

THE STARTING POINT

Christians, either through good teaching or trial and error eventually come to accept that the Bible story revolves around the central figure of Jesus Christ and his gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God.

In his book, *According To Plan*, Graeme Goldsworthy develops this theme, *The main message of the Bible about Jesus Christ can easily become mixed with all sorts of things that are related to it. We see this in the way people define or preach the gospel. But it is important to keep the gospel itself clearly distinct from our response to it, or from the results of it in our lives and in the world.*

If our proper response to the gospel message is faith, then we should not make faith part of the gospel itself. It would be absurd to call people to have faith in faith! While the new birth bears a close relationship to faith in Christ, it is a mistake to speak of the new birth as it were itself the gospel. Faith in the new birth as such will not save us.

It is, therefore, important to understand what the gospel is, so that we include what must be believed, and what the gospel is not, so that we don't require to believe more than is necessary for salvation. The Bible contains a number of gospel expressions, one of the clearest being in Romans 1:1-4,

**1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—
2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures
3 regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David,
4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.**

From this passage we learn four main things about the gospel;

- 1 That it is the gospel of God*
- 2 It is the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets*
- 3 It is regarding his Son who was a descendant of David*
- 4 Who was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection*

*First it is God's gospel. He is the author of it and the one who puts it into effect. It achieves what he wants it to, and in the way he determines. It deals with the problems that he perceives and defines. It does not primarily deal with our needs as we perceive them – how can I live a better life, overcome my hang-ups, make sense of my existence etc, although it may include these. The gospel is God's way of dealing with his “**Problem**” of how he, a holy and just God, can justify and accept the sinner. Only God's wisdom is great enough to devise a plan that will achieve this.*

Secondly, it is the gospel that had its origin in the Old Testament. An important part of biblical theology or God knowledge is to try to understand how the promises given in the Old Testament are actually fulfilled in the New. In other words, the Christians use of the Old Testament is guided by the way we see its message relating to Christ, and through him, to us. Because Jesus is our final authority, we are vitally interested in how he and the apostles preached the gospel using the Old Testament as their Scriptures. It is so easy to overlook that Old Testament scriptures were the only ones in existence at the time.

Thirdly, there is the defined subject matter of the gospel. It is about the Son in a way that is not about the Father, or the Holy Spirit, or the believer. The Son is clearly identified. He is not only God the Son, the second person of the eternal Trinity. He is also Jesus of Nazareth who is descended from David the King of Israel. This sets the limits of the gospel to to the Jesus of history and his birth into a significant family, his life, death, resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. To be preaching the gospel we must be speaking about these things and their meaning for our salvation

Fourthly there is the central fact of the gospel, which is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Paul says that the resurrection identified Jesus as the Son of God.

I can't resist adding my comments at this point. Goldsworthy clearly and correctly says that the notable fact is the resurrection itself. When the topic is discussed, the length of time in the grave is often considered overly important and further confused by changes in the understanding of the word, day.. At the time of the event, the Jews considered any part of a day as 1 day whereas today a day is understood as the precise period of 24hours. Anything less than this is reckoned as part of a day.

So the controversy has raged for centuries. Was Jesus in the tomb for three full 24 hour days or was he there for 1 full day and 2 part days according to Jewish reckoning. Accepted rules for Bible interpretation come down in favour of the latter but does it really matter? The event is about the death and resurrection of Jesus, not how long he was dead. The central fact is that either way Jesus was as dead as a door nail. How long Jesus lay in that state neither adds nor detracts from the miracle of his resurrection as the Son of God. Over concern with peripheral issues only serve to take us away from the meat of the word as previously instanced by Goldsworthy..

Let us rejoin Graeme Goldsworthy as he takes us beyond the core essential beliefs,
Related to the gospel event are other important aspects of God's work which are not themselves the gospel. If we believe the gospel we will probably also believe these, but they are not the focus of our trust the way that the saving work of Jesus is. We do not preach them as the heart of our message to unbelievers.

*First there is the distinct work of the Father. The Bible tells us that God is not divided he is one. Thus Father, Son and Holy Spirit are involved with every aspect of God's work. But the three-ness of the one God means that each person has distinct roles even if the other two persons are also involved. The Father, it would appear, is distinctly the person who elects, creates and sends the Son into the world to preach. The Father's work even if it is “**God so loved the world**” out of John 3:16 is not to preach the gospel unless we get to the facts about the Son's person and work.*

Second, there is the distinct work of the Holy Spirit. He gives faith and new birth, he testifies to our hearts about Christ, he indwells the people of God and sanctifies them by gradually making them more like God. All of these are good and necessary works of God and they do not exist without the gospel. We must, however distinguish them from the gospel. They are the results or fruits of the gospel work of Jesus.

Third, we note what you do, or I do in response to the gospel, is not itself the gospel. You cannot say that repentance and faith are the gospel. They are what the Holy spirit enables us to do about the gospel. If you tell that they should trust Christ, believe the good news, or confess their sins, these things are undoubtedly true, but they are not the gospel.

We must tell them what it is about Christ that they should trust, what the good news is so that they can believe it and why sins should be confessed.

The New Testament emphasises the historic person of Christ and what he did to make it possible for us, through faith, to become the friends of God. The emphasis is also on him, as the one who sums up and brings to their fitting climax, all the promises and expectations raised in the Old Testament. There is a priority of order here that we must take into account if we are to understand the Bible correctly. It is the gospel event that brings about faith in the people of God, and the gospel that will motivate, direct, pattern and power the life of the Christian community. So we start from the gospel and move to an understanding of Christian living, and of the final goal toward which we are moving.

Again, we start from the gospel and move back into the old Testament to see what lies behind the person and work of Christ. The Old Testament is not completely superseded by the gospel, for that would make it irrelevant to us. It helps us understand the gospel by showing us the origins and meanings of the various ideas and special words used to describe Jesus and his works in the New Testament. Yet we also recognise that Christ is God's fullest and final word to mankind. As such he reveals to us the final meaning of the Old Testament.

Thank you Graeme Goldsworthy you have certainly left us with much to think about, much of which is self explanatory whilst the rest will only become plain as we, with the help of the Holy Spirit grow in grace and knowledge. But there are at least two ideas that should stand out like a lighthouse. First, that the gospel is the logical starting point for anyone receptive to spiritual matters and secondly that the gospel works best when it is not cluttered with events and ideas that really don't belong. Remember it is God's solution to his problem that will bear fruit in his time. It is not handcrafted to solve our problems as we would have them solved in our way and in our time. However since God's problem concerns all people, of all times, we have an iron clad assurance that our needs will not be overlooked.

Armed with this understanding let us look for evidence of its application in the fledgeling church. The Corinthian church presented Paul with many problems causing him to write in 1 Cor. 1:17-18, **“For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For 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.”**

Again in 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 warns the church against being pulled apart by division, **“By the grace God has given me I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it . But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”**

The passage goes on to detail how anything inconsistent with the foundation as laid by Paul must be torn down. So what was Paul's foundation? - the gospel

In the final chapter of the gospel according to John we find Jesus issuing his final instructions to the one he was leaving in charge. Three times he charged a testy Peter;

“Feed my lambs”

“Take care of my sheep”

“Feed my sheep”

How was Peter to feed them? With the the food on which grows grace and knowledge – the gospel - that which he had learned at the feet of Jesus and that which would be later revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. If our best efforts are to be of real value to God we will do likewise.

In the extract from According To Plan the writer introduces the concept of God being a three person trinity with each one playing a distinct and differing role to bring about a common goal, In his work, Like Father, Like Son, Tom Smail investigates this thought further and summarises his findings in this way. That God is three persons existing in a very special relationship with the Father playing the role of the initiator, Jesus as the one who responds to the authority of the Father and the Holy Spirit who consummates or brings all plans initiated by the Father, and endorsed by the Son, to their ultimate and intended completion.

So how does this Trinitarian concept fit with God's plan for our salvation, the gospel of Jesus Christ?. The Father devises the plan and sends the Son to earth to offer his life in exchange for ours, in obedience Jesus does as the Father has planned to the extent of dying on the cross. Although the work of Jesus is complete, the plan of the Father is not done and dusted until it has the belief and endorsement of the ones redeemed. To the logical human mind salvation is all one giant fairy tale and it takes the ingenuity and patience of the Holy Spirit before humanity can see beyond himself and this earthly life to the fullness. of the existence that God has planned for the ones he loves. The passport to that existence is nothing more, or anything less, than an unwavering belief that the Lord can, and will, keep every word of his every promise, and more, in his way and in his time,

Let it be clearly understood that it is our belief in, and acceptance of God's plan for our redemption that underpins our salvation. It does not depend on our level of understanding of it, or of our perception of the non essential doctrines like, even, the Trinity..However, although knowledge of the Trinity does not directly effect salvation, knowledge of it, is essential before we can relate to the real Jesus That much we can clearly understand . God outlines his goals but leaves us with the mystery of the '**how**' and '**when**'. Despite the best efforts of men, these mysteries will remain until God reveals the answers. Without this revelation the mysteries remain and disaster is imminent when man, in his enthusiasm, gets impatient and races ahead of God.

If man had the intellect to unravel the mysteries of God by his own hand, the scriptures would be robbed of their validity. For example consider one of my favourite passages, Isaiah 55:8-9, **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”**

That statement is universally truth regardless of the context in which it is used.

A second universal truth is that if a state of control is to be maintained the intellect of the creator must always be greater than the intellect of the creature. God is the creator of man and man is the creature of God. Whenever man conceives that he is, equal to, or a step ahead of God disaster lurks around the corner..

Remember what happens in science fiction when an experiment goes wrong and ends with the creation of a monster. Or go to the pages of history to see the end of the despots who maintained law and order through improper use of armies and police forces created for that very purpose. In the end the creature always seem to depose the creator and assume control, ending with even worse consequences.

But is that not the story of mankind itself? Did not Adam decide to take over from God and what a mess that created. But God has other plans. Because of his superior intellect God planned to rule over man and because man was endowed with a superior intellect to the members of the animal kingdom God decreed that man should have dominion over them. To date it hasn't quite worked out this way, but in the coming kingdom, such lines of authority will be restored.

Fortunately we have a good boss, absolutely the best there is, and as we learn to use power and knowledge in the best interests of his creation more will be revealed, Paul described this growth pattern in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12,

9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

What a finale to know God and his ways as well as he knows us. That is a far cry from the present but if we have the zeal the mist will clear from the mirror and this is already happening. If in doubt just compare our current God knowledge [theology] with our understanding of just a few short years ago.

Saul, later to be known as Paul, knew scripture backwards and was certain in his own mind that he was serving the best interests of God when with zealous intent to set out to exterminate all Christians. But how wrong he was! We well remember how he was struck down on the road to Damascus about five years after the death of Christ. What was Saul's first reaction to the one who had struck him down and was about to change almost every aspect of his life? Was it not to ask? Acts 9:5

“Who are you, Lord?”

Biblical history reveals that Saul was answered far more comprehensively than he ever dare imagine. He had already learnt at the feet of the most outstanding Jewish teacher of the time, Gamaliel. Now he was about to become the star pupil of the greatest teacher of New Testament times, the Holy Spirit of whom Jesus had said, John 16:13-14.

13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.

If Saul was entitled to know who Jesus was, are we not entitled to know who Saul was. Listen to Christ's words to Ananias, the one chosen to care for the stricken Saul. Ananias needed convincing because he knew the purpose of Saul's visit to Damascus. Acts 9:15-16,

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Ananias questioned no further!

An interesting aside, peripheral to the main story, that I noted for the first time, is found in Acts 9:9; **“For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”**

Intriguing, certainly coincides with the time Jesus spent in the tomb and probably has other significance but it is not part of the main story being told. When that story is well understood it becomes time to look deeper into the peripheral facts.

As the story unfolds, Ananias was instrumental in restoring Saul's sight. Baptism immediately followed, through which he was immediately filled with the Holy Spirit, vastly more than the measure allotted to us, thus confirming the importance of his role. Now it was time for him to be transformed into the man that he was meant to be.

His preaching career began in Damascus but after a time the Jews conspired to kill the traitor who had turned against them. But God was not about to let that happen and orchestrated his escape into Arabia. The word does not document what happened there or how long he stayed beyond making it clear that the period must be something less than three years.

As to what happened there we have to rely on Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 1 verse 11-12;
11 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

From this it seems fairly safe to deduce that Saul was led into the wilds of Arabia by the Holy Spirit to be taught the pristine gospel message untainted by human hand. Through a close relationship with the Holy Spirit the Son would be revealed to Saul and through joint relationships with the Spirit and the Son the Father would be revealed. Consequently Saul understood and was equipped to preach the gospel as no other human has been. .

Why the mystery surrounding this equipping of Saul? From what we have already learned we can further assume that man may have been deliberately spared the detail rather than run the risk to be distracted by it. Also the Bible gives no direct instruction on the change of name from Saul to Paul apart from the fact that at the start of his first missionary journey in company with his long time mentor Barnabus they were referred to as Barnabas and Saul but at some point in the trip Saul assumed leadership and from then on they are referred to as Paul and Barnabus.

So was there an actual name change? Again, because such matters are outside the story they set out to tell, we are never told. However it is most likely that there never was a change of name in the true sense, for Saul is a Hebrew name, the Latin equivalent of which is Paul. Because, for whatever reason, Paul's father held dual Jewish and Roman citizenship the same honour was bestowed on his son. As Paul was to spend the rest of his life in Gentile regions we now know him by that name. Perhaps, had he returned to Tarsus it would still be Saul. Interesting, yes, but it has absolutely no bearing on the work that Paul was called to undertake.

This message is to be the first in a series based on Trinitarian understanding and worship to develop a basic understanding of *who* and *what* God is, so that his word will become even more meaningful. But where was I to start? I tried various approaches without getting anywhere until inspired by the Goldsworthy idea of starting from the beginning, The Plan of God.

In turn, this has led to a brief review the life of Paul, the founder of the Gentile church. Although such an approach had never entered my mind it has served well to find a firm base of truth from which to proceed. This is the same base that Paul established in 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,

“By the grace God has given me I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it . But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

For there is no other.

How can we know this? 1 Corinthians 2:2,

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

The simplicity of the gospel, the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Our salvation depends upon believing such things with nothing more required. Such belief is the sole gateway to grace. As the word says, **“Enter through the narrow gate.”** One who understands the gospel better than another does not receive a greater degree of salvation.

Looking back, the reason for the introduction of Paul becomes clear; for he was to play, in relationship with the Holy Spirit such an important part in the execution of the master plan of God. The establishment of God's worldwide church of all believers.

As we go on it will become more obvious how the persons of the Trinity or the Godhead as it is otherwise known, work in close relationship with each other to get the job done, yet individually, the roles they play remain distinct from each other. In all works of God the three persons of the Trinity are jointly operative. This is equally true of creation, redemption or worship. In the coming weeks we will see how all Godly works originate through the Father, are effected through the Son and perfected through the Spirit. This is a truth that I will endeavour to hammer home.

It is often said that Jesus Christ is our perfect role model, but regardless of how much we aspire to base our lives on his, we can never truly emulate him for the simple reason is that he is God and we are not..Whilst our eyes ever remain on Jesus and his perfect example Paul presents himself as a more suitable role model because of his special training and natural zeal.. Remember Paul's first question to the one who had struck him down, **“Who are you Lord”** If he was going into the service of that Lord he wanted to know who he was, and what he stood for. We too, are servant's in the house of the same Lord, and we too, should seek the same answers as did Paul.

From time to time we are moved by biographies and would like to know more about the persons featured therein.. From it, we already know a lot about them but cannot lay claim to really knowing them, short of spending time with them in a one on one relationship. This is essential if we are to confirm or reject our initial impressions. As Paul saw, such is also true with Jesus.

The Bible tells us so much about him but his own words make it clear that there is much more yet to be revealed. John 16:12-13;

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.

From the words of the Bible we glean all we need to assure salvation but if we are to really serve him, in the manner he would like us to, we may need to know more about what really makes him tick. The good news is that unlike our heroes of biographies, who are most likely out of bounds to us, Jesus says,

Matthew 11:28.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Which could be simply interpreted as, **“If you are interested, so too am I.”**

Maybe Arabia will not be the venue but the Holy Spirit will accompany the weary one to a quiet place to retell the old, old story and encourage his hearer to believe.. Once the story is embraced the Holy Spirit will move on to the **'nuts and bolts'** of **how** and **why** it works. There is so much more to be known but little by little the Holy Spirit will guide us deeper into the well of divine truth. That is only if we allow him to do so. Quality time with God is not just a matter of prayer; often quiet reflection can prove equally effective. With Jesus standing silent in the background, the Holy Spirit will bring renewed hope. We haven't got as far as I had planned but hopefully we have established a launching pad that will stand us in good stead as we proceed. But before getting into the meat of the Trinity we must first define it, then find Biblical support for it and answer other related questions like asking it was part of the doctrine of the early church. If we will but ponder over the main points of today's message, it will not have been in vain

What is, and what is not, the gospel?. Leave Jesus in and all else out.

Concentrate on the big picture, see the forest without being distracted by the trees

Remember that God's intellect is greater than ours. We may not understand but we can believe.

COMMUNION

Jan 29th. 2012

Today we have revisited the gospel message and give praise that we see it in a clearer light. Perhaps for the first time we appreciate that it is about none other than Jesus Christ who in obedience to the master plan of his Father took our place at Calvary because our best sacrifices were unworthy of salvation.

As we reflect on that world shattering event our full focus is on Jesus Christ our Saviour. On him and him alone. The creator being greater than his creation offered himself so that his whole creation could be saved. So said John in John 3:17,

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

In response we remember the event in the manner prescribed by our Lord and Master
Matthew 26:26;

While they were eating, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body,”

First Blessing

Father, we are privileged to be able to participate as we remember that shattering event of two thousand years ago. We humbly acknowledge it was all because of our unworthiness and you, in perfect love, provided your own sacrifice as you did in the days of Abraham so that we may live on as the seed of Isaac. In gratitude and humility we participate in that sad occasion with the prayer that more of those redeemed may be moved to do likewise. Father we pray that you will bless us and this bread and make both fit for the occasion. Amen

Matthew 26:27,

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Second Blessing

All loving and all powerful Father in response to the invitation of your Son and our Saviour we take of the cup in acknowledgement of what was achieved by that precious blood. The forgiveness of all sins leaving all free with the hope of living the life that was planned for mankind from the very beginning. As we stand in awe of this very thought please deem this wine worthy of the occasion and deem us worthy to partake of it.. Amen

Hymn