

# WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL GOSPEL?

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## The quest

The search for the essential Gospel has a slightly Holy Grail feel to it. As you rummage through academic tomes about the ‘centre of Paul’s thought’, the ‘heart of the Gospel’ or the ‘essential kerygma’, you can almost hear Graham Chapman and Terry Jones behind you, banging coconuts together and urging you to join them on their quest. Scholars of various stripes seem to think that the essential Gospel is out there somewhere, and it’s only a matter of time before they find it – or, for the more self-confident, before they are recognized by their peers as having found it already: justification by faith, Jesus as Lord of the world, the kingdom, Christ crucified, the Word become flesh, the divinity of Jesus, the resurrection, and so on. Yet for some academics, there may be the nagging doubt that all this questing doesn’t seem to have got us very far. Perhaps the essential Gospel is as elusive as the Grail.

Pastors and evangelists are also looking for the essential Gospel. But whereas academics are looking for it for the sake of study, they are looking for it because they want to know what to preach, and how. There’s a baptism meeting in two weeks’ time, so what should you be proclaiming? It’s a minefield: no matter what you say, you will miss something out, and somebody will point it out with their best disappointed face. You didn’t talk about sin. You didn’t talk about the kingdom. You only described the resurrection in passing. The Holy Spirit wasn’t mentioned. Neither was baptism. Neither was repentance. You didn’t preach ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’. You didn’t explain the cross, or substitutionary atonement, or the victory of Jesus, or grace, or the lordship of Christ, or ... Despite your best efforts, you obviously didn’t quite squeeze in the essential Gospel. Maybe next time.

To make matters worse, books and seminars on the topic don’t seem to help that much. In most cases, rather than boiling the Gospel down to the one-size-fits-all version that pastors are looking for, books on the Gospel seem to add yet more things into the mix (a mix, remember, that all pastors are supposed to be preaching ‘in season and out of season’), so the temptation for many leaders is simply to stop reading them. It has even got to the point where the great D. A. Carson can speak at *The Gospel Coalition* on ‘What is the Gospel?’ – a promising look at our question if ever there was one – and yet structure his talk around ‘eight summarizing words, five clarifying sentences and one evocative summary’, none of which leave this author any the wiser as to what the Gospel actually is. No wonder the quest for the Grail frustrates so many.

## The misunderstanding

So the academics, the pastors and the evangelists are all questing for different reasons, but they are still labouring under the same misunderstanding. That misunderstanding is that ‘the essential Gospel’ is ultimately an abstract idea that can be condensed into a few sentences, a track on iTunes, a series of statements that contain the essence of Christianity, which will explain the Gospel to you no matter who you are or where you come from. I just don’t think that’s the case. You might be able to collate *The Essential Richard Clayderman*, whereby you

play someone twelve representative songs and then ask them if they like it. But you can't do that with the Gospel. And the reason is simple: the Gospel is the climactic moment in a *story*, so it cannot be separated from the story without losing its power altogether.

Consider three different gospel announcements: 'Frodo has thrown the ring into Mount Doom', 'Torres has scored the winning goal', and 'the D-day landings have been successful'. Each of these announcements of good news functions as climactic within a particular story, but if we tried to separate it and insert it into a different story – imagine Tolkien announcing that Torres had scored the winning goal, for example – we would have nonsense, like those models at the seaside where one person's head is slapped on another person's body. That, however, is the effect of boiling down the Gospel to 'Jesus died for your sins' and then announcing it to everyone without trying to understand their story first (whether they believe in sin yet, or even know what it is). The stories believed by our listeners vary dramatically depending on their culture, education, experience and so on, so it is hard to find one 'essential Gospel' that will function as climactic within all of them. So the way we preach the Gospel will depend on who is listening, and what stories they currently believe.

To many, that paragraph might sound a bit anarchic. Surely the word of God presents a concise definition of the Gospel somewhere? Well it does, in several places, but this is the whole point: they vary in their content according to the audience. Without trying too hard, it is easy to think of at least ten ways of summarizing the Gospel that are commonly cited from the New Testament:

- The kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Luke 8:1; Acts 20:25; 28:31; etc)
- Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2 says Paul knew 'nothing except' this)
- Jesus and resurrection (Acts 17:18)
- The unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8)
- Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9)
- Jesus is the Messiah (John 20:31; Acts 8:5)
- Christ died, was raised, and appeared to many witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:1-11)
- Jesus was declared God's Son in power by the Spirit of holiness (Romans 1:1-4)
- The power of God for salvation for everyone who believes (Romans 1:16-17)
- Salvation is by grace through faith, and not by works of the law (Galatians 1:6-7)

And that is without mentioning the eleventh, which is perhaps the most common: that 'the essential Gospel' is basically a download of Romans 1-8, with special emphasis on 3:21-26. This 'essential Gospel' is obviously true, and it forms the basis of much Gospel preaching in evangelical churches. But it has the downside of sounding to many unbelievers like *bad* news rather than good news. People have to understand it, of course, if they are to become disciples, just as people need to know they have cancer if they are to receive treatment; whitewashing sin helps nobody. Yet there are so many ways of preaching Jesus as good news in people's stories – healing for the sick, the death of death, freedom from the past, joy everlasting, meaning reinstated, hope found, and so on – that it seems dogmatic to insist on the bad news first, every time. Particularly since apostolic preaching to unbelievers seldom does.

The point of all this is not to argue that the Gospel is whatever you want it to be. Nor is it that everyone believes a story that's generally right but just needs Jesus squished into it.

Quite the opposite: most stories believed by non-Christians are so far from the truth that they need radical reframing when people get converted, and all their stories need to be subverted by God's Big Story of creation, fall, Israel, Jesus and restoration. But, having said all that, the content deemed essential for 'Gospel preaching' will depend on the audience. Demonstrating Jesus as the Messiah is powerful if the audience is Jewish or Samaritan, but less useful if they are pagans who don't know what a Messiah even is. Paul says he knew nothing but Christ crucified among the Corinthians, but he didn't seem to mention it to the Athenians. Jesus is Lord, perhaps the most all-embracing summary of the Gospel there is, functioned as climactic within both the Jewish story (Yahweh is Lord) and the Roman one (Caesar is Lord), but that doesn't mean it would necessarily be the best summary to every people group for all time. To use a well-known modern example, for one Irian Javan tribe the 'essential Gospel' was that Jesus was God's peace child, based on a tribal custom where warring villages would send a child to one another as a peace offering. Now, in due time, all of these people groups need to have the fullness of God's Gospel explained to them. But 'the essential Gospel', though it will always include the life, death and resurrection of Jesus at the centre, will depend on the audience.<sup>1</sup>

### **Essential for what?**

In fact, the best answer to the question 'What is the essential Gospel?' takes the form of another question: 'Essential for what?' This is often the big issue, and probably has a variety of responses. You see, people asking what the essential Gospel is may be asking one of at least five different things:

1. The preacher's question: What must I preach in order to live up to biblical expectations like 'Preach the word, in season and out of season' and 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel'?
2. The theologian's question: What is essential for salvation? What would I want someone to know about the Gospel before I was happy to baptize them?
3. The evangelist's question: What are the bare bones of what I should preach at a meeting when unbelievers are there, so that I can take them on a journey from secularism to Christianity in thirty minutes?
4. The pastor's question: What is the Gospel I should be encouraging people in my church to tell their unbelieving friends?
5. The discipler's question: When can I stop preaching the Gospel to somebody? In other words, what is enough?

Consider how important it is to ask 'essential for what?' Joe Pastor is the only full-time elder in a congregation of 120, and because of this he does most of the preaching, whether at 'guest meetings' or 'normal meetings'. He is keen to be visitor-friendly, desperate to see people saved, eager to teach the saints, and convinced that he should be proclaiming the

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am distinguishing between the 'essential Gospel' and the 'whole Gospel'. The 'whole Gospel' does not vary at all, and it needs to be repeatedly taught and preached, since we live at a time when many elements of it (substitutionary atonement, original sin, regeneration, the need for conversion) are being challenged, watered down and undermined by many, often using very similar arguments to the ones I am presenting here. The point I am making, however, is that the way we *introduce* people to this glorious Gospel will vary according to who is listening.

Gospel in some form every week. But Joe isn't sure exactly what content he should be communicating, because if he preaches 'the essential Gospel' every week then the Christians in church get bored with it. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot seem to satisfy all of his aims. Implicitly, Joe's answers to the questions above are as follows:

1. I must present a simple evangelistic message, with a call to respond to the Gospel, every week, if I am to take seriously Paul's challenges in these verses. The problem is, the majority of believers in my church would get very bored very quickly if I did this.
2. To get saved, people need to know that Jesus was fully God and fully man, that he came to earth to save us from our sins, lived a perfect life, died on our behalf, rescued us from sin, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is coming again to judge, and commands us all to follow him. If we repent, we get everlasting life and joy with him; if not, we don't.
3. The bare bones of what I should preach to unbelievers is probably everything from (2), above. If I do it properly, they will hopefully become Christians at the end.
4. I should be encouraging my church to tell unbelievers everything from (2), above, perhaps using the 'bridge to life' illustration or something similar.
5. I can stop preaching the Gospel to people when they become Christians.

The problem here is clear. Joe is trying to find the one essential Gospel that unbelievers need to hear, believes it's his responsibility to preach it regularly, and that if Christians get bored with it that's their problem. Because Joe has not really asked 'essential for what?', he is caught between (a) the rock of alienating unbelievers and (b) the hard place of boring Christians. If he did, however, he might come up with a set of answers that would significantly change his preaching.

### Five different answers

What difference, I wonder, would it make to Joe's ministry if instead of the answers above, he answered the five questions like this?

1. The preacher's question: The 'word', the 'Gospel', is absolutely massive. A lifetime's preaching wouldn't exhaust it, so I can genuinely preach the Gospel every week without ever repeating myself – and I can proclaim the Gospel from anywhere in Scripture, by showing how it all pivots on Jesus. To be honest, so-called 'preaching' that simply expounds a Scripture passage, without showing how Jesus is the good news of God, isn't really 'preaching' at all.<sup>2</sup>
2. The theologian's question: To get saved, people need to repent, believe in Jesus and get baptized in water, and they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (This is not the Gospel. This is the appropriate *response* to the Gospel, and I may or may not present this at the end of my message). For me to baptize someone, I would want them to

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<sup>2</sup> The oft-quoted exhortation to 'preach the word' in 2 Timothy 4:2 is *keruxon ton logon*, which means 'herald the Gospel', not 'expound the Bible' (consider both Lukan and Pauline usage of *ho logos [ton theou]* in passages like Acts 6:7, 8:14, 8:25, 11:1, 13:5, 13:7, 13:44, 13:46, 13:48, 13:49, 15:35, 15:36, 16:32, 17:13, 18:11, 19:10, 19:20; Luke 1:2; 8:11; Ephesians 6:17; Philipians 1:14; Colossians 1:25; 1Thessalonians 2:13; Titus 2:5). A few verses later, interestingly, Timothy the teaching pastor is urged to 'do the work of an evangelist.' Without denying the vital role of equipping evangelists, I am not sure Paul would quite recognize our split between Bible teachers (who explain Scripture to believers) and Gospel preachers (who explain salvation to unbelievers).

- know not just how Jesus fits into their story, but how they fit into God's story, including themes like creation, sin, the kingdom of God, the life of Jesus, substitutionary atonement at the cross, resurrection, the lordship of Christ, the pouring out of the Spirit, the church, future judgment and the restoration of all creation. I know that God saves some people without knowing all of these things – so it isn't all 'essential for salvation' in that sense – but I have a responsibility to explain the Gospel to people, so that's what I'm going to do before I baptize them. Needless to say, though, this will probably not all come in the same half-hour message!
3. The evangelist's question: The bare bones of what I preach will vary according to who is listening, because I am always trying to present the Jesus as the climax to *their* story, the solution to *their* problem. There is no single data download I try and wangle into every talk. Instead, I want to understand my listener's story and then explain why Jesus is the climax, the fulcrum, the good news they need. And I can give up trying to take them from secularism to Christianity in half an hour; God may do that, but it will probably take far more than one Gospel message to turn their whole life upside down.
  4. The pastor's question: That's also what I should teach my church to do. That's what 'doing the work of an evangelist' is. I'm trying to teach the saints to listen to their friends' stories, and then fit Jesus in as the climax and the pivot of the whole thing. If I play my cards right, I can probably both preach the Gospel and teach the church how to evangelise in the same message. Weekly sermons are an opportunity to model to the saints how to make Jesus the climax of every story.
  5. The discipler's question: I should never stop preaching the Gospel to people. When someone becomes a believer, that's the start of them understanding God's story, not the end; Paul was eager to preach the Gospel to Christians (Romans 1:15), so I should be too. Many people have repented and been baptized without really understanding original sin, or who they are in Christ, or penal substitution, or who knows what else – so the Gospel needs to be continually preached to them so that they grasp ever more of its splendour.

Do you see? If, instead of one 'essential Gospel' that Joe needs to proclaim whenever unbelievers are around, there are thousands of ways of preaching Jesus from the Bible or the newspapers or whatever else, then there is no need for him to keep repeating himself. Nor is there a need for him to draw a sharp distinction between Gospel meetings and normal meetings, since the Gospel can and should be preached in all of them, in wonderfully different ways. They will all pivot on Jesus, most will probably mention the cross and resurrection, and many will include other key themes as well – but there is no 'one size fits all' Gospel message that every unbeliever will respond to after thirty minutes, if only we can get it right. God's good news is too massive, too worldview-changing, for that.

### **Reframing the question**

So let's reframe our original question. Instead of asking, 'What is the essential Gospel?', we could perhaps ask, '*What is the best Gospel presentation for these people?*' In other words, rather than trying to identify an Essential Gospel Preaching Solution, we can approach every individual, every people group, every group of unsaved people, with a desire to find out their story and explain how Jesus is the good news they need. I am aware of how airy-fairy this

will sound to some (and also how obvious it will sound to others). Yet I am persuaded that it is exactly what the apostles did, exactly what the missionaries of old did, and exactly what we are called to do. For instance:

Setting	Story believed by the listeners	Connecting Jesus to the story
Acts 2 (Pentecost)	We killed a would-be Messiah a few weeks ago. Some said he was raised. Now there are 120 of his followers speaking in our native languages.	The Jesus you killed left an empty tomb behind him, and he's now poured out his Spirit, like Joel said he would. He is Lord and Christ.
Acts 3 (the beautiful gate)	A long-term sick man has just been healed, which is pretty amazing.	Healing is not through man's power but in the name of Jesus.
Acts 8 (Samaria)	We are still waiting for a Messiah, but we are not expecting the same thing as the Jews. People in our city are getting healed, and we're joyful.	Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is the one who is doing the healing, bringing the power and causing the joy.
Acts 8 (Ethopian)	I don't understand this Bible passage. It seems to be talking about a suffering prophet. Why?	'Beginning with this Scripture': Jesus is the suffering prophet. You need to be baptized in his name.
Acts 10 (Cornelius)	The God of Israel is the real God. He's sending me someone who will tell me about him. But I'm a Gentile, so I'm not in his people.	God doesn't show favouritism: Jesus is Lord of everyone, and everyone who believes in him can be forgiven from their sins.
Acts 17 (Athens)	There are lots of gods, and one unknown one that we are waiting to find out about. Images of gods are made by and served by humans. We are the offspring of the gods.	The unknown God is the maker of everything, like your poets imply. Your ideas have been OK till now, but Jesus will soon judge the world, and the resurrection is proof.
Acts 26 (Agrippa)	I believe the Jewish prophets. This man Paul is a prisoner, and he is convinced that a dead Jew called Jesus is alive. Christians are a nuisance.	I used to think Christians were a nuisance too, but then Jesus physically appeared to me. He is the true fulfillment of the prophets. And he is alive, as you've heard.
Martin Luther, 1512-7	God demands righteousness, and I can't achieve it, no matter what.	Faith in Jesus is credited to me as the righteousness of God.
Irian Jayan tribe, 1940s	There are many gods. Getting away with treason is heroic. When our villages fight, we send a peace child to each other to be reconciled.	<del>Jesus was betrayed and died, then rose from the dead.</del> Jesus is God's peace child, who reconciles us to the one true God.
Murderer on death row, 2000	I had one chance, and I blew it. I deserve what is coming to me.	Jesus' death on the cross has made a way for you to be forgiven, and given eternal life. You need to repent of your sins & be baptized.
Rape victim in Britain, 2000	There is no justice in the world. I feel completely unclean and shameful for what has happened.	Jesus can remove your shame and give you a new start. At the resurrection, he began a new world order, without injustice.
Secular	The only things that exist are	You haven't reckoned with the

materialist, 2000	material. There is no soul, no miracles, no God. If you say there is, you're ignorant.	resurrection of Jesus. Materialist assumptions have distorted your analysis of the evidence.
Tim Keller and a student at UC Berkeley, 2008	I'm a philosophy student, and I agree with Kant: you can know about the phenomenal (facts, what you perceive), not the noumenal (values, intangible, what is 'real').	That distinction is a value, not a tangible fact. Christianity says that in Jesus, the phenomenal became noumenal, the value became fact, the word became flesh.

In all of these examples, the preacher has attempted to understand the listener's story, and then present Jesus as the climax, the solution to the problem, the challenge to all other worldviews. So, while a public proclamation about Jesus is central in all of them – the Gospel is good *news*, not good advice – not all of them mention the incarnation, or the cross, or even the resurrection. The 'essential Gospel', from the perspective of the preacher, the pastor and the evangelist, varies according to the audience.

### The whole Gospel

Looked at like this, of course, it is unlikely that we will always be able to bring people from secularism to full-blown Christianity in one half-hour message. All of the messages in the table above leave out massive and vital components of Christian belief, and for anyone to get up on Sunday and preach any of them – and, in fact, any of the sermons in the book of Acts – would leave dozens of questions unanswered and issues unaddressed. So if this is our approach, no single Gospel message is likely to be sufficient, and we may need multiple opportunities to communicate the whole of God's good news so people can get saved. (It is probably this that fuels the desire to preach the full monty, the Romans 1-8 Gospel: at least that way you can feel you've said it all.) Yet this more long-term approach, despite popular conceptions about New Testament preaching, is often the way it happened in the early church.

Because of its significance in Luke's narrative, Acts 2 is often taken as if it is completely normative – as if it basically represents what would happen in our Sunday meetings if we got our act together: the power of God, clear Biblical preaching, a call to repentance, and three thousand responses. What is sometimes not considered is that, in all probability, every one of those three thousand already believed (a) in the God of Israel, (b) the Scriptures, (c) that Jesus had lived in Jerusalem and claimed to be the Messiah, (d) that there was a well-known belief he had been raised from the dead, and (e) that something dramatically powerful, quite possibly from God, was taking place right in front of them. It hardly serves as an example of what we should expect from unchurched pagans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

More typical for our situation might be those in Pisidian Antioch who came back the following week (13:42), or those in Thessalonika who heard three Sabbath sermons (17:2), or the Athenians who said 'we will hear you again about this' (17:32), or the three months Paul preached in the synagogue in Ephesus (19:8), or the two year long daily debate programme he ran in the Tyrannus Hall (19:9-10). Of course, there are more immediate responses too, like the household of the Philippian jailer (16:31-34); nothing is too difficult for God (although bear in mind that the jailer and his family were then baptized at once, which is

rarely true of immediate responses in our churches).<sup>3</sup> But frequently Acts suggests a more long-term process, in which the ‘whole Gospel’ is preached over a period of time – or, in the terms of Acts 20:27, in which ‘the whole counsel of God’ is proclaimed over a period of two years. And because this process would typically culminate in public and verifiable events like baptism and receiving the Spirit, as opposed to more private and ambiguous responses like praying a prayer or a hand in the air, there would be plenty of time to explain the whole Gospel, not just the essential one, before concluding that someone had received it.

There is a delicate balance to strike here. Many of us know D. L. Moody’s story of the unbelievers whom he told to come back next week, who then perished in the Chicago fire before they had the chance to respond to the Gospel. Clearly, stories like this make us very wary of failing to give a salvation appeal every time we proclaim the Gospel. On the other hand, there is the opposite danger of asking for a response (hands in the air, come down the front, or whatever) and equating this with becoming a Christian, with the result that we can announce that ‘ten people got saved’ before any of them have been baptized in water (or even heard about it), filled with the Holy Spirit (or even heard about him) and possibly even repented of sin (or even heard about it). The preacher’s desire to ‘close the deal’ can lead to confusion, false assurance and apparent converts who then disappear as soon as they discover the small print; the opposite desire, to preach the whole Gospel before someone is declared to be a Christian, would understandably lead to a huge sense of guilt if that person was hit by the proverbial bus in the meantime. Perhaps the best way forward is to (a) call for a response; (b) encourage everyone who responds to come forward and talk to someone about it, which provides a good opportunity both to explain more of the Gospel and to talk about repentance, faith, baptism and receiving the Spirit; (c) baptize them immediately if it is considered that they are born again, have repented of their sins and believed; (d) lead people into experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit as soon as possible; (e) carefully follow up each individual through to their baptism, even if it takes another year to get there; and (f) talk publicly in terms of ‘responses to the Gospel’ rather than ‘people who became Christians’. After all, in New Testament terms, the appropriate place to declare and celebrate salvation is not when a hand goes up in the air, but when a body goes under the water.<sup>4</sup>

Having said all of that, it is no good urging people to come back next week and hear more about the Gospel if we only preach the Gospel occasionally. Let’s say Susie Seeker comes to a guest meeting on 1 July and hears ‘the essential Gospel’, which for the sake of argument might be ‘the four points’: God loves me, I have sinned, Jesus died for me, I need to decide. Susie responds in her heart, and prays the prayer with all sincerity, but still isn’t quite sure

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<sup>3</sup> Other immediate responses could be added to this list (the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, Lydia), but most are already God-fearers or even proselytes when they hear the message proclaimed, and as such are probably more aware of the Gospel than most unchurched people in the UK today. The comment made about the Philippian jailer’s baptism applies to each of these, too.

<sup>4</sup> I confess to being somewhat baffled by the nervousness many people have about saying baptism is a crucial part of the salvation process. Passages like Romans 6:3-5, Colossians 2:11-12, 1 Peter 3:21-2 and even Acts 2:38 are frequently silenced by an appeal to the brigand on the cross, as if his (clearly exceptional) circumstances overturn Scripture’s testimony that baptism is an essential part of becoming a Christian. It would be interesting to know how many of those who responded to the gospel this year in our churches were even informed about baptism at the time, let alone told that it was how you were united with Jesus, died to your old life and rose to a new one. Were ‘coming to the front’ to be displaced by water baptism as the defining mark in someone’s union with Christ (as it seems to have been for the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, Lydia, the Ephesian ‘disciples’, and so on), I suspect a fair bit of confusion about the content of the essential Gospel would be displaced with it.

who she is praying to, and she still has all sorts of questions. One of several things may happen to Susie at this point. (i) She may be declared a Christian for having responded to the Gospel, which is strange since she hasn't understood or experienced grace, resurrection life, baptism, the Holy Spirit, or countless other things. Or (ii) she may be advised to come back in late September for an Alpha Course, which leaves her hanging for three months. Or (iii) she may be invited back next Sunday, to hear a much more 'normal' Sunday message about prayer, or giving, or Moses, in which she finds it hard to join the dots between the Jesus of last week and the teaching of this week.

Instead, what needs to happen is (iv), whereby she is baptized immediately if she is born again, and if not, she is assumed not to be a Christian until she has been. She can then be followed up as an enquiring unbeliever (not a new Christian) midweek, and be encouraged to return next Sunday to hear a talk that, whatever its subject matter or Scripture passage, ties everything back to the life, death and resurrection of the Jesus she was so captivated with last week. If this sort of preaching happens regularly in Susie's church, by the time the Alpha course starts in September, she may have already heard the Gospel twelve times, told from twelve different perspectives, and is probably getting a sense for how the whole of Scripture, and indeed the whole of life, pivot on Jesus. In other words, Susie is approaching an understanding of the whole Gospel.

### **Breakout questions**

- How was the Gospel communicated in the last sermon you preached?
- If you were to speak from the same text or theme this Sunday, how could you sharpen things to link your message more closely to the good news of Jesus?
- Do you think it is possible to expound Scripture without preaching?
- If so, how can we avoid doing so?

### **What is the best Gospel presentation for these people?**

Let's summarise where we are so far. (1) Rather than looking for an abstract 'essential Gospel', we are better off accepting that people have different stories, and that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is going to be climactic in those stories in different ways. (2) When we preach the Gospel, whether publicly or privately, we are therefore looking for the best way of explaining the Gospel to a particular person or group of people, rather than a one-size-fits-all Gospel (although, clearly, Jesus will be central in any of them). (3) Preaching Jesus as the Gospel from all of Scripture and all of life is a great way of both instructing Christians and proclaiming the Gospel to unbelievers at the same time. (4) One half-hour message is unlikely to lead people from paganism to new life in Christ on its own, although it might. This means that regularly preaching Jesus as the good news, from all sorts of different angles and passages, is necessary to help people understand the whole Gospel.

So we need to identify the stories that our listeners currently live with, and we will then be in a position to serve them effectively by showing how Jesus is the good news they have been waiting for. To illustrate: the 'gospel' of *The Lord of the Rings* will always have something to do with Frodo destroying the ring, but it will be presented in different ways to elves, hobbits and men. 'Minas Tirith has been liberated' is gospel to men, but not to the elves; 'the Shire is safe' will be good news to hobbits, but men won't be that bothered; 'Sauron is defeated' will

have broader impact, but if (like some hobbits) there were people who didn't know Sauron existed, it wouldn't quite have the same gospel impact as something that brought it closer to home. It is the same with the Gospel. Everyone in the world believes that something is wrong, that there is some sort of enemy to be defeated, even if they disagree as to what exactly it is. So everyone's story – even Saruman's, or Richard Dawkins' – can be retold with Jesus as the solution, the climax, the victory over the enemy. It's just that some stories may need more radical reframing than others.

For this reason, it might be useful to consider some specific examples of how this can be done with the stories told by most people we know. These are primarily UK based, but in principle the exercise can be undertaken with any enemy in the world. The purpose of this next section – which takes up nearly half the paper – is to try and put into practice the main idea for which we have been arguing, namely, that by listening to people's stories we can identify *the best Gospel presentation for them*, rather than insisting that there is one abstract 'essential Gospel' that will meet the needs of every listener in every context. Yet in every one, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are climactic, definitive, and glorious Gospel. So:

### Personal Enemy #1: Guilt

This one is easy, and is probably the most familiar to many of us. For some people, guilt about things they have done in their past is a controlling enemy in their life. It fractures relationships, causes all kinds of substance abuse and self-loathing, and there is often no easy way out of it (particularly if the person sinned against is dead, or long gone). So how is Jesus and resurrection Gospel to them? Answer: it's a Gospel of forgiveness. They need to know that Jesus came to live the life they should have lived, and to die the death they should have died. And they need to know that, when he rose from the dead, his sacrificial death on our behalf was accepted by God. By faith in Jesus, they can receive Jesus' rightness as a gift. Because it is a good idea, in evangelism, to start with what is right in the other person's story, you can affirm that they are right about feeling guilty, and that this is the right response to having fallen short of their own standards, let alone God's. But you can then explain the idea of sacrifice on behalf of sins. The Old Testament arranged for an innocent animal to die so that a guilty person could live and that the righteousness of the person did not depend on their purity, but on the purity of their animal sacrifice. In the same way, Jesus – as a perfect person who died on our behalf – means we can stand before God as completely free from guilt as he was. And Jesus is the only person who offers anything like this. Every other religion will have you working your way out of guilt – Jesus does it all himself, and gives you the results for free. If you see guilt as the major enemy in your life, then Jesus and resurrection is the Gospel you need.

### Personal Enemy #2: Shame

Many may not have thought much beyond that. But in many cultures, particularly in hotter climates (particularly Africa and the Islamic world), the main personal enemy is not guilt, but shame. In guilt cultures, you fall short of an abstract, moral standard, and it has consequences for your life. But in shame cultures, where billions of people today live, the standards are more relational and communitarian than abstract and individualistic, and shame often results from perceived guilt rather than actual guilt. Many Muslims, if they sin,

don't think their main need is forgiveness; they think their main need is for their shame to be removed (which is why the threat of being disowned by family is so very powerful). In a British culture, shame might be a problem for those who have been subject to sexual abuse, and who therefore feel more unclean than guilty, as Mark Driscoll movingly pointed out at the Brighton Conference recently. They need to hear a Gospel of shame removed.

Now, obviously, most of the Bible is written in the context of a shame culture. So how is Jesus and resurrection Gospel to someone like that? Well, Jesus did not just bear the guilt of humanity, he bore the shame of humanity. The most powerful picture of this is the scapegoat (which helps, because it's a word most people know): there are two goats in Leviticus 16, one of which is killed on behalf of the people, showing that sin leads to guilt and hence death, but the other of which is sent out into the wilderness on behalf of the people, showing that sin leads to shame and hence separation. Jesus is not just your death goat. He is your scapegoat. He is the one on whom all your shame is laid, and as he walks out of the camp into the wilderness, you can see your shame walking away on him. He was executed in the most shameful way possible, naked and ridiculed, outside the city walls, as if to say: 'I am carrying all the most shameful things you have ever done or had done to you. You are now clean.' And in his resurrection, Jesus showed that the power of shame was temporary, and that it had been overcome on Easter Sunday – with nothing but glory and honour to come.

### Personal Enemy #3: Fear

The next enemy is fear. Anthropologists say that there are three major categories of culture with regard to human shortcomings (that is, sin): guilt cultures, shame cultures and fear cultures. In a fear culture, the main consequence of sin is the fear that you will be attacked by ancestral or demonic spirits. Now, there may not be many people in your town for whom that is an issue, but if you are church planting in much of Africa or South Asia, it's a huge issue; many of these cultures know very well that there is a spirit world, and that demons have power, and they are terrified of them. It is also a huge issue for many who have been heavily involved in the occult. We had a woman come to our church recently, for instance, for whom fear had been the overriding enemy, because she had been subject to systematic Satanic Ritual Abuse for many years as a child, and as a result had developed over 100 different recognisable, named personalities. Many years after first hearing the Gospel, she would still ring up her pastor sometimes and ask if she was going to be killed, because those who abused her had told her that would happen. The Gospel that she needed to hear, and the Gospel that many from a fear culture need to hear, is that Jesus has authority over all demons, fears, principalities and powers. In his life, he cast them out without a second thought, and we cast them out in his name today. In his death on the cross, Colossians 2 says that he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in himself and dragging their corpses through the streets. And in his resurrection life, Jesus proved his lordship by defeating Satan once and for all – and made that position of authority over demons possible for his followers as well.

### Personal Enemy #4: Meaninglessness

One more personal enemy that exists in many people's stories is that of meaninglessness. Meaninglessness must be one of the major causes of suicide in the West, and it's amazing

how often artists, musicians, celebrities and teenagers think they are original when they talk about how empty and pointless everything is. But the futility of life is not a modern problem, as Ecclesiastes makes very plain. We are not created to function without a sense of destiny, purpose and mission. When we do, it is totally soul-destroying.

Clearly, we are in a position to validate large parts of this story. If it's just a question of accumulating possessions and experiences, then life **is** pointless. There is nothing new under the sun. So how is Jesus and resurrection Gospel here? Well, if there is nothing new under the sun, perhaps we should look for meaning somewhere else. That is the Gospel of Jesus and resurrection. No one in history has ever lived with such a sense of meaning and destiny as Jesus: "He set his face towards Jerusalem ..." "Get behind me Satan." "Anyone who is not against us is for us." "Go tell that fox ... I must finish my course." Why is this? He doesn't seem naïve, does he? Rather, he lived as someone who knew something we don't – that something of dramatic importance was about to happen, and he was bringing it about. And then he rose from the dead, kickstarted the new creation, and told his followers there was a job to do, a planet to heal, a Gospel to share, a world to save. Look what happened. Deadbeat fishermen became apostles. Tax collectors wrote books that are still bestsellers today. Broken, demonised women became the first witnesses of the new creation. Arrogant thugs turned into church planters. Jesus had taken on futility and won, so you don't have to listen to Marcel Duchamp, or Jean-Paul Sartre, or Radiohead, or whoever is depressing you at the moment. Because of Jesus and resurrection, futility is very, very last season. Meaning is back.

### Social Enemy #1: Injustice

So that's a number of personal enemies that have been overcome by the Gospel of Jesus and resurrection. But there are also social enemies (that is, problems with other people). One of the big ones in our generation is that of injustice. In fact, we are probably more aware of global injustice today, and more eager to respond to it, than any previous generation – Fairtrade, Stop the Traffik, Jubilee 2000, Make Poverty History, etc. Yet despite the massive resources at our disposal, huge injustices continue to take place. And frequently, the perpetrators are the powerful, the well-educated, the well-financed – so there's no obvious solution. So how the Jesus narrative function as Gospel within this story? Well, in Athens in Acts 17, Paul preached the resurrection as the proof that God would one day judge the world through one man, Jesus Christ. Resurrection → judgment → vindication for the victims and punishment for the perpetrators. And not only will Jesus judge injustice, but in his earthly life and ministry he fought for it (the poor and the widow), in his death on the cross he suffered it (here you can describe any or all of the injustices Jesus suffered), and in his resurrection he conquered it, and laid the foundation for a world without it.

### Social Enemy #2: Poverty

Another social enemy is poverty. For lots of western people, this would be characterised as the main reason for society's problems – people just don't have enough money. Now obviously, that is not the whole story; having possessions doesn't seem to stop unhappiness at all, and more people kill themselves in wealthy Scandinavia than anywhere else, while the world's happiest country is Bhutan, which is also one of the poorest. Nonetheless, lots of

human pain is caused by poverty – unclean water, famine, disease, shanty towns, unemployment, and so on. And the fact that we are aware that poverty is a problem (rather than just accepting it as part of life, as animals seem to) suggests that we were made for a world without it.

So how is Jesus and resurrection the good news in this story? Most people think that poverty is caused by scarce resources. In the world as a whole, though, there is more than enough food, water, minerals and everything else needed for everyone on the planet. Scarce resources is not ultimately the problem. Rather, the problem is the human desire to have more than other people – the need to compare ourselves with others, and measure ourselves accordingly. In the OT, that was solved with the year of Jubilee. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, however, the ultimate year of Jubilee came about, and a new world order began in which the last would be first, and no one would compare themselves to each other. Even the Lord's Prayer talks about "forgiving us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Fundamentally, you can only make poverty history when you make greed history – which is exactly what Jesus taught, did, and rose again to achieve, and it is also exactly what the early church in Acts did, and exactly what our church today does. That's because we are part of God's new creation, in which there will be no poverty, no greed and no jealousy.

### Social Enemy #3: War

In a similar vein, many people will think the main enemy to be overcome is war. Many people you know will absolutely hate the idea of war, and they'll hate it more than anything else. So how is Jesus and resurrection the Gospel to people like that? Ephesians 2:14-16: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility." The Bible is saying that war between people exists, at root, because people are at war with their God. Consider pouring coffee on a train. Pouring coffee is possible if the train is on the tracks, but if the train leaves the tracks, it's hopeless. You need the train to be reconciled to the rails before you have any hope of reconciling the coffee with the cup. Similarly, we live in a world that has come off the rails. So war between people will always happen unless the war between man and God is brought to an end. And in Jesus, God was reconciling people to himself, which enables people to be reconciled to each other. From that foundation, Jesus was able to teach pacifism and non-violence – not just theoretically, but as one who had practised it, even when people were arresting him and killing him. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospel, the answer to the problem of war.

### Social Enemy #4: Irrationality

Some of our more intellectual friends may see their main enemy as being irrationality: the fact that people are ignorant and believe things without any evidence – religion, or superstition – is the reason for a lot of the world's problems. If we're not careful, Christians can sometimes be a bit defensive about this, and try to defend the idea of believing based on "faith" rather than on "evidence". But this is a huge problem, because it gives us no basis for one worldview being better than another. Instead, we should respond that we agree; believing things without evidence is completely crazy.

And the Gospel is: Jesus and resurrection conquer the enemy of irrationality. The Gospels are littered with dates, rulers, places, evidence – things that happened in the real world (eg Luke 3:1). And the resurrection is the most definitive event in any worldview, because it is a concrete event that we can investigate: “God has given proof of this by raising him”, “500 witnesses”, “many convincing proofs”, and so on (none of which have any remote parallels in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or whatever). In fact, there is no event in the secular materialist worldview that cannot be explained in the Christian one. But the resurrection is the one event in the Christian one that cannot be explained in the secular materialist one. Jesus and resurrection overcomes the enemy of irrationality. (Cue a well-chosen procession of quotations from Keller, Polkinghorne, Collins, McGrath, Flew, Wright, Bauckham, etc.)

### Social Enemy #5: Militant Religious Intolerance

The final social enemy, which also hits quite close to home, is more of a post-9/11 phenomenon: militant religious intolerance. Lots of people will assume that you, as a Christian, are actually the main problem in the world, rather than the main solution. And they will think this because they think that religion inevitably leads to militant religious intolerance. This is where people like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Chris Hitchens are coming from. Now you can, of course, explain why that’s not true. You can point out how few religious people fly planes into buildings, and how militant atheism resulted in far more human suffering in the last century than religious anything (Mao’s China, Stalin’s Russia, etc). But how is Jesus and resurrection Gospel here?

Well, Jesus was a strong and vocal opponent to militant religious intolerance, and in many ways he (and many of his followers) died because of it. Lots of first century Jews were into militant religious intolerance, and a fair bit of Jesus’ teaching is directed towards it: “Put your sword away!” (John 18:11). “The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me” (John 16:2). “And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’ But he turned and rebuked them” (Luke 9:52-55). Not only that, but Jesus was handed over to death by the chief priests because of their militant intolerance, and the early church was persecuted and killed because they said “Jesus is Lord” in a world where everyone else said “Caesar is Lord”. To this day, around 171,000 Christians are martyred each year for the same proclamation. So if people believe militant religious intolerance is the problem, they’re right. And Jesus, who insisted that you should love (rather than kill) unbelievers and your enemies, is the answer!

### Global Enemy #1: Sickness

Finally, people may see there as being global enemies to be overcome. The first one is sickness, which in some ways goes without saying. Everyone is aware that sickness is a problem. So it’s wonderful to know that Jesus and resurrection is the Gospel of sickness defeated. “He took up our illnesses and carried our diseases” (Matthew 8:17). “All those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them” (Luke 4:40). And it’s not just Jesus’ life, either, because the resurrection means that “what is sown corruptible is raised incorruptible.” In other

words, because of the resurrection, all who are in Christ will one day inherit new bodies, just like the one Jesus was given, that cannot rot or get sick or develop cancer or catch flu. Not only that, but that future kingdom breaks into the present frequently, through the people of God operating in Jesus' authority (which is an appropriate place to bring in testimonies of healing). So if you believe sickness is the enemy, then God says: you're right! You know in your heart that the world is not meant to be like this, with sickness at every turn – and one day, it won't be. The reason you feel like that is because you're destined for something else, like a caterpillar thinking how great it would be to be able to fly. Jesus and resurrection are the victory over sickness.

### Global Enemy #2: Ugliness

If you know someone who is very artistic, and who is passionate about beauty wherever they can find it, then they may see the main enemy to be overcome as ugliness in the world. They may be open to a Gospel of beauty restored. This one is often underestimated, because it all sounds a bit arty-farty, but it's tremendously powerful; and I suspect that artistic types are far less often reached by our type of church, because we can often present things in a rather un-aesthetic way. But if you read Scripture carefully, you'll see God's passion for beauty everywhere. It is, quite frankly, a Gospel of beauty triumphant. (a) The Bible begins with God turning disorder and chaos into order and beauty. (b) One of the main results of the Fall was that the most beautiful garden in history became off-limits. (c) God then set about restoring beauty by giving his people the land of Israel – a land flowing with milk and honey, a land where clusters of grapes were so big they needed a pole to carry them. (d) He then commissioned them to build an ark and a tabernacle, with almost pedantic detail: purple, scarlet, embroidery, acacia wood, silver, gold, jewelled garments “for glory and for beauty.” (e) This was then trumped by the temple, built of endless cedar and gold and festooned with golden pomegranates. Nowhere in history has been such a carnival of the arts: elaborate architecture, decorated with expensive metalwork, woodwork and cloth, before which all manner of poems were written, songs sung and dances performed, with musical instruments in abundance and the fragrance of incense throughout. (f) This culminates in the resurrection of Jesus, where corruption and ugliness were overcome, and the new creation was started: a creation in which ugliness was wiped out, the curse of decay on creation was lifted, and the promise of the new world was secured: gates of pearl, streets of glass-like gold, rivers, and so on. Consider that the Bible begins and ends with beauty triumphing over ugliness, and it is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that makes this possible.

### Global Enemy #3: Death

But the last enemy to be destroyed, as 1 Corinthians says, is death. This is the big one. In films, the last enemy to be destroyed is always the head villain (it wouldn't be quite the same if Alan Rickman died half way through *Die Hard*, or if Jack Bauer killed the chief terrorist by 11am). The last enemy is always the most dangerous villain of all, and the reason why the other villains are there. It's the same in Scripture. Death is the biggest of the enemies and the explanation for the others. If there was no death, there wouldn't be any war or injustice or fear or sickness. So if you can abolish death, you can totally strip all the other enemies of their power.

And that's the Gospel of Jesus and resurrection. On Easter Sunday, the biggest of all the villains was totally and completely undone. The tomb was empty, and it still is. And that means that at least one person has conquered the grave, smashed the last enemy, and overturned the curse of death that has afflicted every human since time began. A champion only has to be killed once. Death had a pretty strong track record, until it faced Jesus, to whom it had no answer whatsoever. His resurrection life was simply too powerful. So, as Paul taunted: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O grave, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

### **Conclusion: the essential Gospel**

What that exercise shows, hopefully, is that the sin → wrath → cross → forgiveness model is not the only way of preaching the Gospel faithfully.<sup>5</sup> This is emphatically *not* an argument for ignoring it or failing to preach it, and nor is it intended to undermine the importance of *responding* to the Gospel through repentance, faith, baptism and receiving the Spirit (preaching a Gospel of beauty defeating ugliness, to take the one that many find the most unsettling, does not mean that the appeal should involve painting a picture instead of falling facedown in repentance!) What it is, however, is an argument for considering more presentations of the Gospel, and preaching Jesus as climactic within the stories that are believed by most people we know, rather than trying to fire 'the essential Gospel' at people with both barrels every time there is a guest meeting. Over time, people need to hear 'the whole counsel of God', but they may not get it all at once.

In all of this, it should become obvious that no matter what people's stories are, the good news is ultimately very simple: Jesus. He is the Lord of the cosmos, the bringer of the kingdom, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the one who lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died, and then rose again, conquering sin, death, and everything that goes with it, and redeeming us from slavery, emptiness, ugliness and the grave itself. But he is so definitive, and his accomplishment so multifaceted, that he – his life, death and resurrection – can and should be presented as Gospel in literally dozens of ways. As Sinclair Ferguson famously wrote:

- Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden and whose obedience is imputed to us.
- Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain, has blood now that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for acquittal.
- Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void not knowing whither he went to create a new people of God.
- Jesus is the true and better Isaac who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us. And when God said to Abraham, "Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love from me," now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain and sacrificing him and say, "Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love from us."
- Jesus is the true and better Jacob who wrestled and took the blow of justice we deserved, so we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.
- Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them.

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<sup>5</sup> This might seem to be attacking a straw man, but I remember the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union getting very upset a few years ago with Michael Ramsden, for preaching a Piper-type Gospel (seek your highest joy) rather than a 'rescue from wrath' message. He who thinks he stands firm should be careful lest he fall.

- Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord and who mediates a new covenant.
- Jesus is the true and better Rock of Moses who, struck with the rod of God's justice, now gives us water in the desert.
- Jesus is the true and better Job, the truly innocent sufferer, who then intercedes for and saves his stupid friends.
- Jesus is the true and better David whose victory becomes his people's victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.
- Jesus is the true and better Esther who didn't just risk leaving an earthly palace but lost the ultimate and heavenly one, who didn't just risk his life, but gave his life to save his people.
- Jesus is the true and better Jonah who was cast out into the storm so that we could be brought in.
- Jesus is the real Rock of Moses, the real Passover Lamb, innocent, perfect, helpless, slain so the angel of death will pass over us. He's the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true light, the true bread. The Bible's really not about you – it's about him.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible preaches Jesus as the climax of every story, the fulcrum on which the whole of Scripture turns, the Gospel in every worldview. As those with the profound privilege of preaching the Gospel, we shouldn't settle for anything less.

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<sup>6</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*.