



The Gospel

The English word *gospel* has a long and complicated etymological history. The modern English word *gospel* is a derivation of the Old English word *godspel*, a combination of *gud* (good) and *spel* (news or tidings). This in turn is a translation of the terms in ecclesiastical Latin *bona annuntiatio* or *bonus nuntius*, which also mean *good news*. These terms are used as a literal rendition of the ecclesiastical Latin term *evangelium*, which is a transliteration of the Greek word *euangelion*, also *good news*. Thus endeth the reading from the book of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.¹

The dictionary notes any number of different usages or variant meanings of the term, including secular ones such as *the gospel truth*, usually referring to attestations of veracity or truth. The word can also be applied to the first four books of the canonical New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), as well as a number of other noncanonical documents that also claim to demonstrate the life and teachings of Jesus Christ (Gospel of Thomas, the Infancy Gospel, etc.). The canonical gospels talk about Jesus preaching the “good news” to his hearers, but the application of the term *gospel* to these literary creations is a latter attribution.

It is in the letters of Paul (which predate the canonical four Gospels) that we see the word *gospel* in its central Christian theological form, describing the core proclamation about the significance of Christ, his life, and his teachings. Curiously, Paul hardly ever quotes the sayings of Jesus later to be found in the canonical Gospels; rather, Paul centers his message on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This “Christ-event” is the most important thing, and because Christ became incarnate, was crucified, and was raised from the dead, those joined to Christ share in the transformative power of God; in Paul’s terms, they are a “new creation.” It is this good news, this gospel, which is for Paul the central affirmation of the Christian faith.

¹ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 872.

This gospel, this good news, is enjoined on the Christians as a matter of proclamation. The Christians are “sent out” to proclaim the good news, the gospel, to the ends of the earth and to all creation (Mark 16:15). The key here is the matter of proclamation, or in Greek the *kerygma* (proclamation, preaching), by which this good news is disseminated and urged on those who hear it. The rhetorical bent of this is key; while knowledge about Christ and his teachings may be taught, the centrality of the proclamation of the gospel is the forceful assertion of what God has done for humanity through the person of Christ Jesus. Christians become such because the gospel is preached to them in power and in truth. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess 1:5).

Keeping the Christian community focused on the centrality of this task of proclamation is an ongoing struggle, as it is so easy for Christians to become focused on minor aspects of their traditions to the detriment of everything else. The gospel has also been weakened over the centuries by being tied to one or another form of human ideology, which all claim to speak *for* Christ, rather than *about* Christ. It is difficult to stay “on message” and focused on the true proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but this is what the church must centrally be all about. Many other good and wonderful things may be secondarily derived from this gospel, but they cannot be substituted for it.

This issue will focus on the main task of identifying and proclaiming the gospel “good news” of Jesus Christ. As with many things, this is something that can both be very simple and very complicated. Or perhaps it should be rather said that a Christian is never finished with diving deeper and deeper into the gospel message itself and its subsequent implications for the life of the believer and the world. The task of proclamation is complex, though at its root the message is simple and clear.

May God strengthen you and confirm you in the gospel and strengthen your proclamation of this good news to a world that so desperately needs to hear it!

Mark Granquist, Editor