

The Gospel Declaration

Jesus stood to read the Scriptures in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He unrolled the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, selected his passage and read:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"(Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2).

Jesus sat down and launched his message with a stunning claim: *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"*(Luke 4:21).

Right from the start, Jesus set the record straight about the nature of his good news - the gospel. First, it is great news for those who need it the most: the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed and all who need the Lord's favor. Second, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's good news promises. The gospel is embodied in his person, his words and his works.

The message is not "try harder, be moral, become religious." The gospel is a news flash of what God has done in Christ.

Christ-followers are those who actually believe and embrace the good news that Jesus is the Christ, God incarnate, who came to teach and model life in the kingdom of God. He became one of them, died in their place, rose to show his sacrifice on their behalf had fully satisfied God's wrath. They acknowledge their guilt and turn from their sin. There is a new heart, new life, new allegiance, new desires. The risen Christ has taken up residence within them by his Spirit.

It's about *Christ*. It starts in him. It's initiated and sustained by him. It culminates in him. Alpha. Omega. Founder. Perfecter. From, through, to him. He is the overarching storyline of life itself.

To declare this truth is to unleash the most potent force in all the created order. It raises the dead. It unites the estranged. It heals the wounded. It strengthens the weak. It changes the rebel's heart. Enemies become friends.

For Converge Worldwide, this message is our mission. Together, we join Christ in multiplying disciples, leaders and churches that proclaim good news in words and actions so that all people everywhere can know him.

It begins with God. He created humans in his "image" (Genesis 1:26-27), which means, among other things, we have been given a rational mind with the capacity to know truth about God himself and the world around us (John 8:32; Luke 1:4). At the same time, the Christian faith stresses that humans are finite and fallen (Genesis 3; Romans 3:23). This means, among other things, that human perspectives are always limited and prone to self-serving bias. Yet the Bible authors claim we can know truth about God that is meaningful and certain.

From a Christian perspective the act of communication is rooted in the Triune God himself, who created all things through his spoken word (Genesis 1:3-30) and revealed himself to us most fully in

Jesus, the very "Word" of God (John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:1-3). Humans communicate because we are made in the image of the communicating God. This is the basis for the Christian conviction that God has graciously condescended to use human language in written form, the Bible, to sufficiently and accurately communicate his mind and will to us. The Bible is God's Word revealed in human language.

Knowing the truth matters. The Bible is a unique book; there is no other like it. It is capable of being read, understood and used as a guide for life transformation. It is inspired (or "breathed out") by God (2 Timothy 3:16), and it is accessible to humans because it was written in real human languages, not abstract or mystical codes. It is clear and straightforward enough to be understood by the simplest of minds, and yet deep and complex enough to challenge the most brilliant. Accessible, transcendent.

The Bible is primarily concerned with transforming people into new creatures, fully reconciled to God and to others. It is not exhaustive in what it proclaims. There is much more that could be said on practically any topic the Bible discusses. But what it does proclaim is sufficient to accomplish its purposes (John 20:30-31; 21:25). The Bible tells us everything we need to know in order to respond to God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Living the truth matters. The gospel goes beyond rational arguments, beyond mere orthodoxy. "Knowing the truth" engenders "living the truth," as demonstrated in the life of Jesus, who is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). The good news extends an invitation. Will we trust and follow the person of Jesus Christ? The gospel story must become our story.

The gospel is the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. It encompasses all that God did in preparing for the first coming of Jesus Christ, as well as everything he will do in the restoration of all creation in a new heaven and a new earth after his second coming. The first section of the Bible (the Old Testament) is all about the promise of a coming King who would rescue God's people from their most serious problem: sin and its consequences. The second section of the Bible (the New Testament) is all about the coming of that King into our world and all he accomplished to fulfill the promise of God to save us.

A. The Old Covenant:

Creation, fall, reconciliation... preparation

God created all things at the beginning, and it was all "very good." But the first man and first woman (Adam and Eve) did not trust God enough to obey him. Despite living in the paradise-like garden in which God had placed them, they were not satisfied. Believing they knew a better way, they rebelled against God by defiantly disobeying his command. Their sin brought alienation in their relationship with God, each other and the created realm. Their sin introduced the penalty of death.

God worked to repair sin's damage through promises and relationships he established with humanity. Early on, God chose one man (Abraham) through whom he promised to bless all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3).

Hundreds of years later, God used Moses to miraculously deliver his people "Abraham's descendants" from Egypt, where they had been enslaved. The Lord gave them the Law, which

provided them with guidelines for how to live in right relationship with God (Genesis 26:5; Exodus 24:7-8).

Generations after Moses, God established David as his chosen king, and he guaranteed that a king from his line would always sit on the throne of God's kingdom on earth (2 Samuel 7:13).

This pointed the way to the New Covenant declared by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34), as Jesus, the Messiah, is introduced to us in the New Testament as the Son of David, Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God was doing throughout the Old Testament period to reconcile the world to himself.

B. The New Covenant:

Fulfillment, redemption, completion

Good news! The promised King arrived! His mission and message all echo the theme of the king promised through the Old Testament son of Adam, son of Abraham, son of David. Jesus embodied and proclaimed good news. He displayed his authority by signs and wonders. He was rejected, betrayed and denied. Yet a cadre of followers was bound together by truth, grace and a Spirit-anointed calling. They became witnesses of his death and resurrection.

What appeared from a human standpoint to be nothing more than the cursed death of a criminal on a cross turned out to be the focal point of the gospel. Jesus Christ, the promised King, put to death for the forgiveness of our sins. Raised to new life as proof that God accepted his sacrifice on our behalf. Our sins transferred to him. His righteousness transferred to us.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ gives a foretaste of our future, the future kingdom. He is a picture of what restored humanity will look like. One day God will complete his mission of healing the whole universe, returning everything back to the way it was created to be, under the loving leadership of Jesus Christ, the King. God will live with his people again. All will be the way God desired it to be. Satan's kingdom of darkness and all of its evil powers will be entirely done away with and the reign of God will finally be whole, complete, fully revealed, everlastingly beautiful!

This is the story entrusted to us who follow the King so that we might share it with all the peoples of the world just as God intended.

When Jesus began his preaching ministry, fully aware of all that God had done throughout history to prepare for his coming, he declared: "The time is fulfilled the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15, NASB). Indifference to the saving initiative of God in history is not an option. It demands a personal response of faith. This is the same way the apostle Paul summarized his own message: "testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

To repent is to turn from sin to Christ. It involves understanding that I am guilty of sinning against God, and personally deciding to turn from rebellion to follow Christ. It is inseparable from saving faith - not a work of penance or human effort.

Faith is more than mere optimism or belief in certain historical facts concerning Christ. Even demons know the truth about God and his salvation. In contrast, genuine saving faith includes an element of personal trust in Jesus Christ to save me. There is a subjective confidence that Christ's perfect life and voluntary sacrifice are sufficient for the forgiveness of my sins and to secure my eternal acceptance by God.

Having personally embraced a new life of faith, I publicly declare my faith in Christ through baptism. The act of being plunged beneath the water and brought back up again pictures my personal union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4). While the physical act of baptism itself does not save, there is power in the gospel picture it presents to those who witness it. Submitting to the ordinance becomes an act of obedience to Christ. The New Testament practice of immersion was the very means of appealing to God through Christ for a clear conscience (1 Peter 3:21) and identifying with his redeeming actions buried to sin and raised to Christ's new life.

This new life makes a discernible difference in the way we respond to circumstances and relate to others. It's actually the fruit the Holy Spirit produces when he takes up residence in us. In short, the mark of a Christ-follower is a growing likeness to Jesus. The apostle John said, "This is how we know we are in him. Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:5-6).

The gospel changes everything! In fact, it becomes the very lens through which we look at all of life and its challenges. The Holy Spirit empowers the spread and impact of Christ's good news in individual lives, communities and culture.

A. The gospel impacts culture

From the moment of birth, each of us learns the special shared knowledge of our community called culture. Culture guides how we share meaning through language and symbols, how we classify appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and how we develop the skills necessary to survive and interact.

While it is not humanly possible to be completely free of cultural biases, an awareness of our worldview and an appreciation of other biblically grounded expressions of the gospel can facilitate the spread of the gospel and fellowship across cultures. Multicultural synergy enables Christ's church to worship and witness with greater beauty and fullness.

The gospel transcends all cultures. The essential truths of the gospel can be expressed in any language or clothed in any culture. At the same time, every culture is marred by the sinfulness of people. The realization that we will always be, to some extent, culture-bound should lead to humility and interdependence in the global body of Christ. Christ-followers need to be able to distinguish the essentials of the gospel from our cultural expression of the gospel. The Bible is the sole infallible source of the gospel in every setting and situation.

The gospel is countercultural. The gospel gives us a place to stand and exercise discernment over our culture, so that we live individually and corporately as radical, redeemed Christ-followers. We rely on the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the lifelong task of learning and living out the gospel.

The gospel transforms culture. The gospel transforms our beliefs, values and behaviors and results in a new, shared culture that is an imperfect reflection of the coming kingdom of God. The gospel also compels us to impact lives and communities with the transforming power of Christ's love and truth (Matthew 5:1-16).

Cultural discernment is crucial for our ministries. We need to be clear on the core essentials of the gospel. This understanding has been passed down through the centuries by faithful followers of Christ, and it comes to each of us from our knowledge of the Word of God as guided by the Holy Spirit. At the same time we must acknowledge the influence of culture on our understanding of the gospel, in the historical development of our theology and in our comfort with varied expressions of the gospel. Such awareness helps us embrace the good and confront the evil in our lives and communities. Ultimately we must attempt to communicate and demonstrate the gospel in humble and culturally informed ways without sacrificing its essential truths.

B. The gospel changes individuals

Our goal as Christ-followers is the functional centrality of the gospel in our lives. Like the New Testament writers, the truth of the gospel shapes our thinking and conduct in a way that produces Christ-like love and holiness - putting his kingdom values into practice in the power of the Holy Spirit. Humility, boldness, dependency and the assurance of his presence replace self-reliance, pride, selfishness and many other sins that must be confessed in order to see God's glory revealed and for transformation to take place.

C. The gospel brings individuals together into true community

In order to see spiritual transformation occur within ourselves, we must become deeply involved in authentic and life-changing relationships with others. God's design is for human beings to be involved "in community" not alone or isolated. Jesus prayed that we would experience unity, a concept foundational to spiritual transformation.

This oneness in Christ is to be expressed in local churches where the Lord is worshiped, his Word studied, his people loved, his generosity expressed, his delight in prayer honored, his gospel spread and his ordinances observed under the authority and discipline of godly leaders.

D. The gospel transforms communities through serving others

Being missional begins with a profound conviction that we are invited to join in the mission of God and that the church does not exist for itself, but rather to glorify God and to reach out to the world around us. This goes beyond converting people, to learning and practicing a powerful togetherness, seeking to be faithful to God's promises while serving and welcoming families, singles, the poor, single-parents, the handicapped, the elderly, disillusioned people, immigrants and strangers. They are not simply a "project" but human beings who bear the image of God and are intended objects of Christ's love.

If Jesus pitched his tent among us, we too must pitch our tents among the people. We are to live as missional people and not as self-centered consumers of spiritual goods -- to be incarnational, reflecting the presence of Jesus wherever there is need that can be met in his name.

E. The gospel is to be proclaimed joyously to all peoples

The gospel is not just for us and those around us. God also wants us - commands us! - to share it with people across cultural and geographical boundaries. God stated that through Abraham all nations and peoples of the earth would receive blessing, which was a command to him and his descendants to be a blessing on others. And Jesus made it even clearer: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

F. The gospel shapes our ministry priorities and practices

We incarnate the gospel

- We move out of our safe places to incarnate the gospel in our own neighborhoods (locally), while cultivating a growing participation in what God is doing in other cultures (globally).
- We look for ways God is already working around us and then join him and join others for the sake of his glory.
- We love people as people rather than as projects.
- We avoid dividing life into sacred and secular categories that keep us from bringing good news into every setting we enter.

We display the gospel

- We demonstrate the truth of the gospel through our actions as well as our words, sharing Jesus' concern for justice, compassion and mercy.
- We see all of life as worship, stewardship, discipleship and faith.
- We view all of creation as belonging to God and our efforts to care for it as pointing ahead to the day of complete restoration of all things under Christ.

We proclaim the gospel

- We joyfully bring others into our churches, even as we become the church beyond the walls of our buildings.
- We seek to communicate the gospel in images and language that fit our contexts of influence without sacrificing its essential truths.
- We join Christ in multiplying disciples, leaders and churches so that people everywhere might know his good news.

Our response

It all begins with God and our response as Christ-followers: leadership teams, pastors, elders, church planters, deacons, teachers, professors and all who love Christ and his kingdom. As individuals and circles of Christ-followers, will we increasingly experience and express the gospel as a way of life? "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27, ESV).