

# *What is the Gospel?*

Wherever the Christian faith is spoken or expressed, there are a core set of beliefs, a foundation on which all other beliefs stand or fall. That core is the gospel message. Despite the number of times this message is heard, there is a beauty and deep attraction that endears the open heart. This brief essay speaks to core truths of what all Christians everywhere for all time know as the gospel message. I will cash this out by addressing the problem of sin, the role of faith, and the importance of repentance, after which I will move to union with Christ and belonging to one another. I recognize there may be nuanced differences and, undoubtedly, ideas omitted that some may wish to see in a gospel presentation. Still, it is my hope and sincere prayer that readers will find what follows not only of interest, but drawn to embrace essential Christian teaching known as the gospel message.

Although the word “gospel” means “good news”, it really is a mixed bag of good and bad news. Let me explain, as I speak to the **the problem of sin, the role of faith, and the importance of repentance**.

Reading Gen. 3:1-19, we learn of three catastrophic consequences from the introduction of sin into God’s created order. **First, the basis for truth is lost.** Whereas God said that Adam and Eve would die if they ate from the tree (Gen. 2:17), the serpent said, “You will not die” (Gen. 3:4). Doubting God and trusting our own wisdom to discern truth makes **intellectual relativism the standard for truth**.

**Second, the foundation for morality is eroded.** By actually eating the fruit, Adam and Eve trusted their own sense of what is good and right rather than depend on God (Gen. 3:6). Turning in on our own pleasures to determine what is best makes **moral relativism the norm**.

**Finally, the true nature of our humanity is turned on its head.** Rather than accepting that we are beings made in the image of our Creator, which includes embracing our dependency as a gift from God, we become self-made creations, asserting our independence and autonomy. When Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation to be “like God” (Gen. 3:5), their sense of identity became fluid rather than fixed. Denying our humanity as created by God, we find ourselves living with a relentless cognitive dissonance that leaves us with **an incurable existential relativism**.

Since all of us are children of Adam — “single-sourced” as it were — we are sinners by nature and by choice. Alienation defines us: we are separated from God, fragmented within, and disconnected from others. Because of the ubiquitous presence of sin, the same questions continually haunt us all: “What is Truth? / “What is right?” / “Who am I?”.

As important as it is to acknowledge our common human condition, it’s critical we understand our purpose in life never changes. **We are made to reflect God’s glory**, even though sin disrupts that goal.

**Despite the problem of sin and the sweeping fallout from it, God’s love for us is real.** Though “we were dead in our trespasses and sins...God who is rich in mercy” (Eph 2), “shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). You see, “in this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10).

**When compelled by God’s unconditional love and leaning into his Son with faith, my ability to reflect God’s glory is restored.** As God’s image bearer, I have been gifted with a divine opportunity; a royal commission to represent God’s glory. If indeed this is my charter in life, then being saved from my sin is not primarily for my sake but for God’s.

This suggests that **the focus of the gospel story is not on what Jesus did for me, but on who Jesus is** (see further [The Gospel Precisely](#), Matthew Bates). Put differently, the benefits of the gospel are not the reasons for the gospel. When we gaze upon the life of Jesus we learn he not only claims to be the truth but is truth incarnate. Jesus shows us not merely a hint of goodness but what is genuinely morally right and truly best. Jesus is the quintessential human, the new Adam, and our living hope.

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**What's more, the Bible never really says the gospel will help me get to heaven.** The aim of the gospel is not so much about the future as it is about the present; it's about establishing a relationship with Jesus as king. The first coming of Jesus is really the coming of God as king to restore our divine purpose as his royal subjects to reflect his glory. Interestingly, in reading Mark's passion narrative we find that "king" is used of Jesus six times (Mk 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32). The mocking placard over the crucified Christ that read "King of the Jews" was intended by Rome as a deterrent to eliminate threats to its political power and authority. However, it is in fact stating an important truth: that God's kingdom comes with power; but a power through death, humility, submission, and sacrifice. The crucifixion of the Son of God is actually the power of God on full display!

**The gospel story is really the story of God;** it is God's means of proclaiming his identity to all the world. And, in beautiful irony, when we embrace who God is by looking to Jesus, we actually discover our true identity: God's image bearers with a royal privilege to reflect his glory here on earth now, and into eternity. Rather than being banished from God's presence in a garden, we are restored to an everlasting relationship with God, wherever we find ourselves. "For God so loved the world...."

## Our Union with Christ / Our Belonging to One Another

What precisely happens to us when we become believers? How are we united to Christ?

In looking to Christ's death as an atonement for our sins and to his resurrection and ascension as the promise of new creation, something genuinely changes within us. The Bible calls this **regeneration**, which is **a unique work of the Holy Spirit**. The change is so large and so sweeping that it's likened to a new birth. Value systems are wholly renovated, not just modified. Old impulses and habits are gradually yet certainly replaced with new ones because a death has taken place of our old nature, and a new nature is imparted to us, radically and truly changing us from the inside out.

Consider an illustration from chemistry: a *mixture* consists of two or more elements, each of which can be distinguished and separated from the other when combined in the same container; the elements are not chemically bound to one another. A *compound*, on the other hand, is the combination of two or more elements that are chemically bound to each other such that they cannot be extracted individually. A new substance altogether obtains from the compound.

Similarly, when the Spirit of Christ enters our lives, we are united to Christ and we become a new creation altogether (Rom 8:9; 2 Cor 5:17). We are changed substantially from the inside out. We do not merely add a religious element to our lives, as in a mixture. When, through faith in Christ, God's Spirit unites with ours, we become a new person; a compound as it were. This union forms one new substance (Gal 2:20). Though each part remains distinct (God's Spirit and ours), *the predominating expression for those born from above is "Christ in you, the hope of glory"* (Col 1:27). We're set on a new course to be formed into the new Adam who is image of God in Christ. This is what it means to be a Christian.

When we accept our plight as sinners and admit our moral indebtedness to God, then **repentance** is the most natural response. Repentance is not just a change of mind; it's a change of masters; a complete reorientation heading in a completely new direction. **Why is repentance necessary?** Because it unleashes forgiveness, which is the only means of being reconciled to God (cf., Lk 17:3). **Forgiveness** seals the deal; it opens the doorway for union with God and imparts to us a genuine sense of shalom / completion / well-being, and peace! It is through forgiveness that we rediscover our sense of place and begin learning what it means to be temples of the living God who bear his image; sanctuaries from which God's glory emerges and shines brightly. The net remains of our lives are spent realizing this glorious reality.

Upon turning to Christ in faith and repentance, we become part of a larger story where God is the main character and not merely a footnote to our own self-made narrative. We move from fragmented lives to integrated lives. Lives where we rest in the constancy of God's love shown to us in Christ; where we are embraced and feel not only safe but secure in relationship with God, self, and others.

But there's more: Not only are we united to Christ, ....

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**We belong to one another.** In our union with Christ, we are bound not only to Christ, but to a new family of believers across all time, what Hebrews calls the “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1). This relational bond is stronger than any biological or psychological connection we may form in this life. Scripture calls this new family, the “Church.”

**“What is the Church?”** For many (most?), the term church is simply an aggregate of bodies, bucks, and buildings; an institutionalized organization with paid professionals and a tax-exempt status. When we use the term “church”, however, it’s important we not narrowly define it as some thing we do or some place we go. The New Testament shows the term “church” refers to “the people of God,” whether locally or globally expressed. Metaphors referring to Church include “body” (Col 1:18), “temple” (Eph 2:20-21), “virgin” (2 Cor 11:2), “bride” (Rev 21:9), “people” (Tit 2:14), “flock” (1 Pt 5:2-4), “household” (Eph 2:19), “new humanity” (Eph 2:15), “chosen people, holy nation, royal priesthood” (1 Pt 2:9), and even “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), etc. Given this usage, I doubt anyone in the first century would ask “Where do you go to church?” Because the term “church” was and is **an identity to hold, not a place to go. It’s not an event to engage, but a family to embrace.** When we come to Christ in faith, we are grafted into the Body of Christ composed of “saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; [who are] a kingdom [of] priests [and who will one day] reign on earth.” (Rev 5)!

Importantly, “no image for the church occurs more often in the New Testament than the metaphor of **family.**” In fact, “the early church viewed family as their dominant relational identifier, and family is how Jesus refers to his disciples—not just the twelve, but all of them (and us) (Matt 23:8). The New Testament writers pick up on this metaphor and adopt it in their own teachings ... Family is primary, but in that family, we are all equal brothers and sisters” (see Matt McKirland’s [post](#)). This is why marriage is so often used to portray Christ (who is Bridegroom) and the Church (who is bride).

Finally, we could say that faith sums our experience of coming to Christ. Just as the problem of sin affects everyone (Rom 3:23), so too is **faith the solution for everyone.** Sin levels the playing field. Faith is the great equalizer. The Bible teaches that faith alone is the only necessary and sufficient condition for being reconciled to God. The pressures of performance, the arrogance that arises from privilege, the fear of judgment, and the dehumanizing effects of guilt and shame are all crushed under the cross of Christ. At the cross forgiveness is made available to anyone and to everyone without distinction. It is by faith alone that we are made right with God, united to Christ, and joined to one another as family for eternity.

This is the gospel message. It is the foundation on which the entire Christian faith is laid. Everyone who has embraced Jesus as Lord and Savior affirms these core beliefs.