

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

July 1997

Copyright 1997 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: www.trinityfoundation.org

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

What Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Edited by John W. Robbins

Some questions appear almost rude. To ask, "What is the Gospel?" is like asking, "Who is Jesus Christ?" or, "What is the Bible really about?" Just about everyone in the churches takes it for granted that he knows what the Gospel is, and therefore to raise such a fundamental question may be as irritating as asking people if they can repeat the alphabet. But nearly all churches pervert the Gospel—the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and major Protestant denominations obviously so, but evangelical Arminian and hypo-Calvinist churches pervert the Gospel as well. But if a church is wrong about the Gospel, all of its teaching is affected and will tend to be perverted. If it does not have the Gospel, it is not a Christian church.

The Gospel is information about a past, historical event.

Each of the three words *past*, *historical*, and *event* is of vital significance for understanding what the Gospel is. The Gospel of the apostles was something that had happened. They all looked back upon it. They did not speak of anything in the present as Gospel, and they did not speak of anything in the future as Gospel. Notice, we are not saying that they did not speak of anything in either present or future. We are simply saying that they did not speak of anything in present or future *as Gospel*. Unless we are looking back and speaking of something that happened in the past, we are not

preaching the Gospel. The "past-ness" of the Gospel is one of its essential aspects. The Gospel was not a vision. It was not a dream. The Gospel is good news about an event that happened in history.

The historical nature of the Gospel—its *past*, historical nature—has certain important consequences. First, you cannot *exhort* the Gospel. It is logically impossible. You cannot exhort a past, historical work. You can only declare it, proclaim it, and publish it abroad. Exhortation is good (because it is Biblical) and needed, but it is not the Gospel and is not included in the Gospel. Notice, we are not saying that it is not included in a sermon wherein the Gospel is preached. We are simply saying that if it is included in a "Gospel sermon," it must not be a part of the Gospel.

Second, not only can you not exhort the Gospel, but you cannot experience the Gospel. *The Gospel cannot be experienced*. The Gospel is information about a *unique* experience and achievements. A unique experience is that which cannot, by definition, be repeated. If the believer could experience the Gospel, then he would repeat the experience; and if he could repeat the experience, then the Gospel would not be about a unique experience. The Gospel is *perfect*. Since the Fall, there have been no perfect, ordinary human beings on Earth, either before or after the Gospel. If men could be perfect, they would not need the Gospel. The Gospel concerns the *substitutionary* work of Christ. If the believer could experience the Gospel,

it would cease to be substitutionary. The Gospel is what God has done in Christ *in my place*. If I could experience this, it would not be in my stead. The Gospel cannot be experienced. We certainly do experience some of its benefits, but, as we have seen, the fruits or benefits are not the Gospel. The Holy Spirit given to the believer is the *effect* of Christ's finished work on behalf of his people. So also are faith, hope, joy, peace, and holiness as a state of the believer. They are all effects of the Gospel. We must not confuse the root (the Gospel) and the fruit (see *Colossians* 1:5, 6). The Gospel is information about a past, historical event.

There is no imperfection in the Gospel. It is the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ for his people. There are two important aspects of this: First, the Gospel concerns the *perfect* work of God in Jesus Christ. Unless we are preaching a work of perfection in Jesus Christ, we are not preaching the Gospel. The Gospel admits of no development. Anything that does admit of development (the Christian life of sanctification, for example) cannot be the Gospel. For instance, faith is good, but it is not perfect. Repentance is good, but none of us repents as he ought to. Holy living is good, and no man will see the Lord without it; but our holiest living is far from holy enough. None of these things can qualify as the Gospel. The second important aspect is that the Gospel is information about the perfect work of God *in Jesus Christ*. Even if the believer were perfect, the Gospel would not be about him. It concerns Jesus Christ as the place of God's perfect work. Nothing that is happening in the believer can be called the Gospel. It may be called the fruit of the Gospel, but not the Gospel itself.

Because the Gospel is information about the perfect work of God *in Jesus Christ*, there is no other name under Heaven by which we must be saved. The Gospel is information about the only Saviour, the only mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. The Gospel is *exclusive*. All other means of salvation taught by the churches are false. "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me."

The third important aspect is that the Gospel is information about God's perfect work in Jesus

Christ *for his people*. The Gospel is good news to those who are chosen in Christ for salvation. To them it is the aroma of life, but to those who are perishing it is the stench of death. The Gospel is not the message, God loves everyone, for God does not love everyone.

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation.

Paul tells us that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation. Those whom God intends to save are saved by the message preached. There are many aspects of this point that we could develop, but we shall focus on an area that needs clarification, judging by much literature in the religious world. Paul says that the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. Usually we take such a statement to mean only that if the Gospel is believed initially, then salvation will follow. In other words, we think that such a statement (the Gospel is the power of God) refers almost exclusively, if not exclusively, to the salvation of the unbeliever. But Paul's statement is also applicable to the *believer*. The Gospel saves the unbeliever *when* he believes, but it also saves the believer *as* he believes. It is the continuing power of God for the salvation of the believer. The Gospel is that by which the believer is saved by God at the beginning, middle, and end of the Christian life. There is never a point in the Christian's life when the Gospel is not saving him. He must therefore look to the Gospel at every point during his life.

The Gospel and sanctification are quite distinct ideas. The Gospel does not equal, nor does it include, sanctification. Since the Gospel and sanctification are not identical, we cannot say that sanctification is that by which God saves us. The *Gospel* is the power of God unto salvation. The elect are regenerated and further sanctified by the truth of the Gospel, but the Gospel is not sanctification. We are not suggesting for one moment that sanctification is unimportant. We are even prepared to say that no man will be found pleasing in God's sight without it. But what we are saying is that sanctification will always be a product of the Gospel (*Colossians* 1:5, 6). Only what is produced in our lives as a direct result of the Gospel

is true sanctification. Sanctification needs the Gospel for its source and power. The satanic error of Romanism, Orthodoxy, and Arminianism is to turn sanctification into the Gospel. When this happens, the power of Christian witness is seen to reside in a holy life. But we must realize that sanctification is itself the result and effect of the power of God in the Gospel.

Not only does sanctification need the Gospel as its powerful source, but also sanctification needs the Gospel as its constant protection. A gospel without any sanctification is easy enough to spot. However, a Gospel-less sanctification may be more difficult to detect, especially in an age that thinks that the Gospel and sanctification are identical. If sanctification is allowed, *in whole or in part*, to become the gospel, then we have a sanctification apart from the Gospel. To make sanctification equal to the Gospel, or to make the Gospel include sanctification, is to posit a sanctification *without* the Gospel.

Sanctification needs the Gospel as *its final protection*. All who are saved at the end will be saved by the same means as at the beginning. Our sanctification will be no more capable of saving us at the end than it was at the beginning. So much for those who see final salvation to be based on our sanctification. "What the church needs today is more sanctification!" This is a common cry heard today. It is unfortunate, however, that the cry so often signifies an elevating of sanctification to the status of the Gospel. If the Gospel is that which produces genuine sanctification (and who wants any other sort?) and the church needs more genuine sanctification, then the church needs more Gospel. The Gospel is the power of God for producing sanctification.

The Gospel is information about Jesus Christ and no other person. The Gospel is information about a past, historical event. The event is past, not present or future. It is an historical event and not an existential experience, encounter, or a relationship. Unless we are preaching about a past, historical event, we are not preaching the Gospel.

The Gospel is information about the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ alone on behalf of his people.

The Gospel alone is the power of God for salvation—for the salvation even of the believer. Our sanctification is dependent upon the Gospel as its source, protection, and final covering before the great judgment throne of God. We must always resist isolating sanctification from the Gospel at any point in the Christian walk. Those who identify the Gospel and sanctification and those who wish to include sanctification as a part of the Gospel end up divorcing sanctification from the Gospel. So often the cry, "Sanctification! More sanctification!" means, "Away with the Gospel! More good works!" This Gospel denies other gospels, which are not the Gospel.

"New Birth-ism" is not the Gospel.

Those who preach "You must be born again" as the Gospel are preaching a false gospel. To begin with, the new birth (which is Biblical) is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is an event which takes place in the sinner. The new birth is not the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ and is not said to be the power of God unto salvation. Yet much preaching puts the new birth in the place of Jesus Christ. It is a great error to present the new birth as the Gospel.

It was one error of Rome to treat regeneration as the Gospel. Pseudo-evangelicals have fallen into the same trap. How many times do we hear the Gospel presented as, "Jesus will come into your heart," or a sermon climaxing with, "Ask Jesus into your heart"? It is not the coming of Jesus into the heart that is the Gospel, but the coming of Jesus into the world and dying on behalf of his people. Focusing on the human heart is not focusing on Jesus Christ. It is not preaching a past, historical event. It is not preaching the completed work of God in Jesus Christ. And it is not preaching the power of God for salvation. Those who focus on the heart are not preaching the powerful source of sanctification, but that which is inimical to salvation.

The Second Coming is not the Gospel.

Just as the new birth is Biblical, so the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is Biblical. However, just as the new birth is not the Gospel, so the Second

Coming is not the Gospel. The Gospel is information about a *past*, historical event, whereas the Second Coming is the future advent of the Son. Just as there are many who are heart-centered, here-and-now-centered, so there are those whose gospel is the message of the eschaton.

There are many who believe that what the church needs is a new heart experience if revival is to come. There are also those who believe that the secret of revival is to preach eschatology. Hence, the heart and the future become centers of preaching. *What God has done in Christ* is subordinated to *what God will do in the believer's heart*, and *what God has done in the past* is subordinated to *what God will do in the future*. When this is done a false gospel is preached, and sanctification and eschatology are robbed of their Biblical nature.

The millennium is not the Gospel.

In the past few decades there has been growing interest in postmillennialism which teaches that men—without the presence of Jesus Christ—will usher in the millennium. As a future event, the millennium, like the rapture or the Second Coming, cannot be the Gospel. Those who favor this theory tend to focus on the millennium and the good works we are required to do to bring it to pass. They depreciate, and in some cases deny, the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But their millennium, being future, cannot be the Gospel.

The baptism of the Spirit is not the Gospel.

The preoccupation of the charismatic movement is not the Gospel, let alone the "full Gospel." The preoccupation of the charismatics is with the Spirit and not with Jesus Christ; with a present experience or a possible future experience and not with a past, historical event; with their hearts and lives, and not the heart and life of Jesus Christ. The preoccupation of the charismatics is not with the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ, but with the exciting work of God in the heart of the believer. Further, what charismatics regard as the demonstration of the

power of God is a demonic substitute for what Paul calls the power of God—namely, the Gospel.

Anything which we exhort or experience cannot be the Gospel.

Because the Gospel is information about a past, historical event, it cannot be exhorted or experienced. Anything which we exhort or experience is not the Gospel. We are not saying that we should not exhort. We are saying that when we do exhort, *it is not the Gospel*.

There are many, as we have seen, who believe that the revival of the church is to be found in more sanctification, a deeper experience of God. Such people forget that the power of God is the Gospel (*Romans 1:16*). The way to get the people of God sanctified is to preach the Gospel. When we do exhort, we must keep our sanctification from ever becoming our justification. The churches have turned to calls for more "sanctification," more human effort, more good works largely because the false gospels they preach are ineffectual. If they preached—if they believed—the Gospel of Jesus Christ, genuine sanctification would occur, as effect follows cause. *The Gospel*, nothing else, is the power of God for salvation.

Billy Talks to his Pastor about God

Billy: "Pastor, does God love everybody?"

Pastor: "Yes, Billy" (smiles, pats him on the head).

Billy: "How come it says in *Romans 9* that he hated Esau?"

Pastor: "Been reading your Bible, huh, Billy?" (still smiles). "Well, the Bible also says that God hates, but that only is talking about God's *secret decree*, and as far as we are concerned, he loves everybody."

Billy: "Pastor?"

Pastor: "Yes, Billy."

Billy: "If God tells us about his secret decree, is it still a secret?"

Pastor: "Er, well, I guess . . . not, Billy, but I meant that we should realize that there is a way the Bible talks about God's love for everybody, and that's what we should think about, not the one or two places where it says God hates."

Billy: "Oh. How is it that God loves everybody?"

Pastor: "Well, he gives everybody rain and sunshine, and he blesses the people of the Earth with a conscience so they know right from wrong, and he has given them many gifts which they use to make the world a better and safer place to live."

Billy: "Then he sends most of them to Hell?"

Pastor: "Yes, Billy."

Billy: "Pastor?"

Pastor: "Yes, Billy."

Billy: "Is it love for God to give people good things for a few years to make them feel comfortable and worthwhile, and then send them to Hell?"

Pastor: "Well, I . . . yes, it . . . is, I think because it would have been *worse* if, I mean it would be, um, well, it is, I guess, because he did not send them directly to Hell, but he allowed them to experience his *goodness* and his provision for his creatures. . . ."

Billy: "Is it love to let someone experience something good they will remember forever and always hate God for, because that good thing they loved more than forgiveness?"

Pastor: "Could we change the subject, Billy? I am not sure my answers are satisfying you."

Billy: "O.K., Pastor. Did Jesus die for everybody?"

Pastor: "Why, sure, Billy."

Billy: "Pastor?"

Pastor: "Yes, Billy."

Billy: "If Jesus died for everybody, why isn't everybody going to Heaven?"

Pastor: "Well, Billy, it's because not everybody will *accept* him."

Billy: "But, Pastor, I thought Jesus saved us. You are telling me that we save Jesus."

Pastor (laughing nervously): "Of course not, Billy! I believe that Jesus saves us completely! However would you get the idea that I believed we save Jesus?"

Billy: "Well, Pastor, you told me that Jesus died for everybody, and that only those who accept him will be saved. So, this means Jesus' death and resurrection, what Jesus does, cannot save us of itself, but something more is needed, and that something more is what we do by *accepting* him. For those who do not accept Jesus, they will perish. That means that Jesus' dying for them cannot help them. In fact, it means that Jesus' work for them was a miserable failure. On the other hand, those who accept him make his work effective by their acceptance—they save his work from being a failure. Without us, Jesus and his work of salvation would be doomed! If Jesus cannot save us without the permission we give of our own free will, then we are the *real* saviors, and Jesus is the one we save! Wow! What would he ever do without us?!"

Pastor: "Er . . . uh . . . that's not what I mean. I mean if, it is, I said . . . no, I believe Jesus is the one who does the saving, Billy, it's just that . . . God has made it so that we . . . are *free* to acc . . . meaning, we are, are . . . Billy, the Bible is *mysterious*. It seems to mean certain things, but it doesn't really, like it says . . . you are using *logic*, Billy. The Bible is not logical and the truths are not something we can *fit* into our human minds."

Billy: "Pastor?"

Pastor (now showing a slight frown): "Yes, Billy."

Billy: "When you say the Bible is not logical, does that mean the Bible does not make sense? 'Cause you made sense when you said the Bible wasn't logical. I think it was because you used *logic* that you made sense."

Pastor (now glowering at Billy): "No, Billy, I didn't mean the Bible does not make sense. It does make sense, but just not *our kind* of sense."

Billy: "Pastor?"

Pastor: "Yes, Billy."

Billy: "Why would God give a Bible to us that did not make our kind of sense?"

Pastor: "Well, Billy, it's not that . . . I think it's . . . it makes sense, just does not give us the answers we like to hear, and says things that *seem* contradictory but really are *not*, to keep us from asking smart-aleck questions."

Billy: "So, God doesn't make our kind of sense to keep us humble?"

Pastor: "That's right, Billy. God wants to keep us humble, so he does not let us think we can be absolutely certain about the things some *proud* people are certain about."

Billy: "Pastor?"

Pastor: "Yes, Billy."

Billy: "Are you certain about what you just said to me?"

Pastor (showing obvious irritation): "What do *you* think, Billy?"

Billy: "I think you just called yourself a proud person, but I don't know why, 'cause you are so smart and know so much about God, and how much he needs us."

Pastor: "Billy, why don't you go out and play, like the other children?"

Billy: "Why should I go out and play, when I can stay in here with you and learn how to save God?"

Pastor: "You need to be careful, Billy. I never said we save God. You are the one who said that, remember. I simply believe our choices are significant, and God does not treat us like robots. He created us to have *true human responsibility*."

Billy: "Pastor?"

Pastor (now looking quite angry): "This will have to be the last question, young man! I have important things to do and you should be outside playing."

Billy: "When God put Abraham to sleep, was he telling him what he thought of his 'human responsibility'?"

Pastor (seething): "I have a bad headache, Billy, and I can't answer any more of your questions, but I can tell you this. Whoever has been teaching you has been telling you things a boy your age should not even be thinking about. It sounds like you have been learning some kind of *hyper-Calvinism*! You better be *careful*, young man!"

Billy: "I don't know about hyper-Calintisim, but I have been reading these things in the Bible. Thanks for straightening me out. I will try to cut these bad parts out. Can I borrow some scissors?"

Pastor (rising from his chair): "*Get* out of here, *you, you, you* . . . !"

Billy: "That's O.K., Pastor. I'll ask Joey. He was using some good scissors when we were cutting out our 'friends with Jesus' pictures for Sunday school. Good-bye."

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