



**CHRIST COMMUNITY**  
— CHURCH —

**We're Here to  
Proclaim the  
Good News**

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# **CCC on Purpose – We’re Here to Proclaim the Good News**

## **Introduction**

Is church merely an end in itself or is there something more, some greater purpose that points beyond us? In the first “CCC on Purpose” paper we explored one answer to this question. We noted that as sinners who have come to know that God forgives us because Christ died in our place for our sins on the cross, we instinctively respond with humble, joyful thanksgiving. We try to understand and appreciate what God has done for us and try to know Him better and please Him more. As we do, we wonder at His holiness, mercy, faithfulness, power, and glory. We worship the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and together we try to worship God more wholeheartedly and truly. **We are here to worship.**

This is not all, however. We sinners who have been forgiven by God also instinctively tell other sinners where they can find forgiveness. We literally have nothing better to talk about. For forgiven sinners no other subject even comes close. We tell others that in Christ, God became man, died in our place for our sins and rose again in victory over sin and death. We tell them that because Christ died God offers forgiveness and eternal life to them and that they need only to place their trust in Jesus Christ to receive this great gift. We proclaim the gospel, the good news of God’s gift of forgiveness in Christ. **We’re here to proclaim the Good News.**

These higher purposes allow us to orient and order our lives, especially in difficult or confusing times. They call us out of ourselves, demand our best efforts and draw us

forward into greater faith and obedience. They allow us to measure ourselves and our efforts, to know if we're making any progress or going backward. They help us avoid wasting time and energy, and help us avoid pulling against one another in ways that cause conflict.

Why do these things? As mentioned above – we do these things because we have been forgiven by God and we are thankful and joyful. John summed this up very succinctly, “We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We cannot help but love the One who loved us so much that He gave His Son for us. We cannot help but love the One who, as the Son, willingly laid down His life for us. Because we love Him, we worship Him, individually and corporately in our words and in our deeds. Because we love Him, we tell others about Him and what He has done. Our motivation is not guilt or fear or pride. It is not to build a bigger church than the one down the street. It is not to help us feel good about ourselves. It is not to impress the pastor or the elders or each other. It is because we know what it means to be loved and forgiven by God and to love Him in return. Our love for Him is partial and imperfect, but His great and persistent love for us compels us to grow to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind” (Matthew 22:37). In telling others of God's love and forgiveness we also begin to “love our neighbor as ourselves” (Matthew 22:38).

Let's not lose sight of these purposes, our mission. Let's remind ourselves and each other often of what we are doing and why we are doing it. In a previous paper we considered the subject of worship. Here we'll explore in more detail what it means to proclaim the gospel, the good news.

## Evangelism – Our God Given Mission

The Greek word that our English word “evangelism” comes from is *euangelion*. Like our English word “gospel,” it means “good news.” When we say that we are an “evangelical” church, we are claiming that the gospel message in large measure determines who we are and what we are doing. Evangelism, proclaiming the good news to others, however, is more than something that we have chosen to do because it seems like a good idea. Christ and the Apostles clearly taught that evangelism is the central mission of Christians and of the church.

Christ commanded and authorized His followers to “Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). He also affirmed, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). According to Jesus, the gospel is the central feature of redemptive history. “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached” (Luke 16:16). “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). He also taught that fulfilling this mission is critical with regard to an individual’s destiny. “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). “No one has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age . . . and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

The book of Acts makes it plain that the gospel was the message which the apostles and deacons proclaimed to the world and upon which the church was founded (Acts 1:9; 2:14,17, 39; 3:25; 28:28). Paul explained that we followers of Christ are “under compulsion,” knowing God’s forgiveness in Christ and having the responsibility

of declaring that forgiveness to others (1 Corinthians 9:16). God has entrusted us with “the word of reconciliation” and “the love of Christ constrains us” to plead with others, in Christ’s place, “to be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:14-20). The gospel is the power of God for salvation to all, both Jew and Gentile (Romans 1:19).

As noted above it is natural for forgiven sinners to tell other sinners where and how we have found forgiveness. This proclamation is an act of self-disclosure, since forgiveness is now an essential part of our identity. To say, “I am a fallen person who sins,” no longer is enough to tell the truth about us. That statement is certainly true, but it is now so incomplete as to be misleading. Our self-disclosure must be augmented in such a way as “I am a forgiven sinner.” For those who have been forgiven, it has become impossible to truly disclose themselves apart from declaring the good news of God’s gift of forgiveness in Christ.

Moreover, our proclamation of the gospel is also a form of praise, of declaring God’s infinite worth and glorious works to anyone and everyone. Praise of God is certainly not limited to proclamation of the good news, but the worship of forgiven sinners would be defective if it did not include and give special prominence to the good news. In this sense, it is impossible for a forgiven sinner to praise God apart from declaring the good news of God’s gift of forgiveness in Christ. To speak of God truly, we must speak of His forgiving of sinners, because this has become one of the most important things that we know about God. To state this even more strongly – God’s mercy toward sinners through the death of His Son is now the central thing that we know about God that gives color and depth and meaning to everything else that we know or might say about Him. It is the central truth

through which we move from knowledge about God to knowing God in relationship.

Another very basic and important reason for proclaiming the good news of God's forgiveness of sinners in Christ is simply that this is the best and most important news of which fallen humans may speak. Like the apostles, "We cannot help speak about the things that we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Of all the good news we might proclaim, of all the wonders in heaven and earth, of all good things true or even hoped for, there is nothing better than this – that God has chosen to freely forgive sinners because His Son has died in their place and paid the price of their disobedience. All those human emotions, affections and aspirations that we consider highest and best - joy, peace, thanksgiving, hope, love, justice, truth, freedom, gentleness, goodness - find full expression in and through the knowledge that God is merciful towards us. It is news that is as true as the righteous holiness of God, as bright as His glory, as unbounded as His love. It can be grasped in a moment in a sentence, and yet will be a source of boundless wonder for eternity. It is the substance of the Psalmist's joyous refrain "His loving-kindness is everlasting" (Psalm 136). Having explained the gospel in detail, Paul's does not conclude his exposition with a theological summary statement, but with an exclamation of worship, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Romans 11:33)

It is also important to note that while proclaiming the gospel is the church's mission, it is not exclusively the church's mission, the earthly occupation of the church for the benefit of those who haven't yet heard. John's vision of heaven and the throne of God includes "myriads of myriads, thousands of thousands" of angelic beings and exalted, glorified humans who sing and shout to Jesus

the Lamb, “Worthy are You . . . for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 4:9,12). In proclaiming the good news we are not merely declaring God's grace to other sinners so that they might accept God's gift, we are participating in the eternal worship offered to God by His creatures. Sometimes we may feel that we have not been effective, that our proclamation doesn't “count,” if sinners fail to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith. This is not true. Our proclamation honors God and is an offering of worship to him whether or not anyone ever responds to our words. It is a small but important part of the mighty, eternal chorus of praise to God by His creatures.

## The Gospel – Our God Given Message

But just what is the gospel message? The term “gospel” appears numerous times in the synoptic Gospels (not in John) and Acts. Of the gospel writers, perhaps Mark comes closest to stating directly what the gospel message is when he begins his account, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). We understand from this comment that the gospel, in its broadest sense, is the story of the life, works, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For this reason we use the term “gospel” to refer to the written accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In these gospels, however, “gospel” also refers to a specific message preached by Christ and the apostles. “Jesus went through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23, 9:35). “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14; Luke 9:6).

There has been much helpful discussion of the meaning of “gospel,” “the gospel of the kingdom” or “the gospel of



God,” as these phrases appear in the gospels. It is not necessary, however, to reproduce that discussion here. For our purposes it is enough to observe that Matthew, Mark and Luke assume their readers know what they mean when they recount Jesus' use of “gospel.” This makes sense when we realize that by the time the gospels were written (Matthew, c. AD 50; Mark, c. AD 58 or c. AD 68; Luke, c. AD 59; John c. AD 85-95), the gospel message had already been proclaimed in Judea and Samaria and was rapidly spreading throughout the Roman Empire. Paul's first missionary journey took place on AD 46-48. Thus, the content of the gospel message was already fixed and well known in the church by the time Paul defined it in writing in his first letter to the Corinthians (c. AD 54), explained it thoroughly in Romans 1-5 (c. AD 57-58) and defended it against false teachers in Galatians (c. AD 48).

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, Paul provides a very concise and clear definition of the gospel message, “I declare to you the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved . . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:5-6). Paul's definition, while it certainly assumes the entire earthly life of Christ, focuses on His death, burial, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances. It should be noted that this emphasis is also present in the gospels themselves, which give a much more detailed account of the week and events of Christ's death and resurrection than of His previous three years of ministry. It is also clear that Jesus Himself pointed forward to His death, burial and resurrection as culmination of His earthly life and work. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). “Behold, we are going up to

Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify *Him*, and on the third day He will be raised up" (Matthew 20:18-19). And of course, "While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, and after a blessing, He broke *it* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28).

Beyond this more narrow focus on the death, burial and resurrection, two points stand out in Paul's definition: 1) the gospel is primarily the proclamation of these specific historical events, and 2) the gospel also includes the divinely inspired interpretation or explanation of these events, signaled by the phrase "for our sins" and the repeated phrase "according to the Scriptures." These two elements, the gospel events and the biblical meaning of those events, together are the gospel, the white hot center of God's revelation in His written word, of His revelation in Jesus Christ, and of our mission as followers of Jesus Christ.

This gospel was anticipated in God's promise that Eve's descendent would bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15) and His promise to Abraham, "in you all the nations will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8). It is pictured beforehand in the many details of the priestly and sacrificial system which was given to Israel through Moses. This gospel was elaborated in the wisdom, poetry and prophecy in passages such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 that foretell the Messiah's sufferings. It is the message which Christ expected his followers to proclaim "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the most remote part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

This is the gospel of which Paul and the other apostles were not ashamed and made every effort to declare clearly and completely (Romans 1:16; 15:19). The church is founded upon this message (Romans 16:25; 1 Corinthians 4:15; Ephesians 1:13), and if it is corrupted or distorted the church is placed in grave peril (Galatians 1:6-9; 4:8-11).

This simple gospel message is the resolution of tremendous theological and moral tensions which the Bible presents. The creation has been alienated from its Creator by sin and fallen into bondage to decay and death. How will it be restored to serve the purpose for which God created it? Humankind, through Adam's sin, is corrupt and demonstrates the justice of its universal condemnation with Adam as every generation and every individual repeats the sins of their fathers. Paul's agonized cry is that of everyone who takes righteousness and judgment seriously, "Wretched men that we are, who will set us free from the body of this death?" God loves His creatures, but He is holy and must judge those who break His laws, which He has written on their hearts and revealed through His prophets. How will God's loving kindness and His holiness be reconciled in His dealings with sinners? Israel, chosen of God to be blessed and be the vehicle of blessing for the nations, has repeatedly, almost continually, rebelled against God and fallen into idolatry. They have proven themselves to be a "disobedient and obstinate people" (Isaiah 65:2; Romans 10:21). Nevertheless, God, while chastening them with many heavy strokes, perseveres in His love for His people, "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15-16). How can God's love and justice both be satisfied? How can God be both just and the justifier (Romans 3:26) of His people? The gospel announces that these tensions have

indeed been resolved in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## Gospel Facts

The historical events of the gospel are straightforward – Jesus Christ died, was buried, was raised and appeared to human witnesses. We proclaim these events with confidence because they are consistent with the historical evidence and testimony available to us. This was, in fact, exactly the approach of the apostles as they proclaimed the gospel in Jerusalem just weeks after the resurrection. Peter made much of the fact that he and others with him were eyewitnesses of the gospel events and especially the resurrected Christ (Acts 2:32; 3; 15; Acts 10:1). Paul also makes the same point when he lists those to whom Christ appeared after the resurrection, “He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also” (1 Corinthians 15: 5-8). In effect he is saying, “If you don’t believe me, here are five hundred other people with whom you should talk.” In their letters, Peter and John also appeal to their readers on the basis of their status as eyewitnesses of the gospel events - “We were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16) and “What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life” (1 John 1:1). In his hearing before Agrippa and Festus Paul mentions the resurrection of Jesus and Festus responds, “Paul, you are mad!” Paul’s response is to appeal to King Agrippa who would certainly have heard reports of those who had witnessed the death, burial and resurrection. “The king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with

confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). Thus for Peter, Paul and the other earliest Christians, the events of the gospel were not a matter of faith, in the sense that they were to be believed in the absence of historical evidence. They were not merely a matter of personal experience, but more importantly of public historical record.

Luke, who wrote more of the New Testament by volume than any other writer, adopted this same perspective. Luke was Paul's traveling companion (Acts 16:10ff where he evidently joined Paul's party), biographer, fellow evangelist and physician (Colossians 4:13). During Paul's imprisonment at Jerusalem and Caesarea (Acts 21:16-26:32), a period of over two years, Luke had time and opportunity to purposefully interview eyewitnesses of Jesus' teaching, death, and post-resurrection appearances and to gather information from other sources. In the introduction to his gospel he affirms that he did so. "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught."

This fundamentally historical nature of our message ought to be kept in mind when we proclaim the gospel – the gospel events are true not just for Christians, not just for those who believe, but for everyone, everywhere. Their veracity does not depend upon the church or upon Christians' faith, but rests upon the same kind of evidence that is used to establish and certify historical facts in general. In his extensive defense of the fact of

the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul does not ask us simply to believe that it happened. He does not refer us to some sort of spiritual verification, urging us, for instance, to ask God to show us directly that the resurrection occurred. Rather he appeals to the same sort of evidence that is used to verify historical claims generally – in this case the testimony of eyewitnesses.

Admittedly the testimony that we have for Christ's resurrection comes from eyewitnesses who also happen to have been Christians. But this kind of bias is often present in historical records and does not, in itself, invalidate the testimony. There are many examples of important ancient subjects and events which are known to us only through relatively few and biased written sources. For instance, we know of the life and campaigns of Alexander the Great from the writings of Diodorus of Sicily, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Plutarch of Chaeronea, and Arrian of Nicomedia. These authors lived more than three centuries after the events they describe and each had his own, quite obvious, political and or moral agenda. To compose their histories they relied on other nearly contemporaneous accounts now lost to us which certainly had their own biases. Most of what we know about Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul comes from Caesar's own dispatches, *The Gallic Wars*. Caesar knew that his reports would be anxiously read in Rome and would give him leverage there in future political struggles. The point is that historians routinely and confidently retell the stories of ancient individuals and events based upon biased sources. Their task in using such source material is to sift the wheat from the chaff, to verify or discount the information in their sources by using other kinds of evidence such as secondary or tertiary written sources, tangential mention of persons or events in other records, physical artifacts such as coins, inscriptions, monuments, etc. When the gospel and apostolic accounts of Christ's life, death and resurrection are examined in this way, the

historicity of the events, even of the resurrection, is established beyond reasonable doubt.

Some of the lines of evidence verifying the gospel and apostolic testimony concerning the resurrection are: 1) Matthew and John (see 1 John 1:1 also), and probably Mark were eyewitnesses of the events they record. Luke claims that his account is based upon the testimony of eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4). The personal, cultural, geographical details included in the Gospel accounts are consistent with contemporaneous, eyewitness testimony. 2) The earliest Christians, like Peter (see 2 Peter 1:16 for Peter's claim to eyewitness status), were willing and even anxious to claim that their faith was based upon the resurrection of Jesus. Peter preached in Jerusalem five weeks after the crucifixion, "Jesus of Nazareth . . . Whom God has raised up" (Acts 2:22-24). This claim is inexplicable, unless they actually believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. Since the earliest Christian community was at Jerusalem, this claim would have been easily falsifiable if Jesus' body was still present in the tomb. 3) The four canonical Gospels agree that Jesus Himself predicted His own resurrection. Thus, His failure to rise from the dead would have invalidated His claims about Himself and made Him an unlikely figure upon which to found a new faith. 4) The apostles abandoned Christ during the crucifixion. Their later steadfastness in the face of imprisonment and death is difficult to explain apart from the firm conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead. 5) Paul's conversion from an ardent persecutor of Christianity to its chief proponent seems impossible unless he was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead. The facts of the gospel, even the resurrection, are well supported by historical evidence. So much so that they are not, in that sense, the objects of faith.

## Gospel Meaning

When we explain what the historical gospel facts mean, however, we move beyond the realm of history and historical evidence. At this point we begin to make statements, “according to the Scriptures,” which must be accepted by faith. We make statements about Jesus Who died: that He was the Messiah, the Christ; that He was and is God incarnate, “The Word was God . . . and became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14); that He was fully God and fully man and yet, at the same time, a single person; that He was without sin. We make statements about “our sins,” about our accountability before God and our need for salvation; statements such as “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin” (Romans 5:12) and “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We explain how Christ's death, burial and resurrection provided for our salvation: “Surely He took our infirmities . . . He was crushed for our iniquities . . . by His wounds we are healed . . . the Lord has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4-6); “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24); and “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). We further explain how an individual sinner may benefit from the salvation God has provided, “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31) and “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). Depending on the person with whom we are talking (if they are, for instance, an agnostic or atheist, an animist, a Mormon, a Muslim, a Buddhist), we may emphasize one of these points or need to say much more in explaining the “simple” gospel events.



Christians believe that these explanations are “revealed,” given by prophets and apostles who were “inspired by God” (2 Timothy 3:16) and “moved by the Holy Spirit” so that they “spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:21). The ultimate revelation from God was through His Son (Hebrews 1:3). As noted, such explanations are not subject to historical proof. Eyewitnesses saw Jesus’ death and post-resurrection appearances, but they could not, in the same way, have seen Jesus die *for our sins*.

Nevertheless, the fact that there can be no direct *historical* evidence for such claims does not mean that there is no evidence for them at all. On the contrary, there are several legitimate and powerful lines of evidence sustaining these kinds of “according to the Scriptures” claims. Most of these lines of evidence, in one way or another, rest upon the credibility of the character of Jesus as witnessed to by the apostles. We learn from the apostolic accounts, for instance, that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, that He performed miracles, that He taught with unusual clarity and authority, and that He never sinned. If these things are true then Jesus’ claim to be the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) who “gives His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) makes sense and must be considered seriously. Admittedly, such considerations do not amount to “proof,” but they are evidence which weighs heavily in favor of the trustworthiness of Jesus and, therefore, the trustworthiness of the gospel.

There is at least one compelling argument for the truth of the gospel which does not depend directly upon the trustworthiness of Jesus and the apostles. The gospel facts and their explanation agree with what we know and experience of human nature and relationships. In brief, the gospel claims correspond with what we know to be morally and spiritually true about ourselves, other people, and the world. The gospel deals with the basic stuff of

life our lives – right and wrong, sin, guilt, life and death, forgiveness, reconciliation. We know about these things. They are not foreign to us. They are part of our humanity. They are the marks and method by which the infant and then the child mature into the adult. An adult who does not have knowledge of these moral attributes is considered insane (perhaps a sociopath) or imbecilic.

We have an innate sense that right and wrong exist and that we make real moral choices. We also observe that often our sense of right and wrong is shared by others. We understand that to deny the existence of right and wrong - to try to act and live amorally – is to turn away from what makes us human. Moreover, we know that we have violated and continue to violate our own sense of what is right. We believe that wrong should be condemned and punished and right honored and rewarded and we find that others share this conviction and we create laws that reflect this. We may, therefore, also experience a certain dread and fear of punishment. We also know the experience of being forgiven and of extending forgiveness to others and we know that forgiveness is vital in maintaining relationships. All of these elements of our moral and spiritual experience and self-knowledge are recognized and affirmed in the gospel message. None of them are contradicted or discounted. Our experience makes sense in light of the gospel and the gospel makes sense in view of our moral experience and knowledge. We might say that the gospel resonates with and explains our moral self-knowledge and our knowledge of our fellow human beings. We will note this resonance in more detail, as we discuss the particulars of the gospel message below.

## Why the Gospel is Good News

Christ died “for our sins.” The gospel is a message for sinners; it is good news to sinners. The gospel is directed to those who have violated God's law; those who know themselves to have failed God, others, and themselves; those who are burdened with sorrow for past sins; those who fear God's wrath and punishment. To such people the announcement that “Christ died for our sins” is like medicine to one who is deathly ill, a life preserver to one drowning, a pardon for a criminal who has been sentenced to die, and a host of other metaphors. Jesus himself declared that He had come to save “not the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). He offered the good news of the kingdom specifically to those who are “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3) and who “labor and are heavily burdened” (Matthew 11:27). Celsus, a second century critic, objected to this aspect of the gospel when he sneered, “The call to membership in the cult of Christ is this: 'Whoever is a sinner, whoever is unwise, whoever is childish – yea whoever is a wretch – his is the kingdom of God.' And so they invite into their membership those who by their own account are sinners: the dishonest, thieves, burglars, poisoners, blasphemers of all descriptions, grave robbers. . . . they are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children . . . wherever one finds a crowd of adolescent boys, or a bunch of slaves, or a company of fools, there will the Christian teachers be also.” (*On the True Doctrine*, iv). Celsus was right – the gospel is for sinners.

It should be noted that in Corinthians 15:3-4 Paul does not include in his definition the need to persuade listeners that they are sinners. The gospel message rather assumes this self-knowledge and only makes sense in view of it. However, such persuasion is often, in practice, necessary in proclaiming the good news since we sinners frequently justify or deny our sin and guilt. Jesus noted that, in contrast to self-acknowledged sinners, those who

think of themselves as righteous, such as some of the Pharisees, are least receptive to the gospel. "Truly I say to you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him" (Matthew 21:31). Jesus insisted, then, that if we are to receive the righteousness which is offered to us in the gospel, we must understand and acknowledge our own sinfulness and unrighteousness.

In Romans Paul states that he is not ashamed of the gospel because there is such a great and desperate need for it, for "the wrath of God is revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth in their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). He then argues at length (1:18-3:20) that "there is none righteous, not even one; there is none that understands; there is none that seeks after God" (3:10-11). Thus, Paul presents man's sinfulness not as part of the gospel message proper, but as the universal and desperate condition of humanity which makes the gospel so necessary and precious. Also in Romans, Paul laments the general failure of his "brothers according to the flesh" to respond to the gospel with the observation, "the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it by faith, but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not obtained it because they pursued it by works" (Romans 9:30-31). Thus, Paul insists that repentance, the recognition of and turning away from one's sin, is a necessary preparation for the gospel. In order to hear, understand and personally accept the good news that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," I must acknowledge that I am a sinner and in desperate need of God's forgiveness. We cannot have open hands to receive God's gift of forgiveness if we cling to our own imagined righteousness.

The Bible explains our sinfulness as a departure from and a corruption of our created nature. Man was created “in the image of God.” Human nature, therefore, is not evil in itself, but rather the good creation of God. The first man, however, used his moral freedom to disobey God, to “sin.” In so doing Adam lost his innocence and his moral integrity, and damaged himself and his descendents. As a result all of man’s faculties are corrupted, damaged, impaired by sin. His thoughts are no longer purely rational, but can also descend into irrationality. His emotions are no longer pure, but are tinged with selfishness and pride. His actions are motivated by selfishness as much as love for others and for God. It is not that man is as bad as he could be or purely evil. We are still capable of good or altruistic actions. We can, by strength of will, change our habits and improve our character. Nevertheless, even our best thoughts and actions are always compromised to some degree by irrational selfishness, pride, greed, hatred, lust or jealousy. Scripture uses various images to describe this corruption of man’s nature: 1) inability or sickness (Luke 5:31), 2) weakness (Romans 6:19, 8:3), 3) death (Matthew 8:22, Ephesians 2:1), 4) slavery (Romans 6:6, 8:15), 5) imprisonment (Romans 7:23), 6) futility (Ephesians 4:17), 7) blindness (John 12:40, 1 Corinthians 4:4, 1 John 2:11), 8) darkness (Romans 1:21, Ephesians 4:18), 9) ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13), 10) foolishness (Titus 3:3; the “fool” and “scoffer” in Proverbs).

In his sin, Adam also “fell” away from his Creator. He and his descendents became alienated from God. Again Scripture describes this broken relationship in various ways: 1) Man is guilty and deserving of punishment (Matthew 5:22; Mark 3:29). 2) He is in debt and owes payment (Matthew 18:21-34). 3) He is a rebel (1 Timothy 1:9) or even 4) an enemy of God (Luke 20:43, Romans

5:10) and as such 5) the object of God's wrath (John 3:36, Romans 2:5, Ephesians 2:3). 6) He is lost (Luke 15). 7) He has violated God's love as an adulterous spouse (Jeremiah 5:7 and throughout prophets, Revelation 17:1ff). 8) Being separated from the life of God, he is subject to physical and spiritual death (Romans 5:12-17).

This description of the human situation resonates with us at the deepest levels. We recognize in ourselves and others qualities such reason, imagination, language, creativity, the ability to love, the ability to appreciate beauty and a sense of right and wrong which distinguish us from even the highest animals. Compared with animals, humans are clearly of a different order; we might even say "god-like." A glance at the "miracles" of modern medicine and technology or the history of art impresses us with man's seemingly limitless potential. In the moral realm, we know what it is to love, to forgive, to act truthfully, bravely, and faithfully and history provides us wonderful examples of these kinds of actions. We understand that man is preeminent in creation, different than and higher than other creatures, and that human life is precious and to be protected. We fear, resent, and try at all costs to avoid death, because we seem to know innately that we were not intended to die. Doesn't the Bible's description of man as "made in the image of God" resonate with our self-knowledge on these points? Doesn't it provide reasonable explanation, or, at least, an apt expression of things that we know to be true of ourselves and humanity in general?

At the same time, we know ourselves to have fallen short of our potential. We don't do what we know that we could and should do. Furthermore, we do what we know is wrong. We sin, irrationally and, it often feels, inevitably. We could create, but we destroy. We could speak the truth, but we lie. We could love, but we act selfishly. And

what we know to be true of ourselves individually, we see played out in society and human history, filled as they are with injustice, irrationality and unspeakable brutalities. Even mankind's greatest achievements are deformed and given a terrible quality by sin. The hope of the atomic age is obscured by the fear of self-destruction. The pharmacy of the healer is haunted by the greed of the drug dealer. The brilliance of the genome project is darkened by the shadow of Nazism and the eugenics movement. God's image in us is broken and distorted. Blaise Pascal described man's condition in this way, "Who will unravel this tangle? . . . Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. . . For if man had never been corrupt, he would enjoy in his innocence both truth and happiness; and if man had always been corrupt, he would have no idea of truth or bliss. But we are wretched . . . we have an idea of happiness and cannot reach it. We perceive an image of truth, and possess only a lie. . . It is clear that we have been in a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen" (*Pensees*, circa. 1755). It is also true that, in our sin, we experience sorrow, guilt and fear. These feelings whisper to us that we are responsible for our actions to our Creator.

## God's Law, Sin and the Gospel

It is the function of God's law, whether inscribed on stone tablets or written on our hearts (Romans 2:14-15), to teach us that we are sinful and in need of the gospel. "Through the law we become conscious of sin" (3:20). In the Sermon on the Mount Christ expounded the commandments "You shall not murder" and "You shall not commit adultery" in such a way as to leave us sinners no way to evade condemnation. In Galatians Paul explains that God's law is our "schoolmaster to bring us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians

3:19-24, 22, 24). In this same way John the Baptist's ministry was distinct from and preparatory to the ministry of Jesus. John was the forerunner, who confessed "I am not the Christ" but the "one calling in the wilderness 'make straight the way for the Lord'" and urged his hearers to "repent for the kingdom is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). People came to John "confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:6) and he baptized them "for repentance" (Matthew 3:11), that is the recognition of and turning away from their sin. John's ministry was that of the law, making those who came to him aware of their sinfulness before God. John's ministry pointed forward to and prepared people to receive the good news, the coming of "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The law convinces us that we have sinned and that, more than that, that we are sinners, unable to meet its demands and are, as a result, under the sentence of death. It shows us that we desperately need God's forgiveness and gracious help.

As we proclaim the gospel, there will be those who fail to recognize that they are sinners and powerless to extricate themselves from their condition. Perhaps they need to hear the law of God which echoes, clearly and externally, the principles of right and wrong written on their hearts. Most of all they need the work of the Holy Spirit of God who ". . . will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged" (John 16:8-11). Those who understand the burden of guilt and the enslaving power of sin will have ears to hear the message of God's love and forgiveness. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).



## “Christ died for our sins”

“Christ died for our sins.” This brief phrase contains the central mystery and message of the Christian faith. It is the central and illuminating theme of the self-revelation of God contained in the Bible. The Pentateuch points forward to the death of Christ on the cross in: 1) the “seed of woman,” who will suffer a bruised heel while inflicting a mortal head wound upon the serpent (Genesis 3:15), 2) God's promise to Abraham that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), 3) the symbolic “sacrifice” of Abraham's only son, Isaac (Genesis 22), 4) Joseph, whose “death” pictured by his actual descent into a pit, became the means of deliverance for Israel and Egypt (Genesis 37ff), 5) the Passover lamb, whose blood applied in obedience and faith protected those within the house from death (Exodus 12), 6) the bronze serpent, lifted up and displayed where those who were dying might see it and live (Numbers 21:8), 7) the many sacrifices which picture in detail the meaning of the ultimate sacrifice, 8) the role of the priests who intercede by offering sacrifice between God and man.

The cross of Christ is no less prominent in the historical and poetic books of the Jewish scriptures. Many passages and themes pointing forward to Christ's death for sin are cited in the New Testament, while others seem clear in themselves when viewed in light of the gospel. A few examples are: 1) the scarlet cord that Rahab hung from her window to protect those within from Israel's armies (Joshua 2), 2) the cities of refuge and the forgiveness of manslaughter upon the death of the high priest (Joshua 20:6), 3) the kinsman redeemer law as illustrated in the story of Ruth, 4) the many messianic psalms such as Psalm 22, 5) Job's enigmatic comment

that “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth” (Job 19:25).

Among the many passages from the prophetic books cited in the New Testament as referring to Christ and the death of Christ, Isaiah 53 is uniquely specific and powerful. This passage has been called the “fifth gospel” and explicates the meaning of the death of the “suffering servant” hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. It is so remarkably clear and complete on the subject of the atoning work of the messiah that it really leaves little to be explained by Jesus and the apostles. Here we are told that “the man of sorrows” will be “despised and rejected by men.” He will “bear our grief and carry our sorrows” and be “smitten by God and afflicted,” “pierced through for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.” “The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him,” so that “by his scourging we are healed.” “He was oppressed and afflicted” and “like a lamb led to slaughter, he did not open his mouth.” Even though he “had done no violence, nor was any deceit found in his mouth,” “he was cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of the people.” “The Lord was pleased to crush him . . . as a guilt offering.” “By his knowledge the righteous one, my servant, will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities.” “He was numbered among the transgressors, bore the sin of many and interceded for the transgressors.” Portions of this chapter are directly quoted by Jesus (Luke 22:37), John (John 12:38), Philip (Acts 8:32); Paul (Romans 10:16; 15:21), the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 9:28), and Peter (1 Peter 2:22, 24). In addition there are dozens of passages in the New Testament in which various commentators have discerned indirect or conceptual references to Isaiah 53.

The gospel writers, as noted above, emphasize the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus by giving these gospel events more space and attention. John the

Baptist's introduction of Jesus as the Lamb, Jesus' statement of his intent to give his life as a ransom for many, his presentation of his body broken and his blood shed in the last supper and many other specifics in the gospels also point to the gospel events. Acts maintains this emphasis in telling the story of the expanding church, focusing on the preaching by Peter of "Jesus the Nazarene" who "according to the predetermined plan of God . . . was nailed to the cross and put to death" and whom "God raised up again" (2:22-24) and by Paul of Jesus the Son of God whom Pilate executed and laid in a tomb but whom "God raised from the dead" and through whom "forgiveness of sin is proclaimed" (13:28ff).

It is in the epistles, however, that we find the phrase "Christ died for our sins" elaborated most fully. Some of the important ideas that are used to explain this central concept are: 1) The righteousness which comes by faith in Jesus' death completely satisfies the claims of God's law against us (Colossians 2:14). 2) Jesus' death "propitiated" or satisfied the wrath of God which was formerly directed toward us because of our sins (Romans 3:25) and this propitiation extends to the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2). 3) Because God's wrath was propitiated by Christ's death, we are "reconciled" to God (Romans 5:4; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19) and even made His children (Romans 8:16-17). 4) Our sins were transferred to and carried by Christ in his death on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). On this point Paul can even say that God "made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf" (2 Corinthians 5:21). 5) It is specifically Christ's death which paid the penalty for our sins and satisfied the wrath of God. This doesn't minimize the "emptying" of Himself to become man (Philippians 2: 7) or the other deprivations and sufferings that He underwent during His earthly life, but the apostles insist that it was Christ's death which redeemed us with expressions such as "the word of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18), "the cross of Christ" (1

Corinthians 1:17; Galatians 6:12) “Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2), “glory in the cross” (Galatians 6:12), “Christ died for sins once for all” (1 Peter 3:18). 6) Through faith the righteousness of Christ is credited to us. This is a separate and different righteousness than that which we might hope to obtain through keeping the law (Romans 3:21-22). 7) Through His death and resurrection Christ triumphed over sin, death and the devil (John 5:24; 8:51; Romans 5:17, 21; 6:5, 9; 7:24-25; 1 Corinthians 15: 26, 54-55; Colossians 2:14-15; 2 Timothy 1:10; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:14; Revelation 1:18).

Perhaps the most frequent and prominent meaning that the New Testament writers assign to “Christ died for our sins” is that of substitutionary sacrifice and payment, or to use the theological and biblical term substitutionary “atonement.” Jesus Christ became the substitute for sinners in two respects: 1) He took our sins upon Himself. 2) The punishment that we rightly deserved because of our sins fell upon Him.

The idea that sins can and should be transferred to a substitute is not new with Christ and apostles. It is implicit and explicit in the Levitical sacrificial system. The “scapegoat” sacrifice described in Leviticus 16 is a prominent example. “Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness.” The imagery is clear – the sins of the nation are transferred to the goat which then carries them away into the wilderness. Isaiah 53:6, 11 and 12 apply this idea to the Messiah. “The LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” “He will bear their iniquities.” “He was numbered among the transgressors, yet He Himself bore

the sin of many." Christ insisted that this prophecy applied to himself . "For I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, 'And He was numbered with transgressors'; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment" (Luke 22:37). The New Testament writers tell us in many places and ways that Christ took our sins upon Himself. Peter says, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Peter 2:24). The author of Hebrews likewise, "Christ also, was offered once to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:28). John tells us that, like the scapegoat in ancient Israel, "He appeared in order to take away sins" (1 John 3:5). This connection is also evident in John the Baptist's cry "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). For Paul the substitution of Christ for us as sin bearer is so complete that he can say, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf" (1 Corinthians 5:21) and that Christ "gave Himself for our sins" (Galatians 1:4).

In addition to and as a result of bearing our sins, Christ became our substitute in that the punishment that we deserved, the wrath of God, suffering and death, fell upon Him. Again this idea is found first in the Old Testament. The Levitical sacrifices were killed. The scapegoat was led away into the wilderness, carrying the sins of Israel, to die. In Isaiah 53 we are told that the Messiah will be "smitten by God, and afflicted . . . pierced through for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities . . . oppressed . . . cut off from the land of the living." Isaiah also makes it clear that this punishment was not merely the rejection and persecution by men but was ultimately the righteous judgment of God (53:4, 10). Psalm 22 is also quite graphic with regard to the substitutionary suffering and death of the Messiah. The Psalm opens with the anguished cry, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me." Christ, of course, repeated this from the cross, demonstrating that He understood that this Psalm applied to Himself. Furthermore in Psalm

22, we learn that the punishment which falls upon Christ, rather than upon us sinners, includes: the rejection and reproach of men, being surrounded by enemies, being poured out like water, having one's hands and feet pierced, having one's garments removed and divided, having one's bones pulled out of joint, and finally being laid in "the dust of death." Prominent in these sufferings is the sense of separation from and absolute abandonment by God so well expressed in that first phrase. The suffering Messiah feels that His cries for help do not reach God and that God does not answer (vv 1-2).

In the New Testament the idea that Christ took the punishment that otherwise would have fallen upon us sinners is a continual refrain. Because of our sin God's condemnation fell upon Him (Romans 8:3). God did not spare His Son but "delivered Him over for us." (Romans 8:32). This punishment certainly involved suffering (Philippians 2: 7-8; Hebrews 5:8; 12:13; 1 Peter 2:21; 4:1), but was, above all, death - both the physical separation of the spirit from the body and the spiritual separation of the person from God. "Christ died for the ungodly," "Christ died for us," he suffered the death that otherwise we would have suffered (Romans 5:6, 8; 1 Corinthians 8:11; 2 Corinthians 5:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:10). He "laid down His life for us" (1 John 3:16). Even Caiaphas, the high priest who declared Christ guilty of blasphemy, ironically prophesied that Christ's death would be "for the people" (John 11:49-52). Jesus insisted that His death was not a mistake, but was the very purpose for which He came into the world (John 12:27) and something which He accepted willingly (John 10:18). The apostolic preaching of the cross insisted that He gave Himself for us as an offering and a sacrifice (Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 5:2; Titus 2:14) and that this was God's plan (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Ephesians 1:7-9). In human terms, the manner of His death, hanging on a

“tree,” was so horrific, humiliating and disgraceful that it was appropriate only for those who were cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Taking notice of this Paul describes Christ’s substitutionary death as Christ “becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

If the human, visible, physical suffering of Christ is difficult to comprehend, certainly the emotional and spiritual aspect of His substitutionary death is beyond imagining. There is mystery here, only hinted at by certain lines of thought in Scripture. First, we must notice the progressive abandonment of Jesus Christ by the world which had been created through Him (Matthew 2:16-18; John 1:11), by his nation (John 1:11, Matthew 27:22-23), by the Gentiles (Matthew 27:19, 24), by the leaders of his people (Matthew 26: 65-66; Matthew 27:1), by his own brothers (John 7:3-5), by his disciples (Matthew 26:14-15, 47-50, 56; even the closest and most stalwart of them, Matthew 26:69-75), and finally by God the Father (Matthew 27:46). In His death Christ was absolutely alone, not even experiencing fellowship with God the Father. Moreover, even this most terrible abandonment by God is heightened when we consider that He was at the same time the object of God’s righteous condemnation and wrath (Romans 8:3; Isaiah 53:10, “The Lord was pleased to crush Him”).

A second consideration combines with this idea of abandonment to suggest the magnitude of Christ’s suffering in death. Throughout not just His earthly ministry but from eternity, God the Son had enjoyed perfect, unbroken fellowship with His Father and with God the Spirit. This relationship was certainly in evidence at the baptism of Jesus, when the Father speaks from heaven and the Spirit alights on the Son in the form of a dove. John especially emphasizes the intimacy of the relationship between the Son and the Father in his gospel. Jesus was with God and was God from eternity

(John 1:1-2). Jesus taught that He was God's only begotten Son, sent by the Father into the world (John 3:16-17). He zealously defended "His Father's house" (John 2:15-17). Jesus claimed that He did the works of the Father, that the Father showed Him all things that He was doing, that the Father loved Him, that the Father had given all judgment into His hands, that the Father testified to Him, and that He had come in the Father's name (John 5:19ff). He said that those who knew Him would know the Father (John 8:19), that the Father knew Him and that He knew the Father (John 10:15). He said that He and His Father were one (John 10:30) and that He was in the Father and the Father was in Him (John 14:11) and that He shared in the Father's glory "before the world was" (John 10:5). Against this perfect, unbroken relationship Christ's cry "My God, My God why have You forsaken Me," takes on an infinitely terrible depth. Christ's substitutionary death for us in some measure seems to have impaired the perfect fellowship of the three divine Persons of the Trinity. Is it possible that the punishment for our sin pierced in this way to the heart of God and involved not only the suffering of the Son, but also the "suffering" of the Father and the Spirit?

Another line of evidence which indicates the extent of the punishment suffered by Christ is that His death satisfied the wrath of God against sin. The wrath of the holy God against sin is well illustrated in the history of Israel. Time and time again, in response to Israel's sin, God's wrath results in famine, plague, defeat by enemies, and ultimately death. Far from ignoring or minimizing the wrath of God, Jesus and the apostles made it clear that God's wrath pursues those who sin. Those who reject the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on them (John 3:36). The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against those who suppress the truth (Romans 1:2; 2:5). Men, apart from God's grace are "by nature children of wrath," (Ephesians 2:3) and are also subject to His wrath



because of their sins (Ephesians 5:6). There is a day of wrath coming when God will finally punish the devil, the antichrist and all whose names are not found written in the book of life (Matthew 3:7; Romans 2:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Revelation 6:16-17; 20:10, 15). John's vision of that day, the book of Revelation, is perhaps the most extended and terrifying presentation of God's wrath in Scripture. The point here is that, whatever the extent of the holy God's wrath against our sin, Christ's death in our place satisfied that wrath. Isaiah notes, "The Lord was pleased to bruise Him . . . He will see the anguish of His soul, and be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10-11). Paul, the author of Hebrews, and John all describe Christ's death as "propitiating" or satisfying God's wrath (Romans 2:25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2). Paul especially extends this idea to tell us that through Christ's death God has reconciled us, who were once His enemies, to Himself (Romans 5:10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Colossians 1:20-22). God's holy wrath against "not our sins only, but the sins of the world" (1 John 2:2), is the measure of the price Christ paid when He "died for our sins according to the Scriptures," because His death satisfied that wrath.

## "Christ was buried"

In view of the tremendously rich meaning which the Scriptures attach to the death of Christ, when we come to the next gospel fact, His burial, we might wonder, "Do the Scriptures attach any special significance to this at all beyond the fact of the matter?" In the gospel accounts the burial of Jesus receives less attention than the death or resurrection and may seem, at first, to be merely a logical necessity linking these two more important events.

For the most part, the details given about the burial do reinforce the fact of Jesus' death – that Jesus really did

die – and His resurrection – that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead. Mark notices that Pilate inquired specifically as to whether Jesus was dead and was assured by the centurion who “was standing right in front of Him” and saw Him “breath His last” that Jesus was dead (Mark 15: 39, 44-45). John mentions the soldiers’ observation that Jesus was already dead and the spear thrust into Jesus’ side, a further confirmation of death in that “immediately blood and water came out” (John 19:34). All four gospels mention Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, a secret disciple of Jesus and a member of the council, who asked for and received permission from Pilate to bury the body of Jesus. He, with Nicodemus (a detail mentioned by John), did so in Joseph’s own new garden tomb, in which “no one had ever lain.” Joseph and Nicodemus serve as well-known, respected, witnesses who confirmed by their actions that Jesus was indeed dead. The tomb was not obscure, but the newly prepared tomb of a prominent, wealthy citizen and, therefore, not likely to be confused with others. Likewise, another body could not have been mistaken for Jesus’, since His was the only body in tomb. These details strengthen the witness of the empty tomb to Jesus’ resurrection. A more subtle testimony to Jesus’ death is that all four gospels specify that it is the “body of Jesus,” not “Jesus,” which is subject to burial. Jesus also made this distinction when the woman anointed His head with costly perfume “She has anointed My body beforehand for the burial” (Mark 14:8). Matthew mentions that the chief priest posts a guard to make the tomb as secure as possible. This detail, again, confirms the death of Christ – had He revived from a “swoon” the guards would have witnessed this – and His resurrection – the guard made it impossible for His disciples to steal the body.

Beyond these details, however, other references to Jesus’ burial and the period in which His body remained in the grave open much wider vistas of meaning. Jesus

compared His burial to the “sign of Jonah the prophet.” “The Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:39-41). On the basis of this sign “the men of Nineveh will stand up and condemn this generation because . . . something greater than Jonah is here.” The primary reference here seems, again, to be to the resurrection rather than the time spent in the grave, since Jonah would have been no sign at all had he not been vomited up on dry ground and so survived his ordeal. Likewise, Jesus’ burial would not have exceptional and, thus, the ground for condemnation, had He not been raised from the dead. Nonetheless, this passage suggests a broader meaning for Christ’s burial in two respects. First, Jesus speaks of “the Son of Man,” not “the body of the Son of Man” and, second, he does not say “grave” but uses the intriguing phrase “the heart of the earth.” The phrase makes us think not of the dead body in the tomb, but of the activity of the Son of Man’s immaterial divine-human Person during the burial period. This line of thought also fits the analogy with Jonah more closely, since Jonah did not die in the fish’s belly, but actively prayed and worshiped there.

Several other New Testament passages refer to Jesus Christ’s redemptive activity during the burial period. Peter’s expressions in his first sermon “God raised [Jesus] up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. . . . he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption” (Acts 2:24, 31), suggest that Christ for a time was present in the realm of death or Hades, but was not “abandoned” there and could not be “held” there. Paul states that Christ “descended into the lower parts of the earth” (Ephesians 4:9; see also Romans 10:7). This descent into death and the place of the dead is significant in that it extends Christ’s solidarity with us beyond the cross and into the grave. This idea is mentioned in Isaiah

53:9ff, “they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death . . . he was numbered among the transgressors,” and in Hebrews 2:9, “he tasted death for everyone.” Paul argues that sin will no longer have dominion over us because we were “buried with Christ by baptism into death” (Romans 6:4; also Colossians 2:12). In His atoning substitutionary work, Christ experienced the death of the wicked in their place, fully and completely.

Furthermore, Christ’s descent is presented as the means by which He vanquished death and the devil and destroyed their power over us. Paul tells us that “He who descended is the one who also ascended far above the heavens that he might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:10). God, “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Christ]” (Colossians 2:15). There is not only a past, completed, partial aspect of this victory, “Our savior Christ Jesus abolished death and brought life and immortality to light,” (2 Timothy 1:10), but also future final aspect to which we may look forward “The last enemy that will be abolished is death . . . then the saying will be fulfilled ‘Death, where is your victory, where is your sting?’” (1 Corinthians 15:26, 55-56). The author of Hebrews explains that Christ “partook of [flesh and blood] that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:14-15). In Revelation 1:18 the risen, glorified and victorious Christ declares, “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”

Peter’s references to Christ’s descent into and victory over death add several unique and somewhat mysterious elements.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for

the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water (1 Peter 3:18-20).

They will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does (1 Peter 4:5-6).

Here Peter refers to death or the place of the dead as a "prison," a place of forced confinement for spirits (see Isaiah 24:21-22 and 2 Peter 2:4 for similar expressions.). Christ was "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit," a phrase that again directs our thought away from Christ's body in the grave and toward the activity of His immaterial person. This activity included proclamation or preaching to "the spirits in prison" who "formerly did not obey." Without trying to resolve all difficulties raised by these verses (Did Christ preach to certain spirits or to all of the dead? What was the purpose of this preaching? Do these passages teach a "second chance" at salvation?), we observe that Christ's preaching was part of His triumph over death, the very first proclamation of the gospel of His death, burial and resurrection.

It is wonderful how the language of the passages above treads the fine line between symbolism and literal, material reality. Most Christians agree that the devil is a real personal being. On the other hand, it seems evident that Paul's personifications of death in 1 Corinthians as the last enemy and as a subject to be addressed ("Where is your victory?") are a literary device and not meant to teach that death is a personal being. Regardless,

however, of how literally we understand Christ's "descent," to the "lower parts of the earth," and His "disarming of rulers, authorities, etc.," it is clear that the time Christ spent in the grave was a period of momentous activity with respect to our salvation. In and through His death He triumphed over death and the devil and provided for our triumph over these enemies. In proclaiming the gospel, we add our voices to Christ's own proclamation of His victory which began in the bastion of the enemies' greatest strength, the place of the dead. The significance which the New Testament attaches to the burial period is that it is the beginning of Christ's universal (from the depths of death and Hades, through the "ends of the earth" to the highest heavens) and complete victory over His and our enemies, a victory which is continued and fulfilled through the proclamation of the good news. In this connection it is also noteworthy that the last and most terrible judgments before Christ's return and complete victory over evil will be accompanied by "another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Revelation 14:6). The gospel, the proclamation of Christ's victory, should be and will be proclaimed until history itself is brought to conclusion.

### "Christ was raised on the third day"

The most prominent significance that the New Testament assigns to the resurrection is that it validates Christ's claims about Himself and His redemptive work. Paul states explicitly that, in His resurrection, Jesus was declared to be the Son of God (Romans 1:4). In his first sermon Peter explains that because of Christ's unique nature, His resurrection was inevitable, "It was impossible that death could hold him." Therefore, Jesus' resurrection is proof that Jesus is "Lord and Messiah,"

the one who would sit upon David's throne forever (Acts 2: 24, 30-32). The apostles were so intent on proclaiming the evidentiary value of the resurrection, in fact, that the term almost becomes a shorthand expression in the Book of Acts for the entire gospel message. Matthias is chosen to take the place of Judas as one of the twelve so that he would "become a witness with us of Christ's resurrection" (Acts 1:22). The earliest apostolic preaching was characterized by Luke as "giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33). Of all of the elements of the gospel message it seems that the resurrection was the specific point that caused the strongest reaction in the earliest audiences of the gospel. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were "greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4:2). The Athenian Greeks were both intrigued and offended by Paul's emphasis upon the resurrection (Acts 17:18, 32). Paul argues that the evidentiary value of the resurrection is so important that, if the resurrection had not occurred, the entire Christian faith and message would be false and worthless (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). It also seems that he has in mind the evidentiary role of the resurrection when he says that Christ was "delivered up because of offenses and was raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25). While it was Christ's death which provided the basis for us to be declared righteous by God, His resurrection provided publicly visible evidence that Christ's sacrifice was accepted and that God has, indeed, justified us.

A second meaning which the New Testament gives to the resurrection is that it is reason to believe that the same divine power by which Jesus was raised also is at work in those who follow Him, setting them free from sin and death. Paul argues in Romans 6 that because we have been buried with Christ in baptism, "as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too

may walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection . . . so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (vv. 4-5, 12; see also Philippians 3:10). In Romans 8 Paul associates this resurrection power specifically with the Holy Spirit, "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (v. 11). It should be noted that Jesus' teaching on this point provided ample warrant for Paul's. "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. . . Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5: 21, 24).

The New Testament also sees in Jesus' resurrection the guarantee of the future resurrection of all men and the restoration of creation. Jesus taught "An hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear [My] voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). On the occasion of His raising Lazarus from the dead Jesus promised, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies" (John 11:25). How could such claims be believable if Jesus Himself had failed to rise from the dead? On the other hand, if Jesus has been raised from the dead as eyewitnesses have testified and as Christians believe, amazing possibilities open up. Paul affirms "Christ has been raised from the dead" and then spells out the implications in 1 Corinthians 15. Christ, he notes, is only the "first fruits of those who are asleep . . . for whereas in Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order, Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at



His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father” (vv 20-25). He notes that this process, begun in Christ’s resurrection, will result in the very destruction of death itself (v 26). In His resurrection Christ is seen to be the “Lord of both the dead and the living” (Romans 14:9) and Jesus’ resurrection is proof that through Jesus God will judge the world (Acts 17:31). Elsewhere Paul teaches that through the future resurrection or “revealing” of the children of God all of creation “will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). This hope, Paul says, is implicit in the gospel and in our salvation. Peter agrees, “God has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). The resurrection of Jesus then not only points backward to the cross, but is our hope of transformation in the present and the promise of the complete restoration of creation in the future. Because of the resurrection of Christ’s body, as well as the continued life of His immaterial person, Christianity does not offer an escape from material existence. Rather it affirms that the material world is the good, albeit fallen, creation of God, is redeemable, and, in fact, will be restored to its original glory and more.

This then is the gospel, the good news of God’s gracious redemptive work in the events of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection.

## The Proclamation of the Gospel is the Call to Faith

As noted above, Jesus’ intention and command was that the gospel be proclaimed to all men everywhere (Matthew 24:14, 26:13, 28:18; Mark 13:10; Luke 9:6; John 12:32; Acts 1:8). It is evident that the apostles and

the earliest Christians made a determined effort to obey this command (Acts 1:9; 2:14, 17, 39; 3:25; 8:28ff; 10:28, 34-35; 28:28) and that they understood this to be the central mission of the church (2 Corinthians 5:15-18). Implicit in this proclamation of good news is the call for its acceptance. The good news is to be heard, understood, accepted and believed. Christ the savior is to be heard, believed, followed and obeyed. This call or invitation to receive the good news is explicitly given in various ways: 1) "know," Acts 2:36; 13:38, 2) "obey," John 6:29; Acts 6:7; Romans 1:6, 10:16; Galatians 3:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:8, 3) "receive," John 1: 11-12, 4) by far most common, "believe," Luke 8:12; John 3:15-16, 36, 6:35, 17:20-21, 19:35, 20:31; Christians were known as "those who believe" Acts 2:44, 4:32, 5:14; Acts 8:37, 10:43, 11:21, 13:39, 16:31 5) and less common, "repent" Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38, 3:19, 17:30, 6) "be baptized" Acts 2:38, 8:36, 10:48, 18:8, 22:16 and 7) "call upon the Lord" Acts 2:21, 9:14, 21, 21:16; Roman 10:12-14; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Timothy 2:22. In short, all of these ways of speaking are authorized in the New Testament and we may use them in urging our hearers to respond to the gospel. Each can be helpful in its own way. Nevertheless, it is important to take notice of the preeminent place of faith in the New Testament as the appropriate response to the gospel and to maintain this emphasis in our proclamation of the gospel.

Those who hear the gospel are, above all, asked to believe the gospel. As noted above, this is the most frequent response asked for and observed in the New Testament. Moreover, as the other responses listed above are examined more closely, it becomes evident that they are either accompanied by the invitation to believe or explained in terms of it. It is the knowledge of the mystery of the gospel which leads to obedience of faith (Romans 16:26; see also 2 Timothy 3:15). The "work of God," that is the specific obedience required by God

for salvation, is faith in Jesus (John 6:29; Romans 1:5). Those who “receive” Jesus are the very same ones who “believe in His name” (John 1:12). Those who are asked to repent are also instructed to believe (Mark 1:15; Acts 19:4; 20:21). Those who do repent and are baptized are also described as “those who believe” (Acts 38, 44; 3:19 and 4:4; 10:43, 48 and 11:17-18). Those who call upon the Lord do so because they have believed (Romans 10:12-14). Finally the preeminence of faith as the appropriate response to the gospel is demonstrated in that this point is a major theme in each of three New Testament books.

First, John tells us that he wrote his gospel so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:19). He notes that John the Baptist came so that “all might believe through him” (1:7). He tells us that Jesus’ miracles were done so that his disciples and others would believe (2:11, 23, 10:25, 11:42 and 14:11). John records Jesus’ appeals that his hearers believe (5:24, 6:35, 47, 7:38, 8:24, 10:37-38, 11:40, 12:36, 46, 14:1, 12), Jesus’ distress at their frequent lack of belief (4:48, 5:38ff, 6:36, 64, 8:45, 10:25), a number of instances in which they did believe (2:23, 4:39, 50, 7:31, 8:30, 10:42, 11:45, 12:42, 20:8, 25) and assures us that those who do believe in Jesus will have eternal life (3:15-16, 18, 36).

In his epistle to the Romans Paul affirms that the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” This is true because in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed “from faith to faith” (Romans 1:16-17). He explains at length that through the law and through works of the law “no flesh will be justified in God’s sight” (3:20). It is only through faith in Jesus Christ that man may be justified, declared righteous, before God. He declares emphatically “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law”

(3:28). He then illustrates this principle with the example of Abraham who “believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness” (4:3, the entire chapter). In the remainder of his letter Paul spells out the blessings and responsibilities of those who have been “justified by faith” (5:1-2ff).

Finally, faith is Paul’s central concern in his letter to the Galatians. He fears that, by reintroducing “works of the Law” as the principle of Christian living that the Galatian believers have abandoned the gospel of grace. He insists that “man is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus” (2:16) and that “the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (2:20). Again he uses the example of Abraham to show that “the righteous man shall live by faith” (3:11).

In the New Testament “faith” is used to refer both to the act of believing, as in most of the references above from John, Romans and Galatians, and also to the substance of what is believed, the content of “the faith,” as in Ephesians 4:13, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” The connection between these two meanings is so constant and intimate that it is sometimes difficult to know which is meant in particular passages (see for instance Romans 1:8, 4:12; 1 Corinthians 2:5; Galatians 4:23, 25).

Although “faith” is used on rare occasions to refer to belief in specific ideas beyond the gospel (Romans 14:2), it is still not too much to observe that saving faith, the faith asked for by Jesus and the apostles, cannot exist apart from the content of the gospel message. “The knowledge of the Son of God” is, first and foremost, the knowledge of Him in His death, burial and resurrection. To “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31), is to believe that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried and that He was raised

again according to the Scriptures – that Jesus is able to and actually does save us through His death, burial and resurrection. The New Testament writers know nothing of a faith in Jesus as a great teacher or great moral example which simultaneously denies or ignores His death, burial and resurrection. Faith in the New Testament is both the message of the gospel and the individual, human apprehension that knows, understands, accepts and relies on that message.

## Faith as Knowledge

The words “faith” and “believe” are often used in our everyday speech in ways that are less clear, precise and strong than the way these terms are used in the New Testament. Especially in the religious or spiritual sphere these terms may mean little more than wishful thinking, positive thinking, a general confidence in the benevolence of the universe or of God, or a vague optimism that everything will work out for the best. We hear, for instance, the expressions “keep the faith,” or “you’ve just got to have faith,” “you’ve just got to believe,” as if the important thing were to maintain a positive attitude, regardless of what or who is believed. Moreover, faith in our common parlance often is set against matters of observation and fact. “Science is a matter of observation and facts, while religion is a matter of faith.” In this way faith is often thought of as divorced from material reality and, almost by definition, an irrational flight of fancy. Sometimes Paul’s words are cited in favor of this view, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Paul, however, did not mean that Christian belief and life are disconnected from reality. On the contrary, he enjoins us to trust God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, precisely because we believe and know the greater and more decisive reality of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. Our faith is not

divorced from material reality, but grounded and firmly fixed to the real, material appearance of God in the flesh (John 1:14) and the historical gospel events. Of course, our faith stretches beyond the material into the realm of meaning and spirit as we have discussed above, but this in no way determines that faith is an irrational undertaking. Some of man's most remarkable rational achievements have been in realm of pure theory (in mathematics or physics for example), rooted in, but not confined to material reality.

Because of this disparity between our common usage and the way "faith" is understood in the New Testament, it is helpful to think and speak of faith as "knowledge" because this term connotes more strongly both the reality of the thing known and the personal certainty with which that thing is perceived. Without using the specific term, the writer of Hebrews seems to be addressing this point when he tells us that "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). "Know" also has the advantage in English of connoting both rational, objective apprehension, as well as very personal individual experience. We use the term to refer both to cold facts and to living, breathing people with whom we are in relationship. "Know" conveys the strength, clarity, intimacy of the meaning of "faith" as it is used in the New Testament.

This relationship between faith and knowledge appears directly in the New Testament in the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 2:36; 13:38), but also as a way of describing growth in the Christian life. We might say that the faith that trusts in Christ matures into a full knowledge of Him and His grace. Paul speaks in this way of the believers at Colossi, "How great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face that their hearts may be

encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:1; see also Hebrew 1:2-3, 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30, Ephesians 1:7-9, and John 1:1, 14).

## Faith and Repentance

It is clear that Jesus and the apostles emphasized repentance in proclaiming the gospel. Jesus preached "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The twelve disciples went out at Jesus' command and preached "that men should repent" (Mark 6:12). In "opening their minds to understand the Scriptures," Jesus explained "that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations" (Luke 24:47). Peter, in his first sermon, appealed, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Paul described himself as preaching "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). If we are to proclaim the gospel as Jesus and the apostles did, we must not hesitate to ask that sinners respond to the gospel by repenting of their sin as well as by believing in Christ.

It is also important to recognize, however, that repentance is implicit in believing acceptance of the gospel message. Repentance involves the recognition of one's sin and guilt, remorse for, even, hatred of one's sin, the confession of sin and a determined turning away from sin. If I believe that Christ died for my sins, I have already implicitly believed that I have sinned. I have already implicitly rejected my sin as something deserving of death and, in that way hateful. In desiring and accepting by faith the pardon for my sins offered on the

basis of Christ's death, I have already implicitly turned away from my sins toward the righteousness which is by faith. When considered in this way the call to repentance is seen to be nothing more than the call to faith in the gospel. All of the elements of the call to repentance are contained within the call to faith.

It should also be noted, however, that the reverse is not true. The call to repentance is biblical and necessary in clarifying the meaning of the gospel and yet, in itself, repentance is an insufficient response to the gospel. Repentance is less than faith. A person may truly repent of their sin and yet still lack that faith that lays hold of the cross and knows that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." Jesus seems to have had such a possibility in mind when He warned, "When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (Matthew 12:45). The disciples whom Paul encountered at Ephesus illustrate the incompleteness of repentance apart from faith. They had been baptized with John's baptism of repentance but did not experience the new birth until Paul instructed them to believe in Jesus (Acts 19:1-7). True faith moves through repentance and beyond repentance and grasps the forgiveness which is promised in the gospel. The emotions which accompany repentance are those of sorrow, regret, mourning, resolve. The emotions which accompany New Testament faith move beyond these into relief, gratitude, peace and joy.

In fact, we must be careful not to stress repentance as a precondition for faith, separate from the gospel promise



of forgiveness. We must understand that a repentance which does not lead to faith may be as bad as or worse than no repentance at all. If we do separate the need for repentance from the forgiveness that comes through faith, questions will arise such as: How much repentance is enough before a person is forgiven? How much repentance is enough in addition to the faith required by the gospel? Must a person consciously repent of each and every specific sin and to what degree? How can a sinner be sure that they have repented completely of every sin? These questions warn us that insisting on a degree of repentance beyond that which is implicit in faith violates Paul's teaching that the righteousness which comes through the gospel is ours "apart from works of the law . . . through faith . . . as a gift" (Romans 3:21-24). A sinner can no more earn forgiveness through repentance, no matter how strong or complete, than he can through any other work. On the other hand, it is consistent with Paul's teaching to affirm that the amount of repentance that is necessary for salvation is specified in the gospel message itself. It is the amount of repentance that is necessary to understand and believe that "Christ died for our [my] sins according to the Scriptures." Moreover, this affirmation does not preclude the growth of repentance and of faith in those who have received the gospel in faith. In practice, faith in "Christ died for our sins" opens us to deeper recognition of just what those sins were and are and a growing repentance for them. This growing repentance, in turn, strengthens our faith, leading us into a greater understanding and comprehension of the gospel promise that "Christ died for our sins."

## Faith and Baptism

A brief word may be helpful regarding baptism as an appropriate response to the gospel. There are at least

two instances in which baptism was explicitly called for as a response to the proclamation of the gospel, Acts 2:38, Peter's first sermon, and Acts 22:16, Paul's recounting of Ananias' exhortation to him. In both cases, however, it is apparent that faith is understood to be the necessary condition for baptism and that baptism is an outward sign of obedient faith. Baptism would have been an empty exercise for the Jews in Peter's audience or for Paul unless the gospel which provides its context and meaning was understood and believed. Baptism outwardly pictures the person's inward identification with Christ and trust in His death, burial and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. In neither of these instances can baptism be understood as a substitute for faith. Moreover, when other passages such as Romans 3 and Galatians 1-4 are considered, it is clear that Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16 should not be understood to establish baptism as an additional requirement for justification beyond the faith which comprehends and embraces the gospel. Baptism is required for salvation only in the sense that obedience to God's commands generally is required in order to consistently live out and express the faith which saves. Perhaps it is better to say that baptism is required by salvation. That is because we have been, are being and will be saved we are commanded to follow Christ in baptism.

In proclaiming the gospel we should not fail to ask those who respond in faith to follow Christ in baptism and in this way publicly declare their faith. On the other hand, we must be careful not to give the impression that the activity of baptism (as Peter calls it "the removal of dirt from the flesh" 1 Peter 3:20) in itself has any power to forgive or wash away sins. The baptism which saves is the faith which accepts Christ's death, burial and resurrection as our own and which declares itself outwardly in baptism in water.

## Proclaiming the Good News

We will not present a specific technique for evangelism here such as the “Roman road” or the “Four Spiritual Laws.” Such techniques are very useful in proclaiming the gospel and certainly have been used by God to call many to faith in Christ, but our present purpose is not to provide a manual for evangelism. Nor will we consider apologetic matters such as proofs for the existence of God or the problem of evil. Again these topics may be useful adjuncts in proclaiming the gospel but move beyond the present subject into prolegomena or philosophy. Regrettably, such discussions also seem to divert attention from the gospel as often as to serve as useful clarifications of or support for it. Here we will simply note several general attitudes and principles which, according to the New Testament, should characterize our proclamation.

Our proclamation must be motivated by and filled with love for those to whom we speak. The love that fills the gospel begins with God, whom John states emphatically “is love.” (1 John 4:8). The foremost self-revelation and manifestation of this God who is love is that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). The gospel events and meaning are the most clear, complete and powerful revelation of God’s love for fallen men and creation. This eternal love of God filled the incarnate Son’s earthly life and ministry and was expressed even to those who rejected Him. We see it in His exchange with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21) and His cry for unbelieving Jerusalem, “Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matthew 23:37). We hear it in His anguished prayer from the cross “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”

(Luke 23:34). This love of God in Christ transforms us through the gospel and engenders love in us for Him (1 John 4:10, 19) and for those whom He loves, who bear His image. It “constrains” or “controls” us so that we live not for ourselves but for Christ and moves us to entreat others to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, 20). We can see this love in the gospel pleadings and prayer of Paul, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:3). The gospel may be proclaimed from motives other than and less than love (Philippians 1:15-17) and such a proclamation may even be used of the Spirit to create faith and life in the hearer, but these motives are inconsistent with and contradict the message itself. If we are to proclaim the gospel consistently and faithfully our proclamation must be an expression of love toward our fellow sinners.

When the Spirit uses the gospel to convert the sinner, the sinner is given a new identity, that of forgiven sinner. Forgiveness is no longer something separate from me, something that I must seek from the outside. I now know forgiveness from the inside, and I know that my new identity, my new standing before God, is a gift arising from God’s grace, undeserved and unearned. There is no place for pride, for an attitude of superiority, here. These attitudes, in fact, suggest that I have not understood the gospel at all, but am only a pretender, dabbling around the edges of God’s gracious forgiveness but never entering into it personally. It is regrettable, but undeniable, that often the proclamation of the gospel by the church has been undermined and obscured by attitudes and expressions of superiority, condescension, privilege and exclusivity. Even worse, history is replete with examples of the gospel being used to reinforce the power and prestige of particular churches and individuals. There is no branch of Christendom, no

church, no denomination, nor hardly an individual Christian which is exempt from this terrible fault. It appears no less in the most Protestant of preachers than in the medieval hierarchy of priests against which Luther protested. Medieval sacramentalism distributed the grace and forgiveness of the gospel in small, very controlled doses through its hierarchy of priests in a manner that reinforced the church's authority and made the individual dependent upon the church. The spectacle of the preacher of the gospel who claims and exercises authority over his hearers in areas far beyond the matters of sin and forgiveness (dress, diet, money, etc.) has repeated itself frequently. John of Leyden, whose followers at his urging took control of the city of Munster in 1533 and proclaimed him king, and the American radio evangelist whose healing ministry is available only through a monetary offering are examples. The practice of "closed communion," even if for the noble purposes of protecting the mysteries of God or protecting the participant from "partaking unworthily" (1 Corinthians 11:27), has too often degenerated into a form of coercion, requiring the would-be participant to swear allegiance to a particular form of Christianity rather than to the Lord Himself. The sad result is that the grace and forgiveness of God and communion with other believers, so freely offered in the gospel and in the Lord's Supper, is withheld from sinners who are in desperate need of it.

If we are to proclaim the gospel well, we must never forget that we are and continue to be forgiven sinners. D. T. Niles (Sri Lankan evangelist, ecumenical leader and hymn writer) offered a wonderful description of the basic humility which must characterize our evangelism, "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread." We never cease to be beggars. We never accumulate enough grace and forgiveness to move beyond or away from the cross or to claim any power or authority or position apart from the cross. We see this

perspective in Paul who readily identified himself as “the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9) and knew himself to be “the very least of all saints” (Ephesians 3:8) and the “foremost” of the sinners whom Christ Jesus came to save (1 Timothy 1:15). To provide for our salvation our Lord “emptied Himself . . . humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7-8). “Though He was rich, yet for our sake He became poor, so that we through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). How inconsistent and monstrous it is for sinners who have been graciously forgiven to use the gospel as a means of wielding power over other sinners. We sinners, who proclaim this wonderful news, have needed and continue to need the forgiveness of God as much as any of the other sinners to whom we speak.

We must strive to always keep the person and work of Christ central in our proclamation. We must proclaim Jesus Christ who died for our sins, was buried and was raised again and we must proclaim the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are certainly other important doctrines related to this central message such as the reliability of Scripture, the Trinity, and the existence and nature of heaven and hell. It may, in practice, be necessary to discuss and clarify these related issues in presenting the gospel. It must also be recognized, however, that only if the truth of the person and work of Christ is accepted is there adequate ground for resolving these other matters. The incarnation of the eternal Word in Jesus Christ was not only the means of our redemption but also the definitive and fullest self-revelation of God. In Him all other self-revelations of God, in nature, the prophets, the miracles, the words of the Old and New Testaments, achieve clarity, completion and certainty. Apart from Him, these other forms of revelation all remain unclear, incomplete and uncertain.

There is another sense in which we must keep the person and work of Christ central in our proclamation of the gospel. We must not let the focus become the specific response of the sinner. It is not important whether a sinner has prayed a particular prayer, come forward at a meeting, raised their hand, signed a response card or any other of the many actions intended to let the preacher know that the message has been understood and accepted. In fact, it is not critical whether the speaker ever knows that a response has taken place. The important thing is that the sinner hears, understands and accepts the gospel as true. No outward expression can guarantee that this inner understanding and expression has taken place. To ask for such a specific expression often only muddles the issue. The only means the speaker has to influence the listener toward genuine faith is simply to return ever and always to the message itself – restating, repeating, clarifying, illustrating, persuading – and to pray that God will give understanding, life and faith. When God does give this genuine faith to the sinner through the message preached, it will not fail to show itself in confession, through the forgiven sinner's words and works.

This brings us to a last consideration. In proclaiming the gospel, we are utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit of God for the results. The creation of and sustaining of faith in the human mind and heart is the work of God (Ephesians 2:8-9; John 3:5-8; John 4:44, 65; Acts 16:14). The Holy Spirit impresses the gospel promise, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," upon the human mind and heart in such a way as to create certain knowledge of, an assurance of, the truthfulness of that promise. Faith is surely a "human" thing. It is the person who believes; it is not God who believes in us or for us. Nevertheless, this human thing cannot take place apart from the work of God because the sinner is "dead in his trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). It is only God who

can speak and “make us alive together in Christ” (Ephesians 2:5). Because of this, spiritual life and faith are the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). The spiritual transaction that takes place when the sinner believes is analogous to the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus, the eternal Word, through whom all things were created, spoke, “Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43) and the very command was the means by which God gave Lazarus life and consciousness. Lazarus did obey and come out of the grave, but only after the living Word of God had given him life and the ability to do so.

In addition to resurrection two other images are used in the New Testament to speak of the conversion of the sinner through the gospel: 1) birth, rebirth, regeneration (John 1:12-13 “born of God”; 3:1-8 “born of the Spirit”; Titus 3:5-7 “renewed by the Spirit”; 1 Peter 1:3, 23 “God caused us to be born again” “born again by the Word of God”; James 1:18 “of His own will He begot us with the word of truth”); and 2) creation (Genesis 1:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10). All three of these images emphasize God's initiative (the work of the Holy Spirit in particular) in giving spiritual life and faith through His Word. This divine initiative appears in several instances in the book of Acts. “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord” (11:21); “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (13:48); and “A certain woman named Lydia was listening, and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (16:14). Similarly, Paul's statement that the gospel came to the Thessalonians “not in word only but in Spirit and in power” refers to the creative work of God the Spirit in bringing about faith in Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Jesus insisted upon the necessity of this divine initiative, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. . . . It is the Spirit that gives life . . . but there are some of you that do not believe . . . Therefore I said



to you that no man can come to me, except it were given to him by my Father" (John 6:44, 63-65), and also upon its complete efficacy "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

This work of God's "effectual calling" (per Romans 8:30; Acts 2:39; Romans 1:6-7; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 24-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 "called by our gospel") has been described as "irresistible grace," "effectual grace," "efficacious grace," by various theologians and in various Protestant confessions of faith. What is meant to be conveyed by these expressions is that God calls in such a way that all those whom He calls will come to faith and be saved - an idea found very clearly in Romans 8:28-30. What is not meant is that God saves people "against their will," forcing them to do something they do not want to do ("irresistible" can easily give this impression). God is greater than our heart or will (Phil 2:13; 1 John 3:20; Psalm 33:15) and works in such a way as to make us willing to believe through circumstances which He ordains for us, through people which He brings into our lives, through the particular presentation of His word which we hear, and so on. When we believe, we believe willingly - our will is fully engaged, serving the purpose for which God created it. Nevertheless, we also believe because God has graciously chosen us and effectually called us to believe, and called us in such a way that we cannot help but believe.

The human act of believing certainly involves our mind, will, and emotions. We may experience this work of God by which He gives us life and faith as: 1) coming to understand or know something that we did not know or understand previously, 2) making a decision to believe and trust in something that we did not trust in before, and 3) an emotion of peace, joy, forgiveness, thanksgiving. But the spiritual life and faith given by God is before,

underneath and the cause of the decision to believe. It is a personal knowledge, a certainty, a fact, revealed to my mind and impressed upon my heart by God. By this work of God, I know, I believe, I feel that the gospel promise of forgiveness applies to me personally - that I personally am forgiven. This understanding of faith in no way contradicts the "whosoever believes" of John 3:16. All those and only those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. Nevertheless it is also true that only those to whom God has given the gift of faith will believe (Ephesians 5:8-9). Romans 8:29-30 places the work of "effectual calling" between predestination and justification, in an unbroken series of divine acts. Faith certainly comes from the hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17), but it also is a specific work of the "life giving Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

There are two very practical implications of observing that we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the gospel. First, we ought to pray as we proclaim. Our task is to proclaim Christ faithfully and clearly. This is a worthwhile expression of worship and obedience whether or not anyone responds in faith. We should be as clear and as persuasive as we can be, but in the end, it is liberating to realize that the outcome is in God's hands. We must ask God to use our proclamation of the gospel to give spiritual life and faith. If God does this, all the thanks and glory belongs to Him. If no one responds, we can also thank God that His will is being done. If there is a negative reaction, even persecution, we can rejoice that we have been counted worthy to suffer on account of the gospel (Acts 5:41).

Second, knowing that we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit means that we can "sow in hope" (1 Corinthians 9:10) knowing God's word will not be without effect (Isaiah 55:11). God's love toward sinners and, indeed, toward all of His creation (Romans 8:19-21), expressed

so expansively and finally in giving His Son to die to take away the sins of the world, will not be thwarted or in vain. Sooner or later, sometimes one by one and sometimes in a great throng, the Spirit will use the gospel to give sinners the grace of repentance, the knowledge of salvation, and to convert them to life and faith. Certainly there are grace resistant hearts and cultures and there are places where the means of proclamation are limited by law and lack of opportunity, but until our Lord returns we can be sure that both Jew and Gentiles will respond in faith to the gospel of grace (Romans 11:11-26).

We have noted above the gospel is the best and most important news possible for the sinner. It is also the most powerful news we might carry, the very “power of God.” Simply knowing it transforms individuals for the better, allowing them to begin dealing more truthfully with themselves and with others, allowing them to forgive as they have been forgiven. It transforms their relationship with God and their relationships with other sinners, infusing them with the new dynamics of grace, truth and forgiveness. In this way it uplifts families, communities and societies. One can trace this kind of transformation through history and through individual lives. In the early centuries of Christianity the gospel mitigated the some of the worst aspects of life in the Roman Empire. Justin Martyr observed the refusal of Christians to abandon their infants as the pagans did, as well their opposition to prostitution and mutilation (First Apology, 27). In the middle ages the gospel kept learning and hope alive through individuals like Dominic, Anselm, Francis of Assisi, and Thomas Aquinas. The monasteries that treasured and preserved the light of the gospel also held together the frail fabric of society by maintaining roads, providing care for the sick, copying texts and preserving and improving techniques for the trades and agriculture. The rediscovered gospel of grace flowered in the Reformation to contribute to formation of modern

languages, science and nation states. In England and America evangelical individuals and societies, like John Wesley, the Clapham Sect, William Wilberforce, William Booth and the Salvation Army relieved the sufferings of those brutalized by slavery and the industrial revolution. In taking the gospel to the four corners of the earth, missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also brought education, hygiene and medicine. It would be hardly possible to construct even a representative list of individuals whose lives that have been touched and transformed by the gospel. Such a list would have to include artists, philosophers, scientists, generals, kings, presidents and medical doctors, and examples of every other occupation. Its members would come from the whole spectrum of Christian belief and practice, from every nation, from every century and even decade, but would nevertheless share the common conviction that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” Of course, there are negative examples also – those who have claimed allegiance to the gospel, but whose lives have contradicted its essence of forgiveness and grace. There have been battles and wars fought over supposed Christian principles. Mission efforts, at times, have also served the purpose economic and political imperialism. But none of these nor all of them together can overturn the weight of the good that has flowed from the gospel. As we proclaim the gospel we can know that it is God’s power for salvation in individual lives, in families, in society, and in history.

Rick Lum, August 4, 2011