

Introductory Remarks

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[This article espouses a point of view that claims to provide a *revolution in Pauline Studies*.¹ It claims that the Gospel does not include Justification – see endnote 2. It suggests, I think, that both Arminian and Calvinist views are distorted, but reconcilable under the gospel as defined here. In Akins' argument, you will see what happens when you abuse biblical theology and a lexical hermeneutic. It undermines whatever common contextual basis there is for a group of related passages. In 2002, John Piper wrote *Counted Righteous in Christ* partly in response to this movement.

You should note that this article does not attack justification directly; it only declares that justification has no place in a gospel presentation. It says that justification is the *result* of the gospel, not the *basis* of it. The listeners don't need to know what is happening, or how it is happening, only that they need saving, and Jesus saves. So the “sin-for-righteousness” part of the gospel (what he considers a *Pauline* version) may be dropped. To be fair, Paul does call it “my gospel” in Rom. 2:16; 16:25; and 2Tim.2:8. Mr. Akin's argument is interesting, but wrong, and I suspect the resulting “gospel” is ineffective.

We tend to lump together atonement, forgiveness, redemption, justification, and salvation. In reformed doctrine, salvation is a comprehensive term. It comprises both justification and sanctification. That's how we can “work out our salvation” after we've been saved. Justification is the event, and sanctification is the process of salvation. Justification has two parts as well. One part is the forgiveness of sins that results from Christ's atoning sacrifice: he paid the debt that our sin incurred. That means he *redeemed* us from the penalty of our sin, and so we are forgiven the debt. But the payment didn't give us the righteousness that warrants God's favor. It only got us out of the hole. To put it another way, we didn't gain an inheritance by it – we only avoided jail. And so the other part of justification is imputing Christ's righteousness to us. His righteousness is *considered to be*, or *accounted as*, our righteousness for the purpose of judgement. Without forgiveness, and without righteousness, we remain under the wrath of God, and we have no inheritance in the kingdom. So justification, by definition, involves Christ taking the punishment for our sin in our place, and applying the benefits of his righteousness to us. This two-part exchange is what they say must be excluded from the gospel.

We are left with the death of Christ, his resurrection, and forgiveness of sin in general, but not forgiveness of sin in particular (because there was no exchange on the cross in the past). In Mr. Akin's view, we will be justified only *after* we accept Christ. It is at this point that we are *redeemed*. In the reformed view, it is at this point that the benefits of Christ's life and death, which previously justified and redeemed us, are *applied* to us in the present. Mr. Akin writes, “*The gospel is the message that Jesus Christ died and rose for our sins so that we may be saved.*” Therefore, the *event* of salvation, which is justification, has not yet taken place as the gospel is presented. It is a future event. In his view, the act of accepting Christ appropriates salvation-justification, which was not yet ours, from a general pool of grace (universal atonement). In the reformed view, it is acknowledging that we were justified because of what Christ did on the cross for his people exclusively (specific atonement).

Theirs is an Arminian view. It says that we have been made salvable universally, but we have not been finally saved in particular. The listener can have no other understanding of the gospel if the already-accomplished justifying exchange is removed from it. And that is the whole point behind this movement. They say that defining justification as a one-for-one exchange on behalf of the elect is a Calvinist bias, not a core element of the gospel. And yet Paul writes that Jesus “was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). *His* resurrection brought justification, not our profession.]

¹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Phila. Fortress, 1977). It has been dubbed *The New Perspective on Paul*.

What is the Gospel?

by James Akin

In order to discuss the gospel, we first need to be clear on what the content of the gospel actually is. Unfortunately, there is a lot of loose, imprecise, and polemical talk about “the gospel” and what it includes. Sometimes Calvinists load into their definition of the gospel the distinctive doctrines of Calvinism, which would imply that Arminians preach a false gospel. Sometimes Arminians load into their definition of the gospel the distinctive doctrines of Arminianism, which would imply that Calvinists have a false gospel. In order to be Biblical, we must set aside this rhetoric and look at what the Bible actually says about the gospel.

There are ninety-three references to the gospel in the New Testament, but most assume we already know what the gospel is and are not that useful for determining the content of the gospel. Twenty-six passages, however, refer to the gospel being “of” something, which can give us a clue to what the gospel is about. Not all of these do so, because the phrase “the gospel of X” can indicate alternately the origin, the content, or the effects of the gospel.

Eight of the twenty-six passages, for example, refer to “the gospel of God”--indicating the source of the gospel (Mark 1:14, Rom. 1:1, 15:16, 1Thess. 2:2, 2:8, 2:9, 1Tim. 1:11, 1Pet. 4:17). We know this because God himself is not the subject of the gospel. God was preached long before the gospel was preached. The gospel was a distinctive “good news” which, though promised before hand (Rom. 1:2), begun to be preached at the time of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 1:1b). This leaves eighteen of the passages to indicate the content of the gospel.

Twelve of these eighteen passages, however, do refer directly to the content of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. These passages speak of the gospel as being the good news “of Jesus Christ,” “of his Son,” “of Christ,” “of the glory of Christ,” and “of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1, Rom. 1:9, 15:19, 1Cor. 9:12, 2Cor. 2:12, 4:4, 9:13, 10:14, Gal. 1:7, Phil. 1:27, 1Thess. 3:2, 2Thess. 1:8).

These are closely associated in the gospel of Matthew with three passages which refer to the coming of God’s kingdom, which was inescapably associated in the Jewish mind with the Messiah. These three passages (Matt. 4:23, 9:35, 24:14) thus refer to the good news “of the kingdom,” which was to the Jew a proclamation of the coming of the Messiah.

Fifteen of the eighteen passages indicate the content of the gospel as being the coming of Messiah and his kingdom, which leaves three passages unaccounted for. These refer to the effects of the gospel.

The first of these--Acts 20:24--refers to “the gospel of God’s grace.” The second--Ephesians 1:13--refers to “the gospel of your salvation.” And the final passage--Ephesians 6:15--refers to “the gospel of peace.”

This last reference is ambiguous since it is not clear whether the peace Paul is referring to in this passage is between man and God, or peace between Jew and Gentile, or both. Aside from 6:15,

there are six verses referring to peace in Ephesians. Two are Paul's opening and closing salutations (1:2, 6:23) and thus have less significance for telling us what Paul means in the body of the letter, since the salutation of peace is found in almost all his letters. The remaining four passages all focus on human peace--that is, peace inside the Church--and in particular peace between Jews and Gentiles. This is absolutely obvious in the case of 2:14-16:

For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. (Eph. 2:14-16)

Because the theme of Jewish-Gentile peace is the dominant concept in 2:14-16, we may infer it for 2:17, which flows from these three verses. The final reference, an exhortation to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3) could be a reference to congregational unity in general, but is undoubtedly colored by Paul's preceding remarks on Jewish and Gentile unity, a theme which dominates the preceding two chapters of Ephesians.

The inclusion of Gentiles with Jews as an aspect of the gospel is also emphasized in 3:4-7, and with all this as background it is thus certain that when Paul refers to "the gospel of peace" in 6:15 that it is not simply theological peace--peace between God and man--that he has in mind. The reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into one body is definitely in focus. However, theological peace may also be intended, making "the gospel of peace" echo 2:15b-16a, which has both divine and human peace in focus ("that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross").

Regardless whether both forms of peace are intended in Ephesians 6:15, it is clear that this verse, together with 1:13 ("the gospel of your salvation") and Acts 20:24 ("the gospel of God's grace") all refer to the effects of the gospel. Peace, salvation, and grace are consequences of the gospel--things that flow to us as a result of accepting the gospel.

Thus, of the twenty-six passages which speak of "the gospel of" something, eight of them refer to the origin of the gospel (God), fifteen of them refer to the subject of the gospel (Messiah and his kingdom), and three of them refer to the effects of the gospel (receiving grace, salvation, and peace). These three aspects--the origin, the subject, and the effects of the gospel--might be phrased alliteratively as the cause of the gospel, the content of the gospel, and the consequences of the gospel.

Of these, the relevant one for answering the question, "What is the gospel?" is the content of the gospel--Christ and his kingdom. This is underscored by two Pauline passages discussing the contents of the gospel, the openings to Romans 1 and 1Corinthians 15. In the first of these we read:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power

according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.
(Rom. 1:1-4)

Here Paul forthrightly states the content of the gospel. It is “the gospel concerning his Son.” The remainder of the passage unfolds the content of the gospel by describing aspects of the story of Jesus--that he is descended from David and proven to be the Son of God by being raised from the dead, that he is Christ (Messiah) and Lord.

We see the same emphasis on the story of Jesus as the content of the gospel in the opening of 1Corinthians 15, where Paul states:

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1Cor. 15:1-4)

The story of the Messiah is thus here again the subject of the gospel--that he died for our sins, was buried, and was raised again, all as the Old Testament Scriptures foretold. *Why* Christ himself is the subject of the gospel is something we will see in the next chapter. But for now we should look at just one more aspect of the content of the gospel.

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, there is a lot of loose talk (among Protestant theologians) equating the gospel with the idea of “justification by faith alone.” While the formula “faith alone” can be given an orthodox reading (see my paper, “*Justification: ‘By Faith Alone’?*”), this usage is completely contrary to the Biblical usage of the term “gospel.”

First of all, salvation, not justification, is the primary component of Jesus’ mission. Justification was a component, but not the primary one, as illustrated by the fact that there are twenty passages in the New Testament which speak of salvation in verse with Jesus, but only eleven which speak of justification in the same verse. By this test, salvation is twice as likely to be associated with Christ as justification.

“Justification” is not the key soteriological metaphor in the Bible. This can be easily demonstrated on lexical grounds. The “justif-” complex of words only has 37 occurrences in the New Testament, with the “sanctif-” complex having 20 occurrences. However both of these put together are blown away by the “save-/salv-” complex of words, which has 129 references in Scripture. Salvation, not justification or sanctification, is the chief soteriological term in the Bible.[1] Therefore, if the gospel were to be defined in terms of any of the big soteriological models, it would be salvation, not justification.

The concept of salvation is three and a half times more common in the New Testament than is justification. And were we to include the Old Testament that ratio would increase because justification is almost unspoken of in the Old Testament (which is why Paul has to pick verses like Genesis 15:6, where the terms “justify” or “justification” do not even occur, when he is expounding the doctrine of justification); salvation, by contrast, is mentioned hundreds of times in the Old Testament.

This difference in the Biblical stress on salvation rather than justification is the reason the relevant field in systematic theology is called *soteri-ology* (Greek, *soteria*, “salvation”) instead of *dikai-ology* (Greek, *dikaiosis*, “justification”).

Protestant scholars in this century have been more willing than their predecessors to acknowledge that justification is not the key soteriological concept in the Bible, or even in Paul, but is something brought up in polemical contexts dealing with the Gentiles and Jewish identity. Outside of those contexts, Paul’s talk of justification almost totally vanishes and he speaks about salvation instead, like the rest of the New Testament (Paul being the only author besides James who stresses justification as a soteriological concept at all).

The fact that Paul talks about justification almost exclusively in connection with the controversy over Gentiles and Jewish identity, but about salvation in almost every other context, is a theme that has been taken up and elaborated by the Protestant exegetes participating in what is now being called “the Copernican Revolution in Pauline studies”[2], which has been very frank in admitting that justification is *far* from being the all-consuming concept dominating Paul’s thought that previous Protestants have suggested, and the Copernican Revolution has been very frank in admitting that previous generations of Protestants have simply misread Paul’s doctrine of justification in very significant ways and that Catholics were not nearly so far off the mark in their reading of Paul as the Reformers thought.

The point that the concept of salvation is more central to the gospel than the concept of justification can also be demonstrated by looking at the way in which the New Testament deploys the two terms.

There is only one verse where the term “gospel” and a “justif-” term occur in the same verse (Gal. 3:8). When we expand the scope to include a verse on either side of the term “gospel”, there is still only that one verse. When we expand the scope to include two verses on either side of the term “gospel” a second verse appears (Gal. 2:14). When we expand to a three verse range a third verse appears (Rom. 2:16). It is not until we expand the range to six verses on either side of “gospel” that another verse appears (Rom. 10:16). And it is not until we expand the range to nine verses on either side that a fifth verse appears (Gal. 2:7). No additional verses appear when we expand the range to ten verses, which means that there are only five verses in Paul where the term “gospel” appears and a “justif-” term appears within *a twenty-one verse range*(!)-ten verses on either side of the “gospel” verse--which is larger than many whole chapters in Paul.

By contrast, there are two verses in which the term “gospel” appears with a “save-/salv-” term (Rom. 1:16 and Eph. 1:13). When we expand the range to one verse on either side of the term “gospel” there are fourteen passages. When we expand the range to two verses there are nineteen. When we expand the range to three verses there are twenty-three. Expanding to four or five verses brings the total to twenty-six; expanding to six verses brings the total to twenty-seven; expanding to seven brings the total to thirty; expanding to eight or nine brings the total to thirty-two; and expanding to ten verses brings the total to thirty-four.

Thus there are only five passages in which the New Testament uses the terms “gospel” and “justif-” within a twenty-one verse range, but there are thirty-four passages in which the New Testament uses the terms “gospel” and “save-/salv-” within a twenty-one verse range. Thus the difference between the centrality of justification and the centrality of salvation to the gospel is only magnified when we turn from raw word-counts to looking at how the terms are deployed. At the ten verse range the concept of salvation is *seven times* more likely to be found in the context of the term “gospel” than the concept of justification.

This completely destroys Protestant rhetoric to the effect that “The gospel *is* the message of justification by faith alone.” If you are going to define the gospel in terms of any soteriological concept, it is going to be salvation, not justification, but the primary subject matter of the gospel is Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1:12-13 offers the classic balance of these two concepts in relation to the gospel, stating: “[W]e who first hoped *in Christ* have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, *the gospel of your salvation*, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 1:12-13).

This emphasis on Jesus as the salvation-bringer why we read statements like, “[Y]ou shall call his name Jesus, for he will *save* his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21) and “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save sinners*” (1Timothy 1:15). Not “for he will *justify* his people from their sins” or “Christ Jesus came into the world to *justify* sinners” (1Timothy 1:15). Of course, he did come intending that sinners be justified by his work. The point is one of emphasis: Salvation is the emphasized term in Scripture, not justification.

The gospel is the message of salvation through Christ, not justification through faith. Justification through faith is a *consequence* of accepting salvation through Christ, but it is not *the content* of the gospel. The way the New Testament speaks of the gospel, Christ is its central content and salvation is what he came to bring. Thus in all three of the “my gospel” verses (Rom. 2:16, 16:25, 2Tim. 2:8) we read about Jesus Christ, not justification. Similarly, in 1Corinthians 1:1-7, the longest formulaic exposition of the gospel, we read:

“Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast -- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles” (1Corinthians 15:1-7).

The terms on which the gospel was preached was thus the death and resurrection of Christ so that we may be “saved, if you hold it fast -- unless you believed in vain.” Christ and salvation are the key concepts. In fact, preaching the gospel on any other terms would be ridiculous since the message “You can be saved through Jesus Christ” would be far more intelligible to first century

Jews and Greeks and Romans than “You can be justified through Jesus Christ.” This is still the case, which is why Los Angeles has two big signs that say “Jesus Saves,” not “Jesus Justifies.”

The fact remains that justification is not the central soteriological concept for Paul or for the New Testament as a whole. Justification may be biconditional with salvation and thus *a consequence* of accepting the gospel, but justification is not *the content* of the gospel. We never read in Scripture of “the good news of justification,” but of “the good news of Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ and his work on the cross is the *content* of the gospel; the rest are *consequences* of accepting it.

So to sum up by giving a single-sentence definition to answer the question this chapter poses: The gospel is the message that Jesus Christ died and rose for our sins so that we may be saved.

ENDNOTES:

[1] If anyone is not acquainted with the fact that salvation is a different soteriological concept than justification (though the two are biconditional), then that person needs to go do further reading until he gets the difference between basic soteriological concepts sorted out.

[2] This movement is led by writers such as E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, Dale Moody, Paul Zeisler, and others.

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<http://www.cin.org/users/james/files/gospel.htm>