

## **The Gospel of God**

By Pastor Andy Aikens

Just recently I received earth-shaking news. The Wendy's Frosty, a long time favorite treat, is not dairy. I was shocked. Consider it. If the Frosty is not dairy, then what is it? This is a frightening thought because where something comes from, its contents, and its purpose are all extremely important. If an ice cream product is not actually made of cream extracted from a cow, I am not certain that I want to eat it. Yet, when it comes to the gospel, we rarely consider these things. Many people would heartily agree that God is the author of the gospel, but he is not only its author. The gospel is also about him and designed to glorify him. We have made the gospel about humanity, and we have redesigned it to elevate the worth of man. In the process of doing this we have lost sight of the true source of the gospel, and consequently, we have also lost the true value of the gospel to humanity. The true value of the gospel is its power to give to humanity what we truly need, and what we truly need is God. Like a person longing for ice cream, we have been duped into eating a cheap imitation. It's time to get back to the real thing; it's time to get back to the gospel of God.

This means viewing the cross in God-centered terms. This book is written to inform and persuade readers that the cross is more about God than it is about man. I want more of my brothers and sisters in Christ to begin enjoying the supremacy of God in the gospel. The supremacy of God in the gospel is just another way of saying that God is central to the gospel message. Here are a few ways this thinking affects your understanding of the gospel. Sending Jesus to die on the cross was God's idea. Sin is only properly defined in light of God's holiness. Even the benefits of the gospel to man are really about the benevolence and wisdom of God. The cross serves God's purposes, and teaches us about God's character. The cross demonstrates God's glory by displaying his infinite love and perfect justice.

These emphases help us keep our beliefs about man in proper perspective. Human beings were created for God, but they have rebelled against him. In this rebellion mankind has fallen short of God's glory because people have preferred themselves to God. Thankfully, God has taken the steps to restore man's fellowship with him. The supremacy of God in the gospel acknowledges that the deciding factors of salvation do not rest with man. They rest with God. Until we are brought back into a relationship with God, no one can be happy or holy. The gospel is the good news that God is redeeming a people to himself. Only when we see the gospel in this light will we comprehend the God-centered aspects of the biblical gospel.

### *The Gospel of God*

The Scriptures speak of God's supremacy in the gospel at least seven times by referring to the gospel as the "gospel of God." This phrase may be

unfamiliar to many, but it stands as a testimony that the New Testament writers view God as being at the center of the gospel. The gospel belongs to God as his possession, flows from God as its source, and is about God as its content.

The trumpet of God's supremacy in the gospel sounds forth with the opening lines of Mark's gospel. We hear the phrase for the first time in **Mark 1:14**,

“Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the *gospel of God*.”

In **Romans 1:1** Paul says he has been

“...set apart for the *gospel of God*.”

In Romans 1 Paul fleshes out the meaning of “that little phrase.” In verse 16 Paul calls the gospel, “the power of God.” And, in verse 17 he says that the gospel is concerned with a righteousness that comes from God. Then, in verse 18 Paul begins his more detailed explanation of the gospel on the note of God’s wrath against sin. In those first 18 verses of Romans 1 Paul’s unrelenting focus concerning the gospel is on God, and this is certainly what he has in mind when using the phrase *gospel of God*.

In **Romans 15:16** Paul again uses the phrase when referring to himself as,

“...ministering as a priest the *gospel of God*.”

Then, in **II Corinthians 11:7** Paul asks,

“Did I commit a sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted, because I preached the *gospel of God* to you without charge?”

After that, Paul says in **1 Thessalonians 2:2**

“But after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the *gospel of God* amid much opposition.”

Then later in that same chapter **1 Thessalonians 2:8-9** he writes:

“Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the *gospel of God* but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the *gospel of God*.”

Paul and Mark are not the only New Testament writers to call the gospel, the gospel of God. Peter also uses it in a warning in **1 Peter 4:17**

“For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will *be* the outcome for those who do not obey the *gospel of God*?”

In over twenty years of growing up in the church, I don't think I ever heard this phrase until I recently discovered it in these passages. While its lack of familiarity is proof of its neglect, I desire to focus more on its meaning. The phrase *gospel of God* is an example of a genitive construction. Genitives are created in English with the preposition "of" and look something like, noun of noun. Given the context, this genitive construction can mean possession (the gospel belongs to God), source (the gospel comes from God), or content (the gospel is about God). Usually, when dealing with genitives, one of these meanings stands out as more apparent than the others. However, there are a significant number of passages in which the meaning of the genitive is ambiguous. The job of the interpreter is to determine which meaning is intended. As pertaining to these ambiguous passages, many interpreters are growing fond of saying that all the meanings apply. This can be dangerous because it has the tendency of loading phrases with meanings they just don't carry. But, in this case, this phrase warrants being loaded up. It is natural to understand "gospel of God" as meaning all three: possession, source, and content. We are not left with any questions or contradictions when we understand *gospel of God* in the fullest sense. All of this corroborates that the New Testament understands the gospel as belonging to God, coming from God, and being about God.

The gospel belongs to God. It's his good news to give. He invented this good news, and he distributes this good news. He takes the initiative in applying the gospel to people. He does not sit back and wait on anyone as though his hands were tied. He desired to display his glory by saving sinners, and so he did it. By saying that the gospel belongs to God we emphasize that it is God's prerogative to save sinners. I will address this more fully in chapter 3.

You can see how this flows right into the next point. God is the source of the gospel. God is a loving God, and God is a just God. Therefore, the gospel reflects both of these truths. God saves unworthy sinners because he is loving, and he lets no sin go unpunished because he is just. In this marvelous dichotomy of gospel truth we behold the wisdom and goodness of God. Like the source of mighty waters, the gospel flows out of the heart and character of God Almighty.

Now, not only is the gospel his possession, and not only is he its source, but he is also the content of the gospel. The gospel is ultimately about God. The good news rings loud and clear in Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." The message of the gospel is good news because men may now find peace with God. Why? Not because men are no longer immoral, but because God did something about the enmity that existed between himself and those he wanted to save.

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard well meaning Christians attempt to make the gospel more appealing by telling would-be converts that God

will give them a better marriage, more money, physical healing or (one of my all time favorites when talking to teenagers) get better grades in school. Rarely is it appealing to us sinful humans to know that our creator is no longer at war with us. Yet, because of what Christ has done, if you desire to experience that peace with God, all you need to do is repent of your sin and turn to Christ in faith. This message is not appealing because we have been told so often that God loves us, that we cannot imagine him destroying anyone. We have never felt the angst of separation from our creator. Consequently, we can't possibly comprehend what is good in the gospel, and unless that changes the true gospel message will remain just a religious banality.

### *Illustrated from Scripture*

Paul understood this. He offered no spiritual trinkets when he preached the gospel. One of the most significant moments in Scripture that unfold this God-centered approach to the gospel is found in Paul's preaching at Athens. In Acts 17:22-31 Paul fills his gospel presentation with an explanation of God. For example, in verses 24-26 the Apostle says, "

"<sup>24</sup>The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth.

In this passage, Paul roots the gospel message in the very existence and attributes of God, who is creator and sustainer of all that exists. Paul does not begin with an explanation of man's sin; he does not even talk about God's love. He begins by saying that God created everything and that all creation owes allegiance to this one true God. He then moves from that point to say that man did not follow God, and consequently Christ will judge mankind if they do not repent and turn back to God. Paul's preaching in Athens helps us understand the importance of the supremacy of God in the gospel.

This Biblical presentation of the cross gives us a picture of a God and a gospel that is very different from the god and gospel of the popular culture. The cross teaches us about the sovereignty, strength, righteousness, and the greatness of God. It simultaneously teaches us about the weakness, the depravity, and the failure of man. Popular ideas about the cross and the gospel have said that God needs man, and that man is not so bad. Well, if human beings are not so bad after all, then the cross of Christ is a major overreaction on the part of God. And, if we say that man is the highest reason for the cross, then we diminish the grandeur of God. If we fail to see what is really at stake in the cross, then we probably will not truly understand what Christ has done for us. In an unpublished sermon John Piper has said it this way, "If we don't see it (that is recognize that the glory of God is at stake in the cross), we will probably not see the gospel as the precious news that it is. The gruesome death of Christ will

probably seem like a gross overreaction. The crucial point is that God is the origin of all things and the measure of all things and the goal of all things. And, the universe is all about God." Yet this is not how many have understood the gospel in these post-modern times.

### *The Cultural Gospel*

To demonstrate the difference between what I am saying and what I have called the pop-gospel, ponder this question. Have you heard that God is a God of love? Have you heard that God is also a God of wrath? Chances are pretty high that you have heard about God's love. However, by the same token, chances are pretty low that you have heard anything about God's wrath. This is because when most people share the gospel, they emphasize God's love inappropriately. A typical gospel presentation begins something like this,

"Did you know that God loves you? In fact, he loves you so much that he sent his Son to die for you on the cross."

The problem with this introduction is that it says too much. The speaker is not offering any distinction between God's love for humanity in creation and God's love for his people in redemption. Therefore, there is no basis for comprehending why God would need to send his Son to die in the first place. Most people think everyone is going to heaven regardless.

When speaking to an unbeliever, it is more helpful to follow Paul's example and begin your explanation of the gospel by pointing out that God created all human beings. Next, it is helpful to show that because God created humanity, all men and women owe him their devotion and trust. Once this truth is established it is then possible to show the basis for God sending his Son to die, which is, no one has honored God, as he or she should. This problem between God and man is the reason that all men need a savior. If people do not repent of dishonoring God with their lives and turn to the savior in faith, God will destroy them. He will do this because he is not only a God of love, but he is also a God that is holy and just.

However, the North American subculture known as popular Christianity has taught us that love is the essence of God's character. Don't get me wrong; love, as an attribute is important to any healthy comprehension of God's character. But, like any truth concerning God, if God's love is taught in isolation from other truths about God, it will be misleading. For example, if all the pastors of all the local congregations in the United States went on a no-holds-barred rampage of teaching the wrath of God, Christianity in North America would have a very different tone than it does now. That tone would not be healthy, and I am not advocating it. However, just as it would be unhealthy to teach that God is wrathful in isolation from other truths about God, it is equally unhealthy to teach that God is loving in isolation from other truths about God.

This is particularly true when it comes to our understanding of the gospel. Teaching the love of God while neglecting his other attributes is unhealthy

because it leads people to believe that God overlooks sin. By separating God's love from his other attributes in our gospel presentations, we fail to emphasize his justice and wrath. Without justice and wrath towards sin, God appears to deal with sin by, "loving us anyway." This fails to adequately express the holiness of God. More importantly, it fails to adequately explain the deep physical and spiritual suffering of Christ on the cross.

This kind of overemphasis on God's love is also unhealthy because it leads Christians to think that man is uppermost in God's affections. And, if man is uppermost in God's affection then that necessarily implies that man is the center of the universe. We see this in the fact that Christians often think that the world was created for them. These people do not realize that the world exists as an overflow of God's greatness. He did not create the world for us. He created the world and us for himself. Colossians 1:16 teaches this when it plainly says, "all things were created through him and for him." If, when presenting the gospel, evangelicals continue to emphasize God's love to the neglect of his other attributes, Christians in North America will continue to have a distorted view of God and untrue beliefs about man.

There are many churches and pastors who teach that God is primary to the gospel. But, on the whole this is not the emphasis of most ministries. Many Sundays go by in which many Christians on this continent will not hear a single word concerning what the gospel has to say about God. More and more the pop gospel is about meeting peoples felt needs rather than meeting their one true need, which is to be reconnected to their creator.

We have lost our bearings. People do not comprehend the significance that God is central to the good news. Whether we are talking about sin, the death of Jesus, or daily living, every truth of life must be rooted in God. Sin cannot be properly defined without reference to God, and the cross certainly makes no sense without reference to God. I will say more about this in chapter 6. As I put together the pieces of a high view of God and his gospel, I hope you will begin to see the magnificence of God. In light of that magnificence, I hope you will also see the unworthiness of man and the sufficiency of our savior. Only then will we run to the cross as our only comfort and our only confidence. Only then will we cease to use the gospel to make much of man and begin to use it to make much of God! This book intends to move you away from the spiritual anemia of man-centered thinking by leading you to feast on the iron-rich nutrients of a God-centered gospel.

### *Foundations and Decorations*

Christians need to comprehend and live by a God-centered gospel because it is foundational to the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 3:10 the Apostle Paul says, "by the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." Notice that the foundation Paul speaks of is a person. This is important for comprehending the phrase, gospel of God. At no point is

the Bible attempting to drive a wedge between the Father and the Son. The gospel is about Jesus, but this is not different than saying that the gospel is about God. As Christians we are relating to a very personal God. We do not relate to a set of principles or an impersonal fate. Therefore, the foundation of our lives is God in Christ.

Also, notice that Paul says we must be careful how we build on the foundation he has laid. We must be careful because the things built on the foundation should be consistent with the foundation. If they are not consistent, then it is as though you have laid a different foundation. It is not possible to relate well to God while believing false things about him. That is why we should be so careful about how we understand the gospel.

Many people do not realize it, but when building a home the most difficult aspect of construction is laying the foundation. Yet, if you get the foundation right, then you will have a much better go of it when constructing the rest of the house. My father is a carpenter, and my brothers and I helped him build many houses when I was a teenager. I remember becoming very frustrated with him because he took so long making sure the foundation was correct. This part of the job has no beauty that will be seen as an adornment of the house. In fact, once the house is finished no one is likely to even notice the foundation. But, if the foundation is not done right, then nothing in the adornments will be beautiful in the end.

I hated this part of construction. I wanted to immediately begin forming up walls or laying the floor. I wanted to do some work that would produce results. But, my Dad, who took great pride in his work, was determined to do it right. We would move those string lines, which mark the boundaries of the foundation, again and again until they were right. Only when those string lines were right would we begin digging the footers. It seemed like it took weeks to get it all done. Eventually, the foundation was complete, and the rest of the house would rise out of the ground. The same is true with the gospel.

1 Corinthians 3:10 teaches us that in Christ a proper foundation has been laid. It is upon that foundation that any additional work must be done. Interestingly, God in Christ is not only the foundation, but he is also the adornment. God in Christ is also the contents of the work that goes on top of the foundation. I appreciate what John Piper has said about foundations in an article on biblical counseling, "Foundations are in the basement holding up the house, but they seldom get talked about, and they are usually not attractive."<sup>1</sup> I agree. Therefore, while these truths are foundational, they are also more than foundational. That is why Paul exhorts us to be careful how we build. For Jesus is not only the foundation, he is also the walls, the roof, the cabinets and the decoration that makes the house a home. He is to be talked about and enjoyed regularly.

And yet, sadly, this is not the case for many in these days. We are now reaping the fruit of poor foundation building in the church. The beautiful adornments that should be present are simply not there because the foundation is neither square nor plumb.

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Toward a Definition of Biblical Counseling*, DGM website.

The key ingredient to laying a proper foundation in the life of a believer is a proper understanding of the gospel, the gospel of God. We must have accurate knowledge about what Christ did and what it means. This understanding must begin with the great God of the universe, and include the plight of man in sin. But, it must not stop there. For the gospel to be complete, we must see the grand mystery of Christ's coming and dying on our behalf. We must contemplate these truths until they are deeply implanted in our hearts and minds. We must grow to delight in the sovereign mercy of a Holy God, be humbled by the depravity of all humanity, and marvel at the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death. These three areas of Scriptural revelation are the gospel. They must be laid down in our lives like a proper foundation so that they can also adorn the walls of daily living. God is sovereign. Man is sinful, and Christ's death is sufficient to grant us salvation. Houses need foundations and decorations. The Christian life needs the pure gospel from beginning to end. Christians need the gospel of God.

### *How We Worship and How We Witness*

When God is at the center of the gospel, we worship better and we witness better. Because God is man's greatest need, a focus on God in the gospel message helps us to avoid confusion in our worship and our evangelism. Our fallen condition has separated us from our creator, and amazingly, he has designed a plan to restore us. Once we experience this great truth in our hearts, our one holy passion will be to get to God. This must be the focus of all our worship. It must be the focus of our worship services, but worship services are not all there is to worship. Worship is really about life. The Bible does not really talk about worship services. Certainly there are passages about public worship, but the majority of Scripture that teaches us about worship relates worship to life.<sup>2</sup> As children of God, our lives are to be characterized by devotion to God. And, biblical devotion to God means being all too aware of man's frailty and need for God. While we continue to live on this side of heaven, we must continually acknowledge our failure to live as we were designed. We must do this so that we can continually be brought back to the redemptive plan of God and be restored to fellowship with him.

When our lives have a worshipful, redemptive center of gravity, so will our church services. Honoring God in worship is the work of the church, and should be reflected in every gathering of the church. When the gospel of God is at the center of our worship services, we will no longer base our music and readings and sermons on the feel good stories of the world. Nor will we base the format and content of those services on the entertainment models of Hollywood. Instead, we will place the gospel story dead in the center of everything we do. The gospel will no longer be merely about the benefits it grants to people, but it will be about the exaltation of God in Christ.

When worship fails to have a redemptive focus, it ceases to meet the needs of human beings. This is why the songs I began this chapter with are so

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 216.

troublesome. For, when our music, which is so much a part of our modern worship, no longer reminds us of our depravity, but rather teaches us that we are pretty good, then it no longer helps us worship the great God of our salvation. In fact, that music actually becomes counter-productive in the great enterprise of worship. If my life's aim is to get to God, then I must come to him in the way that he has prescribed. Scripture is clear that man is in need of redemption, and redemption can never be reduced to a one-time experience. While our conversion may occur at a moment in time, our salvation is a lifetime of knowing and relating well to the great God of the universe. Redemption is a lifetime of rehearsing the gospel. A. W. Tozer has said, "The whole work of God in redemption is to undo the tragic effects of that foul revolt, and to bring us back again into right and eternal relationship with himself. This requires that our sins be disposed of satisfactorily, that a full reconciliation be effected and the way opened for us to return again into conscious communion with God and to live again in the Presence as before."<sup>3</sup> That is the gospel of God, and that is why we must gain a sense of the supremacy of God in the gospel. God is the only true source of life and happiness for humanity. Everything else is only temporary.

Augustine has been quoted often as saying, "he is happy who possesses God."<sup>4</sup> The supremacy of God in the gospel grants us this grace of joy and peace. When we comprehend that God is the water our thirsty souls need, then we understand what Isaiah meant when he said, "Bring my sons from afar, And my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, And whom I have created for my glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made." God created us for himself. There is a God-sized hole in our hearts and only he can fill it. Augustine knew this truth and passed it on to us in his most familiar prayer of all, "You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace till they rest in you."<sup>5</sup>

This is not only the great aim for our own worship, but it is also the great aim in our invitation for others to become worshipers with us. Not only does the gospel of God help us worship better, but it also helps us witness better. When we offer the gospel to others, we are offering God. So many times this truth gets distorted among the appeals and the debates. However, at the end of the day there is no salvation apart from a relationship with God. Jesus said that this was the essence of salvation, "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3 NASB).

So, when God is at the center of how we understand the gospel, then God takes a central place in our gospel presentations. When we share the gospel with our family, friends and neighbors, what do we offer them? If our presentation of the gospel is man-centered, we offer people things like release from emotional problems, financial gain, physical healing, or an escape from hell. Don't be confused. All of these blessings can be a result of knowing God. However, with the exception of escaping hell, these blessings are not necessary results of knowing God. When a person knows God, he or she has a greater

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<sup>3</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1993), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions* (Penguin Books, 1961), p.

<sup>5</sup> *Confessions*, p. .

treasure than any temporal comforts. And, even though escaping hell is a necessary benefit of the gospel, knowing God is certainly about more than just escaping hell. We begin to truly help people by ceasing to offer them spiritual trinkets and begin offering them that which is of supreme value, God himself. In fact, if we offer anything less than God in our gospel presentations, then we have not shared the gospel.

It seems, with great frequency, that Christians are viewing the gospel as primarily about man more and more. This is evidenced by the messages found in our popular Christian media. I see Christians being smitten with the world and themselves more and more and the cross, less and less. The reason: we live in an age where church leaders fail to teach the gospel of God. Though the gospel is clearly revealed in Scripture, false gospels are preached every Sunday. The messages heard across this nation every week are riddled with man-centered presuppositions. From the health and wealth message to the positive thinking message, man and his needs are at the center of the proclamation. The church growth movement with its emphasis on numbers has culminated in the seeker-driven presuppositions that are unashamedly man-centered. We are intoxicated with ourselves. Self-help and self-study are rampant. In the church, we are now reaping the fruit of having removed God from the center of the gospel.

The rest of this book seeks to raise your awareness of the many ways that God is at the center of the gospel. The themes that are discussed in the following chapters are increasingly neglected in the preaching and teaching of many pastors. These themes are not neglected by all ministries. However, the truths you are about to encounter are not as common as they once were. You may be tempted to ask, "what is this new teaching?" There is nothing new in this book at all. There is nothing original. It is the gospel of God, proclaimed by the Apostles and echoed down through the centuries by the Fathers and the Reformers.

Yet, when you are done, I hope and pray that this new emphasis on old truths will ring with a freshness that transforms your devotion to Christ so that it will be deeper, Scripture saturated and God-centered. I pray that you will echo the apostle Paul when he said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."