

Present Truth

The *Bible alone* as the only rule of faith and practice; *faith alone* as the only means of acceptance with God; and *Christ alone* as the only mediator between God and men.

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Present Truth is a magazine dedicated to the restoration of New Testament Christianity in this generation. It is especially committed to upholding the truth of justification by faith in this time when it is being threatened by humanism, emotionalism, and ecumenism. Our publication is based on the principle of *sola Scriptura*—the Bible and the Bible only as a rule of faith and practice (2 Tim. 3:15-17). We desire to give the gospel trumpet a certain sound (1 Cor. 14:7-9), that through words easy to be understood (Hab. 2:2) people may “be established in the present truth” (2 Pet. 1:12) and like Noah be proclaimers of the righteousness of Christ (2 Pet. 2:5).

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LETTERS

“I truly enjoyed the little booklet you sent me on ‘Divine Acceptance’ [PTv8#1]. With only 31 pages it presented the truth in a presentable and understandable way. To reflect and rejoice in Christ alone is a blessing to my soul.”

J. A., California, USA

“Dear Sirs: Like most scientists I am an atheist. My interest as a physician is in humankind, not divine nonsense.”

D. W., New York, USA

“I read the *Present Truth* you sent. I think it is great! I was amazed at the things I read that I didn't know about. I would like to read more when they come out.”

H. R., Michigan, USA

“I received your booklet called *Present Truth*. I noticed that much of the article was identifying the difference between Catholics and Protestants in terms of word definition and location of events. Catholics cannot accept the concept of any activity occurring in heaven. They do not believe that heaven is a literal place somewhere in space. Their understanding of heaven is simply a oneness with God. That is another big difference between Catholics and Protestants and makes discussion possible...

“If Christ went to heaven, the dead go to heaven, angels come and go to heaven, and God con-

trols events on earth from heaven, our appreciation of these actions must comply with our faith.”
C. G., Nebraska, USA

“How absurd [PTv8#1] to contend that our obedience has nothing to do with our acceptance with God. Did Adam's obedience in the garden have anything to do with his acceptance with God? ... No one can pass the final judgment ‘by faith alone’. Faith and works are the basis of acceptance in the final judgment. For works are the only viable evidence of true faith... Acceptance in the final judgment is not ‘faith alone, Christ alone, or grace alone.’ It is the believer's obedience that is the basis of acceptance. In the final judgment, no one is saved by “faith alone”.
B. S., Kansas, USA

“NO, NO, NO, [Don't send me a free subscription!].

“[A week later] After reading it, I have changed my mind; so please send to me. Thank you very much.”
H. H. C., Baptist pastor
Michigan, USA

“You convinced me—I accept the Catholic view. Now go away!”
L. H. United Methodist pastor
Arkansas, USA

“Actually, as I read through your magazine with my Bible in hand you helped me move towards the Catholic position!

What an eye opener for me. Thank you.”
M. P., Trinity Church pastor
New Hampshire, USA

“Much of what you write is clearly taught in the Bible, but how you can conclude that obedience isn't part of faith is beyond comprehension (see back cover PTv8#1, question #6).

“Not only is obedience a part of faith, it is in fact the *very essence* of faith. See John 6:29. Faith that does not include obedience is dead (James 2:17). It has been the severing of these two elements that is at the root of so much of the heresy and worldliness we find in the church today!”
R. H., Christian Church pastor,
California, USA

“My favorite part is the back page [PTv8#1], the questions and answers. That in itself is a masterpiece from where I sit, though it is enhanced by the other 31 pages in much the same way a painting is set off by a lovely frame.”
L. S., Colorado, USA

“What are you going to tell Jesus when you are standing at the judgment bar and He asks you why you ignored His Commandments in Acts 2:38; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16?

“Will you tell Him that you didn't think obedience was necessary?”
R. F., New Mexico, USA

Martin Luther's Preface¹

Evangel is a Greek word meaning glad tidings, good news, welcome information, a shout, or something that makes one sing and talk and rejoice. When David defeated the giant, Goliath, there was a great shout, and an encouraging message was passed round among the Jews to say that their terrible enemy had been killed, and that they were free to enjoy liberty and peace; thereupon they sang and danced and made merry. Similarly, God's *evangel*, the New Testament, is a good piece of news, a war-cry. It was echoed throughout the world by the apostles. They proclaimed a true David who had done combat with, and gained the victory over, sin, death, and the devil. In so doing, He had taken all who were enchained by sin, threatened by death, and overpowered by the devil. Though they had merited no rewards, He redeemed them, justified them, gave them life and salvation, and so brought them peace and led them back home to God. For these reasons, they sing thanks and praises to God, and they will ever continue to be happy if they remain firm in faith.

This kind of war-cry, this heartening news, this evangelical, divine message, is called a new testament. It is also like a testament when a dying man decides how his property shall be divided among certain heirs, whom he names. In the same way, Christ, before His death, decided and commanded that this *evangel* was to be proclaimed to all the world after His death. He thereby gave all believers possession of all His goods: namely, His life, by which He had vanquished death; His righteousness, by which He had washed away sin; and His holiness, by which He had overcome eternal damnation. No poor fellow chained in sin, dead, and bound for hell can ever hear anything more comforting and encouraging than this precious and lovely message about Christ; the sinner cannot help

¹ Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *The Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, volume II, *The Spirit of the Protestant Reformation*, translated and edited by Bertram Lee Woolf (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd, 1956), pp. 278-83.



exulting from the bottom of his heart and rejoicing over it when he accepts its truth.

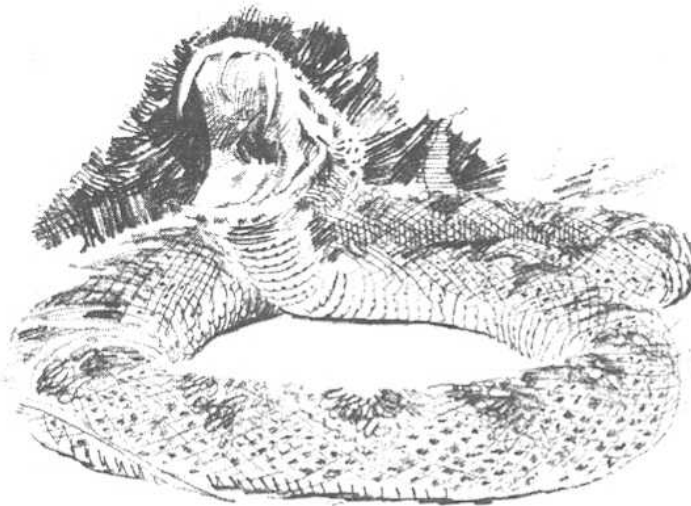
Now God, in order to strengthen such faith, often promised this *evangel*, this testament of His, through the prophets in the Old Testament. Thus Paul says in Romans 1 [:1], "I have been set apart for the gospel of God which He promised beforehand through the prophets in Holy Scriptures, concerning His son who was born to Him from the seed," etc. And, in order that we might apply certain of these words to our own selves, God's first promise was spoken when He said, to the serpent, "I will cause enmity between you and the women, between your seed and her seed. He shall trample on your head, and you will trample on his heel" [Genesis 3:15]. Christ is the seed of the woman, and He has trampled down the devil's head, meaning, sin, death, hell, and all its powers. Without this seed it is impossible for any man to escape sin, death, hell.

Moreover, in Genesis 22 [:18], His promise to Abraham was, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed". Christ is the seed of Abraham according to St. Paul in Galatians 3 [:16], and has given a blessing to all the world through the gospel; for where Christ is not found, there remains the curse which was pronounced on Adam and his descendants, after his sin. The effect of this curse was that they too were guilty of sin, and that death and hell would be their lot. But, contrary to the curse, the gospel brought a blessing to all the world when it proclaimed, for all to hear, that whoever believed on the seed of Abraham should be blessed, i.e., delivered from sin, death, and hell. Thus made righteous, he would live in eternal bless. This is what Christ Himself said in John 11 [:26], "He who believes on me shall never die."

He gave a similar promise to David, [II Sam.7], when He said, "I will raise up your seed after you to build a house for me, and I will establish his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son." That is the kingdom of Christ proclaimed by the gospel. It is an eternal kingdom of life, blessedness, and righteousness; all who believe enter it, and are loosed from the bonds of sin and death. Promises of this kind are made abundantly by the gospel in the other prophets, e.g., Micah 5 [:2], "And you, Bethlehem, though small among the thousands of Judah, from you shall come one who shall be a leader of my people, Israel;" and, again, Hosea 13 [:14], "I will deliver them from the hand of death, from death will I rescue them."

This proves that there is only one gospel, just as there is only one Christ because the *evangelion*, the gospel, neither is, nor can be, anything other than the proclamation of Christ the son of God and of

David, truly God and man. By His death and resurrection, He has conquered sin, death, and hell for us and all who believe in Him. The gospel may be proclaimed in few words or in many; one writer may describe it briefly



and another at length. If at length, then many of the works and words of Christ will be set down, as in the case of the four evangelists. Those who write it briefly, like Peter or Paul, say nothing of Christ's works, but tell succinctly how He conquered sin, death, and hell by His own death and resurrection on behalf of those who believe in Him....

Therefore, beware lest you make Christ into a Moses, and the gospel into a book of law or doctrine, as has been done before now, including some of Jerome's prefaces. In fact, however, the gospel demands no works to make us holy and to redeem us. Indeed, it condemns such works, and demands only faith in Christ, because he has overcome sin, death, and hell for us. Thus it is not by our own works, but by His work, His passion and death, that He makes us righteous, and gives us life and salvation. This is in order that we might take to ourselves His death and victory as if they were our own...

To know His works and His life's story is not the same thing as to know the gospel, because it does not mean that you know that He conquered sin, death, and the devil. Similarly, it is not knowledge of the gospel if you just know doctrines and rules of this kind. But you will know the gospel when you hear the voice which tells you that Christ Himself is yours, together with His life, teaching, work, death, resurrection, and everything that He has, does, or can do...

... it is evident that the *evangelion* does not form a book of laws, but a proclamation of the good things which Christ has offered us for our own, if only we believe.



What is the Gospel?

Richard P. Bucher²

The word "Gospel" is the translation of the Greek New Testament word *euangellion*, and means "good news" or "glad tidings." What is this good news about? Fortunately, the Bible itself tells us. In two key passages, 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 and Romans 1:16-17, Paul reveals much about the Gospel.

"Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." Romans 1:16-17.

From these passages we learn that at the heart of the Gospel is the message that Jesus, the Christ, died on the cross for our sins and that he rose from the dead. "Christ died for our sins" means that He took our sins upon Himself and served the sentence of

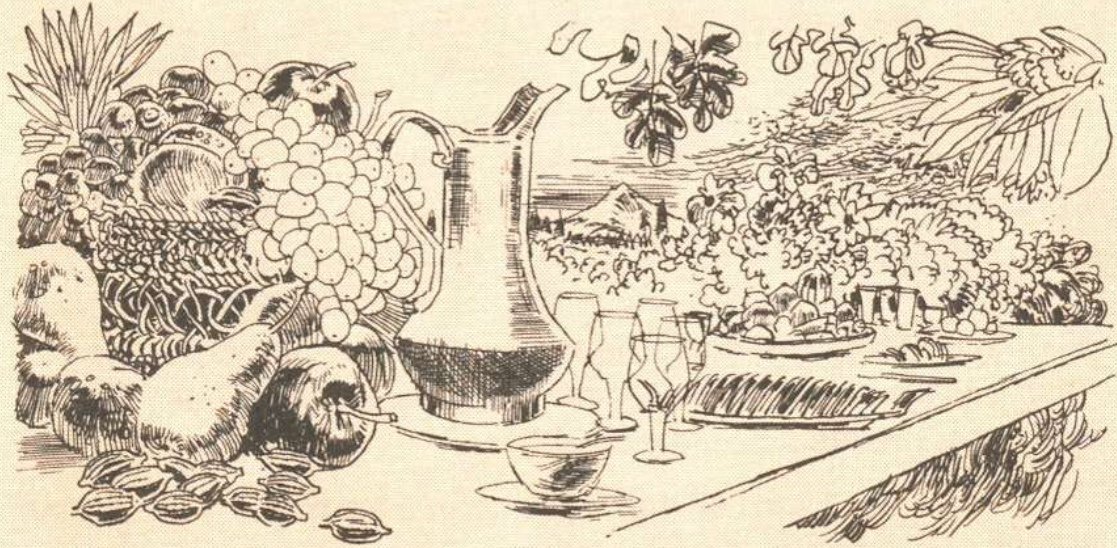
² Richard Bucher is pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Lexington, Kentucky, USA. His web site from which this article was extracted by permission is <www.orlutheran.com>. Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

punishment that we deserved. Every last drop of eternal judgment and punishment that we deserved was poured out on Jesus instead of us. He was the perfect and ultimate sacrifice for sins. Because of His blood shed in death for us, no judgment, guilt, or punishment remains. We are fully forgiven, innocent, not guilty. What makes this such sweet good news is that God offers all this by grace (in other words, as a gift). That is why Paul calls it the Gospel "about the grace of God" (Acts 20:24; cf. Gal. 1:6). Every time the Gospel is proclaimed God freely offers the completed forgiveness and salvation that Jesus won for us by His substitutionary death. Everyone who believes this Gospel and applies it to himself, has forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

We also learn that the Gospel is far more than a message that provides information. The Gospel actually is God's power: it has the power to give salvation and save those who hear it And it has the power to work faith in the hearts of those who hear it. It is for this reason that the Church has long called the Gospel a "means of grace." For through it God graciously works faith in those who hear.

When we search elsewhere in the New Testament, we find this short definition confirmed. The Gospel is variously described as:

- The good news that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 5:42);
- The good news about Jesus (Acts 8:35);
- The good news of peace through Jesus, who is Lord of all (Acts 10:36)
- The good news about the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:20);
- The good news that God has fulfilled His promise by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 13:32, 33);
- The good news about Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18);
- The good news concerning God's Son, who also was man, raised from the dead (Rom. 1:1-4; 2 Tim. 2:8);
- The good news of Christ (Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 9:14);
- The good news, which has to do with the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:17);

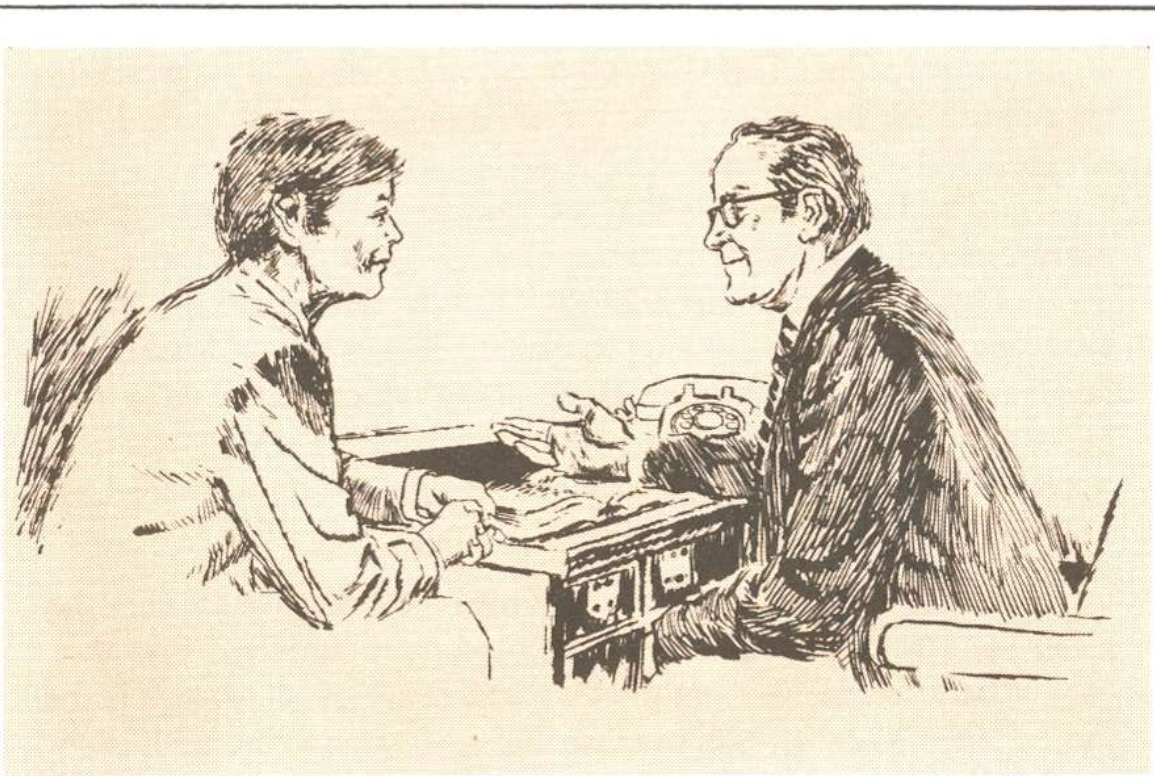


- The good news of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4);
- The good news of your salvation, the word of truth (Eph. 1:13);
- The good news of the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8);
- The good news that Jesus has reserved a hope for you in heaven (Col. 1:5);

The Bible is full of Gospel and not only in passages that explicitly mention salvation through Jesus. Every passage and section of Scripture that emphasizes what God gives freely to us is Gospel. What a feast awaits the one who sits down at this banquet table with a hearty appetite!

The Gospel is Only Good News to Those Who Have Believed the Bad News

This Gospel should be good news to everyone. But it is really only good news to those who have believed the bad news (but the truth) about themselves.



A medical analogy might help to better explain this. The announcement of a miracle cure is only good news to the one who has believed the reality of the disease. It is good news above all to the one who knows he has the disease. Similarly, a reputable doctor regularly engages in two functions: (1) He diagnoses sickness; (2) He prescribes a cure - if there is one. When he diagnoses a sickness or injury, he is duty bound to tell the patient the "bad news." This bad news may be unpleasant, humiliating, or depressing. The patient may be tempted to deny the sickness, or to view the doctor as an enemy and seek a more favorable opinion. But the sensible patient eventually must accept the bad news before he sees a need for the cure - the good news.

The Law of God in the Scriptures tells us the bad news. It diagnoses our spiritual sickness; it tells us that each of us is sinful and guilty in God's sight and deserving of eternal punishment. Because of our fallenness, God's Law can no longer save us. It shows us what God wants and what we should be (perfect!); but it does not give us the power to do what it demands. Therefore, its main function is to diagnose disease, to show us our sin: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held

accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:19-20).

The Law shows us that we cannot cure ourselves (by our performance) and drives us to the One who can: Jesus Christ, our divine Physician. Galatians 3:22-24: "But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor [to lead us] to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith."

It is for those who have accepted their disease through the Law, have acknowledged their sin, and have admitted that they cannot cure themselves that the Gospel is truly good news. It is for these that Jesus came: "On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'" (Mark 2:17).

Above all the Gospel is good news to those poor souls who have energetically tried to keep God's Law but have failed. It is for those especially, who with all their hearts have wanted to be like Christ, have wanted to love God and their neighbor, have wanted to be holy, have wanted to be full of good works and spiritual gifts but the more they try, the more they fail, and the more the Law accuses them. To these the Gospel says, "Fear not! You have a Savior! Where you are unrighteous, Jesus was righteous. Where you are unholy, Jesus was holy. Where you are fruitless, Jesus was fruitful. Where you are inconsistent, Jesus was consistent. Where you succumb to temptation, Jesus was victorious. He didn't keep the Law perfectly only as an example; He kept it to be your substitute. If you have believed, then know that God counts Christ's perfect life as yours. You are covered with His righteousness. To you who are crushed by the burden of the Law, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). God's love for you, His forgiveness of you, His heaven reserved for you, does not and never has depended on your performance. It depends on Jesus' performance, on Jesus' only.

The Ultimate Gospel

The Editor

When the disciples asked about the end of the world, Jesus responded, saying: “this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.” Matt. 24:14.

The preaching of this ultimate gospel is directly related to the end of the world.. Three vital points about the gospel of Christ must be clearly seen for our generation to experience the end of the world. The points are simple but what they imply is far reaching. They answer the following questions: Why?, What? and When?

- 1) Why is this ultimate gospel proclaimed?
- 2) What is this gospel about?
- 3) When did the events of this gospel take place?

The apostle Paul felt so strongly about this subject that he called down God's curse on anyone who taught a gospel different than what he had preached (Gal. 1:8). And in 1 Corinthians 15 he writes: “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you...” and answers our three questions about the ultimate gospel:

- 1) The gospel is preached so people can be saved.
- 2) The gospel is about Jesus Christ.
- 3) The time of the gospel events was the 1st Century.

Why preach the ultimate gospel?

The purpose of the gospel is salvation. Paul writes: “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached

unto you... by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain." 1 Cor. 15:1, 2. The ultimate gospel is what saves all who believe. And that is why it must be preached. "There is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved" than the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Acts 4:12). This gospel is preached so that people will believe and be saved.

In two other passages Paul confirms the truth that the gospel alone saves. In Romans 1:16 he says: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." And in Ephesians 1:13 he calls it "the gospel of your salvation."

If only the gospel of Jesus Christ saves, Paul was justified in his zeal to guard the purity of the gospel.

What is the ultimate gospel about?

Jesus Christ is the subject of the ultimate gospel. The story of his life, death, and resurrection is the good news. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul continues: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve." vv. 3-5.

The ultimate gospel is about the redeeming act of God for humanity. This redemption was accomplished by Christ from his incarnation until his ascension to the right hand of the Father in our behalf.



→ For our salvation it was necessary that the Son of God take on *human form*. So it had been prophesied: the Seed of the woman would be the Savior (Gen. 3:15; Isa. 7:14). And this Christ accomplished in our place – because since the fall of Adam no human being has been conceived or born without sin. Paul explained to the Romans that the gospel of God was about God’s “son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh...” Rom. 1:1-4. The conception and birth of Jesus are the first great substitutionary acts of God for our salvation.

→ The covenant of salvation also requires *a perfect life* on the part of man. The book of Hebrews says Christ came to do the will of God (Heb.10:7). His obedience to the law was substitutionary, vicarious.

→ In addition our sins required *death*, the wages of sin. In dying an atoning death Jesus provided a vicarious substitution in this area as well. Peter writes that he bore “our sins in his own body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24). “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.” This is the ultimate gospel.

→ And when our Substitute and Representative was *resurrected, glorified, and translated into heavenly places* this salvation surpassed even what Adam and Eve had in their provisional state in Eden. “God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses and sins, hath quickened us together with Christ... And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Eph. 2:4-6.

People today use the word “gospel” in a variety of ways. Some simply mean “truth”; others mean “the Bible”; and still others understand it to mean, “what one must do to be saved”. The ultimate gospel is more specific. It speaks of a salvation package that was planned by the Godhead before the world was created, but was executed by Jesus Christ when he came as a babe to this earth. This package includes a holy birth, a sinless life, a death for sins, a resurrection, a translation, and being seated at God’s right hand in heaven.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record the gospel story of Jesus’ incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. As man he fulfilled all righteousness in behalf of those that believe (Rom.

1:17; Matt. 3:15). Living a perfect life and dying an atoning death he provided a complete substitution.

When did the events of the ultimate gospel take place?

The ultimate gospel is about past events. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus took place in the 1st century and were complete by the time Paul penned his 1st Corinthian letter. Look at the verbs Paul uses: "Christ died... he was buried... he rose again... he was seen..." These are all in the past tense. The ultimate gospel is a finished thing. It cannot be added to or taken away from. When Jesus ascended to the right hand of His Father he had already "purged our sins"; he had "obtained eternal redemption for us" – the complete package was reserved in heaven for us (Heb.1:3; 9:12; Col.1:5). The time of the gospel events was *the 1st century*: the time when Jesus lived on this earth.

While those events are limited in time, the preaching of the gospel is not limited to the 1st century. The gospel was preached in Old Testament times as a future event. The gospel is preached in our day as a past event.

What God required of his people in the old covenant he himself has fulfilled in the new. Before the year AD 34 ended Jesus had made an end of sins and brought in everlasting righteousness in harmony with his word: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." Matt. 5:17. This is why Mark so confidently opens his book with the words: "the *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ..." and closes by saying, "So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God." The ultimate gospel is the story of a 1st century event that began with the incarnation and ended with the ascension and enthronement of Jesus the Christ.

- 1) This gospel is preached because it *alone* is what saves.
- 2) This gospel is *only* about Jesus.
- 3) This gospel package was *complete* in the 1st century.

Applying the Three Points

Now let's apply these three, vital points to our Christian experience.

Picture in your mind Louis, a healthy young man whose careful diet has given him physical symmetry and stamina. Ask yourself if Louis' correct diet is part of the ultimate gospel. Let's test it by our three points. Who eats the proper diet?

Louis eats the proper diet.

Is the gospel about Louis?

No, it's about Jesus Christ.

Then we are outside of the gospel as to person. How are we as to timing? Did Louis adopt this diet in the 1st century?

No, he adopted it in this century.

Then we are outside the gospel as to its time.

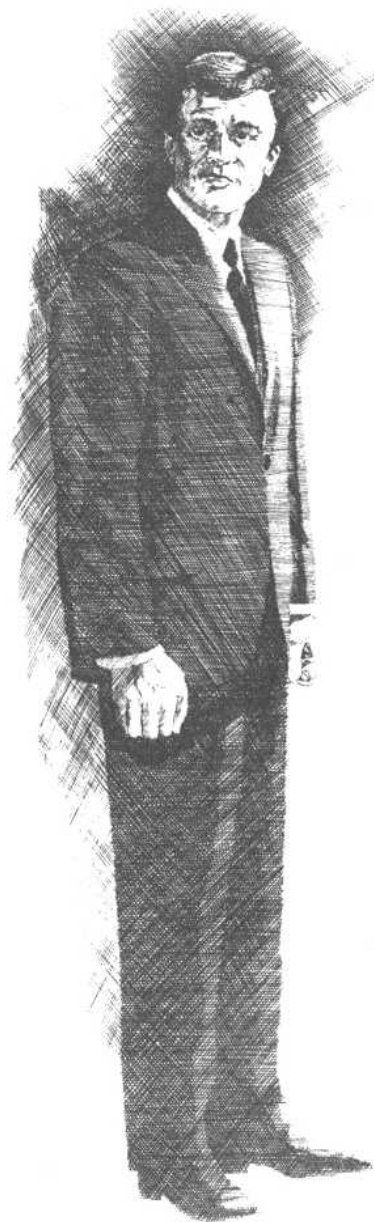
So we conclude that what we eat and what we drink is not part of what saves us. A healthy diet does not save us, but rather, the gospel does have the power to save.

Think about Mike's baptism. Is baptism part of the gospel? Try the test. Who was baptized?

Mike was.

Is the gospel about Mike?
No, it is about Jesus.

Then we are outside the gospel as to person.



Was Mike baptized in the 1st century?

No.

Then we are outside the gospel as to timing.

So our test shows that our baptism does not save us. The gospel saves us; our being baptized does not save us.

Think about the work of the Holy Spirit in Jessica's life. She is growing in grace and in the knowledge of her Lord and Savior. Is the gospel about the purifying work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of true believers? Let's again apply the three points. Who is being purified?

Jessica.

Is the gospel about Jessica or about the Holy Spirit? No, it's about Jesus the Son of God (1 John 4:14).

Then we are outside the gospel as to person.

When is this purifying work being done?

Now! Not in the 1st century.

Then it is obvious that we are outside the gospel as far as timing.

So we conclude, the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of true believers is not what saves them. That wonderful work is not part of the gospel that saves us. It is the work that Jesus did while he lived on earth that saves us. This is the gospel of our salvation.

Are you willing to make another application? Think about your decision to accept Jesus as your personal Savior. Maybe it was at an hour of worship or in the privacy of your room. Deciding to accept Jesus is a good thing, but is it part of the gospel? Who accepted Jesus?

You did.

Is the gospel about you?

No, it's about Jesus!

Then we are off base as to the person.

When did you decide to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Was it in the 1st century?

No.

Then the timing doesn't coincide with the gospel events.

We must conclude that our decision to accept Jesus is not what saves us.

Think for a moment about another decision. The person who made it had been in Jerusalem all day. After supper he and some of his friends walked to Gethsemane. He went on alone in this garden and prayed in profound sorrow. There the guilt of the sins of the whole world was laid on him. He could have left sinners to pay for their own guilt and returned to his Father in heaven but with extreme anguish, sweating great drops of blood, he decided to carry those sins in his own body to the cross. This man made a far-reaching decision that night nearly 2,000 years ago. Was that decision part of the gospel?

Let's try our test. Who made that decision?

Jesus Christ.

Is the gospel about Jesus?

Yes it is!

Was that decision made during Christ's time on earth in the 1st century?

Yes it was.

Seeing we have the right person *and* the right time we may conclude that Jesus' decision to bear my sins and yours is part of the gospel package that saves us. What Jesus did as a man in the 1st century is the ultimate gospel— the gospel of our salvation.



Other Good Things

The ultimate gospel does not include everything good, as we have just pointed out; it is something specific done by one Man, in one place, at one time. Since this gospel does not include every good thing, then there are other good things of which we may speak.

The Ten Commandments are "holy, just, and good", but they are not the gospel.

Healthful living is good, but it is not the gospel.

Baptism is good, but it is not the gospel.

Sanctification by the Holy Spirit is good, but it is not the gospel.

Deciding to accept Jesus as your Savior is a wonderful thing, but it is not part of the gospel package that saves you.

The thing that saves you has already been done and that perfectly, by Jesus Christ who took our place, substituting his life for ours and dying for us. This is the ultimate gospel.

The Ultimate Gospel is not Fruitless

This gospel is not fruitless. Those who believe that in the 1st century Jesus fulfilled all the righteous demands of God for their salvation will bear fruit in how they live today. While the gospel is a word about Christ those who believe it show changes in their experience: Paul says "the gospel... bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth." Col. 1:5, 6. And what is that fruit? Verse ten of the same chapter tells us: "Being fruitful in every good work." Good works are the fruit of the gospel.

Obedience to all God's commandments is the fruit borne on the gospel tree. If you believe the gospel of Christ you will live to the glory of God: glorifying him "in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." 1 Cor. 6:20. You will be baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Matt. 28:19. You will walk in newness of life being filled with the Spirit that works in us both to will and to do God's pleasure, always "giving thanks to the Father that made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light." Col. 1:12.

All that Jesus was as a perfect man is counted ours the moment we believe and these characteristics are progressively woven into our characters. So Paul prays that believers will "walk worthy of the Lord, unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God." Col. 1:10.

As a Substitute

Hanging on the cross, Christ was the gospel. He had lived in obedience to every particular of the law of God. That perfect life was sacrificed by the shedding of his precious blood. The communion bread represents his life that fulfilled all righteousness. The communion cup represents his blood that paid the eternal debt for our sins.

Jesus was a substitute in life and death. He was born a holy child (Luke 1: 35) because we were not (Psa. 51:5). He was subject unto his parents and grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52) as a substitute for our disobedience and faults. He went about doing good because all we like sheep have gone astray. Not only that, he humbled himself to the place of a slave in order to serve and satisfy our needs. We need something more than someone to wash our feet. "The wages of sin is death". We should have to die and for this we need a Savior, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb. 9:22)." So Jesus took the blame for all our sins. And having paid the ransom for the sins of the whole world he was buried. But, he *arose*, appeared before many witnesses, and ascended to heaven where he is now applying the benefits of the gospel package, his body and blood, in behalf of all who believe in him.

We may look at the plan that was conceived before the world was made, that was fulfilled on earth by Jesus Christ in the 1st century, and that is applied to our accounts when we believe. Jesus says: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else." Isa. 45:22.

"Look unto Jesus, sinless is He;
Father, impute His life unto me.
My life of scarlet, my sin and woe,
Cover with His life, whiter than snow."

Defining the Gospel

Geoffrey Paxton *

Some questions appear almost rude. To ask, "What is the gospel?" is like asking, "Who is Jesus Christ" or, "What is the Bible really about?" Just about everyone in the church takes it for granted that he knows what the gospel is, and therefore to raise such a fundamental question may be as irritating as asking people if they can still repeat the alphabet. Yet if we are unclear on the meaning of the gospel, we have to call into question all that we are doing.

There is a great risk involved in posing this question afresh. We may discover we have been wrong! That is a great risk. The human heart has never found it easy to admit error, and today is no exception. To raise the question "What is the gospel?" and to answer it is to expose ourselves to the possibility that we have been mistaken on the most fundamental point of Christianity.

Let us humble ourselves before God and take the risk.

The Essential Elements of the Gospel

There are characteristics which belong to one thing, but which also belong to other things. For example, a horse has four legs, but so does a cow. Such characteristics will not help us to discover the *essential* nature of a thing. To discover the essential nature of a thing is to define that thing; and to define that thing, we must discover the characteristics which belong to that thing and not to any other thing.

* When this article was originally published in *Present Truth* Vol. 5, No. 3 (May 1976), Anglican clergyman, Geoffrey Paxton, was president of the Queensland Bible Institute in Brisbane, Australia.



It is the same with defining the gospel. We have to arrive at those characteristics which are peculiar to it and to nothing else. To give characteristics which belong to the gospel *and* to other things will be to *describe* the gospel but not to *define* it. For this reason we have used the term “*essential* elements”. Let us now see what these essential elements of the gospel are.

1. The Gospel Concerns Jesus Christ

The sum and substance of the gospel is Jesus Christ. Not only is Jesus Christ involved in the gospel. He *is* the gospel. This is important, for it distinguishes Jesus Christ from the other Members of the Deity and from the believer.

We say that we distinguish Jesus Christ from other Members of the Deity. There is a very real sense in which we may say, “The gospel is Jesus Christ,” but in which we cannot say, “The gospel is the Father,” or, “The gospel is the Spirit.” While the Father and the Spirit are obviously involved in the gospel, the Father is not the gospel and the Holy Spirit is not the gospel. The gospel is about the doing (life) and dying (death) of Jesus Christ. It is not about the life and death of the Father or the Spirit. While the Father is glorified in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel itself is not Father-centered. Nor is it Spirit-centered.

We say that we distinguish Jesus Christ from the believer. Just as the gospel is not about the Father or the Spirit (in the way we have explained), so the gospel is not about the believer. The gospel is about Jesus Christ.

Though some do not wish to speak of the believer as being involved in the gospel, it may be possible to speak of the believer as being involved in that he is *represented* in the gospel. He is represented in the gospel by his Substitute, Jesus Christ. The believer lives and dies *in Jesus Christ*.

Thus to expound the gospel, we may proclaim who Jesus Christ is and what He has done. We may even proclaim who the believer is (son of God) and what he has done (rendered perfect obedience to God) so long as we proclaim that this was done *in and through Jesus Christ*.

The gospel is about Jesus Christ—not about the Father as such, or the Spirit as such, or the believer.

2. The Gospel Concerns a Past, Historical Event

Each of the three words *past*, *historical* and *event* are of vital significance for understanding what the gospel is. The gospel of the apostles was something that had happened. They all looked back upon it. They did not point to anything in the present as gospel, and they did not point to anything in the future as gospel. Notice, we are not saying that they did not point to anything in either present or future. We are simply saying that they did not point to anything in the present or the future *as gospel*. Unless we are looking back and pointing to something that happened in the past, we are not preaching the gospel. The “past-ness” of the gospel is one of its essential aspects.

The gospel was not a vision. It was not a dream. The gospel was an historical happening. It happened in history. Within a certain degree of accuracy, it may be dated.

The historical nature of the gospel—its *past*, historical nature—has certain important consequences:

First, you cannot *exhort* the gospel. You cannot exhort a past, historical work. You can only declare it, proclaim it, and publish it abroad. Exhortation is good (because it is biblical) and needed, but it is not the gospel and is not included in the gospel. Notice, we are not saying that it is not included in a sermon wherein the gospel is preached. We are simply saying that if it is included in a “gospel sermon,” it must not be a part of the gospel.



Second, not only can you not exhort the gospel, but also the gospel cannot be experienced. Yes, you have read correctly! *The gospel cannot be experienced.* We have several reasons for saying this:

- a. The gospel is about a *unique* experience.
- b. The gospel is *perfect*.
- c. The gospel concerns the *substitutionary* work of Christ.

If the believer could experience the gospel, it would cease to be unique, perfect, and substitutionary. The gospel is the unrepeatable, perfect work that God has done in Christ *in my stead*. If I could experience this, it would not be unrepeatable, nor flawless, nor done in my stead.

We repeat, the gospel cannot be experienced. We certainly do experience its benefits, or the Holy Spirit. But as we have seen, the Holy Spirit is not the gospel. The Holy Spirit given to the believer is the *fruit* of the gospel. So also are faith, hope, joy, peace as a subjective state, and holiness as a state of the believer. They are all fruits of the gospel. We must not confuse the root (the gospel) and the fruit (see Col. 1:5,6)

Third, we *believe* the gospel. Believing is not seeing. Believing the gospel is hoping in something that is *not seen*. Faith is the substance of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1); but who hopes for that which he already has (Rom. 8:24)?

The gospel is a past, historical event. This has stupendous consequences for the church and the world. The gospel is the past, historical Christ event.

3. The Gospel Concerns the Perfect Work of God in Jesus Christ for Us

As we have stated, there is no imperfection in the gospel. It is the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ for us. There are two important aspects of this:

First, the gospel concerns the *perfect* work of God in Jesus Christ. Unless we are preaching a work of perfection in Jesus Christ, we are not preaching the gospel. The gospel admits of no development. Anything that does admit of development (the Christian life of sanctification, etc.) cannot, by virtue of definition, be the gospel. For instance, faith is good, but it is not perfect. Repentance is good and necessary, but none of us repents as he ought to. Holy living is good, and no man will see the Lord without it; but our holy living is far from perfect. None of these things can qualify, therefore, as the gospel.

The second important aspect to notice is that the gospel is the perfect work of God *in Jesus Christ*. Even if the believer were perfect, the gospel would not be about him. It concerns Jesus Christ as the place of God's perfect work. Nothing that is happening in the believer can be called the gospel. It may be called the fruit of the gospel, but not the gospel itself. If this is so (and it is so), then the medium and the message (of the gospel) are quite distinct. Only concerning Jesus Christ can it be said that the Medium *is* the message.

4. The Gospel Is the Power of God for Salvation (Rom. 1:16)

We must be clear about what is being said here. We are not saying that the gospel *leads* to power. Paul tells us that the gospel *is* the power of God for salvation. The power of God is the gospel. The gospel and the power of God are identical. This is why we

include this point under “essential elements”—i.e., elements essential to the nature of the gospel.

There are many aspects of this point that we could develop, but we shall focus on an area which needs clarification, judging by much literature in the Christian world. Paul says that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. Usually we take such a statement to mean only that if the gospel is believed initially, then salvation will follow. In other words, we think that such a statement (i.e., that the gospel is the power of God) refers almost exclusively, if not exclusively, to the salvation of the unbeliever.

But it must be highlighted that Paul’s statement is also greatly applicable to the *believer*. The gospel saves the unbeliever *when* he believes, but it also saves the believer *as* he believes. It is the power of God for the salvation of the believer. Let us isolate certain consequences of this truth.

First, the gospel is that by which the believer is saved by God at the beginning, middle and end of the Christian walk. There is never a point in the Christian’s life when the gospel is not saving him. He must therefore look to the gospel at every point in his walk with God.

Second, we trust that we have made it clear that the gospel and sanctification are quite distinct realities. The gospel does not equal, nor does it include, sanctification. If it did, we could not assert our previous three points. Sanctification is the chief work of the Spirit which takes place in the experience of the believer. This work is not yet perfect. Since the gospel and sanctification are not identical, we cannot say that sanctification is that by which God saves us. The *gospel* is the power of God unto salvation.

Now let us make ourselves quite clear. We are not suggesting for one moment that sanctification is unimportant. We are even prepared to say that no man will see God without it. But what we are saying is that true sanctification will always be the product of the gospel (Col. 1:5, 6, 10). Only what is produced in our lives as a direct result of believing the gospel is true sanctification. Sanctification needs the gospel for its source and power. The satanic error is to turn sanctification into the gospel. When this happens, the power of the Christian witness is thought to reside in the holy life of

the believer. But we must realize that sanctification is itself the result and effect of the power of God in the gospel.

Not only does sanctification need the gospel as its powerful source, but sanctification needs the gospel as its constant protection. A sanctification which is cut loose from the gospel is as dangerous as a gospel that does not produce any sanctification. Perhaps it is more dangerous. We say "more dangerous" because a gospel without any sanctification is easy enough to spot. However, a gospel-less sanctification may be more difficult to detect, especially in an age which thinks that the gospel and sanctification are identical.

Third, sanctification needs the gospel as *its final protection*. All who are saved at the end will be saved by the same means as at the beginning. Our sanctification will be no more capable of saving us at the end than it was at the beginning. As far as saving us is concerned, the only thing our sanctification adds to the gospel is our imperfection! So much for those who see final salvation to be based on our sanctification.

"What the church needs today is more sanctification!" This is a common cry heard today. It is unfortunate, however, that the cry so often signifies an elevating of sanctification to the status and role of the gospel.

If the gospel is that which produces real sanctification (and who wants any other sort?) And the church needs more real sanctification, then the church needs more gospel. The gospel is the power of God for (the producing of) sanctification.

Let us summarize what we have said thus far. We have attempted to state what the gospel essentially is. That is to say, we have attempted to state what makes it the gospel and nothing else.

1. The gospel is about Jesus Christ and no other Person. In a real sense it is not even about any other Person in the Godhead, and certainly not about any other human person such as the believer.

2. The gospel is a past, historical event. It is past and not present or future. It is an historical event and not an existential experience. Unless we are preaching a past, historical event, we are not preaching the gospel.

3. The gospel is the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ. All that is perfect is not the gospel, and all that is the work of God

is not the gospel. The gospel is the perfect work of God *in* Jesus Christ.

4. The gospel is the power of God for salvation – for the salvation even of the believer. Our sanctification is dependent upon the gospel as its source, protection, and final covering before the great judgement throne of God. It is indeed tragic that so often the cry, “Sanctification! More sanctification!” means, “Away with the gospel! Away with the gospel!”

This Gospel and Other gospels

We now want to simply make explicit what is implicit in our previous section. We have positively stated four essential, definite features of the gospel. In the light of what we have already laid down, we must now say what cannot be the gospel.

1. Correct Doctrine Cannot Qualify as the Gospel

A correct system of truth cannot qualify as gospel. The four elements that we have stated make it impossible for church doctrine to qualify as the gospel. We need to beware lest we offer a system of doctrine – as good as it might be – as the gospel. We need to be careful that we do not derive our security from an intellectually watertight system rather than from the great work of God in Jesus Christ on our behalf.

2. “New Birth-ism” Cannot Qualify as the Gospel

Those who preach “Ye must be born again” as the gospel are preaching a false gospel. To begin with, the new birth (which is biblical) is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a reality which takes place now and, by the grace of God, will take place in the future. The new birth is not the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ and is not said to be the power of God unto salvation. Yet much preaching puts the new birth in the place of Jesus Christ. It is a great fallacy to present the new birth as the gospel.

It was the error of Rome to treat regeneration as the gospel. All too many evangelicals have fallen into the same trap. How many times do we hear the gospel presented as, “Jesus will come into your

heart,” or a sermon climaxing with, “Ask Jesus into your heart”? It is not the coming of Jesus into the heart that is the gospel, but the coming of Jesus into the world on behalf of sinful men.

Focusing on the human heart is not focusing on Jesus Christ. It is not preaching a past, historical event. It is not preaching the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ. And it is not preaching the power of God for salvation. Those who focus on the heart are not preaching that which is the powerful source of sanctification.

3. The Second Coming Cannot Qualify as the Gospel

Just as the new birth is biblical, so the second coming of Jesus Christ is biblical. However, just as the new birth is not the gospel, so the second coming of the Master is not the gospel. The gospel is a past, historical event, whereas the second coming is the future event of the Son. Just as there are many who are heart-centered, here-and-now-centered, so there are those whose gospel is the message of the eschaton (last things).

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

4. The Baptism of the Spirit Cannot Qualify as the Gospel

The preoccupation of neo-Pentecostalism cannot qualify as the gospel, let alone as the “full gospel.” The preoccupation of neo-Pentecostalism is with the Spirit and not with Jesus Christ, with a present experience or a possible future experience and not with a past, historical event. The preoccupation of neo-Pentecostalism is not with the perfect work of God in Jesus Christ, but with the exciting work of God in the heart of the believer. Further, what Pentecostals regard as the demonstration of the power of God is a poor substitute for what Paul calls the power of God – namely, the gospel. For all who wish to see, it is clear that neo-pentecostals are

excited about that which is far inferior to that which excited Paul and the other New Testament writers.

5. Anything Which We Exhort or Experience Cannot Qualify as the Gospel

We have seen in the first part of this article that the gospel is a past, historical event. As such, it cannot be exhorted or experienced. Anything which we exhort or experience cannot qualify as the gospel. When we do exhort (and so we should) we must keep our sanctification from becoming the gospel. The gospel must always stand guard over sanctification. The perfect work of God must always stand guard over the good works of His children. The past, historical event of God must always stand guard over the present and future activity of men. The doorposts of human works must always be sprinkled with the blood of Christ for the destroying angel to pass over us – yea, even on the last day.

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In Heavenly Places

“Although we were not around at the time, we, as believers, are accounted by God as having been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20), as having died and been buried with Christ (Colossians 3:3, Romans 6:3-6), and as having been raised up with Christ (Ephesians 2:5-6). In his life and death Jesus was our substitute and representative. We deserve to die for our sins and, when Jesus died for us, as far as God is concerned, we were there on Calvary dying for our sins in the person of our substitute and representative. When he rises to new life at the right hand of the Father he represents us believers. So, we are *in Christ* and *with Christ* in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:5-6) Everything Christ is as the perfect human son of God, he is for us. He now dwells in perfect fellowship with the Father, not only as the eternal second person of the Trinity, but as the well-beloved son fulfilling the role God always intended for his human sons.”

—Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom*, 1987, (Paternoster Press, Exeter, Devon, UK), p. 25.