

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

H. A. IRONSIDE

"Moreover brethren I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:1-4).

It might seem almost a work of supererogation to answer a question like this. We hear the word *gospel* used so many times. People talk of this and of that as being "as true as the gospel,"³ and I often wonder what they really mean by it. What is the gospel? First I should like to indicate what it is not.

I. What the Gospel Is Not⁴

A. Not the Bible

In the first place, the gospel is not the Bible. Often when I inquire, "What do you think the gospel is?" people reply, "Why, it is the Bible, and the Bible is the Word of God." Undoubtedly the Bible is the Word of God, but there is a great deal in that Book that is not gospel.

"The wicked shall be turned into Hell with all the nations that forget God."⁵ That is in the Bible, and it is terribly true; but it is not gospel.

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁶ That is in the Bible, but it is not gospel.

Our English word *gospel* just means the *good spell* and the word *spell* is the old Anglo-Saxon word for "tidings," the good tidings, the good news. The original word translated *gospel*, which we have taken over into the English with little alteration is the word, "evangel,"⁷ and it has the same meaning, the good news. The gospel is God's good news for sinners. The Bible contains the gospel, but there is a great deal in the Bible which is not gospel.

B. Not the Commandments

The gospel is not just any message from God telling man how he should behave. "What is the gospel?" I asked a man this question some time ago, and he answered, "Why I should say it is the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, and I think if a man lives up to them he is all right." Well, I fancy he would be; but did you ever know anybody who lived up to them? The Ten Commandments ask of sinful man an obedience that no fallen creature has ever given. The Sermon on the Mount demands a righteousness which no unregenerate man has been able to produce. The law is not the gospel; it is the very antithesis of the gospel. In fact, *the law was given by God to show men their need for the gospel.*

"The law," says the Apostle Paul, speaking as a Jewish convert, "was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. But after that Christ is come we are no longer under the schoolmaster."

C. Not Repentance

The gospel is not a call to repentance, or to amendment of one's ways, to make restitution for his past sins, or to promise to do better in the future. These things are all perfectly right and perfectly proper in their place, but they do not constitute the gospel; for the gospel is not good advice to be obeyed, it is good news to be believed. Do not make the mistake then of thinking that the gospel is a call to duty or a call to reformation, a call to better your condition, to behave yourself in a more perfect way than you have been doing in the past.

D. Not Giving Up the World

Nor is the gospel a demand that you give up the world, that you give up your sins, that you break off bad habits and try to cultivate good ones. You may do all these things and yet never believe the gospel, and consequently never be saved at all.

There are seven designations of the gospel in the NT, but over and above all these, let me draw your attention to the fact that when this blessed message is mentioned, it is invariably accompanied by the definite article. Over and over and over again in the NT we read of *the* gospel. It is *the* gospel; not *a* gospel. People tell us there are a great many different gospels; but there is only one! When certain teachers came to the Galatians and tried to turn them away from the simplicity that was in Christ Jesus by teaching "*another* gospel," the apostle said that it was a different gospel, but not another, for there is none other than *the* gospel. It is down-right exclusive; it is God's revelation to sinful man.

E. Not Comparative Religion

The scholars of this world talk of the "Science of Comparative Religions," and it is very popular nowadays to say, "We cannot any longer go to heathen nations and preach to them as in the days gone by, because we are learning that their religions are just as good as ours and the thing to do now is to share with them, to study the different religions, take the good out of them all, and in this way lead the world into a sense of brotherhood and unity."

So in our great universities and colleges men study this Science of Comparative Religions, and they compare all these different religious systems one with another. There is a Science of Comparative Religions, but the gospel is not one of them. All the different religions in the world may well be studied comparatively, for at rock-bottom they are all alike; they all set man at trying to earn his own salvation. They may be called by different names, and the things that men are called to *do* may be different in each case, but they all set men trying to save their own souls and earn their way into the favor of God. In this they stand in vivid contrast with *the* gospel, for *the* gospel does not come to men to tell them to do anything, but *the* gospel is that glorious message that tells us what God has *done* for us in order that guilty sinners may be saved.

II. The Seven Designations of This Gospel

A. The Gospel of the Kingdom⁸

When I use that term I am not thinking particularly of any dispensational⁹ application, but of this blessed truth that it is only through believing the gospel that men are born into the Kingdom of God. We sing:

"A ruler once came to Jesus by night,
To ask Him the way of salvation and light;

The Master made answer in words true and plain,
'ye must be born again.'"

But neither Nicodemus, nor you, nor I, could ever bring this about ourselves. We had nothing to do with our first birth, and can have nothing to do with our second birth. It must be the work of God, and it is wrought through the gospel. That is why the gospel is called the gospel of the Kingdom, for, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God."¹⁰ "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever...And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you."¹¹

Everywhere that Paul and his companion apostles went they preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and they showed that the only way to get into that Kingdom was by a second birth, and that the only way whereby the second birth could be brought about was through believing the gospel. It is the gospel of the Kingdom.

B. The Gospel of God

God is the source of it, and it is altogether of Himself. No man ever thought of a gospel like this. The very fact that all the religions of the world set man to try to work for his own salvation indicates the fact that no man would ever have dreamed of such a gospel as that which is revealed in this Book. It came from the heart of God; it was God who "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."¹² "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."¹³ And because it is the gospel of God, God is very jealous of it. He wants it kept pure. He does not want it mixed with any of man's theories or laws; He does not want it mixed up with religious ordinances or anything of that kind. The gospel is God's own pure message to sinful man. God grant that you and I may receive it as in very truth the gospel of God.

C. The Gospel of His Son

It is the gospel of God's Son not merely because the Son went everywhere preaching the gospel, but because He is the theme of it. "When it pleased God," says the apostle, "who called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me that I might preach Him among the nations; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood."¹⁴ "We preach Christ crucified...the power of God, and the wisdom of God."¹⁵ No man preaches the gospel who is not exalting the Lord Jesus. It is God's wonderful message about His Son. How often I have gone to meetings where they told me I would hear the gospel, and instead of that I have heard some bewildered preacher talk to a bewildered audience about everything and anything, but the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel has to do with nothing else but Christ. It is the gospel of God's Son.

D. The Gospel of Christ

The Apostle Peter, preaching on the day of Pentecost of the risen Savior, says, "God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ"¹⁶ and he speaks of Him as the anointed one, exalted at God's right hand.

The gospel is the gospel of the Risen Christ. There would be no gospel for sinners if Christ had not been raised. So the apostle says, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins."¹⁷

A great New York preacher—great in his impertinence, at least—said some years ago, preaching a so-called Easter sermon, "The body of Jesus still sleeps in a Syrian tomb, but His soul goes marching on."

That is not the gospel of Christ. We are not preaching the gospel of a dead Christ, but of a living Christ who sits exalted at the Father's right hand, and is living to save all who put their trust in Him. That is why those of us who really know the gospel never have any crucifixes around our churches or in our homes. The crucifix represents a dead Christ hanging languid on a cross of shame. But we are not preaching a dead Christ; we are not pointing men to a dead Christ; we are preaching a living Christ. He lives exalted at God's right hand, and He "saves to the uttermost all who come to God by Him."¹⁸

E. The Gospel of the Grace of God

It leaves no room whatever for human merit. It just brushes away all man's pretension to any goodness, to any desert excepting judgment. It is the gospel of Grace, and grace is God's free unmerited favor to those who have merited the very opposite. It is as opposite to works as oil is to water. "If by grace," says the Spirit of God, "then it is no more works...but if it be of works, then is it no more grace."¹⁹

People say, "But you must have both." I have heard it put like this: There was a boatman and two theologians in a boat, and one was arguing that salvation was by faith and the other by works. The boatman listened, and then said, "Let me tell you how it looks to me. Suppose I call this oar Faith and this one Works. If I pull on this one, the boat goes around; if I pull on this other one, it goes around the other way, but if I pull on both oars, I get you across the river."

I have heard many preachers use that illustration to prove that we are saved by faith and works. That might do if we were going to heaven in a rowboat, but we are not. We are carried on the shoulders of the Shepherd, who came seeking lost sheep. When He finds them He carries them home on His shoulders.

F. The Gospel of the Glory of God

I love that name. It is the gospel of the Glory of God because it comes from the place where our Lord Jesus has entered. The veil has been rent, and now the glory shines out; and whenever this gospel is proclaimed, it tells of a way into the glory for sinful man, a way to come before the Mercy Seat purged from every stain. It is the gospel of the Glory of God, because, until Christ had entered into the Glory, it could not be preached in its fullness, but, after the glory received Him, then the message went out to a lost world.

G. Everlasting Gospel

It will never be superseded by another. No other ever went before it, and no other shall ever come after it.

One of the professors of the University of Chicago wrote a book a few years ago in which he tried to point out that some of these days Jesus would be superseded by a greater teacher; then He and the gospel that He taught would have to give way to a message which would be more suited to the intelligence of the cultivated men of the later centuries.

No, no, were it possible for this world to go on a million years, it would never need any other gospel than this preached by the Apostle Paul and confirmed by the Holy Ghost with signs following; the gospel which throughout the centuries has been saving guilty sinners.

III. The Gospel Declared

What then is the content of this gospel? We are told right here. "I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain."²⁰ There is such a thing as merely believing with the intelligence and crediting some doctrine with the mind when the heart has not been reached. But wherever men believe this gospel in real faith, they are saved through the message. What is it that brings this wonderful result? It is a simple story, and yet how rich, how full.

"I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received." I think his heart must have been stirred as he wrote those words, for he went back in memory to nearly 30 years before, and thought of that day when hurrying down the Damascus turnpike, with his heart filled with hatred toward the Lord Jesus Christ and His people, he was thrown to the ground, and a light shone, and he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul why persecutest thou Me?"²¹ And he cried, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And the voice said, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." And that day Saul learned the gospel; he learned that He who died on the Cross had been raised from the dead, and that He was living in the Glory. At that moment his soul was saved, and Saul of Tarsus was changed to Paul the Apostle. And now he says, "I am going to tell you what I have received; it is a real thing with me, and I know it will work the same wonderful change in you, if you will believe it."

First of all, "That Christ *died* for our sins according to the Scriptures." Then, "that He was *buried*;" then, "that He *rose again* the third day according to the Scriptures." Notice that phrase, "According to the Scriptures." The gospel was no new thing in God's mind. It had been predicted throughout the OT times. Every time the coming Savior was mentioned, there was proclamation of the gospel. It began in Eden when the Lord said, "The seed of the woman shall bruise thy head."²² It was typified in every sacrifice that was offered. It was portrayed in the wonderful Tabernacle, and later in the Temple.

We have it in the proclamation of Isaiah, "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed."²³ It was preached by Jeremiah when he said, "This is His Name whereby He shall be called, the Lord our Righteousness" (Jer 23:6). It was declared by Zechariah when he exclaimed, "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the Man that is my fellow...smite the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones" (Zech 13:7).

All through those OT dispensations, the gospel was predicted, and when Jesus came, the gospel came with Him. When He died, when He was buried, and when He rose again, the gospel could be fully told out to a poor lost world. Observe, it says, "that Christ *died for our sins*." No man preaches the gospel, no matter what nice things he may say about Jesus, if he leaves out His vicarious death on Calvary's Cross.

A. Christ's Death—Not His Life

I was preaching in a church in Virginia, and a minister prayed, "Lord, grant Thy blessing as the Word is preached tonight. May it be the means of causing people to fall in love with the Christ-life, that they may begin to live the Christ-life." I felt like saying, "Brother, sit down; don't insult God like that;" but then I felt I had to be courteous, and I knew that my turn would come when I could get up and give them the truth.

The gospel is not asking men to live the Christ-life. If your salvation depends upon your doing that, you are just as good as checked in for hell, for you never can live it in yourself. It is utterly impossible. But the very first message of the gospel is the story of the vicarious atonement of Christ. Jesus did not come to tell men how to live in order that they might save themselves; He did not come to save men by living His beautiful life. That, apart from His death, would never have saved one poor sinner. *He came to die*; He "was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death."²⁴ Christ Jesus gave Himself a ransom for all. When He instituted the Lord's Supper He said, "Take, eat: this is My body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me...This cup is the new covenant in My Blood."²⁵ There is no gospel if the vicarious death of Jesus is left out, and there is no other way whereby you can be saved than through the death of the blessed spotless Son of God.

Someone says, "But I do not understand it." That is a terrible confession to make, for "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost."²⁶ If you do not understand this, if you do not see that there is no other way of salvation for you, save through the death of the Lord Jesus, then that just tells the sad story that you are among the lost. You are not merely in danger of being lost in the Day of Judgment; but you are lost *now*. But, thank God, "the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost,"²⁷ and seeking the lost He went to the Cross.

"None of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through,
Ere He found the sheep that was lost."

B. The Necessity of Death

He had to die, to go down into the dark waters of death, that you might be saved. Can you think of any ingratitude more base than that of a man or woman who passes by the life offered by the Savior who died on the Cross for them? Jesus died for you, and can it be that you have never even trusted Him, never even come to Him and told Him you were a poor, lost, ruined, guilty sinner; but since He died for you, you would take Him as your Savior?

His death was real. He was buried three days in the tomb. He died, He was buried, and that was God's witness that it was not a merely pretended death, but He, the Lord of life, had to go down into death. He was held by the bars of death for those three days and nights, until God's appointed time had come. Then, "Death could not keep its prey, He tore the bars away." And so the third point of the gospel is this, "He was raised again the third day according to the Scriptures." That is the gospel, and nothing can be added to that.

Some people say, "Well, but must I not repent?" Yes, you may well repent, but that is not the gospel. "Must I not be baptized?" If you are a Christian, you ought to be baptized, but baptism is not the gospel. Paul said, "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel."²⁸ He did baptize people, but he did not consider that was the gospel, and the gospel was the great message that he was sent to carry to the world. This is all there is to it. "Christ *died* for our sins according to the Scriptures, and was *buried*, and *rose again* the third day according to the Scriptures."

IV. The Gospel Accepted

Look at the result of believing the gospel. Go back to verse two, "By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain."²⁹ That is, if you believe the gospel, you are saved; if you believe that Christ died for your sins, that He was buried, and that He rose again, God says you are saved. Do you believe it? No man ever believed that except by the Holy Ghost.

It is the Spirit of God that overcomes the natural unbelief of the human heart and enables a man to put his trust in that message. And this is not mere intellectual credence,³⁰ but it is that one comes to the place where he is ready to stake his whole eternity on the fact that Christ died, and was buried, and rose again. When Jesus said, "It is finished,"³¹ the work of salvation was completed.

A dear saint was dying, and looking up he said, "It is finished; on that I can cast my eternity."

"Upon a life I did not live,
Upon a death I did not die;
Another's life, another's death,
I stake my whole eternity."

Can you say that, and say it in faith?

V. The Gospel Rejected

What about the man who does not believe the gospel? The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that *believeth not* shall be damned."³² He that believeth not shall be devoted to judgment, condemned, lost. So you see, God has shut us up to the gospel. Have you believed it? Have you put your trust in it; is it the confidence of your soul? Or have you been trusting in something else? If you have been resting in anything short of the Christ who died, who was buried, who rose again, I plead with you, turn from every other fancied refuge, and flee to Christ today. Repent ye, and believe the gospel.³³

"Oh, do not let the word depart,
And close thine eyes against the light;
Poor sinner, harden not thy heart,
Thou wouldst be saved—why not tonight?"

Footnotes

¹This article is the second chapter of Ironside's book *God's Unspeakable Gift* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1908). He makes many excellent points, often with wit and humor. Get ready to enjoy a feast that is just as relevant today as it was 90 years ago. Ed.

²Need info on Ironside.

³Today this expression would be rendered "It's the gospel truth!" Ed.

⁴To adapt this book chapter to a journal article, this heading was added. All headings and subheadings have been given Roman numerals and letters, respectively. In a few places transition words such as "it is called" were removed since the outline form eliminates their need. Ed.

⁵Ps 9:17. All Scripture in this article is taken from the King James Version.

⁶Heb 10:31.

⁷Greek *euangelion*. Ed.

⁸Literally "the good news of the kingdom." While Ironside fails to cite a single place where this expression occurs, he is making the point that the believer is guaranteed kingdom entrance. Ed.

⁹Dr. Ironside was a keen dispensationalist, but he is not talking about that here.

¹⁰John 3:3, 7.

¹¹1Pet 23-25.

¹²John 3:16.

¹³1 John 4:9-10.

¹⁴Gal 1:15-16.

¹⁵1Cor 1:23-24.

¹⁶Acts 2:36.

¹⁷1 Cor 15:17.

¹⁸Heb 7:25.

¹⁹Rom 11:6.

²⁰1 Cor 15:2.

²¹Acts 9:4.

²²Gen 3:15.

²³Isa 53:5.

²⁴Heb 2:9.

²⁵1 Cor 11:24-25.

²⁶2 Cor 4:3.

²⁷Luke 19:10.

²⁸1 Cor 1:17.

²⁹If Christ is not risen, the point of 1 Corinthians 15, then believers have believed in Him in vain. Only a risen Savior, as Ironside earlier pointed out, can give eternal life to those who believe in Him. Ed.

³⁰It is not clear what Ironside means by this. He may mean understanding, but not accepting the gospel. Ed.

³¹John 19:30.

³²Mark 16:15-16.

³³Mark 1:15. In light of his earlier assertion that repentance isn't the gospel, Ironside's reason for quoting Mark 1:15 here is a bit puzzling. However, his immediately preceding words, "trun from every other fancied refuge," evidently explains his interpretation of "repent ye." This is essentially the change-of-mind view of repentance. Thus he understands Mark 1:15 to mean something like this, "stop trusting in anything else to get you to heaven and believe in Christ." Ed.