

What is the Gospel?

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Introduction

1 Peter 1:23 says, “[F]or you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.” What is the ‘word of God’ to which Peter is referring? Is Peter referring to the entire collected canon of NT Scripture? Keep in mind that this letter was written perhaps 30 years before all the remaining books of the NT would be written and long before they would be collected and agreed upon as the accepted canon of Scripture. It seems more likely that Peter is referring specifically to the basic message which had been preached from the very beginning, long before all the books were written and collected, that which Scripture itself calls the gospel.

This is what is stated in v25: [KJV] “And this is the word which by the gospel is [or “was”] preached unto you.” Peter says that we’re born again by the power of the gospel! This is consistent with Romans 10:17, which says, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ.” So what is this word of Christ? Is this referring to the entire collected writings of the NT? Look back at v15: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” (Note: the KJV follows the Received Text which “Bring glad tidings” is the same Greek word for preaching the gospel!) Paul, like Peter, is being specific. It is not just preaching in general; it is the preaching and hearing of the gospel that brings about saving faith. And, as we find in Romans 1:16, Paul said that the gospel “...is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

This leads us then to ask, “What is the gospel?” What was being preached when they preached the gospel? Some would say that the gospel is comprised of every teaching and doctrinal issue mentioned in Scripture. But when Peter says that we’re born again by the word of God, the gospel that was preached, is he saying that it takes everything taught from Matthew 1 to Revelation 22 to accomplish that? Is that what Paul meant when he said that the gospel was the power for salvation? Or did they both have something more limited and specific in mind?

The word gospel is from two related Greek words: the noun *euangelion* (Strong #2098) and the verb *euaggelizo* (Strong #2097). (By the way, from these two Greek words we get our English words like evangelize and evangelism and evangelist). The noun form is usually rendered as “gospel” or “glad tidings” (which is the literal meaning) and is found 77 times in NT. The verb form is usually rendered as “preaching the gospel” and is found an additional 61 times. That’s 138 times altogether throughout NT Scripture; obviously we would learn something about the definition of the word gospel (and all that is entailed or intended by that word) by looking at some of the verses where these two Greek words are found.

Preaching the Gospel Before Christ’s Death

Beginning in the book of Luke we read about the preaching that was being done over and over in the days of Jesus...

- Luke 2:8-10 Angel of the Lord spoke to shepherds about birth
- Luke 3:18 By John the Baptist (know from John 1:7 that John’s task was to bear witness to the light – Jesus – so that all might believe in Him)
- Luke 4:18 By Jesus in quoting Isaiah 61:1-2
- Luke 7:22 and 8:1 Also by Jesus
- Luke 9:6 By the twelve sent by Jesus

Numerous passages show that the primary emphasis of the preaching during this time was on the coming kingdom...

- Matthew 4:23; 9:35 Jesus was proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.
- Mark 1:14-15 Jesus preached the kingdom was at hand; people needed to repent and believe in the gospel.
- Luke 4:43 Jesus was preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God.
- Luke 16:16 The Law and Prophets were previously proclaimed, but now “...the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached.”

All these examples show preaching that was leading up to the crucifixion of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom, the church. The disciples at this time were apparently not preaching the entire gospel message, but their focus was upon the coming kingdom.

Preaching the Gospel After Christ's Death

Christ's death on the cross brought about the establishment of His kingdom and the new covenant of grace; thereafter the gospel would be preached in its true fullness. Preaching the gospel now included several additional concepts and themes...

- Mark 14:9 Anticipating the future right before His death, Jesus said that wherever the gospel would be preached, what was done in preparing Jesus for His death would be mentioned.
- Mark 16:15-16 Preaching the gospel leads to belief and baptism and consequently salvation (in other words, how to get into the kingdom).

Consider the preaching of the apostles in the book of Acts...

- Acts 5:42 The apostles kept right on teaching and preaching the gospel that Jesus is the Christ.
- Acts 8:4 Those that were scattered preached the gospel.
- Acts 8:12 Philip "preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" brought about belief and baptism.
- Acts 8:25 The apostles were preaching the gospel.
- Acts 8:35 Philip preaching the gospel was preaching Jesus! (Question: How many books of the Bible did Philip use to lead the Ethiopian treasurer to Christ? Only Isaiah. The gospel was/is not long and complicated; the entire NT was not needed to preach the gospel!) His preaching must also have included baptism.
- Acts 8:40 Philip kept preaching the gospel to all the cities.
- Acts 10:39-40, Peter preached to the household of Cornelius about the death and resurrection of Jesus; he proclaimed in v43 that "everyone who believes in Him shall receive forgiveness of sins." In v48, he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.
- Acts 11:14 Peter described his preaching as words by which they would be saved.
- Acts 15:7 All this (Peter's preaching to the household of Cornelius) is referred to as "the word of the gospel." Notice the preaching of the gospel was for the purpose of bringing about belief in Jesus.
- Acts 11:20 In Antioch preaching the gospel was preaching the Lord Jesus!
- Acts 13:32 Paul was preaching "the good news of the promise made to the fathers," and this promise was fulfilled by God raising up Jesus.
- Continued by Paul and others in Acts 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10
- Acts 17:18 Preaching the gospel was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.
- Acts 20:24 Paul said that his ministry was "to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."

From the book of Romans...

- Romans 1:15-16 Paul said that he "was eager to preach the gospel [because] it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."
- Romans 2:16 All will be judged according to the gospel being proclaimed by Paul.
- Romans 10:15-17 Preaching and hearing of the gospel is for the purpose of bringing about saving faith.
- Romans 15:19 Paul said, "From Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ." (Surely this cannot include all that was yet to be written by him or others.)
- Romans 16:25-26 Preaching of the gospel and preaching of/about Jesus Christ leads to obedience of faith.

From 1 and 2 Corinthians...

- 1 Cor 1:17-18 Preaching the gospel is “the word of the cross” (see also 2:1-2; he preached nothing except Jesus Christ crucified).
- 1 Cor 4:15 They were begotten or spiritually born by the gospel.
- 1 Cor 15:1-4 Gospel is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.
- 2 Cor 4:4-5 Gospel of the glory of Christ is preaching Christ Jesus as Lord.
- 2 Cor 9:13 NASB: “obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ...” KJV: “professed subjection to the gospel...”

The gospel therefore includes something that is to be obeyed. 1 Peter 4:7 asks, “What will happen to those who do not obey the gospel of God?” 2 Thess 1:8-9 gives the answer: “[T]hose who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ ... will pay the penalty of eternal destruction...”

From other NT letters...

- Galatians 1:6-7 Preaching salvation by means other than "the grace of Christ" was called "another gospel" and "distorting the gospel of Christ." (Some were emphasizing salvation by works of law rather than by the grace of God – such was not the truth of the gospel.)
- Galatians 1:16 Paul was called to preach (the gospel) Christ as the Son of God.
- Galatians 1:23 Preaching (the good news) of faith
- Galatians 2:14 Peter was hypocritical in seeming to ignore the fact that Christ’s death had ended the separation between Jews and Gentiles and the obligation to observe the Law. His actions were deemed as “not [being] straightforward about the truth of the gospel.”
- Ephesians 1:13 After having heard "the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation," they had become believers and were thus "sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise."
- Ephesians 2:11-22 Christ’s sacrifice took away the enmity, the Law of commandments which separated Jews from Gentiles and, in a sense, all people from God since they could not truly and fully keep the requirements of the Law. V17 says that, in doing so, Christ preached the gospel of peace, peace between Jew and Gentile, and more importantly, peace between man and God (6:15 says we should have our feet shod “with the preparation of the gospel of peace”).
- Ephesians 3:6 “Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”
- Ephesians 3:8 Paul preached “the unfathomable riches of Christ.”
- Philippians 1:5-7 Because of the gospel they were participants and partakers of grace.
- Colossians 1:5-6 Hearing the word of truth, the gospel, included “the hope laid up for you in heaven” and understanding “the grace of God”.
- Colossians 1:23 Gospel included hope.
- 2 Thess 2:14 Gospel calls people so that they might “gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- 1 Timothy 1:9-11 The sound teaching of the gospel apparently includes an admonition to turn away from sin (repentance – change of attitude and action regarding sinful behavior).
- 2 Timothy 1:8-10 Gospel brings to light “life and immortality”.
- 2 Timothy 2:8 Gospel proclaims Jesus Christ as risen from the dead.
- 1 Peter 1:23-25 We are born again by the gospel.

Defining the Gospel

What then should we conclude from these many references to the gospel in Scripture? What words stand out throughout these verses that ought to be included in the Biblical definition of the gospel? What was the extent of the good news and glad tidings being preached? According to these passages, gospel preaching included these themes:

- Divinity of Jesus – Christ, Lord, Son of God (Acts 5:42; 8:35; 17:18; 2 Cor 4:4-5; Galatians 1:16)
- Death on the Cross (Mark 14:9; Acts 10:39; 1 Cor 1:17-18; 2:1-2; 15:1-4)
- Burial (1 Cor 15:1-4)
- Resurrection (Acts 10:40; 13:32; 17:18; 1 Cor 15:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:8)
- Salvation (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 11:14; Romans 1:15-16; Ephesians 1:13)
- Being Born Again (1 Cor 4:15; 1 Peter 1:23-25)
- Grace (Acts 20:24; Galatians 1:6-7; Philippians 1:5-7; Colossians 1:5-6)
- Peace (Ephesians 2:11-22)
- Hope of Eternal Inheritance (Ephesians 3:6, 8; Colossians 1:5-6, 23; 2 Thess 2:14; 2 Timothy 1:8-10)
- Belief/Faith (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 8:12; 10:43; 15:7; Romans 1:15-16; 10:15-17; 16:25-26; Galatians 1:23)
- Repentance (1 Timothy 1:9-11)
- Obedience (2 Cor 9:13; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Thess 1:8-9)
- Baptism (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 8:12, 35-38; 10:48)

It would thus seem reasonable to give this definition: The gospel is the good news that Jesus is the Christ (anointed Messiah), the Son of God, that He died on the cross, was buried, and rose again, and that, by the grace of God, we can be born again, added to His kingdom and saved by believing in Jesus and obeying the command to repent and be baptized.

In short, the gospel is the good news that we can be saved through Jesus! That is the main focus and extent of the glad tidings.

In other words, the gospel is focused on those specific themes and requirements that bring us into a saved relationship with the Lord. And therefore it ought then be recognized that there is a difference between the gospel that brings us into that saved relationship and the various teachings that were/are aimed at those already in that saved relationship with the Lord.

Both are important, but they are two different things. Remember what it says in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of [or teach] all the nations, baptizing them in that name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [then] teaching them [further] to observe all that I commanded you.” The gospel was preached and people became Christians; other teaching on other issues came after conversion!