

What Is the

Gos•pel? (gŏs'pəl)

Greg Gilbert

Foreword by D. A. Carson

“Greg Gilbert is one of the brightest and most faithful young men called to serve the church today. Here he offers us a penetrating, faithful, and fully biblical understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no greater need than to know the true gospel, to recognize the counterfeits, and to set loose a generation of gospel-centered Christians. This very important book arrives at just the right moment.”

—R. ALBERT MOHLER JR., President,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Two realities make this a critically important book: the centrality of the gospel in all generations and the confusion about the gospel in our own generation. *What Is the Gospel?* provides a biblically faithful explanation of the gospel and equips Christians to discern deviations from that glorious message. How I wish I could place this book in the hands of every pastor and church member.”

—C. J. MAHANEY, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“Greg Gilbert contends that the current evangelical understanding of the gospel is lost in a fog of confusion. He burns away that fog by shining fresh light on an old subject. Gilbert writes in a clear, concise, and colloquial style that will especially appeal to young adults. *What Is the Gospel?* will sharpen your thinking about the gospel, etching it more deeply on your heart so you can share the good news of Jesus Christ with boldness. It will leave you pondering the extent to which the gospel has impacted your own life. It will cause you to cry out with thankfulness to God for what Christ has accomplished.”

—JAMES MACDONALD, Senior Pastor,
Harvest Bible Chapel, Chicago vicinity

“A wonderful telling of the old, old story in fresh words—and with sound warnings against subtle misrepresentations. As the old gospel song attests, and as is true of Greg Gilbert’s fine book,

those who know the old, old story best will find themselves
hungering and thirsting to hear this story like the rest.”

—BRYAN CHAPELL, President,
Covenant Theological Seminary

“Greg Gilbert is someone I have had the honor and privilege of
teaching and who is now teaching me. This little book on the
gospel is one of the clearest and most important books I’ve read
in recent years.”

—MARK DEVER, Senior Pastor,
Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC

“For good reason, Christians love the word *gospel*. Tragically,
however, multitudes of Christians fail to grasp what the gospel
fully is. In doctrinally sound and down-to-earth ways, my good
friend Greg Gilbert shows just how important it is to understand
both the theological nature and the functional necessity of the
gospel. We can only hope and pray that this is the first of many
books from Greg.”

—TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN, Senior Pastor,
Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

“What is the gospel? This short but powerful book answers that
question with a clear and concise presentation. It is a superb
treatment of the good news. Read it and then pass it on.”

—DANIEL L. AKIN, President,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Greg Gilbert, with a sharp mind and a pastor’s heart, has writ-
ten a book that will be helpful for seekers, new Christians, and
anyone who wants to understand the gospel with greater clarity.
I’ve been waiting for a book like this! As a sure-footed guide to
a surprisingly controversial subject, it clears up misconceptions
about the gospel, the kingdom, and the meaning of the cross.”

—KEVIN DEYOUNG, Senior Pastor,
University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan

“*What Is the Gospel?* demonstrates in a sensitive and intriguing way that the gospel is indescribably profound as well as eminently describable—clear enough for anyone to comprehend.”

—PAIGE PATTERSON, President,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Greg Gilbert has called the church back to the source of her revelation. In a simple and straightforward manner, he has laid bare what the Bible has shown the gospel to mean.”

—ARCHBISHOP PETER J. AKINOLA,
Primate of the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion

“There is no greater challenge in an age of doubt and pragmatism than making the glorious gospel clear. This is the greatest need for the seasoned Christian and skeptic alike. In this thoughtful but accessible work, Greg Gilbert clearly answers the most important question ever asked.”

—DARRIN PATRICK, Vice President,
The Acts29 Church Planting Network

“Greg Gilbert cuts through the confusion by searching Scripture to answer the most important question anyone can ask. Even if you think you know the good news of what God has done in Christ, Gilbert will sharpen your focus on this glorious gospel.”

—COLLIN HANSEN, *Christianity Today* editor at large

“This book will help you better understand, treasure, and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if you think you know enough about the gospel already, you might need it more than you think.”

—JOSHUA HARRIS, Senior Pastor,
Covenant Life Church, Gaithersburg, Maryland

“Amidst a contemporary Christian culture characterized by rampant confusion regarding the central tenets of our faith, Greg Gilbert has given us a portrait of the gospel that is clear for those who have believed and compelling for those who have yet to

believe. Word-saturated, cross-centered, and God-exalting, *What Is the Gospel?* will capture your mind's attention and ignite your heart's affection for the God who saves us by his grace through his gospel for his glory."

—DAVID PLATT, Senior Pastor,
The Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham, Alabama

"Clarity on the gospel brings both confidence in the gospel and conviction concerning core gospel truths. This excellent book is wonderfully clear and biblically faithful, and will repay reading with renewed gospel focus."

—WILLIAM TAYLOR, Rector,
St. Helen Bishopgate, London

"When I think of the centerpiece of my Bible, my heart immediately embraces the gospel. I know many people who love the gospel, but I'm always open to loving it more and understanding it better. Greg Gilbert has written this book to help us to know and love the gospel more."

—JOHNNY HUNT, President,
the Southern Baptist Convention,
Pastor, First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia

"What makes this book profound is its simplicity. Perhaps the greatest danger in Christianity is making assumptions about what the gospel is without hearing the Bible's clear and definitive voice. It is not an overstatement to say this may be the most important book you'll read about the Christian faith."

—RICK HOLLAND, Executive Pastor,
Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California

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Gospel?

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Foreword by D. A. Carson

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Dual Identity Design

Interior typesetting: Lakeside Design Plus

First printing 2010

Printed in the United States of America

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All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-1500-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-1501-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-1502-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2460-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gilbert, Greg, 1977–

What is the Gospel? / Greg D. Gilbert ; foreword by D.A. Carson.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-1500-2 (hc)

1. Theology, Doctrinal—Popular works. I. Title.

BT77.G44 2010

230—dc22

2009030583

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	
14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To Moriah

I love you.

Tons and tons.

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SERIES PREFACE

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize. We at 9Marks believe that a healthy Christian is a healthy church member.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

By this token, the reader might notice that all "9 marks," taken from Mark Dever's 2001 book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway Books), begin with the Bible:

- expositional preaching;
- biblical theology;
- a biblical understanding of the gospel;
- a biblical understanding of conversion;
- a biblical understanding of evangelism;
- a biblical understanding of church membership;
- a biblical understanding of church discipline;
- a biblical understanding of discipleship and growth; and
- a biblical understanding of church leadership.

More can be said about what churches should do in order to be healthy, such as pray. But these nine practices are the ones that we believe are most often overlooked today (unlike prayer). So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. These volumes intend to examine the nine marks more closely and from different angles. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

FOREWORD

More than thirty years of teaching theological students have shown me that the most controverted questions they ask vary from generation to generation—and the same is true of the broader Christian public. At one time you could guarantee a heated debate by throwing out the question, What do you think of the charismatic movement? or Is inerrancy worth defending? or What do you think about seeker-sensitive churches? It is easy enough to find people willing to discuss these questions today, but there is usually little heat left in them and not much more light. Today the question most likely to light a fuse is—as the author of this volume points out—What is the gospel? One might usefully add that question’s first cousin, What is evangelicalism?

That these questions engender mutually exclusive answers, often dogmatically defended with only a minimum of reflection on the Bible, is, quite frankly, alarming, because the issues are so fundamental. When “evangelicals” hold highly disparate opinions about what the “evangel” is (that is, the “gospel,” for that is what “evangel” means), then one must conclude either that evangelicalism as a movement is a diverse phenomenon with no agreed gospel and no sense of responsibility “to contend for the faith” that the Lord has “once for all entrusted” to us, his people (Jude 3 NIV), or that many people call themselves

“evangelicals” who do not have any legitimate right to do so because they have left the “evangel,” the gospel, behind.

Enter Greg Gilbert. This book does not so much claim to break new ground as survey afresh some old ground that should never have been ignored, much less abandoned. The clarity of Greg’s thought and articulation is wholly admirable. This book will sharpen the thinking of not a few mature Christians. More importantly, it is a book to distribute widely to church leaders, young Christians, and even some who have not yet trusted Christ who want a clear explanation of what the gospel is. Read it, then buy a box of them for generous distribution.

D. A. Carson

INTRODUCTION

What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?

You'd think that would be an easy question to answer, especially for Christians. In fact, you'd think that writing a book like this—one asking Christians to think carefully about the question, *What is the gospel of Jesus?*—would be completely unnecessary. It's like asking carpenters to sit around and ponder the question, *What is a hammer?*

After all, the gospel of Jesus Christ stands at the very center of Christianity, and we Christians claim to be about the gospel above all else. It's what we intend to found our lives upon and build our churches around. It's what we speak to others about, and it's what we pray they also will hear and believe.

For all that, how firm a grasp do you think most Christians really have on the content of the Christian gospel? How would you answer if someone asked you: *What is this news that you Christians go on and on about? And what's so good about it?*

My sense is that far too many Christians would answer with something far short of what the Bible holds out as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Maybe they'd answer, “The gospel is that God will forgive your sins if you believe in him.” Or they'd say something like, “The good news is that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Or, “The gospel

is that you are a child of God, and God wants his children to be abundantly successful in every way.” Some would know that it’s important to say something about Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection, but then again, how does all that fit in?

The fact is, getting Christians to agree on an answer to the question, What is the gospel? is not as simple as it should be. I work with a ministry called 9Marks, an organization affiliated with Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC. For the most part, those who read and comment on our material are from a pretty narrow slice of evangelical Christianity. They believe the Bible is true and inerrant, they believe Jesus died on the cross and rose bodily from the dead, they believe human beings are sinners in need of salvation, and they intend to be gospel-centered, gospel-saturated people.

But what would you guess is the topic that single-handedly generates the most comment and the most energetic response of anything we write on? Yep, it’s the gospel. We can write and speak for months about preaching, discipling, counseling, church polity, even church music, and the response from our readers is interesting but not surprising. But let us post an article trying to be clear about what the Bible teaches is the good news of Christianity, and the response is stunning.

Some time ago, one of my friends posted a short article on our website about a well-known Christian artist who had been asked in an interview to define what the good news of Christianity is. Here’s what the artist said:

What a great question. I guess I’d probably . . . my instinct is to say that it’s Jesus coming, living, dying, and being resurrected

and his inaugurating the already and the not yet of all things being restored to himself . . . and that happening by way of himself . . . the being made right of all things . . . that process both beginning and being a reality in the lives and hearts of believers and yet a day coming when it will be more fully realized. But the good news, the gospel, the speaking of the good news, I would say is the news of his kingdom coming, the inaugurating of his kingdom coming . . . that's my instinct.

Several of us responded by asking questions such as, “If we’re articulating the Christian gospel, shouldn’t we include some *explanation* of Jesus’ death and resurrection?” Or, “Shouldn’t we say something about sin and the need for salvation from God’s wrath against it?”

The response to that series of posts was incredible. For literally months, we received dozens of messages about it. Some who wrote to us appreciated the questions we raised; others wondered what was wrong with articulating the gospel like that since Jesus preached about the arrival of the kingdom. Others were just refreshed to hear Christians thinking hard about how to articulate the gospel in the first place.

In some ways, I’m glad to see Christians getting excited when a discussion about the gospel begins. It means they’re taking it seriously, and that they have deeply held thoughts about what the gospel is. There would be nothing healthy at all in Christians who couldn’t care less how we define and understand the gospel. On the other hand, I think the energy generated by discussions about the gospel points to a general fog of confusion that swirls around it these days. When you come right down to it, Christians just don’t agree on what the gospel is—even Christians who call themselves evangelical.

Ask any hundred self-professed evangelical Christians what the good news of Jesus is, and you're likely to get about sixty different answers. Listen to evangelical preaching, read evangelical books, log on to evangelical websites, and you'll find one description after another of the gospel, many of them mutually exclusive. Here are a few I've found:

The good news is, God wants to show you his incredible favor. He wants to fill your life with "new wine," but are you willing to get rid of your old wineskins? Will you start thinking bigger? Will you enlarge your vision and get rid of those old negative mind-sets that hold you back?

Here's the gospel in a phrase. Because Christ died for us, those who trust in him may know that their guilt has been pardoned once and for all. What will we have to say before the bar of God's judgment? Only one thing. Christ died in my place. That's the gospel.

The message of Jesus may well be called the most revolutionary of all time: "The radical revolutionary empire of God is here, advancing by reconciliation and peace, expanding by faith, hope, and love—beginning with the poorest, the weakest, the meekest, and the least. It's time to change your thinking. Everything is about to change. It's time for a new way of life. Believe me. Follow me. Believe this good news so you can learn to live by it and be part of the revolution."

The good news is that God's face will always be turned toward you, regardless of what you have done, where you have been, or how many mistakes you've made. He loves you and is turned in your direction, looking for you.

The gospel itself refers to the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true, and only Lord of the world.

Good news! God is becoming King and he is doing it through Jesus! And therefore, *phew!*, God's justice, God's peace, God's world is going to be renewed. And in the middle of that, of course, it's good news for you and me. But that's the derivative from, or the corollary of the good news which is a message about Jesus that has a second-order effect on me and you and us. But the gospel is not itself about *you are this sort of a person and this can happen to you*. That's the result of the gospel rather than the gospel itself. . . . Salvation is *the result of the gospel*, not the center of the gospel itself.

The gospel is the proclamation of Jesus, in [two] senses. It is the proclamation *announced* by Jesus—the arrival of God's realm of possibility (his “kingdom”) in the midst of human structures of possibility. But it is also the proclamation *about* Jesus—the good news that in dying and rising, Jesus has made the kingdom he proclaimed available to us.

As a Christian, I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live. . . . Over time when you purposefully try to live the way of Jesus, you start noticing something deeper going on. You begin realizing the reason this is the best way to live is that it is rooted in profound truths about how the world is. You find yourself living more and more in tune with ultimate reality. You are more and more in sync with how the universe is at its deepest levels. . . . The first Christians announced this way of Jesus as “the good news.”

My understanding of Jesus' message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now—here and today. It's almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, "Change your life. Live this way."

You see what I mean when I say the gospel is surrounded by a fog of confusion! If you had never heard of Christianity, what would you think after reading those few quotations? You'd obviously know that Christians intend to be communicating some message that is good. But beyond that, it's just a jumble. Is the good news simply that God loves me, and that I need to start thinking more positively? Is it that Jesus is a really good example who can teach me to live a loving and compassionate life? It might have something to do with sin and forgiveness. Apparently some Christians think this good news has something to do with Jesus' death. Others apparently don't.

My point is not to decide here and now which of these quotations are better or worse than the others (though I hope that after reading this book you'll be able to decide). It's simply to point out how many different things come to people's minds when they're asked, What is the gospel?

I want to try in this book to offer a clear answer to that question, one that is based on what the Bible itself teaches about the gospel. In the process, I am hoping and praying for several things.

First, if you are a Christian, I pray that this little book—and more importantly, the glorious truths it attempts to articulate—will cause your heart to swell with joy and praise toward Jesus Christ for what he has accomplished for you. An emaciated gospel leads to emaciated worship. It lowers our eyes from God to self and cheapens what God has accomplished for us

in Christ. The biblical gospel, by contrast, is like fuel in the furnace of worship. The more you understand about it, believe it, and rely on it, the more you adore God both for who he is and for what he has done for us in Christ. “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” Paul cried (Rom. 11:33), and it was because his heart was full of the gospel.

Second, I hope that reading this book will give you a deeper confidence as you talk to others about the good news of Jesus. I have met any number of Christians who hesitate to share the gospel with friends, family, and acquaintances for fear of not having answers to all their questions. Well, it’s probably true, no matter who you are, that you’ll never be able to answer *all* the questions! But you *can* answer *some* of them, and I hope this book will help you answer *more* of them.

Third, I pray that you will see the importance of this gospel for the life of the church, and that as a result you will work to make sure that this gospel is preached, sung, prayed, taught, proclaimed, and heard in every aspect of your church’s life. It is through the church, Paul says, that the manifold wisdom of God will be made known to the universe. And how is that? Through the preaching of the gospel, which brings to light “for everyone” God’s eternal plan to save the world (Eph. 3:7–12).

Fourth, I hope this book will help to shore up the edges of the gospel in your mind and heart. The gospel is a stark message, and it intrudes into the world’s thinking and priorities with sharp, bracing truths. Sadly, there has always been a tendency among Christians—even among evangelicals—to soften some of those edges so that the gospel will be more readily acceptable to the world. One of my prayers is that this book will serve

to preserve those edges and prevent the erosion of truths that, though hard for the world to swallow, are indispensable to the good news of Jesus. All of us are tempted, in the name of being winsome witnesses, to present the gospel in as attractive a way as possible. That's fine in some respects—it is “*good news*,” after all—but we must also be careful not to round off the gospel's sharp points. We must preserve the edges, and I hope this book will help us to do that.

Finally, if you're not a Christian, then I pray that by reading this book you will be provoked to think hard about the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the message on which we Christians have staked our entire lives, and it's one that we believe demands a response from you, too. If there's anything in the world that you cannot afford to ignore, it is the voice of God saying, “Good news! Here is how you can be saved from my judgment!” That's the kind of announcement that demands attention.