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# What is the Gospel?

**In 2014 we celebrate 200 years of the Gospel in New Zealand. One of the aims of the bicentenary celebrations is to help the churches of New Zealand grow in their confidence in the gospel and learn to proclaim it afresh in life-giving ways. To achieve this together, we have to ask again a basic question of the faith - what is the Gospel?**

In some regards, it is a sign of the weakness and confusion in the contemporary Church that the answer to this question is becoming increasingly contested with many alternative and even contradictory Gospels being advocated. This is the negative side of the question.

But there is also a positive side. The Gospel is not just for unbelievers, though we seem to sometimes think that way. The Gospel *is* for all that they might come to Christ, but the Gospel is also for God's people that they might come to a full maturity in Christ. That is why the Apostle Paul outlined to the Ephesian church the Gospel that brought them salvation (1:3-14), and then prayed for them that they might know this same Gospel even more fully (1:15-23). So, the Gospel is for believers and non-believers alike. And if that is so, then it is fully appropriate for believers to keep on asking the foundational question, What is the Gospel? It is this positive side of the question that I wish to consider under four headings.

## The Gospel is a narrative

The Gospel contains the story of what God has done for us in Christ. It also contains the story of who we are in the world and our need for reconciliation to the true and living God. We find these narratives expressed throughout scripture: John 1; Romans 1-4; 1 Corinthians 15; Colossians 1, for example. All these narratives have as their focal point the death and resurrection of Christ and our need for repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

We need to hold together both sides of this story. If our Gospel narrative focuses solely on the human side and our need for salvation, then we are in danger of only preaching a Gospel of "sin management" (as one theologian termed it) or

even a narrative of human self-improvement with no Christ at all. There are also parallel dangers when we only express a narrative concerning what God has done - often out of a desire to emphasise the grandeur of the Gospel - but one which downplays the need for human conversion.

How do we balance these two narratives? In the same way Scripture does, by centering both on the narrative of the cross of Christ, which reveals to us both the holiness of God and our human plight, and also the grace of God and the power of lives transformed. Both narratives are Good News.

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## The Gospel is a Person

The Gospel centres on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Here I wish to make three points. Firstly, to speak of the Gospel as being a "Person" we must reject the idea that Jesus is merely teacher or exemplar - he is so much more than that, he is Saviour. The Gospel is not a philosophy or an ethical code for living. Nor is it about Christians being clever or superior in what they know or do. It is about being known by God and being in relationship with him through faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

Once, someone told me that for him the Gospel could be summarised as, "love is stronger than

hate and life is stronger than death". This was his attempt to abstract the essence of the Gospel from the particularity of its history in order to communicate it more effectively in a pluralist context. I believe strategies such as this are misguided and doomed to failure. How much better his formulation of the Gospel would have been if he had begun with the phrase "Because of Jesus..."

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Thirdly, in the Gospel we must hold together as one both the person and work of Christ. That is, the Christ of Christmas (Emmanuel, God with us) must also be the Christ of Easter (the Lamb of God), and vice versa. There was a time when people only seemed to speak narrowly of Christ dying for sin without acknowledging him as the one to whom every knee must bow.

Nowadays some are tempted to go too quickly from the incarnation of Christ to his resurrection power. Not surprisingly, those who take this route are often critical of traditional views of the atonement and human sin, and there is little to restrain their over confident call for the Church

to bring in God's resurrection kingdom along with an associated emphasis on human effort. Christ *does* consummate his kingdom, but he does so as the lamb that once was slain. Christ *is* present in resurrection power but always as the crucified one.

### **The Gospel is a Verb**

A verb is an action word, and so is the Gospel: it is the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations in the name of Jesus, the crucified and resurrected messiah of Israel (Luke 24:46-47). That was the apostolic task given by the risen Lord Jesus that is now bequeathed to the Church as part of her call and worship (1 Peter 2:9). Because faith only comes through hearing the word of Christ (Rom 10:17), we are to gospel the Gospel!

There is definitely a modern sensibility that is uncomfortable with the idea of Christian evangelism (or proselytising, has some would want to call it). The modern pluralist society would wish to remove all talk of religion from the public square. It is said to be for the benefit of religious diversity, but only seems to serve the benefit of those who reject religion all together.

Today, the Church more than ever needs to be reminded of Isaiah's declaration, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news." Too often evangelism is left to the few or becomes the subject of large measures of guilt. However, evangelism properly understood should flow out of the worshipping heart of the church: as the joyful church lifts her voice in thanksgiving to God, so too the word of the Lord will sound forth to every place (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

### **The Gospel is a People**

There has been much concern in recent years about the gap between Christian profession and Christian discipleship. I heard a Rwandan Church leader at the Lausanne III conference in Cape Town answer the question as to why Rwanda, such an evangelised country, should have experienced

such a dreadful genocide. He answered, “We taught our people to believe, but failed to disciple them.”

It’s not that I want us to turn the Gospel of Grace into a new form of legalism, but discipleship cannot be relegated to a mere add-on. Sanctification is also the good news! The solution is to rediscover the Gospel purpose of God’s people, the Church. If you are like me, it’s all too easy to hear the Gospel addressed firstly to me as an individual and then only secondly to me as part of the Church. However this flattens out the corporate nature of the Gospel message, the very *telos* (purpose) of which is the formation of Christ’s body, the Church. We need to learn (at least in our individualistic culture) to hear the Gospel addressed to the Church first, and then to me second, as it includes me as an individual in a deeper identity in Christ.

After all, the Gospel forms the Church, the Gospel matures the Church and the Gospel is the worship of the Church. If I am included by faith through grace into God’s new humanity, then discipleship is no longer some form of works coming in by the backdoor. But is rather a living out, in community, of the faith, love and hope that are already part of the riches of God’s grace in Christ.

When we divide the Gospel from Church, faith from discipleship, we end up with evangelists who act like salesmen and pastors who operate like managers! Instead, both are to be seen as ministers of the Gospel whose work overlaps and complements each other. Sunday worship should not be disparaged as a ghetto-ising of the church, nor mission and compassionate ministries undertaken without reference to the local Christian community. The most radical thing we can do as believers in Christ is to gather together as the body of Christ, celebrating all that God has done for us in Christ and allowing Christ the head to rule over us with kingly authority through his word and Spirit dwelling in us richly.

## Conclusion

So what is the Gospel? Samuel Marsden in 1814 launched the CMS mission to Māori on Christmas Day with the text of Luke 2:10, “Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy...” The passage goes on to announce, “...which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”

Here is the Gospel rooted in the rich narrative of God’s promises to his people in the Old Testament. It is centred on the birth of the one who is both “Saviour” and “Lord”. Notice also that the Angel addressed these few shepherds, but the news was “for all people” and led to an outpouring of worship by a heavenly host, who were soon joined by the shepherds themselves.

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The whole context was one of irrepressible joy and expectation! That, too, was the context in which Marsden was privileged to preach, as demonstrated by the 400-strong haka at the end of the Service (much to the surprise of the Europeans present!). Marsden commented in his journal, “In the above manner the Gospel has been introduced into New Zealand, and I fervently pray that the glory of it may never depart from its inhabitants till time shall be no more.” As we celebrate the bicentenary of this first church service, may God’s people also re-discover the glory that comes from knowing Christ as Lord and Saviour.