

The Gospel Uncut / Fall 2009

Series Overview

INTRODUCTION TO NEW CURRICULUM GUIDE FORMAT

Some changes have been made to the curriculum. The document you are about to read is a general document covering the entire sermon series, designed to orient you to what is coming up and to discuss themes that will be consistently present through the series. Because the Curriculum Guide is no longer split into two sections, I (Eric Butler) have chosen to endnote and footnote some of the more technical notes. This allows one to read the document easily, but to check my work or methods where you want to. Additional comments will be footnoted. References will be endnoted, to avoid the footnotes taking up half the page. Footnotes will be numbered, endnotes lettered.

I have also broken with our traditional avoidance of the first person singular pronoun and names when writing the Curriculum Guide. There are now multiple contributors to the guide, which benefits us greatly in terms of covering issues more completely. It also means that there are now multiple biases in the guide and, sometimes, differing viewpoints. (There are simply far too many things to hold opinions on to hope that we would all hold identical opinions everywhere.) Attaching names to these viewpoints is not meant to glorify particular individuals, but, rather, to allow you to become familiar with their perspective. All of us have biases. If you learn them, which will be aided by seeing our names on our opinions where they differ, you can better avoid importing our biases into your teaching and life.

Finally, the work done here is done carefully, with prayer and oversight, but also by imperfect humans, and within a particular time frame. Care has been taken to direct you to our resources so that you might check our work and not be deceived if we are mistaken, but bear in mind our imperfections as you use our resources.

The Gospel

Before we spend seven weeks discussing the gospel it is necessary to define the term “gospel” in a consistent way¹. Gospel, at one point, simply meant “good news”². When we attach a definite article to the word we no longer mean any old good news, but specific good news. Despite this, it is worth asking why the first people to proclaim the gospel chose to call it gospel.

Two particular uses of gospel appear relevant. First, to bring news of victory in battle is to gospelize. “Good news! We won!” Second, there is reason to believe that some Roman Emperors proclaimed their ascension to the throne as gospel. “Good news! I’m Emperor!” The relevance, and extent, of this second usage is debated by scholars, but it would be hard to claim that the gospel is neither a proclamation of victory nor a proclamation of kingship³. And, of course, the gospel certainly is good news.

¹ The following section relies extensively on a complete list of noun and verb forms of the word “gospel”. This list was provided by Benjamin Redelings, who did us the kindness of writing a small program to sort through a publicly available Greek text and creating a list of the verses, complete with a flag for noun or verb and the English text (from the ESV) of that verse, with the appropriate English word highlighted.

²The LXX, or Septuagint, the Classical Greek translation of the Old Testament published before Jesus was born and quoted extensively in the New Testament, uses the noun we translate as “gospel” twice, once in Isaiah 60:6, and once in 2 Samuel 18:19. The verb form (“to gospelize”) appears in 21 verses: 1 Samuel 31:9, 2 Samuel 1:20, 4:10, 18:20, 18:22, 18:25-27, 18:31, 1 Kings 1:42, 1 Chronicles 10:9, Psalms 40:9, 68:11, 96:2, Isaiah 40:9, 52:7, 61:1, Jeremiah 20:15, Joel 2:32, and Nahum 1:15. These uses fit the idea of good news, with the verbal form emphasizing the carrying of news, well.

³ Uses of various Greek words, now considered religious, in political usage is briefly discussed in the third paragraph of the section entitled “A Fresh Perspective?” in the essay found here: http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Paul_Caesar_Romans.htm

The author himself is involved in the larger controversy about the significance of Christian usage of these words, and believes that they are used to deliberately stress Jesus’ lordship over and above Rome. You should be aware of this if you read beyond the cited paragraph.

But what is the gospel? We often think we know, but there's a lot contained in the gospel that doesn't fit our normal ideas. There are, for starters, a number of gospels with modifiers attached⁴. The gospel of the kingdom¹, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of Godⁱⁱ, the gospel of Jesus as the Christⁱⁱⁱ, the gospel of God's Son^{iv}, the gospel of Christ^v, the gospel of the glory of Christ^{vi}, the gospel of the Lord Jesus^{vii}, the gospel of God^{viii}, the gospel of peace^{ix}, the gospel of peace through Jesus^s, the gospel of Jesus and the resurrection^{xi}, the gospel of the grace of God^{xii}, the gospel of the faith^{xiii}, and the gospel of your salvation^{xiv}. There are also gospels "about" things, such as the gospel about Jesus^{xv} and the gospel about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ^{xvi}. Several major themes appear in these modifiers. First, the frequency of these terms tells us something. The gospel of Christ, especially when we include the variants, is by far the most common. The gospel of God comes in second, and the gospel of the kingdom next. Notably, the gospel of the kingdom is mentioned in earlier books, and disappears in later books⁵. Second, most of these could be transformed into English declarative sentences with a few simple additions. For instance, "the good news that the kingdom of God is here", "the good news that Jesus is the Christ", "the good news that God has given us" or "the good news of God's work".

The gospel is also described as containing a number of things we do not always associate with it. Acts 13:32-33 describes as gospel that the promises to the Jewish patriarchs have been accomplished in Jesus' resurrection. In Romans 2:16 Paul notes that according to his gospel God judges secret deeds through Christ. Elsewhere he includes Jesus' Davidic ancestry as part of the gospel^{xvii}.

Paul speaks of his gospel^{xviii}, as if there might be gospels coming from multiple people. Indeed, there are. The Gospel of Mark (Matthew, Luke, or John) is a contraction of the original title, the Gospel According to Mark (Matthew, Luke, or John). This is the final piece of the puzzle.

Originally gospel meant "good news". Today it means a specific set of good news. In the Bible we find ourselves halfway through that transition. Sometimes we need to specify what gospel, as in some of the examples above. Sometimes the author of a book worries about false gospels, which are called gospels even though they aren't what we call the gospel^{xix}. However, in at least 25 instances we read of "the gospel" as if there is but one main thing that constitutes the gospel, and, unless otherwise noted, we should know which gospel is being referred to^{6xx}. This suggests a simple pattern. Once the news of Jesus was simply gospel. Eventually, it became the gospel that we all talk about all the time. From there it became simply the gospel, unless we specify otherwise.

But there is one more step a lot of us engage in, in which the gospel comes to mean some bare-bones collection of facts about Jesus. This is both a fairly modern innovation, and a dangerous one. No one in the Bible seemed to think the gospel was a small set of ideas. Instead, when the four evangelists wrote their accounts of the gospel the shortest any of them did it in was sixteen chapters (Mark).

There is a time and a place to summarize the gospel. When we begin to talk about the gospel, though, it is best to remember that the gospel is a large thing, with a vast number of ramifications. All the gospels we have mentioned are gospels centered around Jesus' person and work. The good news that the Kingdom is here comes to us because the King is here. Judgment comes through Jesus because the gospel, in the smaller sense, has told us that Jesus is lord, and established, through his teachings, how we should be. Jesus is David's descendant because the gospel is about Jesus as Messiah, the arbiter of the reconciliation between God and man, and the Messiah is David's descendant, foretold in prophecy. You can write the bare bones of the gospel on a post-it note, if your handwriting is small. You can spend your entire life speaking of the gospel without repeating yourself, too.

Overarching Text for the Series: 1 Corinthians 15:1-28

This section of 1 Corinthians is the overarching text for this sermon series. For this reason it seems wise to dive into it and explain it in this initial document.

⁴ This list includes both noun and verb forms, that is both things called "gospel of" and things "proclaimed as gospel" of.

⁵ This is earlier and later in chronology, not composition. The gospels, for instance, discuss events that occur before the Pauline Epistles, but may well be written after them. In fact, the presence of such differences which do not match their assumed time period of composition strongly suggest that the authors of the gospels correctly preserved early material, without "updating" it. This provides evidence that, as Christians have always claimed, the Bible is an accurate record.

⁶ This list contains only instances in which the surrounding context does not seem particularly helpful. Notes like "which we preached to you" could presumably specify a term that simply meant "good news" fairly well. There are, then, probably more than 25 instances in which "gospel" is used as the name of a particular body of news. Interestingly, and in support of the general theory here, these uses are heavily clustered in later books.

1 Corinthians 14 is a section about the use of the charismata, the power gifts, of the Holy Spirit. At the conclusion of this discourse Paul moves into a discussion of the resurrection. This is actually the central theme of chapter 15. The gospel is framed, within chapter 15, primarily in terms of it being news of the resurrection.

The Resurrection

The resurrection Paul discusses here is not always something Christians are clear on.

First, Paul discusses two resurrections. One is that of Jesus. The other is the Resurrection of the Dead (a term I will use more consistently than Paul to supply clarity where he depends on context). The resurrection of Jesus is, obviously, Jesus' return from the dead. The Resurrection of the Dead, on the other hand, is a generalized resurrection of all the righteous (at the very least)⁷.

Second, resurrection always involves a full return from death. Jesus' body is certainly different after the resurrection, but it is his body, which has become re-animated, by Jesus Himself, and has left the tomb. Unlike going to heaven, or any afterlife, resurrection is the complete reversal of death. In Revelation 20:5 (not a book to be read incautiously, but this limited reading seems safe to me) an event termed a resurrection is also described as the dead coming to life. When Jesus raises Lazarus in the book of John, he and Martha have an instructive conversation about resurrection that appears to preface the raising of Lazarus which is, then, a type of resurrection^{xvi}. Martha expresses belief that Lazarus will be raised again in "the resurrection of the last day", to which Jesus responds by claiming to be the resurrection. There are a number of layers to this story, a flatly amazing claim, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that Lazarus' bodily return appears to be a resurrection, and that Martha expresses a belief in a final resurrection of the dead for at least good people like her brother. John 5:25-29 also discusses the idea of the final resurrection, for which Jesus claims credit. However, he seems to see no need to define his terms, suggesting that his audience is quite familiar with ideas of a resurrection to life and a resurrection to judgment. (Whether his audience believes in these ideas is a different question, as we know that some Jewish sects did not.)

Within 1 Corinthians 15 Paul adopts this discussion of a final Resurrection of the Dead and ties it into Jesus' own resurrection. The resurrection (of the dead) has now been split into two parts, first the Messiah, then the rest of us. It is important to note that Paul is making a claim about bodily resurrection. There is no other kind, and the verse normally used to back the claim that there is, 1 Corinthians 15:44, actually uses two words that both refer to non-physical elements. If our current body, which is most certainly physical, is described as incorporeal psyche (soul), then the description of the resurrection body as incorporeal pneuma (spirit) should not force us to ignore the fact that Paul holds up Jesus, with his physically resurrected body, as the model for resurrection. However, in Greek Corinth the idea of a physical resurrection might run into serious opposition. Several branches of Greek philosophy held that the material world was lesser, and someone preaching that we would, at some point, all get our "lesser" bodies back again, after a period of absence, would not be well-received on this point.

The Gospel

What is the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15? Again, let us remember that the gospel is a vast body of material. Paul does not here define the gospel universally, but, rather, reminds his readers of the points he think most relevant for them and the argument he is making here. First, Paul notes that the gospel was preached, that the Corinthians now stand in it (obviously an idiom), and that they are being saved by it. While the use of a present continuing verb here is interesting it is most important to note that the gospel is a mechanism of salvation.

The gospel is also transmitted. Paul preaches it, and Paul introduces the things of "first importance" as things that were passed on to him, presumably from the disciples who spent three years with our Incarnate Lord.

⁷ Our sources for this belief are scattered, and sometimes tainted by specific ideological considerations. Besides the New Testament, we have a number of intertestamentary books, religious works written between the Old and New Testaments, that speak of a final resurrection. Josephus mentions it briefly in his early description of the Pharisees in Wars of the Jews, book 2 chapter 8, in which he describes the Pharisees as believing that the souls of the righteous will move to "other bodies", while the Sadducees deny any meaningful afterlife. Extensive discussion of the resurrection is also found in the Talmud. For those interested in serious study of the development of this belief between the testaments, and what this means for the New Testament references, N.T. Wright has written two volumes, a more scholarly one *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, and one more oriented toward the lay-reader, *Surprised by Hope*, that compile the sources, evaluate them, and discuss the issue in depth.

Paul then dives into a bare-bones gospel. This is marked both by general common sense (Paul doesn't spend anywhere near sixteen chapters on the gospel he gives) and by his statement that these are the things of first importance. In other words, before we start discussing the main issue Paul is reminding his audience of the most important sections of the gospel. Again, this may be the most important, given what he is about to say. Most people have a tendency to leave critically important things off such lists if these things are not in dispute.

So what is Paul's bare-bones gospel? First, and not surprisingly to our ears, that Christ died for our sins. The mechanism is not further elaborated⁸. However, Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. This is a clear Messianic link. Christ isn't just someone who died and then we said nice things about it, rather Christ is someone who died just as Scriptures said he would. Paul is quite interested in evidence, here. The gospel he presents is very heavy on demonstrating that he is right, something that may shake our modern notions of faith as belief without good evidence, but for Paul the gospel is historical truth, subject to historical proof. It's news as trustworthy as the newspapers no one had invented yet. Christ's burial also gets a mention. This is something we rarely include in our post-it note gospels, but if Paul is interested in demonstrating his claim, the resurrection of a dead body that has been buried is more surprising than the resurrection of a dead body that had barely finished cooling. The mention of "on the third day" probably helps this case, too. He really was dead. Buried in the ground three days. Then he came back, just as Scriptures said he would. And he appeared to demonstrate this to a bunch of witnesses. Indeed, this list of witnesses takes up most of the description of the gospel. (Two notes here: first, Cephas is Peter, Cephas being an Aramaic name, Peter being a Greek one. Second, Paul's discussion about his own witnessing of Christ establishes several important things. Jesus' appearances have stopped, at least in this sense. Paul was the last one. Paul was the last one at an odd time. This should clear away any notion that Paul is describing visionary appearances, which continued on, while these stopped.)

So what is the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15? It is, firstly, the establishment of the undeniable fact that God has acted in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The secondary implications of this are worked out throughout the rest of the argument, which does not end where we do, but continues on through the end of the chapter.

The Argument

Paul's bare-bones gospel starts our argument off with a premise: Christ has been raised from the dead. It is the establishment of this fact that allows the argument to continue. Having done this Paul can tackle his main concern, which is, apparently, that some deny the Resurrection of the Dead. (It is somewhat ironic to write this, knowing that in today's world a huge number of Christians don't even know what the Resurrection of the Dead is, even to bother to deny it.)

Paul's first line of argument is negative. If Christ is raised then resurrection is possible. If resurrection doesn't happen then Paul's opponents will need to deny the fact of Jesus' resurrection that he has just so firmly established. And if Christ has not been raised then this whole thing is a lie (one reason why it is so important for Paul to establish the historical credibility of his claim), and everything the apostles and the Corinthians do is just a waste of time. What's more, Paul claims that, "you are still in your sins". This is a bit of a strange claim. Didn't he claim earlier that Christ died for our sins? Here he seems to change his stance, as if Christ is now raised for our sins.

The answer seems to be that for Paul the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ are not really two separable events with different effects. One common way of speaking of Christ's death and resurrection within the early Church was that of *Christus Victor*, Christ Victorious. Christ's death may have averted the wrath of God from us, but how did we know that he had won? How did we know that sin had not swallowed up Christ, too, and was still waiting for us? Because Christ rose. If the hero walks into the monster's lair and never returns the monster may or may not be dead. When the hero walks back out, holding the monster's head, we know. Paul discusses this more in his next section, but it seems critical to hold these points together. Christ's resurrection proves, in some sense, that his death worked.

⁸ Why would I say this? Because there are a number of potential mechanisms by which Christ could die "for our sins". Modern theologians have only expanded the list, often in radically useless directions, but Paul himself seems to have no problem discussing the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as accomplishing multiple things in multiple ways. While we tend to read this section and assume that Paul refers to substitutionary atonement Paul himself seems not to think this stripped-down gospel needs to include discussion of the mechanism.

Paul's second line of argument is positive. Since we know that, in fact, Christ really has been raised this opens up tremendous hope. If Adam could bring death to us all then Christ can bring life, in resurrection, to us all. Altering the series of the argument would seem to add some clarity, here, as few of us are intimately acquainted with the questions of a first-century audience. It is important that we see the link between verses 22 and 26. Resurrection, unlike a disembodied heaven, is the complete unmaking of death. Death is cracked open in resurrection, and all those it has claimed are taken away from it by its conqueror, Christ. It is not a route around death, not a way to make death a better state, rather, it is the complete destruction of death.

Much of this would be familiar to an audience used to the idea of a Resurrection from the Dead. Paul interrupts this line of thought with another one, about the order of things. Christ, as the conqueror of death, rises first. Then, when he comes again, he will take from death all those who are his. Christ's centrality is emphasized here. Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed, God's Christ, and he is the means through which God brings the entire world into line, through Christ's victorious actions. This line of thought, which may seem less useful to us, is critically important for his audience, who previously would have expected, if anything, a single resurrection. Why is it now coming in two parts? Paul explains why this is fitting and proper, as Jesus is first in the resurrection.

ⁱ Matthew 4:23, 9:25, 24:14, Luke 4:43 (as a verb), 8:1 (again as a verb), 16:16, and Acts 8:12.

ⁱⁱ Mark 1:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 5:42

^{iv} Romans 1:9, Galatians 1:16

^v Romans 15:19, 1 Corinthians 9:12, 2 Corinthians 2:12, 9:13, 10:14, Galatians 1:7, Philippians 1:27, 1 Thessalonians 3:2

^{vi} 2 Corinthians 4:4

^{vii} 2 Thessalonians 1:8

^{viii} Mark 1:14, Romans 1:1, 15:16, 2 Corinthians 11:7, 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 2:8, 1 Timothy 1:11 (with the addition of the adjective "blessed" applied to God), 1 Peter 4:17

^{ix} Ephesians 6:15

^x Acts 10:36

^{xi} Acts 17:18

^{xii} Acts 20:24

^{xiii} Galatians 1:23, and "of your faith" in 1 Thessalonians 3:6

^{xiv} Ephesians 1:13

^{xv} Acts 8:35

^{xvi} Acts 8:12

^{xvii} 2 Timothy 2:8

^{xviii} Romans 2:16, 2 Timothy 2:8

^{xix} 2 Corinthians 11:4, Galatians 1:6, 1:8-9

^{xx} Philemon 1:13, 2 Timothy 1:8, 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:4, Philippians 1:5, 1:7, 1:12, 1:16, 2:22, 4:3, 4:15, Ephesians 3:6, 6:19, Galatians 2:5, 2:7, 2:14, 2 Corinthians 8:18, 1 Corinthians 4:15, 9:14, 9:18, 9:23, Romans 1:16, 10:16, 11:28, Acts 15:7.

^{xxi} John 11:24-25