospel') and a verb ('proclaim the gospel'). Paul assumes that his readers will know what he means by the 'gospel', but he also offers brief summaries of it throughout his writings. In the opening of Romans, Paul introduces himself as 'set apart for the gospel of God' and explains that this gospel is 'concerning his Son... Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 1:1, 3-4). And in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, Paul refers to the gospel which he has received (vv.1-2) and explains that it focuses on the story of Christ's death and resurrection in fulfilment of the scriptures (vv.3-8).

Paul also sees the gospel as God's means of salvation. In Romans 1:16, he famously describes the gospel as the 'power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith', while in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 he explains that the gospel came to the Thessalonian believers 'in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.' The gospel does not just inform, but transforms through the power of the Spirit.

The gospel in the New Testament, then, is the wonderful announcement that God in Jesus is working to redeem the world. Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God brings reconciliation and salvation. This message about Jesus needs to be at the heart of the church's 'Good News' today - both for Christians and for the world.

### THE GOSPEL AND DISCIPLESHIP

For Christians, the gospel is at the heart of our faith and the means by which we continue to grow. For this reason, Paul wished to 'proclaim the gospel' to believers in Rome (Romans 1:5), and elsewhere referred to the gospel as 'the boundless riches of Christ' (Ephesians 3:8). Like the love of God (Ephesians 3:18-19), the gospel is deep and broad and wide!

The gospel shapes us as disciples by rooting us in God's incredible grace. Salvation, it reveals, is due not to our own works or merit, but rather to God's generosity (Ephesians 2:8-9). Christ died for us not because of our friendliness

or good character, but simply because of his love for us (Romans 4:6-11). Discipleship involves growing ever more deeply in the love and grace revealed by the gospel and allowing its presence to change us. The 'means of grace' which Wesley described remain ways of opening ourselves to such grace today.

The gospel also shapes our discipleship by inviting us to live consistently with the way of Jesus, doing the 'good works' that God prepared for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). While we are saved by grace, the announcement of the gospel always invites a response and we are empowered by the Spirit to live new lives. The sermons of Acts, for instance, frequently call for faith and repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30), while Paul shows that those who are saved by grace are united to Jesus, and so live a new life no longer defined by sin (Romans 6:1-14). To put it in Wesleyan terms, the grace that justifies, is intimately connected to the grace that sanctifies. The Christ who comes as Saviour reigns as Lord.

Another way in which the gospel changes us is by placing us in the community of the church. In the New Testament, there are no 'solo' Christians, an insight echoed by John Wesley in his teaching on 'social holiness.' It is in the church that we encounter the riches of the gospel through communion with others. It is in the church that we rehearse the story of the gospel in sermon, song and sacrament. As we allow the word of Christ - the message of the gospel - to dwell richly within our communities (Colossians 3:16), we find transformation.

The centrality of the gospel for discipleship also explains why the New Testament writers remind Christians to 'stand' in the truths of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1) and to 'contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3b). The gospel, it seems, can be easily distorted, as Paul warns so forcefully in Galatians 1. Discipleship, today as in the New Testament, involves holding firmly to the gospel and rooting our lives and ministries within it.

## THE GOSPEL IN MISSION

The world as well as the church needs the gospel, and so sharing the gospel is a key part of the church's mission. 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News', writes Paul in Romans 10:15 (citing Isaiah 52:7), and Paul's own

desire was to share the gospel wherever Christ had not been named (Romans 14:20). Sharing the gospel remains just as crucial today, especially in a context where fewer and fewer people know the story of Jesus.

In the New Testament, sharing the gospel leads to the growth of the church. In 1 Corinthians, Paul uses agricultural images to show how God blesses and brings to fruition the planted seeds of the gospel (1 Corinthians 3:5-9), while in Acts there is a link between the growth of the church and the spread of the 'word' about Jesus (Acts 6:7; 8:4; 12:24; 13:49). In both Paul and Acts, prayer is also central for ensuring that the seeds of the gospel bear fruit in the lives of others (Acts 4:31; 16:25; Ephesians 1:15; 6:20).

Sharing the gospel can also be pursued in creative and flexible ways. In Acts, Paul's sermons to Jews tend to highlight how Jesus fulfils Old Testament scripture (Acts 13:13-43) while sermons to non-Jewish audiences build on the common ground of God's existence (Acts 17:16-33). In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains that in his mission he desires to 'become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22b). For Paul, the 'gospel' remains centred on God's work in Jesus, but there is flexibility in how best to share Jesus in culturally persuasive ways. Today's post-Christian environment similarly calls for creative and innovative ways of sharing the gospel.

Christians are called to live as witnesses to the gospel as well as sharers of the gospel. Jesus calls believers to be 'light' and 'salt' so that others can praise the heavenly Father (Matthew 5:13-16), while Paul invites Christians to live 'in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (Philippians 1:27). When 1 Peter 3:15 calls believers to give a response to those who ask about their hope, the context shows that such believers are called to a distinctive way of life which follows the way of Jesus. In the same way today, lives that witness to the way of Jesus create opportunities to share the Good News.

While the New Testament calls Christians to share the Good News of Jesus and live as witnesses to the Kingdom, it also recognises that proclaiming the gospel can lead to suffering and persecution. Jesus warned his followers that just as

the world hated him, so too they would hate them (John 15:18-21), and Acts shows that spreading the gospel led to frequent persecution (Acts 5:17; 8:1; 12:1-5). Paul also writes that 'all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Timothy 3:12). The persecuted church in the first century and around the world today reminds us that sharing the gospel can and often will be costly.

## CONCLUSION

The gospel is central for the New Testament and central for us today. Within the New Testament, the gospel focuses on God's work in and through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This is the message that has changed and continues to change our world!

The gospel is key for discipleship because it is at the heart of our faith. As we grow more deeply into the knowledge and love of God's work in Jesus, so we are transformed to be more like him. As we grow in faith we see ever more clearly 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Corinthians 4:4b).

The gospel is key for mission because it is the means through which God reaches out to the world. It is as we speak and announce God's work in Jesus that the Spirit draws others to him. And it's as we reflect the way of the gospel in our lives and communities that we can show something of the Kingdom and of the transformation that Jesus brings.

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