

What is the Gospel? – A Key Question for Evangelicals Today

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If asked the question, ‘What is the gospel?’, most evangelicals would emphasize justification by faith. They would stress that everyone has sinned (Rom. 3:23), that God sent his Son into the world to save sinners (John 3:16, 1 Tim. 1:15), that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins (1 Pet. 2:24, 3:18), and that individuals are saved, not by their own efforts, but by putting their faith in him (Acts 16:31, Eph. 2:8–9).

This approach is very understandable. The Reformers made justification by faith, coupled with the authority of Scripture, the basis of true Christianity. As their successors, most evangelicals would want to give it the same importance.

The question has to be asked, however, as to whether an emphasis on justification by faith is completely satisfactory in Britain today. The Reformers belonged to a different culture from our own, in which Christianity was generally accepted, and the prevailing heresy was the idea that salvation can be procured by good deeds (justification by works). Our culture is very different. Most people have little or no Christian background, and although some children grow up in a church, synagogue, or mosque thinking that they have to earn their salvation, most people have little idea that they need salvation, and are used to getting things without having to work for them. The Reformers’ emphasis was undoubtedly right for their own time, but is it right for ours?

Justification by faith

To answer this question, we need first to consider the contexts in which justification by faith is emphasized in the New Testament.

In the Gospels, Jesus stressed the doctrine in much of his ministry. He did so, for example, in his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14) and in his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). On the first occasion he was addressing ‘some who were confident that they were righteous, and despised others’, on the second ‘a man of the Pharisees’. The Pharisees believed that justification lay in observing Jewish law (Rom. 9:30–32; cf. Acts 15:1, 5; Gal. 5:4).¹ The context of Jesus’ emphasis on justification by faith was therefore the legalism of many of his Jewish contemporaries.

In Acts, Paul emphasized the doctrine in his preaching to Jews and Jewish proselytes (Acts 13:16–41). He presumably did this because of their legalism – he did not preach in the same way to Gentiles (Acts 14:15–17, 17:22–31). Peter also emphasized the doctrine at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–35). This was because Jewish legalism had become a problem in the Church. The Council had been called because some Jewish Christians were insisting that Gentile Christians should be circumcised and keep Jewish law (1, 5).

¹ This has been questioned by E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977); *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). However, the passages I have cited leave little doubt that this was the case.

In the Epistles, Paul stressed justification by faith in many of his letters. He faced the problem of circumcisionists in the Church. Thus he wrote to the Galatians because they had been ‘bewitched’ by members of the circumcision party (Gal. 1:6–7, 3:1–3, 6:12–13), and he warned the Philippians to ‘watch out’ for members of this group (Phil. 3:2–3). He probably also wrote Romans because there were circumcisionists in the church at Rome. This would explain its affinity to Galatians, its debating style, its emphasis on ‘everyone, Jew and Gentile’ (Rom. 1:16 etc.), its long section on the Jews (9:1–11:36), and such otherwise puzzling details as Paul’s defensive explanation of why he had not yet visited Rome (1:13–16, ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel’). Evangelicals have traditionally taken Romans to be a neutral exposition of the gospel, but it reads more like a polemical one.²

Paul also faced the problem of teachers who combined Jewish mythology and legalism with Greek philosophy and asceticism. He warned several churches to be on their guard against such teachers – the Colossians (Col. 2:8–23), Ephesians (1 Tim. 1:3–7, 4:1–3), and Cretans (Tit. 1:10–16). The background to Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith in his letters was again therefore the problem of legalism (justification by works), and the threat this posed in many churches.

Change of conduct

Justification by faith is not the only doctrine that is emphasized in the New Testament. A second is that, for a person to be saved, he or she must stop doing wrong things, and do right ones.

Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples, ‘unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:17–48). He also warned them, ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (7:21–27). When a lawyer asked him what he had to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to live out the commandments ‘You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself’ (Luke 10:25–37). When the rich young ruler asked him the same question, Jesus said to him, ‘keep the commandments’, and ‘sell your possessions and give to the poor’ (Matt. 19:16–22). He later taught his disciples that, when he comes in his glory, he will judge people according to the way in which they respond to the needs of others (Matt. 25:31–46).

Similarly Paul warned that people who do wrong things ‘will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (1 Cor. 6:9–10, Gal. 5:19–21). The writer to the Hebrews urged his readers to strive for holiness, ‘without which no one will see the Lord’ (Heb. 12:14). James emphasized that ‘faith without works is dead’ (Jas. 2:14–26). John wrote, ‘whoever does not practise righteousness is not [born] of God, and whoever does not love his brother’ (1 John 3:10).

Jesus accordingly called people to repent (Matt. 4:17), as did Peter (Acts 2:38) and Paul (Acts 26:19–20). Jesus told some inquirers, ‘unless you repent, you will ... perish’ (Luke 13:1–5). At Athens, Paul declared that ‘God ... commands all people everywhere to repent’ (Acts 17:30). Repentance (*metanoia*) literally means a change of mind, but it implies a change of conduct (Luke 3:7–14, Acts 26:20), or at least, a willingness to change (cf. the words of the dying thief, Luke 23:42).

² I discuss this more fully in *The Meaning of Romans*, to be published.

Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 to a man being saved in spite of his work ('as through fire') must be understood in its context. He is referring to *teachers* (1–10) whose teaching does not promote lasting Christian qualities (cf. 13:8–13). He does not say the same of teachers whose teaching is destructive (16–17).

The Holy Spirit

A third emphasis in the New Testament is that an individual cannot be a Christian without being born of and receiving the Holy Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that 'unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' (John 3:5–8). Paul stressed that 'if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him' (Rom. 8:9). In Acts special steps were taken if believers did not receive the Holy Spirit when they were converted (Acts 8:4–17, 19:1–7).

In all of these contexts, the main function of the Holy Spirit is to enable believers to do what God wants them to do. In speaking about 'water and the Spirit' to Nicodemus, Jesus was alluding to Ezekiel 36:25–27, as Nicodemus should have recognized (John 3:9–10); here God tells his people, 'I will put my Spirit in you and cause you to walk in my statutes' (cf. Jer. 31:31–34). Similarly, in Romans 8 Paul explains that the Spirit enables us to fulfil 'the righteous requirement (*to dikaiōma*) of the Law' (4; cf. Gal. 5:13–26).

In Acts, Luke describes what happened when believers received the Holy Spirit on three occasions (2:1–4; 10:44–46; 19:6). On each, they spoke in tongues and magnified God or prophesied. The tongues were intelligible to others (2:5–11), and were not therefore the same as those at Corinth (1 Cor. 14:2) or the unintelligible tongues spoken by Christians today.³ What happened to the apostles (Acts 2:1–4) is reminiscent of what happened to Isaiah (Is. 6:1–8). Just as Isaiah's 'unclean lips' were cleansed by a hot coal from the altar so that God could use him to speak for him by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21), so the apostles' tongues were cleansed by fire so that God could speak through them (Acts 2:1–11, 14–36).

John the Baptist described reception of the Holy Spirit as 'baptism' in the Holy Spirit (Mat. 3:11). Jesus used the same term (Acts 1:5), as did Paul (1 Cor. 12:13). John had in view the purging action of the Spirit – he coupled baptism in the Spirit with purification by fire, and contrasted it with merely washing in water (Mat. 3:11–12; cf. Zech. 13:7–9, Mal. 3:1–5).

Jesus also described the Holy Spirit as 'the Spirit of truth', who would be to his disciples 'another *Paraclētos*' (John 14:15–17), teaching them more about him (14:25–26, 16:12–15), reminding them of his teaching (14:26), and helping them to bear witness to him (15:26–27, 16:7–11, Matt. 10:17–20). The disciples needed help in these ways in their role as apostles (cf. Matt. 28:19–20, Acts 1:8).

Jesus made reception of the Holy Spirit dependent on faith (Luke 11:5–13, John 7:37–39) and obedience (John 14:15–24). The apostles did the same (Acts 5:32, Gal. 3:14).

³ For a full discussion, see my article, 'Paul's Advice on Spiritual Gifts' (on-line).

The gospel

At first sight, the three emphases – justification by faith, the need for a change of conduct, and the need to receive the Spirit – are inconsistent with each other. The need for a change of conduct would seem to conflict with justification by faith. However, we must not allow this impression to lead us into altering any of these doctrines. Scripture teaches each one plainly and holds them together. Thus, on the day of Pentecost, when the crowd asked Peter what they had to do, he told 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 2:38). Baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins is an act that acknowledges complete dependence on him for forgiveness, an act of faith alone. Peter thus brings all three emphases together.⁴

What, then, is the relationship between them? Both Paul and James discuss this question in their letters, but they do so from different standpoints. Paul is concerned about those who, like members of the circumcision party, taught justification by works; James is concerned about those who taught justification without works (Jas. 2:14–26). The emphasis in their answers accordingly differs. Paul speaks about being saved by faith ‘for’ (*epi*) good works (Eph. 2:8–10; cf. Rom. 6, Gal. 5:13–26, Tit. 2:11–14), James of being justified by faith and works ‘working together’ (Jas. 2:22).⁵

These answers reflect the different problems Paul and James were addressing, and should not be set against each other. Paul’s emphasis is appropriate for one problem (legalism), James’s for the other (antinomianism). The Reformers understandably stressed the former, but this emphasis is not always appropriate. Luther was over-zealous in dismissing James’s letter as ‘strawy’.⁶

Paul’s and James’ answers can be united by saying that, for a person to be saved from sin, he or she must combine two attitudes – an utter dependence on Jesus for forgiveness, and an earnest desire to live a better life with the help of the Holy Spirit. In other words, he or she must both be ‘poor in spirit’ and ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’ as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–12). Poverty of spirit precludes any thought of salvation by means of works, hungering and thirsting for righteousness any thought of salvation without them.

What, then, is the gospel? It is that message which enables seekers to understand and to respond to Peter’s call at Pentecost – to repent, to be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and so to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the good news [to those who are concerned about their sins and want to be righteous (2 Cor. 2:14–16)] that God calls us to come to him through Jesus Christ, whom he has made Lord, Saviour, and Giver of the Spirit, without division (Acts 2:22–36).

Note that, when the gospel is presented in this way, becoming a Christian leads smoothly into being a Christian. According to the New Testament, being a Christian essentially involves seeking to do the Lord’s will, with the help of the Spirit, and asking him for forgiveness when

⁴ Cf. Matt. 28:18–20, Mark 16:15–18, Luke 24:46–49; Acts 3:19–21, 5:29–32; 1 Cor. 6:9–11, Tit. 3:1–8, 1 Pet. 1:1–2, 1 John.

⁵ For a full discussion, see my article, ‘Faith and Works’ (on-line).

⁶ *Prolegomena to the New Testament*, 1522.

we fail (1 John 1:5–2:6 etc.). The three elements of this correspond closely to the three components of Peter’s call at Pentecost:

doing the Lord’s will	_____	repentance
with the help of the Spirit	_____	baptism for forgiveness
asking for forgiveness	_____	receiving the Spirit

Presenting the gospel today

How much seekers need to be told to enable them to understand and to respond to Peter’s call at Pentecost depends on what they know already. Those who know a great deal do not need to be told very much. Those who know very little need to be told much more. Those who hold wrong beliefs need to have these beliefs corrected. This is why, when Paul presented the gospel to Gentiles, he started much further back (Acts 14:15–17, 17:22–31) than when he presented it to Jews (Acts 13:16–41, 17:1–3).

At the time of the Reformation, seekers had a Medieval Christian background. They thought that they had to do good works to be saved. Accordingly, the Reformers, while requiring and calling for repentance, placed particular emphasis on justification by faith. This emphasis continues to be appropriate for those who have been brought up in a church, synagogue, or mosque, and have been taught, or have come to believe, that they have to earn God’s acceptance. Such need to have stressed to them, ‘not by works’ (Eph. 2:8–9).

Most people in Britain today, however, do not have this kind of background. The majority have only very vague and confused ideas about God, and know little about the Christian faith. Such people need very extensive teaching if they are to be able to respond adequately to Peter’s call. In particular, they need to be taught as much about repentance and the gift of the Holy Spirit as about faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Thus, they need to be taught all that the Bible teaches about right and wrong so that they know in practical terms what it means to repent. It is not sufficient nowadays just to call upon people to repent. It is not even sufficient to call upon them to keep the great commandments – to love God and to love others. They need to be taught the laws these commandments summarize (Matt. 22:34–40, Rom. 13:8–10, etc.), otherwise they may misconstrue them. When Jesus spoke to the rich young ruler, he took him through individual commandments, and told him precisely what he had to do (Matt. 19:16–22). He also ensured that those who were contemplating becoming disciples counted the cost before doing so (Luke 14:25–35).

A particularly important commandment is that believers should love one another in the same way as Jesus has loved them (John 13:34–35). In the New Testament, converts were taught to keep this commandment from the outset (1 Pet. 1:22a).

Problems today

If justification by faith is preached on its own in today’s society, most of those who hear it will get a distorted impression of the gospel. If there is no stress on repentance, they will get the idea that being a Christian is more about God blessing us than us obeying him. This will attract some people who should not be attracted, and produce morally weak converts. It will also put off some people who should not be put off – people who are seeking a better moral framework for their lives. I have in front of me a leaflet from a local church that came through

my door. It poses the question, ‘Sad, bored, depressed, lonely...?’, and invites me to ‘come and hear how people’s lives have been instantly changed’. The leaflet is, I am sure, well meant, but it appeals to self-interest, not self-denial (cf. Jas. 1:27).⁷

A second problem with preaching justification by faith on its own is that converts are left to hear about baptism in the Holy Spirit later. Moreover, when they do hear about it, they are liable to learn that it brings, not so much the ability to produce the fruits of repentance, but further blessing and assurance. This leads them to seek spiritual experiences like speaking in unintelligible tongues, thinking that these are signs of having the Holy Spirit, which they are not (1 Cor. 14:22).⁸ They then become unsettled, and want greater emphasis on spiritual experiences in their own church, or move to another church where there is a greater emphasis.

A third problem with focussing on the blessings of the gospel is that it raises false expectations, and does not prepare believers for unmerited suffering.⁹ Jesus spoke of followers experiencing hardship, sickness, and imprisonment (Matt. 25:34–40). He warned his disciples that they would be rejected by the world (John 15:18–21) and in the world have tribulation (John 16:33). The early Christians experienced severe persecution (Acts 8:1), famine (Acts 11:27–30), poverty (Gal. 2:10), sickness (Gal. 4:13–14, Phil. 2:25–27, 1 Tim. 5:23, 2 Tim. 4:20), and other hardships (2 Cor. 11:23–28). The apostles taught believers to expect suffering, and to regard it as a refining influence in their lives (Rom. 5:1–5, 8:17–39, etc.). Paul even made the anguished cry, ‘Abba, Father’, proof of having the Spirit (Rom. 8:15–17). If Christians get the idea that they should not suffer, they can question their faith when they do, or that of other Christians who suffer. God severely rebuked Job’s friends for attributing his suffering to sin (Job 42:7).

A fourth problem with focussing on the blessings of the gospel is that it can produce Christians who do not fully accept the authority of Scripture. They accept some Scriptures (those relating God’s blessings in Christ), but not others (those proscribing now-accepted forms of conduct). This is not only a problem in itself, but it creates confusion as to what it means to be an evangelical. The term has traditionally described someone who believes in both the authority of Scripture and justification by faith, not justification by faith only.¹⁰

A final problem is that most evangelicals do not make the apostolic appeal, ‘be baptized’ (Acts 2:38 etc.), but substitute some other form of response. This represents a further departure from apostolic practice, and exacerbates differences among evangelicals over baptism.

Conclusion

Many of the problems facing evangelicalism in Britain today can be traced back to evangelical understanding of the evangel itself. Similar problems exist in the United States, and other Western countries. This is why the question ‘What is the gospel?’ is so important. Several authors have drawn attention to this in recent years, from different evangelical

⁷ Our Lord’s invitation in Matthew 11:28–30 has to be understood in relation to the burdens imposed by the Pharisees on those who were seeking to be righteous (23:1–4).

⁸ ‘Paul’s Advice’.

⁹ Suffering can also of course be merited (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

¹⁰ The term is not an ideal one. The primary doctrine is the authority of Scripture: justification by faith is a corollary of this. If the name ‘evangelical’ continues to have a broad meaning, a new term would be helpful, e.g. ‘biblical’.

backgrounds, including John MacArthur Jr.,¹¹ David Pawson,¹² John Piper,¹³ Kenneth Prior,¹⁴ and David Wells.¹⁵ Paul made it clear that it is possible to preach ‘another Jesus’ from the one he did, and for converts to receive ‘a different spirit’ and accept ‘a different gospel’ (2 Cor. 11:4). Every effort has to be made to avoid this. I hope that what I have written will help to stimulate further discussion of this important issue.¹⁶

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¹¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel according to Jesus*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), and other books.

¹² J. David Pawson, *The Normal Christian Birth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989).

¹³ John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2005).

¹⁴ Kenneth Prior, *The Gospel in a Pagan Society*, 2nd edn. (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1995).

¹⁵ David F. Wells, *Turning to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

¹⁶ This article is an abridged version of my booklet *What is the Gospel?* (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1997), which is now out of print. Copies of an evangelistic booklet (*Living*) that presents the gospel to outsiders in the way that I describe here may be obtained from the distributors (bmdpgn@amsolve.com).