



GROWING IN GRACE

UNIT 2: WHAT IS JESUS' MESSAGE?

THE BIG IDEA: THE GOSPEL

OBJECTIVES

- To learn what the gospel is
- To understand the significance and power of grace throughout the Christian life
- To respond to the invitation and summons of the gospel
- To learn to repent and believe the gospel every day

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ~ 1 Corinthians 2:2

When we speak of discipleship, we must avoid creating the impression that discipleship is divorced from rather than derived from the gospel. Far too many people assume that one becomes a Christian by receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ, but one grows as a Christian through more advanced teaching or a “program of discipleship.” Many people emphasize a variety of practices, disciplines, and strategies that will enable one to “go deeper” in the Christian faith. Certainly, there is great value in spiritual disciplines such as memorizing Scripture, developing a focused prayer life, fasting, or simplifying one’s lifestyle. These are all to be commended, and we will have more to say about this later. The problem is the unspoken assumption that these disciplines and strategies can be divorced from what God has done in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and it is these supposed “post-gospel” practices that bring actual life transformation where the gospel does not.

Failure to see this leads to disastrous consequences. If we suggest that the gospel is the way we enter the kingdom of God, but spiritual disciplines enable us to advance in kingdom living, then we will end up directing people’s attention away from the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This would be seriously damaging. As Paul said to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2.2). Those who advocate the importance of spiritual disciplines and practices as the essential key to life transformation would (no doubt) say that the death and resurrection of Jesus are central to the Christian life, but a subtle change of emphasis has taken place in practice. The true test is to ask: What are you most excited about? What do you most want to discuss? Where do you look for the strength and ability to grow in Christ-likeness? In what are you resting to bring life transformation? If the answer to these questions is not the cross and resurrection of Jesus, but rather a spiritual activity, then something is off. You are perhaps assuming the gospel is necessary for salvation, but not for Christian living.

When this happens, we deny the power of grace we need to grow. Instead, we rely on ourselves and develop an achievement mindset as it relates to our spirituality. We hopelessly try to win God’s favor or the respect and admiration of others through our religious performance. Or we end up feeling defeated and disillusioned when we fail to measure up. We can never escape the spiritual performance treadmill, and we oscillate between feelings of pride and superiority (when we succeed) to inadequacy and despair (when we fail).

For all these reasons and more, we must always be on guard against the pursuit of a spiritual practice that is distanced from the gospel. Such a spirituality may have the “appearance of godliness” but is in fact “deny-

ing its power” (2 Timothy 3.5). Hard work and effort that does not spring from the gospel of grace will not sanctify you, it will strangle you. The purpose of all spiritual practices is simply to aid us in our connection with the one who lived, died, and rose for us. There can be no connection with Jesus apart from dependence upon his substitutionary life, death, and resurrection.

All true spiritual practices, therefore, will drive us deeper into the gospel, not away from it because the gospel is the power of God not only for our salvation (Romans 1.16) but also for our continued growth (Colossians 1.5-6). We do not begin the Christian life by relying on Jesus, and then make progress in the Christian life by relying on ourselves and our own effort. No, we are saved by grace, and we grow by grace. That is why when Paul bid farewell to the Ephesians, he commended them to “the word of his grace, which is able to build you up” (Acts 20.32). It is “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20.24) that holds the power to build you up in the Christian life.

Or consider Titus 2.11-12. Paul writes, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” The grace of God not only brings salvation, but trains us to renounce ungodliness and to live godly lives. Thus, true life transformation comes through a richer experience of grace. If we desire to grow into maturity as followers of Jesus, we must deepen and enlarge our understanding of the gospel as God’s appointed means for personal and communal transformation.

The reality is that we never move past the gospel to something more advanced. Of course, those who do not yet know Christ must hear and receive the gospel in order to enter into a life-giving relationship with God. But those of us who already identify ourselves as Christians must continually rediscover and apply the gospel to our lives in order to grow. In other words, we become more like Christ by appropriating as-of-yet unrealized aspects of the gospel and by applying those gospel truths to as-of-yet untouched areas of our lives. The way to experience lasting change is by relying more and more on Christ rather than ourselves and by applying newly discovered facets of the gospel to more and more areas of our lives. The engine that drives our ongoing Christian formation is not greater discipline, more advanced teaching, or a program of discipleship, but the gospel of grace.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what subtle ways could one’s approach to discipleship be divorced from rather than derived from the gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. What are the potential consequences of relying on spiritual practices rather than on Jesus for our continued growth in the Christian life?
3. Read Titus 2.11-12. According to Paul, what is the relationship between the grace of God and the Christian life?

4. What is wrong with saying that the gospel is only for beginners?

5. What is the key to experiencing lasting change in the Christian life?

SCRIPTURE STUDY: MARK 1:1, 14-15

¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

What the Gospel Is Not

Mark begins his narrative of the life of Jesus by writing: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (1.1). He recounts that when Jesus launched his public career, he went about "proclaiming the gospel of God" (1.14). This raises the question: What do we mean by the gospel? We understand that it has something to do with Jesus - but what? This is where the confusion sets in because there are a number of misconceptions when it comes to the gospel.

Some think of Jesus primarily as a religious leader offering a new path of spirituality, or a moral teacher presenting a new ethical teaching, or a philosopher proposing a new theory of life. The gospel certainly has something to say about spirituality, ethics, and philosophy, but the gospel itself is none of these things.

Another common misconception is to reduce the gospel to the minimum required set of facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus that must be believed in order to be forgiven so that you can "go to heaven when you die." But if the gospel is nothing more than a "Get Out of Jail Free" card to be used at death, then it implies that the gospel has nothing to do with your life now.

This has been referred to as a gospel of mere "sin management," and it can take two forms, one personal and the other social. The personal form of sin management teaches that you must believe the right things. If you do, then you will "go to heaven when you die." But this reduces life with God to a merely transactional "bar-code faith" in which we exchange our verbal profession of faith in Jesus for "a ticket to heaven." This form of sin management claims to secure your eternal future but does nothing to change your life in the present. The social form of sin management teaches that you must do the right things. This form of sin management assumes that the only reason why Jesus died was to promote justice, equality, and freedom, for example, and he only "lives on" in the sense that we carry on his agenda by defending the oppressed or

fighting against injustice. In both cases, the gospel has been reduced to nothing more than the removal of either personal or social sins. And in both cases, the focus is not on what Jesus has done, but on what you must believe or do. What is missing is a dependent, life-transforming relationship with Jesus that begins now and lasts forever. And what is missing is any sense that Jesus' mission might be quite a bit larger than merely getting you to believe or do the so-called "right things."

What the Gospel Is

If the gospel is not the minimum required set of facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus that must be believed in order to "go to heaven when you die," what is it? Let me suggest three things.

1. Proclamation

Notice that John the Baptist's arrest and imprisonment was the cue for Jesus to begin his ministry. How did he do it? – by "proclaiming the gospel of God." That's the first clue. The gospel is something that must be proclaimed. It is first and foremost an announcement!

The word "gospel," or "good news," was a technical term in the ancient world for news of history-making, life-changing significance like the announcement of a new ruler. For example, archaeologists have found an inscription dating from 9 BC that refers to Caesar Augustus as a god. The inscription reads: "The birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of the gospel through him." When Jesus proclaims the gospel of God, he is making a counter-claim. He is suggesting that the greatest news the world has ever heard is not the arrival of Caesar Augustus, but the arrival of God himself.

Seeing the gospel as proclamation helps us understand the difference between good news and good advice. If I were to sit across from you and tell you that I have some good advice for you, what would you expect? You would expect me to tell you something that you should do. The advice may very well be good for you, although it could be a matter of my own subjective opinion, in which case I could be mistaken. But let us suppose the advice I offer will, in fact, improve your life in some way. Perhaps I am recommending a new diet or exercise regimen. The advice may be good, but in the end the onus is on you to follow this advice in order for its benefits to be realized in your life.

If, on the other hand, I were to sit across from you and tell you that I have some good news for you, that would create an altogether different expectation. You would not expect me to tell you something that you must do, but rather to tell you something that has happened. If this news is good, then it means that I am reporting something that has happened that fundamentally changes your personal situation for the better. You may need to respond to this news in some way. If I tell you that you have been accepted into graduate school or that you have been offered a new job, you will have to show up for the first day of class or arrive at the office for work. But the fact that I am sharing news, emphasizes that the critical action has already been taken by another. The decision has been made. The difference between good advice and good news is the difference between "do" and "done."

The problem is that most people assume the gospel is merely good advice. Or, perhaps in a slightly more nuanced way, we think Jesus offers us good news in order to begin the Christian life, but then gives us good advice regarding how to live the Christian life. We assume that Jesus is offering suggestions about how to be a better person, how to be a better Christian, or how to live a better life. "If you follow these steps then God will take care of you and make your life go well." But the gospel is not advice about what you must do for God, but rather it is news of what God has done for you!

2. Promise

What has God done? He has kept his ancient promises. When Jesus announces "the time is fulfilled" (Mark

1.15), he is declaring that something that had been promised long ago is now being fulfilled in real time. Over the many long centuries, God promised that one day he would rescue us from the powers of sin and evil and forgive us despite our spiritual rebellion, brokenness, and failure so that we might be reconciled in relationship to God. What God promised was certainly not less than forgiveness, but it is so much more. He promised not merely to wipe the slate clean, but to live with us and in us, to restore us and to reign over us. Not only that, he promises to renew the whole world by putting right everything that once went wrong and by ushering in a whole new creation. When Jesus says the time is fulfilled, he is announcing that all of this is now happening in and through Jesus himself. The gospel declares that God is keeping his promises which are cosmic in their scope.

This fulfillment, however, comes in a rather unexpected way – not through strength, but through apparent weakness, not through a victorious military leader, but a suffering servant, not through brute force or strength of argument, but through the perfect life, the substitutionary death, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And those who receive this promise and shape their lives around it are not the proud who do not think they need to be rescued, but rather the humble who know that they do.

All of which goes to show that the gospel is primarily a message of grace rather than merit. Grace is often defined as “unmerited favor.” It is sometimes said that mercy is not getting what you do deserve, whereas grace is getting what you don’t deserve. But, in fact, while that is a helpful definition, it does not go quite far enough. God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ is not simply unmerited or undeserved in a neutral sense. It is de-merited favor. The truth is that we deserve the exact opposite of the love that we are shown. The grace of God reveals that God’s love is not conditional. He does not love us because of who we are or what we do. (It’s not based on merit.) But God’s love is not simply unconditional either. He does not merely love us as we are. No, God’s love is contra-conditional. He loves us despite who we are and despite what we have done. If grace is de-merited favor, then it means that there is nothing that you can do to make God love you more, and there is nothing that you can do to make God love you less. In Jesus Christ, he loves you with an infinite love that cannot fluctuate or change.

Grace fundamentally reorients the motivations of the heart and that is why grace builds you up in the Christian life. A religious person says, “I obey, and therefore God accepts me,” and an irreligious person says, “I can do whatever I want because I’m the master of my own life.” But a Christian says, “God accepts me in Jesus Christ, and therefore I obey.” In other words, a Christian strives to love, serve, and please God not in order to win God’s love and favor, but because he or she already has it through Jesus Christ.

In order to embrace the gospel, you must affirm two truths: “I am a sinner” and “Jesus is my savior.” If you have one, but not the other, then you don’t have the gospel. That is why the gospel critiques both relativism on the one hand, and moralism on the other. Of course, you can avoid Jesus by “breaking all the rules” and rejecting the idea that you are a sinner in need of grace because “you make your own rules.” In this case, you are denying that you are a sinner. But you can also avoid Jesus by “keeping all the rules” and refusing to acknowledge you need a savior in the first place. Instead, you are trying to save yourself through your own spiritual record and performance rather than relying on Jesus’ record and performance on your behalf. In this case, you are denying that Jesus is your savior. Isn’t it ironic that you can avoid Jesus as your savior by “breaking all the rules” as well as “keeping all the rules”? A failure to believe in grace keeps the irreligious away from God, but a failure to believe in grace is also the root cause of spiritual deadness and pride in religious people. In both cases, you fail to acknowledge that you are a sinner and that Jesus is the savior of sinners. Therefore, only grace unites us to Jesus and, in turn, makes us more like him.

3. Power

Jesus announced that “the time is fulfilled,” and though he has not yet finished all that he came to do, he has made a real start. That is why he goes on to say, “the kingdom of God is at hand.” Jesus is not merely suggesting that the reign of God is “almost here” in a temporal sense, but rather it has “drawn near” in a spatial sense. It now confronts us as a present reality. The kingdom of God has arrived in the person of the king – and his name is Jesus. Therefore, the presence and power of God are available now to everyone who wants to experience these things for themselves. The gospel announces that the power of God has been unleashed in the world, and this opens up to us a whole new way of being human.

When the Apostle Paul writes of the gospel in Romans 1, he does not say that the gospel merely possesses power or provides power, but rather it is the power of God. When the gospel is announced and received, it changes things. It lifts you up and transforms you. It changes your words, thoughts, and actions. It alters your priorities, commitments, and values. It reorients your perspective and redefines your goals. The gospel is the power of God and therefore it changes you. If it hasn't changed you, then you have not experienced it. In the gospel, a different way of life is now presented to us. If we want to experience its transformative power for ourselves, we must rearrange our lives in order to rely on Jesus rather than ourselves as the source and center of our existence. That is why spiritual transformation begins and ends with the gospel. We never “graduate” from the gospel and move on to something else.

Why the Gospel Matters

If the gospel is the proclamation of God's good news, if it is a fulfillment of God's ancient promises, and if it is God's power unleashed in the world, then it requires a response from us. The gospel is not a mere invitation but a summons. It is not as if Jesus went around saying: “If you would like to experience a new kind of spirituality, you should try following me.” Nor would a Roman herald announce: “If you would like to try living under a new ruler, you should try Augustus.” No, the herald would proclaim, “Caesar Augustus is Lord – whether you like it or not – and he demands your loyalty and allegiance.” As for Caesar, even more so for Jesus – the proclamation of the gospel is an authoritative summons to obedience. This is why Paul calls it “the obedience that springs from faith” (Romans 1.5).

The gospel proclaims the way things really are – perhaps despite appearances. There are people who say things like: “The only reason why you believe in Christianity is because it helps you cope with life. Your faith is a crutch. It provides support. It helps meet your emotional needs. You believe because it works for you, but if it stopped working, you would give it up.” But in a small pamphlet that C. S. Lewis wrote in the 1940s he turned things around the other way. He wrote: “Christianity claims to give an account of facts – to tell you what the real universe is like. Its account of the universe may be true, or it may not, and once the question is really before you, then your natural inquisitiveness must make you want to know the answer. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be: if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives no help at all.”

The gospel is not an optional suggestion for how to view reality – it is reality! We are called to get in line with it. If the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand, then the world is now a different place. That is why Jesus issues this summons to “repent and believe in the gospel.”

The difficulty is that many people think the word “repent” means “to feel badly.” We liken it to the word “remorse.” We believe that to repent means to feel sorrow, shame, or guilt over something that we have done. There is certainly an aspect of sorrow involved in repentance, but the word “repent” is not primarily a feeling word; it is a thinking word. In Greek, it literally means “to change your mind” or “to do a 180° turn in your thinking.” If you have been headed in the wrong direction, the best thing to do is to turn around and move the other way as quickly as possible.

When Jesus calls us to repent, he is telling us that we have been living our lives under all the wrong assumptions. We have assumed the world is a certain way, and it is up to us to bend reality to our will. But we've got it all wrong. Jesus has launched the reign of God, and now we need to revise our strategy for living and bend our will to reality.

This isn't a one-time act that only occurs the first time you place your faith in Jesus. It's not as if you "change your thinking" once and never have to do it again. No, as Martin Luther put it, all of life is repentance. The consistent pattern of the Christian life is repentance and faith. Why? Because the default mode of the human heart actively resists grace, and therefore it is all too easy for us to slip back into old patterns of thought and behavior. For that reason, we need to continually remind ourselves of the truth of the gospel. We must preach the gospel of grace to ourselves every day and stand on its truths. As we remember that we are as loved and accepted by God as we will ever be through Jesus' record rather than our own, it frees us from a performance mindset and empowers us to live out our new identity in Christ motivated not by guilt but by gratitude. That can be hard to believe, which is why Luther suggested, we need to take the gospel and "beat it into our heads continually" because we are prone to forget it. Repentance is not a one-time deal; it's a lifestyle.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the gospel?
2. What are some of the misconceptions of the gospel that you have fallen into? In what ways do you tend to view the gospel as merely a transaction between you and God, i.e. believing or doing something for God in exchange for "a ticket to heaven"? In what ways do you tend to view the gospel as merely a form of sin management?
3. Whenever we merely assume the gospel is operating in the background, rather than clearly articulating the gospel and embodying its implications, we inevitably end up pushing the gospel to the periphery and place something else at the center. What beliefs or practices have you mistakenly placed at the center of your Christian life rather than the gospel?
4. How have you conceived of the gospel as good advice rather than good news?

5. How have you experienced the gospel as a power that has transformed your priorities, commitments and values?

 6. How would you describe grace?

 7. How has grace reoriented the motivations of your heart?

 8. In what areas of your life do you struggle to believe that God is truly gracious towards you?

 9. In what ways do you need to “repent and believe” everyday in response to the summons of the gospel?
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PRAYER PROMPTS

- Pray for God to deepen your understanding of the gospel and his abounding grace.
- Pray that God would grow you by grace and reorient the motivations of your heart.
- Pray for the strength and humility to repent and believe every day.
- Pray the same prayer for one another.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE: TITUS 2:11-12

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹²training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-19

¹Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ²and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

1. What does Paul regard to be of “first importance”? Is Paul delivering good advice or good news?
2. How does Paul describe the vital role of grace not only in his becoming an apostle, but in his growth as a Christian (verses 8-10)? For additional reference, read Philippians 3.2-11, Acts 8.1-3, and Acts 9.1-22.
3. What historical events does Paul consider to be critical? In what ways is Christianity uniquely dependent upon historical events compared to other “world religions”?
4. Paul acknowledges that Christianity stands or falls upon the death and resurrection of Jesus. If these events did not take place, what would be the many ramifications?
5. Paul describes his own personal experience of God’s grace and then goes on to describe the cosmic impact of the gospel. How would you describe the gospel’s impact on your own life? How does it reach across the breadth of human experience?

6. Paul speaks of hope. What hope does the gospel provide? In what ways do you struggle to make that hope a living reality in your life?

7. In verses 1-3 Paul states that the gospel is something to be preached, to be received, to stand on, to be saved by, and to hold fast to. In what ways or in what circumstances do you struggle to do what Paul declares?

FURTHER READING: JON STOTT, *CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE MODERN WORLD* (1975)

What is the one, the changeless New Testament gospel? And in stating it can we indicate at all its contemporary power? The first and best answer would be to say that the whole Bible is God's good news in all its astonishing relevance. Bible and gospel are almost alternative terms, for the major function of the Bible in all its length and breadth is to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, God's revelation recorded in Scripture has been distilled for us in the good news the apostles proclaimed. What is it?...

In a single word, God's good news is Jesus. On the day of Pentecost, after quoting from Joel, Peter began his sermon proper: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus..." (Acts 2.22). His first word was Jesus, and Jesus must be our first word too. Jesus Christ is the heart and soul of the gospel. When Philip sat down beside the Ethiopian, we are told literally that "he evangelized to him Jesus," that is, he shared with him the good news of Jesus (Acts 8.35, my translation). Similarly, Paul began his great manifesto to the Romans by describing himself as "set apart for the gospel of God...concerning his Son...Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 1.1-4). And we must all be profoundly thankful that the personality of Jesus retains its powerful hold over human minds. When people take any serious interest in Jesus, whether they come from a background of other faiths, or secularism, or youthful counterculture, they often feel his fascination. But how did the apostles present Jesus? Their good news contained at least five elements.

1. The Gospel Events

First, of course, there were the gospel events. For certain "things" had "happened" in Jerusalem and "been accomplished" among them (Luke 1.1; 24.14, 18) which nobody could deny. In particular, Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified and resurrected. So Paul summarizes the gospel tradition: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins..., that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day..., and that he appeared" (1 Corinthians 15.3-5). He actually mentions four events - the death, burial, resurrection and appearance of Jesus. Yet it is clear that his emphasis is on two, namely that Christ died (and was buried in order to prove it) and that Christ rose (and was seen in order to prove it). The appearance attested the reality of his resurrection, as the burial attested the reality of his death...

The apostles did not present their Lord's death and resurrection merely as historical events, however, but

as significant events, as saving events. Paul was clear that he “died for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15.3; compare Galatians 1.4) and was “raised for our justification” (Romans 4.25)...The resurrection was more than a historical event. It was a divine vindication of Jesus. “You killed him,” Peter repeated several times (Acts 2.23; 3.15; 5.30-31), “but God raised him,” thus reversing the verdict of men, snatching him from the place of a curse and exalting him to his own right hand as Lord, Christ and Savior (Acts 2.24; 3.13-15; 5.30-31).

2. The Gospel Witnesses

The second element in the apostles’ message is the gospel witnesses, by which I mean the evidence to which they appealed for its authentication. This was twofold...The first witness was the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul emphasized this by repetition in his succinct statement of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15.3-4): “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” and “was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” And Peter kept quoting Scripture in his Acts speeches, to demonstrate that the Christ of Old Testament expectation was Jesus...The second witness was the evidence of the apostles’ own eyes. Jesus himself had linked the forthcoming apostolic witness to the prophetic witness of the Old Testament when he added to his reference to Scripture “you are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24.48). He did it again before the ascension: “you shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1.8). They knew they were uniquely qualified to witness to Christ, not just because they had been “with him from the beginning” (compare Mark 3.14; John 15.27; Acts 1.21-22), but especially because they had seen the cross and the risen Christ with their own eyes...

This double authentication is important for our own day. We have already noted the fascination that the person of Jesus has for our contemporaries, and that this often gives us a meeting point with them. But which Jesus are we talking about? Even Paul in his day recognized the possibility of teachers proclaiming “another Jesus” than the Jesus he preached (2 Corinthians 11.4). And there are many “Jesuses” abroad today. There is Jesus whom some scholars treat as a myth. There is Jesus the tragic, failed revolutionary. There is Jesus as portrayed in musicals and movies. It is over against these human reinterpretations that we need urgently to recover and reinstate the authentic Jesus, the Jesus of history who is the Jesus of Scripture. This means, further, that we have no liberty to preach Jesus Christ according to our own fantasy, or even according to our own experience. Our personal witness does indeed corroborate the witness of the biblical authors, especially that of the apostles. But theirs is the primary witness, for they were “with Jesus” and knew him, and they have borne witness to what they heard with their ears and saw with their eyes. Our witness is always secondary and subordinate to theirs...Our responsibility in evangelism is neither to create a Christ of our own who is not in Scripture, nor to embroider or manipulate the Christ who is in Scripture, but to bear faithful witness to the one and only Christ there is as God has presented him to the world in the remarkably unified testimony of both the Old and the New Testament Scriptures.

3. The Gospel Affirmations

Third, there were and still are the gospel affirmations. As we have seen, they center of Jesus Christ. They concern not simply what he did more than nineteen centuries ago, however, but what he is today in consequence. The historical Christ is the contemporary Christ. In New Testament terms, the fundamental affirmation is that “Jesus is Lord.” If we confess with our lips that “Jesus is Lord,” Paul wrote, and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved (Romans 10.9). Indeed the end for which Christ died and rose again was “that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Romans 14.9)... What Paul insists on in these texts is that the lordship or sovereignty of Jesus is a direct consequence of his death and resurrection...The “right hand of God” at which Christ “sits” is then symbolic of his universal authority, because of which he is able both to bestow blessing and to require submission...If from the throne Jesus bestows blessing on his people, he also expects them to submit to him, to bow their knee to him...To be in his kingdom or under his rule brings both total blessing and total demand.

Thus the symbolic statement that Jesus is “at God’s right hand” comprises the two great gospel affirmations that he is Savior (with authority to bestow salvation) and that he is Lord (with authority to demand submission)...Moreover, both affirmations are part of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ. If we are asked in today’s increasingly syncretistic culture wherein lies the uniqueness of Jesus, I think we should have to answer “Jesus is Lord” and “Jesus is Savior.” Theologically speaking, these affirmations express the great doctrines of incarnation and atonement, and there is nothing comparable to them in other religions.

4. The Gospel Promises

Fourth, we turn logically from the gospel affirmations to the gospel promises, to what Christ now offers and indeed promises to those who come to him. For the good news concerns neither just what Jesus once did (he died and rose again), nor just what he now is (exalted to God’s right hand as Lord and Savior), but also what he now offers as a result. What is this? At the end of his Pentecost sermon Peter promised the crowd with great assurance that if they repented and were baptized they would receive two free gifts of God, namely, “the forgiveness of sins” and “the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Forgiveness is an essential ingredient of the salvation offered in the gospel. The risen Lord had commanded that “forgiveness of sins” be proclaimed to all nations on the basis of his name (Luke 24.47)... However unpopular this message may be today, forgiveness remains humanity’s chief need and an indispensable part of the good news. But Christ offers more than the forgiveness of our past. He offers too a new life in the present through the regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our future inheritance...We must not separate the two gospel promises that God has joined together, forgiveness and the Spirit...True freedom is more than deliverance from guilt; it is deliverance also from self, from what Malcolm Muggeridge once called “the dark little dungeon of my own ego.” Once rescued from guilt and self-centeredness, we can give ourselves to the service of God and others. And only in this servitude is true freedom to be found.

5. The Gospel Demands

Fifth, we come to the gospel demands. We move from what Jesus did, who Jesus is and what Jesus promises, to what Jesus requires of us today. We have already seen that Peter’s first word in answer to the crowd’s conscience-stricken question of what they should do was repent. It was his first word again at the conclusion of his second sermon: “Repent therefore” (Acts 3.19). And Paul ended his sermon to the Athenians with the statement that God “now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17.30).

To repent was to turn from their sin, and in particular their grievous sin of rejecting Jesus. Their metanoia or “change of mind” was, then, a reversal of their opinion of Jesus and of their attitude toward him. They had repudiated him and expressed their rejection in the crucifixion; now they were to believe in him as Lord, Christ and Savior, and express their acceptance in their baptism. For, although baptism no doubt means more than this, it cannot mean less. They were to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ.” That is, they were to submit humbly to baptism in the name of the very person they had previously sought to destroy. Nothing could indicate more clearly than this their public and penitent faith in him. Further, their repentance and baptism introduced them into the new community of Jesus. There was no conversion without church membership...

Conversion includes faith as well as repentance. It is true that Peter’s command to the crowd was to “repent” rather than to “believe.” Yet, those who received Peter’s word, repented and were baptized are a few verses later referred to as “believers” (Acts 2.44)...So the gospel demands are repentance and faith – and (in public) baptism...

Evangelism, then, is sharing the good news with others. The good news is Jesus. And the good news about

Jesus that we announce is that he died for our sins and was raised from death, and that in consequence he reigns as Lord and Savior at God's right hand, and has authority both to command repentance and faith, and to bestow forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit on all those who repent, believe and are baptized. And all this is according to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is more than that. It is precisely what is meant by "proclaiming the kingdom of God." For in fulfillment of Scripture God's reign has broken into the life of humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This reign or rule of God is exercised from the throne of Jesus, who bestows salvation and requires obedience. These are the blessing and the demand of the kingdom. As Jesus himself had put it at the very beginning of his public ministry, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1.15).