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Lecture 7: The Gospel: The Secret the Church Never Told

The Christian Church has been claiming to represent the Gospel of Jesus Christ (as) for centuries. The amazing fact is that Christians never actually tell anybody what the Gospel is according to their own sacred book, the New Testament. Any Christian can tell you what the Gospel is, if you ask him. But the answer is invariably different from the answer given by the New Testament itself.

What is the big secret the Church is keeping under cover, and why do they not want you to know about it? You are about to find out what the big secret is, but the reason the Church has been hiding the facts is something only Christian leaders can explain.

Most Christians one meets contend that the most important thing to know is the Gospel. Yet when one asks them what the Gospel is, the answer vary. The more liturgical types tend to say that the Gospel is the written portion of the Bible which describes the life and death of Jesus (as) on earth.

This is a good answer as far as it goes, for each of the four canonical Biblical books referred to as the Gospel contain the word in their title, to evangelion, in Greek. But these titles have all been added by a late hand. The more evangelical types answer something on the following order: “The Gospel is the good news that Jesus died to atone for our sins on the cross so that we might be saved through faith in Him.”

I followed the advice of my evangelical friends and took a look at the Greek Scriptures, the central Christian source of faith and practice, to see what the Bible says the Gospel is. All of the passages quoted in this study are from the book called the New Testament. If the Gospel is a particular message, the New Testament ought to be very clear about exactly what that message is.

I was not surprised to find that the word Gospel appears nearly a hundred times in the King James Version of the New Testament to translate the Greek word to evangelion, a word often translated into common speech as the “good news.” I was surprised to find that the word is almost always used in a sentence which presupposes that the reader already knows what the good news is.

The context may say something about the Gospel, about its power or glory or even affliction.
It may say something, and most generally does, about the preaching of the gospel, by whom and where and under what circumstances.

The texts which mention the Gospel without defining it clearly, without telling what the message actually is, are the following: Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 11:5; 26:13; Mark 1:1; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; Luke 4:18; 7:22; 9:6; 20:1; Acts 8:25; 14:7; 14:21; 15:7; 16:10; Romans 1:9; 1:15; 10:15; 10:16; 11:28; 15:16; 15:19; 15:20; 15:29; 1 Corinthians 4:15; 9:12; 9:14; 9:16; 9:17; 9:18; 9:23; 15:1; 2 Corinthians 2:12; 4:3; 4:4; 8:18; 9:13; 10:14; 10:16; 11:4; 11:7; Galatians 2:5; 2:14; 4:13; Ephesians 6:15; 6:19; Philippians 1:5; 1:7; 1:12; 1:17; 2:22; 4:3; 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:2; 2:4; 2:8; 2:9; 3:2 1; Timothy 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:8; Philemon 1:13; Hebrews 4:2; 1 Peter 1:12; 4:6; 4:17.

Anyone can examine these texts personally, but without finding anything in the text or context to indicate exactly what the message of the Gospel is, exactly what the apostles or Jesus (AS) were preaching as the Gospel. This leaves us with a mere handful of texts which reveal anything about the Gospel at all. It is fairly easy to review them and summarize the information they contain.

The first text is in Mark 1:14,15 “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.” Mark 1:14 says that Jesus (as) came preaching the Gospel. Verse 15 tells what Jesus (as) actually said when he preached the Gospel.

So we can take Mark 1:15 as a summary of the Gospel as Jesus (as) preached it. It contains two items of news or information, and two commands. The first item of information is that the time is fulfilled, that is, that the predicted time of some prophecy had come to a terminus. The second item of information is that the kingdom of God is near. These two pieces of information were very apt for the time and place. xThey are not universal or eternal messages. They relate specifically to the hopes of the Jews in Palestine at that period of the Roman Empire. The clear implication is that the prophecies gave a specific time for God to set up a kingdom or reign on earth, and that reign should penetrate the Roman empire at the time and place at which Jesus (AS) appeared as Messiah. The Gospel portrayed here as information is very local in character.

The two commands given in function of that information are a bit more universal in scope. The first command is to repent. The second is to believe the Gospel, that is, the message that God’s kingdom was about to penetrate the Roman Empire. The word translated “repent” is metanoeite which comes from metanous.

Just as metaphysics goes beyond the physical to the matters of the mind, this “metanoia” goes beyond the matters of the mind. In other words, Jesus (AS) appears to be telling the people not to be deceived by what they see and think, but to go beyond that to realize something that their minds could not tell them, that what he is saying is true, that God is about to set up His kingdom. The clear inference is that

despite the situation and what it seems to be, they owe their ultimate allegiance to God.

The next text is in Mark 16:15,16. “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” This text does not give more detail about the content of the message at all. It refers to the delivering of the message, and the results of it.

Some will believe and be saved, and others will not believe, and be damned. That is, some will realize that they owe ultimate allegiance to God, and believing that, they may be saved. Others will deny obedience to the sovereignty of God, and consequently will be lost. An interesting point is that baptism is mentioned along with belief as one of the requisites for being saved. Baptism is not very well defined in the New Testament either.

It arose out of the Jewish practices of ablutions, in two contexts. The one was conversion to Judaism, and the other was the baptism of repentance, such as that represented by John. The baptism which came into use among the early followers of Jesus (as) doubtlessly included those characteristics, and apparently more as well.

But whatever it meant, it was clearly within a purity code with a practice of ablutions. Furthermore, whatever it meant, it was not a part of the proclamation of the Gospel, but a result and response to it, one coupled with belief in the sovereignty or “kingdom” of God.

Baptism is the first matter that is associated with the Gospel in this text, but it is not the only one.

If it is intrinsic to the Gospel proclamation itself, then the issues in the following texts are as well. That is, if we accept baptism as a part of the Gospel message, then we must accept casting out devils, speaking in tongues, handling serpents, drinking poison without being hurt, and healing the sick by laying on hands. Mark 16:17–18. “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues;

They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” There are episodes described in the four Gospels and in the Book of Acts which describe all of these events as taking place. But they are not essentially and intrinsically the message of the Gospel. The Gospel is not the good news that people will start picking up snakes.

The context of the preaching of the Gospel is described with colorful detail, but the actual content of the message is given only briefly and rarely. Nevertheless, an occasional word can shed light on the nature of the Gospel message. Such is found in Acts 20:24 “But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.”

Here the sentence ends with what could be stated in ordinary speech as “the good news of the gift of God.” This text does not tell what that gift is. If we ponder it in the light of Mark 1:15, it suggests that the gift of God is the replacement of human despotism with the rule of God. But the text does not state this.

It is significant that the Gospels and the Book of Acts do not give direct information on what the Gospel is except in Mark 1:15. We are completely dependent on that one text to know what the Gospel is. At this point we turn to the epistles. There is only one relevant text in the epistles written by a man who actually knew and heard Jesus (as) proclaiming the Gospel.

That is 1 Peter 1:25 “But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.” The enlightening bit of information given here is that the Gospel is preached or proclaimed by means of the “word of the Lord.” In the context, the word of the Lord can only refer to the Hebrew Scriptures, and to nothing else.

At this point we are justified in affirming that the Gospel is the message that God is sovereign, that is, that allegiance and obedience are due to Him, even in so despotic a society as the Roman empire, and that this message is proclaimed by the use of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Having got a clear idea from those witnesses of the Gospel who claim to have heard it directly from the mouth of Jesus (as), we can now turn to the epistles of Paul. The writings of St. Paul, according to St. Peter, are difficult to understand. Furthermore, he is not a direct witness. Rather, he claims to be a witness on the basis of a vision long after the disappearance of Jesus (as). He never knew Jesus (as) personally.

He claimed to have met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and on the basis of that visionary experience, he made several assumptions. First of all, it is clear that he assumed that Jesus (as) had been killed.

He had this merely on hearsay. He was not there to see it happen, and cannot therefore be a valid witness of the fact. Secondly, having seen Jesus (as) in vision, he assumed that he had been resurrected from the dead. St. Paul had belonged to the sect of Pharisees, who were criticized by the Saduccees among the Jews for believing in the resurrection from the dead.

Paul latched on to this visionary experience to begin to proclaim the resurrection. He went around stirring up controversy among Jews over the question of the resurrection and for this he was finally imprisoned and sent to Rome for trial. St. Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel is submerged in this course of events in his personal life. The story is found not only in his epistles, especially the beginning of Galatians, but also in the last half of the Book of Acts.

The first text of relevance is Romans 1:1 “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures.)” At this point Paul’s concept of the Gospel overlaps completely with what we have seen among the eye-witnesses. But Paul goes on to add his own cogitations and understanding of the Gospel

in verses three and four.

“Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:” What he says here may very well be true, but it is an addition determined by his personal experience, and not a part of the Gospel as proclaimed by Jesus (as) and his eye-witness apostles.

It is missing in Mark 1:15, the only expression of the content of the Gospel to be found overtly stated by the evangelists. It has more to do with Paul’s confrontation with the Saduccees about the resurrection than it does with what we find Jesus (as) actually saying in Mark 1:15. St. Paul repeats this allegation on one other occasion. 2 Timothy 2:8 “Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel.” Here he admits that this clause is a part of “my” Gospel, not necessarily a part of the original.

Now whether or not we can accept what Paul says about the resurrection as true, there is one thing that is of primary importance. What is the result or response of Paul’s Gospel? It is found in verse 5 “By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name.” Paul’s Son of God and resurrection theme, arising from his sectarian experience as a Jew, is a parenthesis which does not effect the core of his Gospel.

He has clearly repeated the apostolic Gospel in verses one and two, which is the proclamation of the sovereignty of God even in the Roman empire. The result of that proclamation, even after Paul’s discursus into Jewish sectarian conflict is still the same as that of the other apostles: grace for obedience to the faith. St. Paul, despite his personal distraction and despite not being a direct eye-witness to the proclamation of the Gospel, still preserves the apostolic proclamation of the sovereignty of God and the good news of grace for obedience even under Rome.

Paul’s input is truly illuminating. In Romans 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” He gives us two new pieces of information here. The first is that the Gospel contains power. That is, it is not merely the proclamation that people ought and must obey God rather than Caesar no matter what the consequences.

It is also a gift of power, that is, the possibility to put into practice obedience to God despite the human institutions which oppose it. Thank God for Paul, for it is only at this point that we can see why the Gospel is actually good news. News of the duty of civil disobedience is not good news unless there is a guarantee that it can be more or less successfully carried out.

St. Paul reiterates this in Romans 16:25 “Now to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began.”

St. Paul returns to this subject in another epistle 1 Thessalonians 1:5 “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.” The second bit of information is that the kingdom of God, that is, submission to the sovereignty of God, is not for Jews only, but for others as well. The kingdom of God is at least as universal as the Roman empire.

In the next Pauline text there is another new bit of information. Romans 2:16 “In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.” Here Paul does not go into the detail of what he sees as Jesus’s (as) role in judgment, but he does point out that a proclamation of the judgment of God is a part of the Gospel which he preaches.

This was implicit in Jesus’s (as) proclamation in Mark 1:15, but not stated. The sovereignty of God implies the duty of obedience, and the duty of obedience implies accountability. Paul is thus consistent in the application of the primitive Gospel.

In another Pauline epistle we find Paul affirming the distinction we made between baptism and the Gospel on the basis of Mark 16. 1 Corinthians 1:17 “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.” He does not go into detail here on what he means by the cross of Christ.

The point he is trying to make, however, has to do with the rhetorical principles he finds most effective in preaching the Gospel. He does not rely on wisdom of words. This may be a reference to Hellenistic philosophy. If so, this may be an indication of agreement with Peter, that the Gospel is to be preached through the medium of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel, as we have seen, is characterized by two things. First, he is highly personal, mixing his Jewish sectarian conflicts into his proclamation. Second, he is deeply astute in bringing out the very real implications of the Gospel in terms of divine power and judgment.
This could only put him in a position in which he was misunderstood by some and definitely in conflict with others. Much in the Book of Acts and the Pauline epistles bears this out. One indication is his reference to multiple gospels in Galatians 1:6–9 “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.”

Paul indeed found areas of confrontation, and this was inevitable. It is not certain, however, that there were real disagreements at that point among the followers of Jesus (as) on the content of the Gospel.

Paul follows this tirade with a description of his visionary experience. Strangely enough, he appeals to

the visionary experience as a better guarantee of validity than eye-witness report. Galatians 1:11; 2:1-2 "But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain."

There is a text to follow which is susceptible to misunderstanding. Galatians 2:7 "But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter."

The careless reader may think that this refers to the two gospels noted earlier, and that one of the gospels included the rite of circumcision and the other rejected it. That is not the import of the sentence. Rather, it merely divides the territory of proclamation. Peter is given the proclamation to Jewish people, and Paul is sent with the good news to non-Jewish people. The messages are ostensibly the same.

Paul, being sent to the non-Jews, is more fully aware than others of the universal character of the Gospel message. He thus gives an interesting bit of information about the very content of the Gospel. The Gospel includes the message that all nations will be blessed in Abraham (as).

Galatians 3:8 "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed." The idea is that, rather than God's kingdom being limited to Jews, it is promised from the beginning to be on the basis of the faith of Abraham (as), and for all nations.

Again, thank God for St. Paul. This information would otherwise have been missing from the New Testament. It constitutes a reaffirmation that the Gospel is a recalling to the faith of Abraham (as) and is for all nations. St. Paul affirms this universality in Ephesians 3:6 "That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel."

St. Paul mentions the word Gospel again in Ephesians 1:13 "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise." This text is less rich in information than in promise. Paul here enlarges upon the theme of power to accomplish the Gospel in the use of the words "sealed with that holy Spirit of promise."

This expression no doubt reflects St. Paul's awareness of the very real and practical difficulties of obedience to God in a despotic regime. He also affirms Peter's statement that the Gospel is to be proclaimed by the medium of the Hebrew Scriptures or the "word of truth."

Much has been made in some circles about the Gospel being the good news of salvation without good works, or the works of the law. Much of the discussion is based on the expressions of St. Paul. The subject is far too complex to discuss here, but it is clear that Paul does not envision a salvation without good works.

The first reason is a logical one. Paul's concept of the Gospel does not depart from that of the apostles, and he more clearly than any other introduces the accountability of judgment in the Gospel itself. The second reason is that Paul actually states in connection with the Gospel, that right behavior is necessary.

Behavior is what the old word "conversation" means as used in the following text. Philippians 1:27 "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."

St. Paul refers to judgment in connection with the Gospel in a very positive sense in Colossians 1:5 "For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel." This hope is reiterated in Colossians 1:23 "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister." Here Paul repeats the Abrahamic universality.

This contrast of hope and damnation, so reminiscent not only of Jesus's (as) words on many occasions but of the many similar expressions in the Qur'an, come up again and again in the brief, early epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians 1:8 "In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." 2 Thessalonians 2:14 "Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is probably in this context of judgment that we should read St. Paul's words to Timothy. 2 Timothy 1:10 "But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

Paul has noted the role of Jesus (as) in the judgment without defining it in the context of the Gospel as such. His expressions here apparently mean that Jesus (as) in mediating the Gospel to humankind, played a key role in abolishing death and bringing life and immortality in the context of the judgment.

We have noted how St. Paul was an ambiguous character. For the most part he illuminated the expression of the Gospel which had been left far from clear in other parts of the New Testament. Yet, not being an eye-witness, he was also more impressed with events outside the life and teaching of the real, historical Jesus, and this left a mark on his understanding. We can now go back to the two remaining passages written or reported by people who knew Jesus (as) personally.

Jesus (as) makes a reference to the Gospel in an extended passage in Matthew 24:4-28. The passage is an answer to a question about the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. He prophesies that the Gospel should be preached to the whole world, and reiterates that the Gospel is "of the kingdom", that is, relating to the message of God's sovereignty. Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end

come.

The truly defining text on the Gospel does not appear until the end of the book, as though the New Testament writers were holding this big secret until the end.

The final mention of the word to evangelion, the Gospel is found in Revelation 14:6–7 “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.”

Although much information has been gleaned about the Gospel from the New Testament texts, only this one along with Mark 1:15 actually gives anything like a comprehensive view of the content of the Gospel message. It is interesting to note that this is the only text that gives real detail about the content.

It is just as interesting to see that there is not the slightest mention or reference to the proclamation of a vicarious sacrifice for sin on a cross or anywhere else. That message, true or not, is not a part of the New Testament Gospel. If it is a part of any gospel, it must be a part of one of those other gospels St. Paul referred to as being accurst.

First of all, this Gospel is termed the eternal Gospel. It is stripped of any local aspects that might have been attached to the Gospel as reported by the evangelists and apostles about Jesus’s (as) time. This definition of the Gospel is at the heart of the Apocalypse of St. John, a book that has baffled commentators for centuries and been the subject of the most varied interpretations of its obscure symbols and cryptic expressions. But these two verses are as clear, understandable, and bereft of any vestige of obscure symbolism as is possible.

The real, true, eternal Gospel is expressed here in one brief verse which cannot be misunderstood by any human being who has acquired the capacity to use human language. The Gospel of Revelation 14:7, the only expression of the Gospel that exists in the Bible besides Mark 1:15, and the only detailed expression of the Gospel to be found in the Bible, contains three brief commands: fear God, give glory to God, and worship God.

These commands may seem somewhat imprecise at first glance. However, they contain some rather precise implications. The fear of God does not refer to terror or horror. Rather, it refers to those influences which we experience as exterior to ourselves but which determine our behavior and choices. These influences are those of authority and those of peers. By accommodating our behavior to the demands of ungodly government and ungodly neighbors, we relinquish the fear of God. On the contrary, by taking the divine opinion into consideration instead of the opinion of peers, we can acknowledge divine law. This is what is meant by fearing God. To fear God is to recognize the very principles expressed in the Gospel as found in Mark 1:15.

The meaning of giving God glory is somewhat easier to grasp without explanation. It means quite literally to include as a central part of the liturgical act to glorify God verbally in an expression such as subhan Allah, glory to God.

It has a meaning in terms of attitude, however, as well. Just as human institutions and individuals can steal the fear of God by demanding conformity, they can steal the glory of God by demanding recognition and credit. To give God glory implies recognizing God as the source of all good things. For this reason many people answer expressions of gratitude by saying “Thanks be to God.”

The third imperative is proskyneesate, which is translated “worship.” The actual meaning of the Greek word, however, is to fall down in prostration. It is reliance on another gospel to suggest that mental recognition of God’s authority relieves us of the responsibility to carry out what many might consider mere forms of no intrinsic value.

Whether or not there is intrinsic value in the formal gestures of prayer, there is most certainly intrinsic value in the obedience which carrying them out entails. Of the three commands included in the Biblical definition of the Gospel, and there are only three, one is the command to pray in prostration.

Any concept of the Gospel that ignores the practice of prayer in prostration is a non-Biblical one. There are so few defining expressions of the Gospel in the Bible that it is impossible to ignore any of them and remain within a Biblical framework.

Besides the three imperatives that make up the Gospel, there is an explanatory phrase for why we should fear God and give God glory. The explanation is that we are facing judgement. This explanation is the logical one for the first two imperatives. The realization of impending judgment should have the power to free us from peer pressure and reliance on human authorities. In a similar way, and more positively, the fact that God is our judge should encourage us to remember to give God recognition and credit for all good things.

Finally, there is an explanatory phrase for the third imperative, again one which is supremely logical in view of the command to pray in prostration. The explanation is simply that God has created all things. This is the one great defining aspect separating God from all other things.
There is only one Creator and all other things are His creations. This is the Gospel definition of God, which is no definition in terms of limitation at all, but the recognition that as Creator and Sovereign, He cannot be defined or limited by any created thing.

A careful review of the Biblical references to the Gospel dispels the first impression that the New Testament fails to give a clear exposition of its character and content. Although the texts that are truly defining are few in number, they are clear and unequivocal. The Gospel is simply a call to recognize God alone as Creator and Sovereign Judge, and to order our behavior in view of that realization, without reference to creed, priest, church or sacraments. There is another word for religion that consists in the submission of the individual to God. That word is Islam.

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