

## Love's Shibboleth: The True Gospel

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. (2 Jn. 1:9)

1 Corinthians 15:1-4 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: 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,

The word *Shibboleth* is a Hebrew word from the book of Judges. During the time of the Judges there were several moments of civil war in Israel: Hebrew fighting against Hebrew. One of those is mentioned in Judges 12, where the tribe of Ephraim became angry at some fellow Jews from Gilead. A war broke out between them, but since they were very similar looking, they needed a way to tell friend from enemy. Apparently the tribe of Ephraim pronounced their *sh's* as *s*. So when the Gileadites wanted to sniff out if a person was an Ephraimite, they would first ask him if he was an Ephraimite, and if he denied it, they then told him to say the word *shibboleth*. We're not sure what it meant, it might have meant river, some think it meant ear of wheat. Whatever it did mean, it was useful as a kind of password. Ephraimites couldn't say Shibboleth, and would say Sibboleth.

So that Hebrew word has passed into English. When we talk about a shibboleth we mean a way of speaking that is used by one set of people to identify another person as a member, or a non-member, of a particular group. Teenagers have their shibboleths, certain slang is in, some is out. Today's politically correct crowd has shibboleths: words and terms you cannot use, and words and terms you must use.

Sometimes Shibboleths are meaningless and arbitrary. But sometimes they are very important ways of identifying people. And when it comes to Christianity, when it comes to the church, we also have a shibboleth. Actually, Christianity at large has many minor shibboleths that identify you as belonging to a certain group or sub-culture within Christianity. But among those who believe the Bible and identify as true, born again, saved believers, there is one shibboleth we look for in each other. The Shibboleth is the gospel.

The gospel, or as John calls it in this letter, the doctrine of Christ, is the set of essential truths that is the boundary of Christianity. If you do not believe those truths, then you are outside the faith.

Now you may be someone who makes no claim to be a Christian, and self-consciously rejects the gospel. You may be someone who says he is. But if you do not embrace those truths that make up the gospel, then you are not in the faith, not a Christian, not a believer.

John has been showing the church he is writing to that real Christian love does not fudge or erase the boundary marker of Christianity. Because it loves in the truth, and loves because of the truth, and is expressed in truth, then love sometimes must make that boundary very clear. As we saw last week, it sometimes has the sharp edge of refusing hospitality to those who deny the gospel and yet pretend to be Christian teachers.

If we are going to love in the truth, then we need to be very familiar with this boundary of the faith. Churches that believe the church is made up of believers want this shibboleth from each other. Before we baptise or receive someone into membership, this is the shibboleth we ask for: tell us the gospel. This is not something we are making up: the Bible makes the gospel the password, the entry, the boundary of the faith. So we should expect that those who call themselves saved, can tell us the means by which they were saved: the gospel.

Let's say you belonged to a society or a club made up of drowning survivors, people who had been saved from drowning. Let's say I came along and said, "Oh, that's me! I'd like to be a part of this." You would say, "Okay, tell us how you were saved from drowning!" Now if I then begin talking about the importance of water safety, and the great danger of rip tides, and how I once donated to the life-guards, and what a pity to see the coast-guard underfunded, you would scratch your head, and say, "But when did you, or how did you survive drowning?" While everyone might have a different account, and some would be dramatic, and some would be quite tame, but the shibboleth of drowning survivors would involve water, personal danger, some kind of intervention or rescue, and resulting safety. Without those ideas, you would not admit me to your society of drowning survivors.

The same is true of Christians. Christians believe we are God's Judgement Survivors. We believe we have been saved from His wrath and judgement on our sin. We believe we would have been eternally drowning in a lake of fire. So our Shibboleth is a recognition of the key ideas and truths that are indispensable to it.

But it is amazing to ask professing Christians to give you the gospel, and you hear the spiritual equivalent of stories about donating to the coast guard. The gospel is having God in your life, or the gospel is living in the way of Jesus. You'll hear that the gospel is that God embraces you in spite of your mistakes; or that the gospel is realising your true potential. You'll hear that the gospel is that feeling that God is with you, but none of this is what the Bible calls the good news, the doctrine of God our Saviour, the message of eternal life, the way, the message from the beginning.

What is the gospel? We could go to many places in Scripture to describe and define it. We could simply use John 3:16, or John 1:12. We could find it in Romans 3:20-28, or Romans 4:5, or 5:8, or 6:23. Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 summarise the gospel. Individual verses sometimes have it all there – 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 2:16, 1 Pet 2:24, 3:18.

But perhaps the clearest statement is in 1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter, Paul was responding to some people in Corinth who were denying the resurrection of the body, and therefore, the resurrection of Christ. In so doing, they were denying the gospel. So before he lays out answers to their resurrection-objections, he gives the gospel very plainly and simply. In four verses, we have the gospel:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you-- unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, (1 Cor. 15:1-4)

The gospel centres around two events – the death and resurrection of Jesus. The burial simply proved Jesus was truly dead, and the appearances listed in verses 5- 8 prove that He truly lived again. The gospel is about these events. But the gospel is not just these events. A Christian is not someone who merely believes certain things happened over one weekend in A.D. 33. A Christian is one who understands the meaning of these events, and embraces them with his whole heart. The meaning of those events, when we unpack them, gives us the set of truths we call the gospel.

We can unpack these verses into four words that we can all remember as the essentials of the gospel: God, Sin, Christ, Faith.

## **I. God**

The first word of the gospel must be God. The word gospel is from old English: god=good, spell=news. The gospel is good news to the world. It is good news about God's attitude to the world, that leads to this statement about Christ died for our sins and rose again. It was God who sent Christ to die for our sins according to the Scriptures.

The first word of the gospel is God, because God is the first principle and first idea to make sense of anything else. When you meet the person who claims he doesn't believe in God, he is almost claiming he doesn't believe in reality. He is claiming to not believe in order, in meaning, in beauty, and in justice, but yet he lives his life as if those things exist.

But Romans 1 says that every man has the knowledge of God hardwired into him: 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. (Rom. 1:19)

The God of Scripture is the Creator of all things visible and invisible. The God of the Bible is also the direct ruler and Lord of all things, not absent. The God of the Bible is not impersonal like the god of pantheism: He can be known and loved and experienced as a Person. The God of the Bible is not just niceness, He is holy and can be obeyed or disobeyed.

Without God, you don't have a gospel.

It is not about social renovation. The gospel is not primarily food to the hungry, money to the poor, employment to the unemployed, social advance for the oppressed. It might result in such benefits, but such things do not constitute the intention or purpose of the gospel. The gospel begins and ends with God.

It is not about social revolution. The gospel is not about revolt against forms of political tyranny or oppression as Liberation Theology in own country suggested. Christianity affects politics, but it is not about politics. The gospel begins and ends with God.

It is not about a psychological technique. The gospel does not provide some kind of internal therapy to affirm 'the self' or to liberate you from 'misplaced shame'. The gospel will change your inner man, but it is not just a means to finding inner peace. The gospel begins and ends with God.

It is not about moral influence. The gospel is not simply a great example of God's love teaching people to sacrificially love one another or be noble or selfless.

It is not about realising your own godhood, coming to worship the divine within. It is not realising your godhood or your inner potential or creating your reality.

Before we go any further with anyone, the first word of the gospel is God. But that leads us to the second word.

## **II. Sin**

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: 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,

The next part of 1 Corinthians 15:3 tells us more about the gospel. It tells us the really bad news.

“Christ died for our *sins*” . Here is why God sent His Son. Sin.

Man has a problem. His primary problem is not his lack of education, his lack of clean running water, his lack of literacy, his health, his poverty. His primary problem is that he has turned his back on His Creator.

Isaiah 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way;

The word for going our own way from God is 'sin'. How many of us do that?

Romans 3:10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The gospel includes the doctrine of **human depravity**. Humanity is sinful and inherits a sin nature. To say that man is innocent or could become righteous by his own acts contradicts the gospel. From the beginning, God made man to fellowship with Himself. But believing Satan's lies, we chose to disobey, to rebel, to strike out for independence. And instead of getting more life, we got death. We got death because we separated from the source of life, and we got death as a judgement from God upon sin.

Ephesians 2:1-3 And you... were dead in trespasses and sins, ... and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

What should a fair, and just Creator do with a creature who has everything from His hand, but disobeys so that he can become equal with God? Sin is high-handed treason against God; it is openly rebelling against the source of our life.

Sinners like to think of God as safe and tame. But our sin, in fact, makes God very dangerous to us. He is indeed the quintessence of love and goodness, if He is favourable towards you. But if not, there is no one more dangerous than God. If you are on His wrong side, you are so unsafe it can barely be expressed, because your worst enemy is everywhere, and He is angry, and there is nothing He can't do.

God's mill goes slow, but grinds small; the more admirable His patience and bounty now is, the more dreadful and unsupportable will that fury be which ariseth out of His abused goodness. Nothing smoother than the sea, yet when stirred into a tempest, nothing rageth more. Nothing so sweet as the patience and goodness of God, and nothing so terrible as His wrath when it takes fire (William Gurnall, 1660)

The gospel contains the doctrine of **eternal punishment (Mat 25:46, Rev 20:15)**. If there is such a thing as sin, then there is such a thing as punishment for sin, judgement for sin.

What is that penalty? To offend an infinite God is an infinite offence. Yet we are finite, time-bound, mortal beings. The only way we could pay an infinite debt would be if we were punished for an infinite period of time.

The gospel is about what God does about the penalty, power and eventual presence of sin, so as to enjoy restored fellowship with the Triune God. It is firstly about sin and its consequences and its judgement from a holy God before anything else.

So our second word of the gospel is sin. We do not rush to speak about love and wonderful plans for your life, when the man does not see the problem.

"It is a great mistake to give a man who has not been convicted of sin certain passages that were never meant for him. The Law is what he needs...Do not offer the consolation of the Gospel until he sees and knows he is guilty before God. We must give enough of the Law to take away all self-righteousness. I pity the man who preaches only one side of truth - always the gospel and never the Law" D.L. Moody

John Wesley was once mentoring a young preacher and told him "Preach 90 percent Law and 10 percent grace."

We haven't understood the gospel until we have seen ourselves as lawbreakers. We haven't understood the gospel until we have understood what ought to have happened to us apart from the gospel. We were drowning, drowning in a sea of our own making, sinking into judgement. That brings us to the third word of the gospel.

### III. Christ

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: 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,

If we couldn't save ourselves, then God, lovingly sent Christ to die for our sins. This is the truth of **substitutionary atonement**. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, so that we might be forgiven, and have Christ's righteousness imputed to us.

This principle of substitution was taught by God from the after Adam and Eve fell. In order for the guilty to live, an innocent must die in their place. All those animal sacrifices looked forward to a human being who would be truly morally innocent, and be guilty of no sin, so that he could bear the sins of others.

On the cross, Jesus became a lightning rod for all the anger of God towards sin, all His just punishment on sin. Jesus became the epitome of sin, the ultimate and final sin bearer. Isaiah 53:5<sup>5</sup> But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;

The gospel is that Christ died as a substitute for sin, being punished by God as if He were a sinner.

How then could Christ pay for our sins over a space of three hours? That brings us to who Christ is. The answer must be that Christ was actually an infinite Person with infinite merit. If an infinite Person suffers as a substitute, He pays an infinite price. This means that Jesus Christ had to be God. Essential to the gospel is the doctrine of the **deity of Christ (Jo 1:1-14; Rom 9:5; Phil 2:6; 1 Jo 5:20)** A creature, no matter how exalted, could not bear the infinite price of your sin, nor offer up infinite merit on our behalf.

But our text says that Jesus died for **our** sins. Jesus, however, was acting as a substitute for mankind. To be a true substitute, He had to be a true human being. He had to be able to die, something God cannot do. Therefore, we know that fundamental to the gospel is the truth that Jesus was truly human. To have the gospel we must believe the doctrine of the **humanity of Christ (1 Tim 3:16; 1 Jo 4:2-3)**.

How did Jesus enter our world as both God and man? If He had simply appeared on earth as a fully grown man, He would not have been truly human, not having been born. But if He were born of two human parents, the doctrine of the Incarnation would be unclear or even compromised (and He would have inherited the curse of Jeconiah, through Joseph). To truly join our race as the God-man,

He needed to be born, and conceived miraculously. Fundamental to the Gospel is the doctrine of the **virgin birth**. (Lk 1:35, Gal 4:4)

Jesus could only have been a true sin-bearer had He been sinless Himself. How would we know if He had lived sinlessly and successfully paid for our sins? Only if He rose from the dead would He have been successful in His atonement—having rendered death itself an unlawful act upon His sinless life—and upon all who would be found in Him. Essential to the gospel then are the doctrines of the **sinless life of Christ** (1 Pet 1:19, 2 Cor 5:21) and the **bodily resurrection of Christ** (Rom 1:4, 4:24-25, 10:9)

But whom did Jesus satisfy on the Cross? If He paid for our sins, who was paid, especially if He is God?

The fact that Jesus was paying a penalty on the cross to God, while being Himself God leads us to another truth fundamental to the gospel: God is more than one Person. How could God be both the one who provides satisfaction and who is satisfied? This means that essential to the gospel is the **doctrine of the Trinity** (Jo 10:30; Ro 3:25; 1 Pet 1:2)

There are a lot of contenders for the title of Jesus. It is absolutely crucial that we believe on the Jesus Christ of the Bible, because Paul warned in 2 Corinthians 11 that false teachers present us with another Jesus. All around us are Jesus' that bear no relationship to the Bible.

And Jesus can certainly not be all of these things. To call on Jesus if you do not believe you are calling on the Eternal Son of God, the God-Man, is to call on someone who will not answer, like dialling the wrong number. The only qualified Saviour is the virgin born Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, Second Person of the Trinity, sinless One who died and rose for you.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one **Mediator** between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,

#### **IV. Faith**

1 Corinthians 15:1-2 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you **received** and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain.

Here is the fourth idea of the gospel. Paul says that the Corinthians heard this gospel, they received the gospel, and they stood in it – they continued to believe the gospel, and it was the means by which they were saved.

This is the fourth word which summarises the gospel: faith. Faith is the response of an obedient heart to the gospel: it receives it. It believes it, and trusts it, accepts it, and fully embraces it.

You do not receive this gospel by your parents, or by your church attendance, or by baptism. You don't absorb it by accident, or by exposure to those who have received it. You receive this by faith, and by faith alone.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Eph. 2:8-9)

Essential to the gospel is the fact that **man is unable to merit salvation**. We cannot be good enough, or become good enough to be saved. The gospel that gives God glory is the gospel that says, the only response you can make to God is to turn from your sin and trust the Saviour. Empty your hands of sin and self, and come empty-handed to God.

4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. 5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, (Rom. 4:4-5)

The gospel is God treating Jesus as if He were me, and God treating me as if I were Jesus. This is a gift. An unearned, undeserved gift. Every other religion will insist that you give God something valuable in exchange. You improve yourself, or prove yourself, and God will then accept you. The gospel says, God will never accept you for your works. He will accept you if you hide yourself in another. That wonderful hymn says it well:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in thee;  
Nothing in my hand I bring,  
simply to the cross I cling;  
naked, come to thee for dress;  
helpless, look to thee for grace;  
foul, I to the fountain fly;  
wash me, Saviour, or I die.

The gospel is about trusting in a transfer – my sins for his righteousness. My punishment on Him; His life in me.

Now, if there were some other way, or multiple other ways to be reconciled with God, then God would have revealed those to us. But the fact that He commands all men everywhere to repent and believe means that faith in Jesus is the only way. "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

If God became a man, and entered time and space, there is no other way of salvation. This incarnation also leads to **particularism**. The Gospel is exclusivist.

Does this gospel have a deadline? Does anything happen if the world keeps rejecting it? The answer of the Bible is that the same one who died to provide atonement will also personally return to execute judgment on those who rejected it, and to vindicate those who received it. Thus if we deny the doctrines of the **ascension (Acts 1:9; Ep 1:20-23)** and **personal return of Christ**, we deny the gospel.

Now in the explanation of these four words, I have actually mentioned several truths or several doctrines. God's existence, Human sinfulness, human inability, eternal punishment, Christ's deity, Christ's humanity, Christ's virgin birth and sinless life, Christ's substitutionary atonement, Christ's resurrection, ascension, and second coming, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, The Trinity

These doctrines form the very basis of understanding the gospel. They are the doctrines of the gospel itself. To deny them is to deny the gospel. Because these doctrines are essential to the gospel, they have sometimes been called the fundamentals. People who hold to the fundamental doctrines as being the boundary of Christianity are, at least historically speaking, fundamentalists.

Now, that does not mean that in the act of evangelism, we share all of these doctrines in great detail. Nor is it the case that everyone understands all these doctrines at the point of regeneration. Most of us grow to understand these truths more as we mature.

Ignorance is a different matter than denial, though. No one can flatly deny these doctrines without

denying the gospel itself. Since we believe faith is a gift, and the enlightened understanding an act of the Spirit, God-given faith will not reject one of the tenets of the Gospel once exposed to it.

When you are asked for the shibboleth of true Christianity it is these four words: God, Sin, Christ, Faith. The truths that explain those four words, which explain Christ died and rose again for our sins, are the fundamental, essential truths that we call the gospel, the boundary of Christianity.