

“From the pen of a scholar with the heart of an evangelist and one who has sacrificed greatly for the Gospel comes this concise and clear description of the true Gospel. Mark Ballard succinctly dispels with a host of attempts to saddle the Gospel of salvation with non-salvific encumberments of social reform. He graciously exposes the fallacy of the fashionable elevating of social concerns to ‘Gospel issues,’ which transforms the simple Gospel into a complex message of opinions, thereby obscuring the true Gospel.

Mark masterfully and precisely distinguishes between the essentials of the Gospel and results from the Gospel. Mark’s cogent and precise style reasserts the uniqueness and priority of the Gospel of salvation. This book is undoubtedly an essential read for the scholar, student, and everyone who desires clarity about the Gospel so people can hear God’s astonishing message of salvation.”

- Ronnie Rogers

Pastor, Trinity Baptist Church
Norman, Oklahoma

“When I was a teenager, I worked for a man who would say, ‘Ain’t that the gospel!’ in response to anything he agreed with or felt good about. For him, ‘Gospel’ was simply a positive term with no clear referent or meaning. Sadly a similar thing can be said about the way some in the church use the term ‘Gospel’ today. What does it mean to ‘preach the Gospel,’ or to be a ‘Gospel-centered’ ministry? What is a ‘Gospel issue’? Too often, the word ‘Gospel’ becomes a plastic-elastic entity in our usage, and the word is either emptied of part of its scriptural significance or infused with a meaning we have created for it. Instead, the Gospel – the saving truth of Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection – is a real, unalterable, life-transforming, supernatural message. Dr. Mark Ballard’s latest book, *Words Matter: What Is the Gospel?* provides a clear biblical perspective on the meaning of the Gospel, and offers real-world guidance for how to share the Gospel with others.”

- Stephen Rummage

Senior Pastor, Quail Springs Baptist Church
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

“Spiritual leaders tend to attach the word ‘Gospel’ to many of their social causes. While their goal may be worthwhile, it often confuses people about the Biblical message of salvation. In *Words Matter: What Is the Gospel?*, Dr. Mark Ballard presents a clear understanding of the Gospel and reminds us of the danger of using the word ‘Gospel’ in a careless way. His words will challenge and convict any person who teaches or preaches God’s Word.”

- Phil Waldrep

President, Phil Waldrep Ministries
Decatur, Alabama

“Mark Ballard has done an incredible job emphasizing the critical need to understand the nature of the Gospel. The Gospel is not complicated . . . Christ died for our sins, was buried and raised from the dead. It is all about salvation. The Gospel is that simple. Our lives will be transformed when we are saved, but don’t confuse the results of the Gospel with the Gospel itself. The Gospel is the offer of grace from a loving God. It is for us to receive by faith.”

- Jimmy Draper

President Emeritus, Lifeway
Colleyville, Texas

WORDS
MATTER

What Is the Gospel?

Mark H. Ballard

Timothy K. Christian



Words Matter

What Is the Gospel?

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Published by Northeastern Baptist Press

Post Office Box 4600

Bennington, VT 05201

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Cover design and layout by Leason “Tripper” Stiles III

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-953331-00-7

ePub ISBN: 978-1-953331-01-4

To our children,

Benjamin Enoch Zhijang Ballard

Trina Maria Silva & Timothy Marcus Christian

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Gospel Is Crucial	15
The Gospel Is Clear	31
The Gospel Is Certain	47
The Gospel Is Serious	67

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I pastored in Deerfield, Virginia. One Sunday, after the evening service, a church member asked, "Can I visit you at the parsonage next Tuesday?"

"Sure," I said. "Would you like to set a specific time?"

"Will you be home in the evening?"

"Yes. We plan to go to Staunton that day, but we should be home all evening. What time works for you?"

"Well, I'm not sure of an exact time," he said. "I'll be over sometime in the evening."

We made our trip to Staunton on Tuesday and were careful to be home by 3:00 in the afternoon. We completed some projects, prepared for our guest, had dinner, and waited ... and waited. But he didn't come.

The next evening, as I prepared the worship center for our mid-week service, the man entered the building and walked directly to me. With apparent agitation he said, "Preacher, you lied to me!"

I greeted him by name and asked, "What do you mean?"

He said, "I went to see you Tuesday evening, but you weren't home."

"I'm confused," I said. "We were home all evening. In fact, we waited for you until 10:00. We expected you. We were watching and listening for you."

"There you go lying again! I came to your house. I knocked on the door. I even went around and knocked on the back door. No one was there."

"I don't know how we could have missed you."

"You're lying to me again! Your car wasn't even in the driveway."

At that moment I suspected the problem. It seemed we were using the same vocabulary, but a different dictionary.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Did you come Tuesday evening?"

"Yes!"

"What does 'evening' mean to you?"

He said, "Anytime after lunch and before 4:00 PM."

"What time did you come to our house?"

"Around 2:00."

"Now we've discovered the problem," I said. "We got home around 3:00 PM."

"But you said you'd be home all evening."

"Yes," I said. "Where I grew up, evening meant after 6:00 PM and before 9:00 PM."

WORDS AND DEFINITIONS

Words are important; so are definitions. If we use the same words but different meanings we don't communicate. We confuse.

If this is true in general conversation, it's especially true when we study and teach the Bible. Correct, clear, and consistent use of biblical words and their definitions is vital. Why? The Bible deals with God's revelation and our eternal destinies.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

For example, the Bible commands everyone to believe the Gospel.¹ Simple enough. Yet, to obey the command we must correctly define the Gospel. We must know what we are commanded to believe.

The Greek word translated "Gospel" is *euangelion*. It is a compound word. It combines *eú*, meaning good or well, and *angéllō*, meaning to proclaim or tell.² The Gospel means to tell, declare, or proclaim good news.

The "Gospel" is not generic good news. It is a specific kind of good news. If your doctor says, "It's not cancer," if your child says, "I love you," if the Director of the Homeless Shelter says, "You provided 900 meals for our clients this year," it is good news. But it is not the Biblical Gospel.

In the New Testament, the Gospel refers "only to the glad tidings of Christ and His salvation."³ It is the

good news of how Jesus Christ conquers our sins and gives eternal life to all who believe in Him.

THE GOSPEL CAN BE CONFUSED

If, however, we use a different dictionary and re-define the Gospel, the confusion will be far more serious than dropping by to visit a friend who isn't home. Confusion about the true meaning of the Gospel will result in people missing heaven and landing in hell.

THE GOSPEL CAN BE MISUSED

“The Gospel” is the narrow focus of this book. The present day misuse of the word among evangelicals, including among my fellow Baptists, concerns me. Is the misuse unintentional? Perhaps. For some. Is it subtle? Certainly. Is it confusing? Definitely. Does it matter? Absolutely. Allow me to explain.

The Bible clearly defines the Gospel—the good news we believe and proclaim. It includes three indispensable truths.⁴

1. Jesus Christ's substitutionary death for sinners—“Christ died for our sins.”
2. Jesus Christ's necessary burial—He was actually dead; He did not just appear dead.

3. Jesus Christ's physical resurrection—"He rose again the third day."

To be born again a sinner, separated from God, must believe these simple facts. They are non-negotiable. These three simple facts lead us to singular faith in a qualified Savior. The three facts declare what Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, did for us. He was punished in our place so that we can go free. We turn from our sin and self and trust Jesus Christ alone for our salvation.

These facts are simple enough for a child to understand, believe, and be saved. They are clear enough to humble an intellectual, leading him or her to trust Jesus Christ with thankful child-like faith. What is my concern?

MUCH ADO ABOUT SOMETHING

Speakers and writers often load "the Gospel" with excess baggage. They connect the Gospel to multiple items and issues that have little or no relationship to the biblical Gospel.

Perhaps you have heard some or all of the following statements.

- "Believers should live Gospel-centered lives."
- "It's all about the Gospel."
- "It's the Gospel truth."
- "Plan for Gospel conversations."

The statements may or may not be valid. It depends on ones definition of the Gospel. And that is my point. Words matter.

“Gospel” is applied to an array of issues. For example, “It’s a Gospel issue,” is a popular all-encompassing phrase in evangelical circles. I have heard “Gospel issue” related to:

- Race relations
- Social work
- Social justice
- Immigration
- Abortion
- Adoption
- Women’s rights
- Identity politics
- Critical Race Theory
- Intersectionality
- Religious Liberty

This list, I assure you, is only partial.

A Gospel Issue

First, “What is a ‘Gospel issue?’” What does the term mean?

One blogger formulated a definition based on its general use in multiple articles. “A ‘Gospel issue,’” he stated, “is one that is essential to a right understanding and practice of the Christian life for those who believe

the Gospel.”⁵ However, he also noted, “It seems that the expression ‘Gospel issue’ is a rhetorical move to lend urgency, moral, and spiritual significance to a given point of view.”⁶

Some ask, “What’s the problem? What’s wrong with making a genuine concern more urgent and significant? Besides, what’s wrong with a social issue being connected to a Gospel believer’s ‘right understanding and practice of the Christian life’? How does that confuse the Gospel? How does it misuse the Gospel? Aren’t you being a bit hypercritical? How does the term ‘Gospel issue’ redefine the Gospel?”

Those are important questions. They deserve a clear answer.

When Jesus Christ’s Gospel transforms us, He impacts every area of our lives. However, believing ‘the Gospel’ for salvation is distinct from sanctification—growing in the Christian life. If one speaks of an action as if it were an essential tenet of the Gospel, one redefines the Gospel. That’s true no matter how good or valid the activity may be. Law is not grace.

Feeding the poor is good, but it is not an essential Gospel tenet. Defending the unborn is vital, but it is not the Gospel. Religious Liberty is a Baptist distinctive, but it is not the Gospel. Voting for or against a specific candidate is not the Gospel. Social justice is not the Gospel. Caring for widows and orphans is a mark of “pure and undefiled religion,”⁷ but it is not the Gospel.

Believers can love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds. We can love our neighbors as

ourselves. According to Jesus, these are the first and second greatest commandments.⁸ Perhaps leaders who identify multiple social issues as “Gospel issues” intend to urge believers to obey the second greatest commandment. If so, I agree with the sentiment but it makes my point. It confuses and misuses the Gospel.

An example will help. Phil Johnson is the Executive Director of “Grace To You”—John MacArthur’s radio, TV, and internet program. A woman confronted him following a morning worship service. She wanted to help Phil understand “the ‘social justice’ issue.”⁹

“Despite what you think,” she said, “it is a Gospel issue. Injustice is everywhere in the world. I am fighting it full time. Right now I have several lawsuits pending against injustice in the health-care industry. Don’t tell me that’s not Gospel work. You’re not being a faithful witness unless you’re fighting for social justice. It’s built right into the Gospel message: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”¹⁰

The woman was sincere and zealous. But she had been led astray. She had confused the “second great commandment” with the Gospel.

Phil tried to encourage as well as clarify. Their conversation continued.

“That’s surely one of the most important tenets of God’s moral law, and it *does* distill the idea of hu-

man justice into a single commandment,” [Johnson] said. “But be careful how you state it. That’s not the *Gospel*. That’s the Second Great Commandment.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “I meant to say the Gospel is ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.’”

“Well, that’s the *First* Great Commandment,” [he] said. “That’s still law, not Gospel.” ...

“But it’s in the Bible,” she repeated. “So it’s a Gospel issue.”¹¹

And so the confusion grows. The law cannot save. That was never its purpose. The law convicts of sin and the need for a Savior. The law reprimands; it multiples guilt.¹² Then it takes us by the hand and leads us to Jesus.¹³ No amount of good works or law keeping can make one right with God.¹⁴

“Love the LORD your God”¹⁵ is not the biblical Gospel. It is a result of the Gospel, but it is not the Gospel. “Love your neighbor as yourself”¹⁶ will not break sin’s chains. Neighborly love cannot make one a child of God. Such a “Gospel conversation” is a false, social Gospel conversation. Johnson observed:

Blending the Gospel with social activism has been tried many times (Google “Walter Rauschenbusch” or “social Gospel.”). It has always turned out to be a shortcut to Socinianism,¹⁷ carnal humanism,¹⁸ or some more sinister form of spiritual barrenness.

The social message inevitably overwhelms and *replaces* the Gospel message, no matter how well intentioned proponents of the method may have been at the start.¹⁹

“To insist that social justice activism is an essential tenet of Gospel truth is a form of theological legalism.”²⁰ The same can be said for any other activity. Paul warned the Galatians against adding law to the Gospel. The crusaders in Galatia tried to make Jewish dietary laws and circumcision essential Gospel tenets.²¹ Paul would have none of it. He said,

⁶ I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different [kind of²²] Gospel, ⁷ which is not another [of the same kind²³]; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other Gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.²⁴

Paul accepted no additions to the Gospel. Additions do not purify the Gospel; they “pervert” it. He warned, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”²⁵ Adding to the Gospel leads to the proverbial “slippery-slope.” Loosely

referring to anything and everything as a “Gospel issue” robs the Biblical Gospel of its meaning and power. *That which means everything ultimately means nothing.*

When evangelical leaders use “Gospel” as a nebulous catchall term, their followers are defenseless when non-evangelicals appropriate the term. A recent example made the national news.

A non-evangelical minister condemned Bible-believing conservative Christians who speak against “same sex marriage” and unique “LGBTQ+ rights.” Authoritatively he declared, “Frankly, they are denying the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

When trusted evangelical leaders repeatedly declare that women’s rights, social justice, identity politics, etc., are “Gospel issues,” how will their disciples respond to such a statement? Will they question their previous resistance to the movement for LGBTQ+ normalization? Will they question a literal interpretation of the Bible? After all, no genuine Christian wants to be guilty of “denying the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Words matter; so do their definitions. When a word is isolated from its definition, loaded with excess baggage and used broadly, it loses its meaning and significance. In contrast, the Biblical Gospel is not a broad nebulous term. The Gospel is **CRUCIAL, CLEAR, CERTAIN, and SERIOUS**. To these we now turn.

1. Mark 1:14-15; See also Acts 15:7; Romans 1:16
2. Spirios Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, electronic ed. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), s.v., “εὐαγγέλιον, *euaggélion*.”
3. Ibid.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3-4
5. R. Scott Clark, “Why Complementarianism Can’t Be a ‘Gospel’ Issue”; accessed 14 June 2020, <https://heidelblog.net/2012/09/why-complementarianism-cant-be-a-Gospel-issue/>.
6. Ibid.
7. James 1:27
8. Matthew 22:37-39
9. Phil Johnson, “A Gospel Issue?” accessed 11 June 2020, <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/articles/Gospel-issue/>.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all (James 2:10).
13. Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith (Gal 3:24).
14. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20). Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Galatians 2:16).
15. Matthew 22:37
16. Matthew 22:39

17. A false teaching that denies a number of traditional Christian doctrines, including the Trinity and Christ's deity, and affirms that salvation is given to those who adopt Christ's values. See *Dictionary.com*, s.v., "Socinian", accessed 7 July 2020; also, Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Carl F. H. Henry, eds., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), s.v., "Socinianism." It teaches the Example Theory of the Atonement, denying "that God's justice requires payment for sin; it says that Christ's death simply provides us with an example of how we should trust and obey God perfectly, even if that trust and obedience leads to a horrible death." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 582.
18. "A belief system based on the principle that people's spiritual and emotional needs can be satisfied without following a god or religion." *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v., "Humanism" in <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/humanism>, accessed 7 July 2020.
19. Phil Johnson, "A Gospel Issue?"
20. Ibid.
21. See Acts 15:1-5; Galatians 2:11-14; 5:1-6
22. Zodhiates, *Word Study Dictionary*, s.v., "ἕτερος, *héteros*."
23. Ibid., s.v., "ἄλλος, *állos*."
24. Galatians 1:6-9
25. Galatians 5:9

1

The Gospel Is

CRUCIAL

The Apostle Paul declared the Gospel's cruciality to his friends in Corinth. His urgency was evident. He wrote, "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain."²⁶

For Paul, the Gospel was not a casual conversation. Notice:

- *How he communicated*—"I declare ... I preached ... I preached"
- *What he communicated*—"the Gospel"
- *The result of his communication*—"you received ... you stand ... you are saved"

The Gospel is crucial. It stirred Paul's heart. It stimulated his emotions and spurred him into action.

Present Message

When the church in Corinth heard Paul's letter read publicly, they received his present message. "I declare, I make the Gospel known to you right now." In that sense, the Gospel continues to be a present message. The Gospel message now goes out through God's faithful churches around the world. Churches, of course, are people rather than buildings. God's people share the Gospel personally²⁷ as they have conversations in day-to-day life, and corporately as they gather in local congregations for weekly praise and preaching.²⁸

Past Message

Paul also noted that he "preached"—past tense—the Gospel to them.²⁹ It was his past message. He had not changed his message since his last visit.

Persistent Message

Further, he urged them to "hold fast that word which I preached to you."³⁰ Cling to it. Hold it firmly. Don't let it go. The Gospel was Paul's persistent and consistent message.

The Gospel does not evolve with the times. We are not to adjust and redefine it. Our declaration of the

Gospel must be consistent. The Corinthian church then and our churches now must retain the consistent Gospel message. We “hold fast” to the Gospel. We retain it.³¹ We protect its message like soldiers defending a fortress under assault.

Do you read the labels on food packages or in your medicine cabinet? For example, are you familiar with PEG-8 Dimethicone, Sodium Capryloamphopropionate, or Ethylparaben? No? Neither was I. But I just wiped my hands with them before I wrote this paragraph. They are three of the sixteen ingredients in an individually packaged antibacterial hand wipe. By the way, you’ll be encouraged to know it also contained Benzethonium Chloride along with the always popular PEG-60 Lanolin.

Many items on ingredient lists are hard to pronounce, much less understand. Not so with the Gospel. The contents are easy to understand. They are also essential. The Gospel’s content is not mysterious or debatable. Believers must hold fast to and declare the true Gospel.

Priority Message

The Gospel was also Paul’s priority message. He proclaimed the Gospel above all else. He said, “For I delivered to you first of all”³² meaning “‘of first importance.’” The Gospel is the most important message that the church ever proclaims. While it is good to be involved in social action and the betterment of mankind, there is no reason why these ministries should preempt the

Gospel.”³³ Nor is there reason to use social action to re-define the Gospel. In fact, we must not do so.

GOSPEL PROCLAIMED

The Gospel was Paul’s *past, present, persistent, and priority* message. The narrative of his ministry in Acts and the doctrinal instructions in all of his epistles reveals his pattern. Paul proclaimed the same Gospel wherever he went and to whomever he spoke. His message did not shift from one class or culture to another. Whether answering a prison guard’s questions in Philippi,³⁴ reasoning with philosophers in Athens,³⁵ or testifying before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem,³⁶ his core message was the same. “Christ died for our sins, ... He was buried, and ... He rose again the third day.”

The consistent content of Paul’s preaching reveals his unwavering conviction—the Gospel is crucial. Everyone needs to hear it.

GOSPEL RECEIVED

Paul proclaimed the Gospel. The Corinthians “received” the Gospel. They “took it in”;³⁷ they accepted and internalized the crucial Gospel message.

The Corinthians believed Jesus Christ died on the cross for their sins, was buried, and rose from the dead.

They believed the Gospel message and responded in faith. They trusted the living Lord Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. Because they received the Gospel, Jesus Christ rescued them from their sins.

Why did they need to be rescued? Like you and me, the Corinthians were sinners. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”³⁸ No one meets the Father’s perfect standard of righteousness. Jesus said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”³⁹

Sin has consequences. The holy, righteous, and just Judge of the universe declared the wages that sin earns:

- Death—physical and spiritual
- Separation from God
- His just punishment⁴⁰

Left to our own devices we are in deep trouble. Human ingenuity, philanthropy, personal reform, or religious activity cannot rescue us from sin. They cannot create a clean heart within us or deliver us from guilt.⁴¹ Even if we could stop sinning right now, what of our past sins? Their stain remains. We are now headed for eternal separation from God in hell. We are in trouble. Big trouble. We need a Savior, and Jesus Christ is the only sufficient Savior.

The Corinthians are an encouraging example. According to Paul, the Corinthians received the Gospel in

the past and were saved in the present. How? The Gospel made the difference.

Corinth was notoriously ungodly. Paul noted the sinful actions and attitudes prevalent in the city. They were “fornicators ... idolaters ... adulterers ... homosexuals⁴² ... sodomites⁴³ ... thieves ... covetous ... drunkards ... revilers ... [and] extortioners.”⁴⁴ They were doomed.

Paul warned, “Such people will not ‘inherit the kingdom of God.’”⁴⁵ No doubt about it, even if they have endured racial bigotry, social injustice, and economic oppression. However, he added some good news. “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”⁴⁶ Now everything was changed. They were saved and forgiven. They enjoyed a right relationship with God. Why? They believed the Gospel and Jesus Christ transformed their lives.

The Gospel is crucial. When one hears, believes, and responds to the Gospel, he/she is saved. This crucial Gospel was Paul’s primary message.

No Compromise

Because the Gospel was crucial, Paul warned the church not to compromise the message. He noted, “Since you ‘stand’ in the Gospel, ‘hold fast’ to the Gospel.”⁴⁷ The simple, clear, uncompromised Gospel—Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death, necessary burial, and literal bodily resurrection—is crucial.

The same is true for you, for me, and for our churches. We can “stand firm” in the Gospel—set free from past sins. We can “hold fast” to the Gospel—no compromise. The Gospel is our priority message.

DISTRACTED MESSENGERS

Distraction is an ever-present danger. Gospel messengers must be attentive. Even those who have known the Lord and declared His Gospel for many years can be distracted from the crucial Gospel message. Social service can eclipse Gospel sharing. Calling it a “Gospel issue” won’t change the reality; it won’t introduce even one soul to Jesus Christ and His saving grace.

Several years ago Cindy and I moved to North Carolina for graduate work. We left a church-planting ministry in Texas so I could work on a master’s degree at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. I did not pastor a church the first few months we lived in Wake Forest. We joined a congregation just outside the city limits. The church was serious about proclaiming the Gospel from the pulpit on Sundays and throughout the week. Many of the church members shared the Gospel with friends, neighbors, and strangers.

On Tuesday nights several church members gathered at the building for training. After the training, teams of three visited those who had recently visited a church service or activity. A team would go to their home and get to know them. The teams answered ques-

tions about the church's ministries and beliefs. They also asked permission to share the Gospel. Cindy and I joined this exciting ministry.

Through the evangelistic ministry we met many church and community members. We often learned their stories. One church couple shared a shocking story. At least I was shocked. The couple had been international missionaries for thirty-five years. One Tuesday evening during a fellowship time they noted their excitement about sharing the Gospel. Someone commented, "I guess you really miss sharing the Gospel on the mission field."

A sad look clouded their faces. They glanced at one another before the wife spoke.

"No," she confessed, "we never shared the Gospel before we joined this ministry."

She went on to explain. "We spent our ministry lives on foreign soil. We fed the hungry. We clothed the poor. We helped the sick get medical attention. But we never shared the Gospel."

She could have added, "For thirty-five years we worked for the largest missionary organization in the world. We were missionaries in good standing. We received good reviews. Other missionaries respected us. But no one received Jesus Christ as a result of our ministry. Our good works were not Gospel conduits. Neither of us shared the Gospel with a single person. We didn't learn how to share the Gospel until we retired from our missionary work. A church that made the Gospel a pri-

ority changed our lives. We finally learned that the Gospel is crucial.”

Today, a verbal and growing number of Christians and churches have moved social needs and social justice to the forefront. They are now priority issues. I'm troubled by this growing trend, especially within my Baptist denomination. Why? The churches are headed toward the same ministry results lamented by my friends after thirty-five barren years of social missionary work.

Ministry to the underprivileged, neglected, and abused are good and biblical if they are conduits for the Gospel.⁴⁸ That only happens, however, if the Gospel is primary and social ministry is secondary.

Let me be blunt. What difference will it make if Christians give warm clothes and vitamin-enriched food, but do not present the Gospel? What eternal difference will it make if we give every oppressed group the dignity and respect they deserve, but do not give them the Gospel? What difference will it make if we proclaim that these are “Gospel issues”? Without a true, simple, clear Gospel presentation and invitation, people will be eternally separated from God in hell.

UNDISTRACTED MESSENGERS

Bible believing churches can keep the Gospel primary. Social ministry must remain secondary. It can be an effective tool for presenting the Biblical Gospel.

Paul agreed.

Undistracted by Injustice

There were massive social needs in first century Rome. Hundreds of thousands of slaves served Roman masters. The poor lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions while the rich and powerful lived lavish, self-indulgent lives. The chasm between the haves and the have-nots was a Grand Canyon.

Many in ancient Rome desperately needed justice. Injustice was blatant. One example paints the picture. Claudius, the Roman Emperor, in an act of systemic racism and bigotry, expelled all Jews from Rome.⁴⁹

In spite of the rampant inequality and injustice in their city, Paul was not distracted when he wrote to the Romans. “I *am* ready,” he said, “to preach the Gospel to you who are in Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ,”—and he explained why—“for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”⁵⁰

Don’t miss the simple point. For the Apostle Paul, the Gospel was the priority need for everyone. It was the primary need for the oppressor and the oppressed. It was the priority need for the disenfranchised and marginalized. And so it is today. The Gospel is still the hope for those enduring any form of injustice.

Undistracted by Inequality

The Biblical Gospel can calm social unrest, correct inequality, and cure systemic racism. The Gospel is the great equalizer.

In the New Testament era, relationships between Jews and Gentiles were often bitter. Neither group respected the other. The attitudes spilled over into the church. Many early Jewish Christians believed a Gentile could not be saved without first converting to Judaism. The conviction became a major hindrance to Paul's missionary work and prompted the first church council in Jerusalem. They debated the question, "Must a Gentile become a Jew in order to be saved?" Their conclusion was, "No." Gentiles need not become Jews, keep the law, or submit to circumcision in order to be saved.⁵¹

Paul whole-heartedly entered the debate. He spoke in favor of his Gentile converts and the unrevised Gospel of grace. But through it all, he refused to be distracted. He knew the Gospel was the answer for both Jews and Gentiles. He noted that God revealed a mystery: "that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."⁵² Jews can accept Gentiles as absolute equals because of the Gospel.

At the same time, Paul allowed no reverse discrimination from the Gentiles toward their Jewish brothers and sisters. He said, "Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh ... were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers

from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”⁵³ The Gospel is the great unifier.

Undistracted by Enslavement

Paul wrote to his friend Philemon. He was a genuine believer, but also a slave-owner. While imprisoned in Rome, Paul met Philemon’s runaway slave, Onesimus. Paul led him to Christ. Onesimus ministered to him and was a great comfort during Paul’s imprisonment. He wished Onesimus could stay with him but he believed it was his duty to send him back.

The brief letter to Philemon is Paul’s commendation of Onesimus, who presented the letter to Philemon when he returned. Paul has been criticized as a child of his times, a perpetrator of the multiple patriarchal abuses of his day. But the criticism misses the power of the Gospel.

Paul commended Onesimus, urging Philemon to receive him “no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, ... both in the flesh and in the Lord.”⁵⁴ Paul’s point is moving. If Philemon recognized Onesimus as a brother in Christ, he could no longer see him as property to be used. He would see him as a brother to be loved, respected, and welcomed. He would see that both he and Onesimus were sinners saved by grace, made in God’s image, equal brothers in Christ. The Gospel is the great equalizer.

Paul refused to be distracted from the Gospel. It was his hope and confidence. No other innovation could heal the injustice, inequality, and enslavement of his day. The Gospel was Paul's consistent priority because **THE GOSPEL IS CRUCIAL**.

We too can share this crucial Gospel if we know the Gospel's content. Which leads to our next subject.

26. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2
27. Acts 1:8
28. Hebrews 10:23-25
29. 1 Corinthians 15:1
30. 1 Corinthians 15:2
31. Zodhiates, *Word Study Dictionary*, “κατέχω, *katéchō*.”
32. 1 Corinthians 15:3
33. Warren W Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*: NT, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 617.
34. Acts 16:30-32
35. Acts 17:18
36. Acts 23:6
37. “To take to oneself, seize or take into one’s possession.” Zodhiates, *Word Study Dictionary*, s.v., “παραλαμβάνω, *paralambánō*.”
38. Romans 3:23
39. Matthew 5:48
40. Romans 6:23; Exodus 34:12
41. Psalm 51:10, 14
42. “*Catamites*, those submitting to homosexuals”—NKJV marginal note
43. “Male homosexuals”—NKJV marginal note
44. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10—Paul’s list of sins describes every present day major city in the world. Corinth’s sins are no longer notorious; they are the norm.
45. 1 Corinthians 6:10
46. 1 Corinthians 6:11
47. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2
48. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).
49. Acts 18:2
50. Romans 1:15-16

51. Acts 15
52. Ephesians 3:6
53. Ephesians 2:11–13
54. Philemon 16