

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL MESSAGE?

J. I. Packer

IN a word, the evangelistic message is the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified, the message of man's sin and God's grace, of human guilt and divine forgiveness, of new birth and new life through the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a message made up of four essential ingredients.

1. The Gospel is a message about God. It tells us who He is, what His character is, what His standards are, and what He requires of us, His creatures. It tells us that we owe our very existence to Him; that for good or ill, we are always in His hands and under His eye; and that He made us to worship and serve Him, to show forth His praise and to live for His glory. These truths are the foundation of theistic religion; and until they are grasped, the rest of the Gospel message will seem neither cogent⁷ nor relevant. It is here with the assertion of man's complete and constant dependence on his Creator that the Christian story starts.

We can learn again from Paul at this point. When preaching to Jews, as at Pisidian Antioch, he did not need to mention the fact that men were God's creatures. He could take this knowledge for granted, for his hearers had the Old Testament faith behind them. He could begin at once to declare Christ to them as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes. But when preaching to Gentiles, who knew nothing of the Old Testament, Paul had to go further back and start from the beginning. And the beginning from which Paul started in such cases was the doctrine of God's Creatorship and man's creaturehood. So, when the Athenians asked him to explain what his talk of Jesus and the resurrection was all about, he spoke to them first of God the Creator and what He made man for. "God . . . made the world . . . seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made . . . all nations . . . that they should seek the Lord" (Act 17:24-27). This was not, as some have supposed, a piece of philosophical apologetic⁸ of a kind that Paul afterwards renounced, but the first and basic lesson in theistic faith. The Gospel starts by teaching us that we, as creatures, are absolutely dependent on God, and that He, as *Creator*, has an absolute claim on us. Only when we have learned this can we see what sin is, and only when we see what sin is can we understand the good news of salvation from sin. We must know what it means to call God Creator before we can grasp what it means to speak of Him as *Redeemer*. Nothing can be achieved by talking about sin and salvation where this preliminary lesson has not in some measure been learned.

2. The Gospel is a message about sin. It tells us how we have fallen short of God's standard, how we have become guilty, filthy, and helpless in sin, and now stand under the wrath of God. It tells us that the reason why we sin continually is that we are sinners by nature, and that nothing we do or try to do for ourselves can put us right or bring us back into God's favor. It shows us ourselves as God sees us and teaches us to think of ourselves as God thinks of us. Thus, it leads us to self-despair. And this also is a necessary step. Not until we have learned our need to get right with God and our inability to do so by any effort of our own can we come to know the Christ Who saves from sin.

There is a pitfall here. Everybody's life includes things that cause dissatisfaction and shame. Everyone has a bad conscience about some things in his past, matters in which he has fallen short of the standard that he set for himself or that was expected of him by others. The danger is that in our evangelism we should content ourselves with evoking thoughts of these things and making

people feel uncomfortable about them, and then depicting Christ as the One who saves us from these elements of ourselves, without even raising the question of our relationship with God. But this is just the question that has to be raised when we speak about sin. For the very idea of sin in the Bible is of an offence against God that disrupts a man's relationship with God. Unless we see our shortcomings in the light of the Law and holiness of God, we do not see them as sin at all. For sin is not a social concept; it is a theological concept. Though sin is committed by man, and many sins are against society, *sin cannot be defined in terms of either man or society*. We never know what sin really is until we have learned to think of it in terms of God and to measure it, not by human standards, but by the yardstick of His total demand on our lives.

What we have to grasp, then, is that the bad conscience of the natural man is not at all the same thing as conviction of sin. It does not, therefore, follow that a man is convicted of sin when he is distressed about his weaknesses and the wrong things he has done. It is not conviction of sin just to feel miserable about yourself, your failures, and your inadequacy to meet life's demands. Nor would it be saving faith if a man in that condition called on the Lord Jesus Christ just to soothe him, and cheer him up, and make him feel confident again. Nor should we be preaching the Gospel (though we might imagine we were) if all that we did was to present Christ in terms of a man's felt wants: "Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you want peace of mind? Do you feel that you have failed? Are you fed up with yourself? Do you want a friend? Then come to Christ; He will meet your every need"—as if the Lord Jesus Christ were to be thought of as a fairy godmother or a super-psychiatrist . . . To be convicted of sin means, not just to feel that one is an all-round flop, but to realize that one has offended God, and flouted His authority, and defied Him, and gone against Him, and put oneself in the wrong with Him. To preach Christ means to set Him forth as the One Who through His cross sets men right with God again . . .

It is indeed true that the real Christ, the Christ of the Bible, Who [reveals] Himself to us as a Savior from sin and an Advocate with God, does in fact give peace, and joy, and moral strength, and the privilege of His own friendship to those who trust Him. But the Christ who is depicted and desired merely to make the lot of life's casualties easier by supplying them with aids and comforts is not the real Christ, but a misrepresented and misconceived Christ—in effect, an imaginary Christ. And if we taught people to look to an imaginary Christ, we should have no grounds for expecting that they would find a real salvation. We must be on our guard, therefore, against equating a natural bad conscience and sense of wretchedness with spiritual conviction of sin and so omitting in our evangelism to impress upon sinners the basic truth about their condition—namely, that their sin has alienated them from God and exposed them to His condemnation, and hostility, and wrath, so that their first need is for a restored relationship with Him . . .

3. The Gospel is a message about Christ—Christ, the Son of God incarnate; Christ, the Lamb of God, dying for sin; Christ, the risen Lord; Christ, the perfect Savior.

Two points need to be made about the declaring of this part of the message: (i) *We must not present the Person of Christ apart from His saving work*. It is sometimes said that it is the presentation of Christ's Person, rather than of doctrines about Him, that draws sinners to His feet. It is true that it is the living Christ Who saves and that a theory of the atonement, however orthodox, is no substitute. When this remark is made, however, what is usually being suggested is that doctrinal instruction is dispensable in evangelistic preaching, and that all the evangelist

need do is paint a vivid word-picture of the man of Galilee who went about doing good, and then assure his hearers that this Jesus is still alive to help them in their troubles. *But such a message could hardly be called the Gospel.* It would, in reality, be a mere conundrum,¹⁰ serving only to mystify . . . *the truth is that you cannot make sense of the historic figure of Jesus until you know about the Incarnation*—that this Jesus was in fact God the Son, made man to save sinners according to His Father’s eternal purpose. Nor can you make sense of His life until you know about the atonement—that He lived as man so that He might die as man for men, and that His passion, His judicial murder was really His saving action of bearing away the world’s sins. Nor can you tell on what terms to approach Him now until you know about the resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session—that Jesus has been raised, and enthroned, and made King, and lives to save to the uttermost all who acknowledge His Lordship. These doctrines, to mention no others, are essential to the Gospel . . . In fact, without these doctrines you would have no Gospel to preach at all.

(ii) But there is a second and complementary point: we must not present the saving work of Christ apart from His Person. Evangelistic preachers and personal workers have sometimes been known to make this mistake. In their concern to focus attention on the atoning death of Christ, as the sole sufficient ground on which sinners may be accepted with God, they have expounded the summons to saving faith in these terms: “Believe that Christ died for your sins.” The effect of this exposition is to represent the saving work of Christ in the past, dissociated from His Person in the present, as the whole object of our trust. But it is not biblical thus to isolate the work from the Worker. *Nowhere in the New Testament is the call to believe expressed in such terms.* What the New Testament calls for is faith in (en) or into (eis) or upon (epi) Christ Himself—the placing of our trust in the living Savior, Who died for sins. The object of saving faith is thus not, strictly speaking, the atonement, *but the Lord Jesus Christ, Who made atonement.* We must not, in presenting the Gospel, isolate the cross and its benefits from the Christ Whose cross it was. For the persons to whom the benefits of Christ’s death belong are just those who trust His Person and believe, not upon His saving death simply, but upon Him, the living Savior. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,” said Paul (Act 16:31). “Come unto me . . . and I will give you rest,” said our Lord (Mat 11:28).

This being so, one thing becomes clear straight away: namely, that the question about the extent of the atonement, which is being much agitated in some quarters, has no bearing on the content of the evangelistic message at this particular point. I do not propose to discuss this question now; I have done that elsewhere. I am not at present asking you whether you think it is true to say that Christ died in order to save every single human being, past, present, and future, or not. Nor am I at present inviting you to make up your mind on this question, if you have not done so already. All I want to say here is that even if you think the above assertion is true, your presentation of Christ in evangelism ought not to differ from that of the man who thinks it false.

What I mean is this: it is obvious that if a preacher thought that the statement, “Christ died for every one of you,” made to any congregation, would be unverifiable and probably not true, he would take care not to make it in his Gospel preaching. You do not find such statements in the sermons of, for instance, George Whitefield or Charles Spurgeon. But now, my point is that, even if a man thinks that this statement would be true if he made it, it is not a thing that he ever needs to say or ever has reason to say, when preaching the Gospel. For preaching the Gospel, as we have just seen, means [calling] sinners to come to Jesus Christ, the living Savior, Who, by virtue of His atoning death, is able to forgive and save all those who put their trust in Him. What has to be said about the cross when preaching the Gospel is simply that Christ’s death is the

ground on which Christ's forgiveness is given. And this is all that has to be said. The question of the designed extent of the atonement does not come into the story at all . . . *The fact is that the New Testament never calls on any man to repent on the ground that Christ died specifically and particularly for him.*

The Gospel is not, "Believe that Christ died for everybody's sins, and therefore for yours," any more than it is, "Believe that Christ died only for certain people's sins, and so perhaps not for yours" . . . We have no business to ask them to put faith in any view of the extent of the atonement. Our job is to point them to the living Christ, and summon them to trust in Him . . . This brings us to the final ingredient in the Gospel message.

4. The Gospel is a summons to faith and repentance. All who hear the Gospel are summoned by God to repent and believe. "God . . . commandeth all men every where to repent," Paul told the Athenians (Act 17:30). When asked by His hearers what they should do in order to "work the works of God," our Lord replied, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (Joh 6:29). And in 1 John 3:23 we read: "This is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ . . ." Repentance and faith are rendered matters of duty by God's direct command, and hence impenitence and unbelief are singled out in the New Testament as most grievous sins. With these universal commands, as we indicated above, go universal promises of salvation to all who obey them. "Through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins" (Act 10:43). "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev 22:17). "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Joh 3:16). These words are promises to which God will stand as long as time shall last. It needs to be said that faith is not a mere optimistic feeling, any more than repentance is a mere regretful or remorseful feeling. Faith and repentance are both acts, and acts of the whole man . . . faith is essentially the casting and resting of oneself and one's confidence on the promises of mercy which Christ has given to sinners, and on the Christ Who gave those promises. Equally, repentance is more than just sorrow for the past; repentance is a change of mind and heart, a new life of denying self and serving the Savior as King in self's place . . . Two further points need to be made also:

(i) The demand is for faith as well as repentance. It is not enough to resolve to turn from sin, give up evil habits, and try to put Christ's teaching into practice by being religious and doing all possible good to others. Aspiration,¹⁴ and resolution, and morality, and religiosity,¹⁵ are no substitutes for faith . . . If there is to be faith, however, there must be a foundation of knowledge: a man must know of Christ, and of His cross, and of His promises before saving faith becomes a possibility for him. In our presentation of the Gospel, therefore, we need to stress these things, in order to lead sinners to abandon all confidence in themselves and to trust wholly in Christ and the power of His redeeming blood to give them acceptance with God. For nothing less than this is faith.

(ii) The demand is for repentance as well as faith . . . If there is to be repentance, however, there must, again, be a foundation of knowledge . . . More than once, Christ deliberately called attention to the radical break with the past that repentance involves. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me . . . whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mat 16:24, 25). "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also (i.e., put them

all decisively second in his esteem), he cannot be my disciple . . . whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Luk 14:26, 33). The repentance that Christ requires of His people consists in a settled refusal to set any limit to the claims that He may make on their lives . . . He had no interest in gathering vast crowds of professed adherents who would melt away as soon as they found out what following Him actually demanded of them. In our own presentation of Christ’s Gospel, therefore, we need to lay a similar stress on the cost of following Christ, and make sinners face it soberly before we urge them to respond to the message of free forgiveness. In common honesty, we must not conceal the fact that free forgiveness in one sense will cost everything; or else our evangelizing becomes a sort of confidence trick. And where there is no clear knowledge, and hence no realistic recognition of the real claims that Christ makes, there can be no repentance, and therefore no salvation. Such is the evangelistic message that we are sent to make known.

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J. I. Packer: Anglican theologian; born in Gloucestershire, England.

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