

The Nature of the Gospel Itself

Introduction

Few issues are more critical to the health of the church than clarity about the gospel. The New Testament presents the gospel not as a vague religious message, but as a definite announcement with specific content. Yet in contemporary evangelicalism, the term is often stretched to include discipleship demands, ethical imperatives, or evidences of spiritual transformation. While these matters are vital to the Christian life, confusing them with the gospel itself undermines assurance, distorts grace, and obscures the simplicity of faith.

This paper aims to clarify the nature of the gospel in its narrow, biblical sense. It will define the gospel as the apostles proclaimed it, examine how the apostle Paul uses the term, explain why 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 represents the irreducible minimum of gospel content, distinguish between gospel content and gospel implications, highlight current confusion within evangelicalism, and provide a simple diagnostic tool for separating gospel issues from discipleship issues.

A Biblical Definition of the Gospel in Its Narrow Sense

In Scripture, the gospel (*euangelion*, “good news”) refers to a specific message announcing what God has done in history through Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners. It is not a call to moral reform, a summary of all Christian doctrine, or a description of the transformed life that should follow faith.

As Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer explains: “The term *gospel*, while it means *good news*, is in this connection used only of that specific way of salvation which God publishes in His Word by which a meritless sinner may be perfectly and eternally saved on no other terms than that he *believe* on Christ as his Savior.”¹

Chafer’s definition helps prevent the common error of confusing gospel content with the subsequent transformation and responsibilities of the believer.

At its core, the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins, rose again, and that eternal life is given freely to all who believe in Him. It is a message to be proclaimed and believed. It is not a work to be performed.

This definition highlights three essential features:

1. **Objective content** – The gospel is grounded in historical events, not subjective experience.
2. **Substitutionary meaning** – Christ’s death addresses the problem of sin by dying in our place.
3. **Faith-alone reception** – The benefits of Christ’s work are received by faith, apart from any works.

As Paul affirms, this gospel—received by faith alone—is ‘the power of God for salvation’ (Romans 1:16). Salvation is tied to believing the gospel, not to the believer’s subsequent obedience or perseverance.

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “*Preaching the Gospel in Its Accuracy*,” Grace Bible Studies, accessed January 26, 2026, https://www.gracebiblestudies.org/Resources/Web/www.duluthbible.org/g_f_j/Chafer.html.

A crucial distinction helps clarify what the gospel is—and is not. In Jesus’ ministry, He primarily preached the gospel of the kingdom, the announcement that the promised Messianic kingdom was near for Israel (Matt. 4:17; 10:5–7). This message emphasized Israel’s restoration and obedience under God’s reign. Many Jews expected a literal, earthly kingdom, and the disciples themselves initially looked for a political and national fulfillment (Acts 1:6–7).

After His death and resurrection, God revealed the gospel of grace, the message central to Paul’s letters: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again, and eternal life is received by faith alone (1 Cor. 15:1–4; Acts 20:24). Unlike the kingdom message, this gospel is not tied to Israel’s national promises, moral performance, or future obedience. Confusing the two leads to serious error—presenting salvation as dependent on works or discipleship rather than on Christ’s finished work.

Understanding this distinction safeguards the free offer of salvation, ensures clarity in teaching, and prevents conflating the requirements for discipleship with the requirements for salvation (Rom. 6:23; Luke 14:25–27).

How Paul Uses the Word “Gospel” in His Letters

Paul’s letters provide the clearest and most sustained treatment of the gospel in the New Testament. Several points are especially important for understanding both the content of the gospel and the distinction between salvation and the Christian life.

1. The gospel is received, not invented.

Paul emphasizes that the gospel is not a message he developed, adapted, or modified to fit his audience. In Galatians 1:12 he writes, “*For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*” The gospel is divine truth revealed by Christ Himself, not human wisdom or tradition. This underscores its authority and unchangeable nature. Believers are not free to alter the message to make it more appealing or culturally acceptable without distorting it.

2. The gospel is fixed content, not flexible opinion.

Paul treats the gospel as specific and non-negotiable. Paul’s warning in Galatians 1:6–9 shows the gospel is unchangeable; adding even small requirements—works, commitments, or performance—corrupts it.

3. The gospel is distinct from broader biblical teaching.

Paul consistently separates the gospel from other aspects of biblical instruction. In Acts 20:24, he calls it “*the gospel of the grace of God,*” while in Acts 20:27 he speaks of declaring “*the whole counsel of God.*” The gospel is the core message that secures eternal life, while the “whole counsel” encompasses ethical teaching, church practice, and guidance for believers. Moral exhortation, discipline, and growth are vital, but they are not part of the message that saves. This distinction mirrors the A-Truth / B-Truth principle described by Dr. Bing: the gospel addresses salvation (A-Truth), while broader teaching addresses discipleship and growth (B-Truth). See *A Simple Diagnostic: Gospel Issue or Discipleship Issue* below.

4. Moral transformation and obedience are not gospel requirements.

Although Paul frequently instructs believers in godly living, perseverance, and love for others, he never presents these as conditions for receiving eternal life. Romans 6–8, Ephesians 4–5, and Galatians 5–6 are full of exhortations to holiness, yet they are clearly addressed to those who are already justified. Paul’s letters show that transformation flows from salvation, not into it. Faith in

Christ secures the believer's standing before God; works and obedience may demonstrate the reality of that faith but do not contribute to justification.

5. Paul models faithful gospel delivery.

Finally, Paul shows that delivering the gospel faithfully requires both clarity and restraint. He does not dilute the message to avoid offense, nor does he expand it to include discipleship requirements. His letters illustrate a careful balance: proclaim Christ crucified for sin (1 Corinthians 15:1–4), insist on faith in His work alone for salvation, and then guide believers in growth, love, and obedience. This serves as a model for all teachers and ministers: the gospel must be kept pure, while discipleship follows salvation rather than defines it.

Paul's letters teach that the gospel is revealed, fixed, and sufficient for eternal life. Faith in Christ alone saves; moral transformation, obedience, and perseverance are results of salvation, not prerequisites. Confusing these categories leads to distorted gospel presentations and undermines assurance of salvation. By keeping the gospel content pure while providing ethical instruction to believers, Paul sets a model for faithful ministry that honors both grace and God's truth.

Why 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 Is the “Irreducible Minimum”

No passage defines the gospel more concisely or authoritatively than 1 Corinthians 15:3–4. Paul not only identifies this message as being “of first importance,” but also presents the gospel he *received* and *delivered*—not developed or adapted:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Dr. Ryrie underscores the centrality of these facts:

Facts are essential. In describing the Gospel he preached, Paul said it was “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). These historical and doctrinal facts are “of first importance,” for without them there is no Gospel.²

Paul gives us the precise definition of the Gospel we preach today in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8. The Gospel is the good news about the death and resurrection of Christ. He died and He lives—this is the content of the Gospel. The fact of Christ's burial proves the reality of His death. He did not merely swoon only to be revived later. He actually died and died for our sins. The inclusion of a list of witnesses proves the reality of His resurrection. He died for our sins and was buried (the proof of His death); He rose and was seen by many witnesses, the majority of whom were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (the proof of His resurrection). This same twofold content of the good news appears again in Romans 4:25: He “was delivered up ... and was raised.” Everyone who believes in that good news is saved, for that truth, and that alone, is the Gospel of the grace of God (1 Corinthians 15:2).³

To believe in Christ for salvation means to have confidence that He can remove the guilt of sin and give eternal life. It means to believe that He can solve the problem of sin which is

² Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1989), p. 30.

³ *Ibid.* p. 39

what keeps a person out of heaven. You can also believe Christ about a multitude of other things, but these are not involved in salvation. ... That issue is whether or not you believe that His death paid for all your sin and that by believing in Him you can have forgiveness and eternal life. ... The essential facts are that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3–4; Romans 4:25).⁴

As we consider this passage, several key features stand out:

- ***Paul received and delivered the gospel—he did not develop it.*** Paul emphasizes that this message was given to him by revelation and passed on without alteration. It is authoritative, divinely revealed content, not a product of human reasoning, cultural adaptation, or moral teaching. People are called to receive it by faith, as it is.
- ***The focus is entirely on Christ’s work, not human behavior after believing.*** Salvation is anchored in what Christ accomplished—His death, burial, and resurrection. Faith in this work alone secures eternal life. Paul does not include behavioral reform, moral performance, or lifelong commitment as requirements for receiving this gift. These may follow as results of salvation, but they are not conditions for it.
- ***The content is historical and theological, not ethical or experiential.*** Paul grounds the gospel in real events—Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection—which fulfill Scripture. It is not a set of promises about personal growth, spiritual feelings, or ethical outcomes. The gospel is objective and verifiable, not subjective or situational.

Irreducible Minimum and Non-Negotiability

Calling this passage the *irreducible minimum* does not minimize other biblical truths; rather, it marks the boundary line of saving content. Nothing less than these facts saves, and nothing more may be added as a condition for receiving eternal life. This protects the gospel from additions such as commitments, works, promises, or lifelong obedience—matters that relate to discipleship, not the content of saving faith.

1 Corinthians 15:3–4 therefore provides the authoritative apostolic definition of the gospel message by which sinners are saved. It is this message—Christ crucified and risen—that must be proclaimed clearly and believed simply.

Gospel Content vs. Gospel Implications

A vital distinction must be made between the content of the gospel and the implications that flow from believing it. Confusing these categories has led to many of the theological errors seen in modern gospel presentations.

Gospel content refers to what must be believed to receive eternal life—namely, the saving work of Christ: His death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3–4). This message is complete, sufficient, and cannot be supplemented with additional requirements.

Gospel implications, by contrast, are the truths and responsibilities that follow salvation. These include spiritual growth, obedience, transformation, perseverance, and love for others. Scripture commands these things, but always as the outflow of salvation, not as conditions for receiving it.

⁴ Ibid. p. 119

Keeping this distinction clear guards against several errors. When gospel and discipleship are blended, people may look to their performance for assurance, rather than resting in Christ's finished work. Grace is subtly replaced with merit, and faith is shifted from Christ to self-evaluation.

The New Testament consistently roots the Christian life in an already-secured salvation. Believers are urged to live worthy of the calling they have *received* (Eph. 4:1) and to present themselves to God *because* they have been justified (Rom. 12:1). The imperatives for Christian living grow out of an established identity in Christ—not as prerequisites for receiving eternal life.

Dr. Ryrie summarizes this distinction well:

It is an inexcusable error to confront sinners with problems that concern the Christian life and call upon them to make promises regarding them. An unsaved person is never called upon to surrender himself to God. The saving act is in no instance represented as our 'giving ourselves to God'; it is, on the contrary, taking His Son as our Savior.⁵

Gospel implications, then, are like the fruit of a healthy tree: they demonstrate life, but they do not produce it. Recognizing this difference preserves both the freeness of the gospel and the seriousness of discipleship, without confusing one for the other.

Confusion in Evangelicalism

Despite the clear distinction between gospel content and gospel implications, many contemporary presentations blur the line, leading to theological error and pastoral misunderstanding. J.B. Hixson, in *Getting the Gospel Wrong*⁶, identifies several contemporary “gospels” that deviate from the biblical message: the **Purpose Gospel** (salvation framed as fulfilling personal purpose), the **Puzzling Gospel** (unclear or contradictory message), the **Prosperity Gospel** (linking faith with material blessings), the **Pluralistic Gospel** (implying all religions lead to salvation), the **Performance Gospel** (salvation tied to works or obedience), and the **Promise-Only Gospel** (also called the “crossless gospel” by critics), which teaches that one can receive eternal life by trusting God's promise without knowing who Christ is or what He accomplished on the cross. Each of these distortions, in one way or another, obscures the simple, singular requirement of faith in Christ for eternal life.

Confusion also arises from popular evangelistic invitations that unintentionally add human effort to the gospel. Lance Latham in his book in *The Two Gospels*,⁷ highlights several of these:

- **“Forsaking All Your Sins”** – requiring the sinner to promise perfect obedience from now on, ignoring Romans 8:7, which shows the carnal mind cannot submit to God.
- **“Surrender All”** – teaching that salvation depends on a full personal surrender, rather than recognizing that Christ's surrender on the cross accomplished our redemption (Rom. 3:25; 3:28).

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Moody Publishers, 1969), p. 170.

⁶ J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, revised edition (Eagle, CO: Grace Gospel Press, 2013).

⁷ Lance B. Latham, *The Two Gospels* (Streamwood, IL: Awana Clubs International, 1984).

- **“Make Jesus Your Lord”** – often framed as promising to obey Christ for the rest of one’s life; true faith, however, looks to Christ’s death and resurrection, not human works (Rom. 10:9; John 8:24).
- **“Give Your Heart to Jesus”** – suggesting salvation is secured by a human act of devotion, rather than trusting in the finished work of Christ.

Although well-intentioned, such invitations can leave people trusting in their promises instead of Christ’s payment for sin.

Even widely used explanations like the **ABC method** (“Admit, Believe, Confess”) can unintentionally suggest multiple steps or requirements. While it might be helpful as a teaching tool, its structure may blur the biblical truth that eternal life is received by faith alone in Christ alone.

These modern distortions illustrate a growing tendency to merge gospel content with discipleship themes. When the gospel is expanded to include obedience, commitment, personal surrender, or step-based formulas, it ceases to be the message Paul described as “of first importance.” Maintaining the biblical distinction preserves both the freeness of salvation and the seriousness of spiritual growth without confusing one for the other.

A Simple Diagnostic: Gospel Issue or Discipleship Issue?

A frequent source of confusion in evangelical teaching is the tendency to mix truths related to salvation with truths related to the Christian life. Dr. Charlie Bing’s A-Truth / B-Truth principle provides a helpful framework for distinguishing the two and keeping the gospel message clear.⁸

A-Truths refer to salvation—truths describing how a person receives eternal life. B-Truths refer to discipleship—truths that describe growth, obedience, service, and spiritual maturity.

These two categories must never be collapsed, because each answers a different question:

- How is a person saved? (A-Truth)
- How does a saved person grow? (B-Truth)

The following contrasts summarize the distinction:

A-Truth	B-Truth	Explanation
Salvation	Discipleship	Believing in Jesus as Savior grants eternal life; following Him as Lord describes the process of learning, obeying, and growing as a disciple (Jn 8:30–31).
Faith	Works	Faith is a passive trust in Christ’s finished work, while works are the evidence that flows from faith (Rom 4:5; Heb 11).
Grace	Merit	Salvation is entirely undeserved favor; any attempt to earn it by works or commitment nullifies grace (Rom 11:6).
Justification	Sanctification	God declares the believer righteous once for all; sanctification is the lifelong process of spiritual growth (Rom 5:9–10).

⁸ Charles C. Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship: How to Understand Some Difficult Bible Passages* (Brenham, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2015).

Spiritual Birth	Spiritual Growth	Being born again grants eternal life; growth in Christ reflects the ongoing development of the believer (Jn 3:3; 1 Pet 1:22–23).
The Gift	The Prize	Salvation is freely given; rewards are earned through faithful service (Phil 3:14; Jn 4:10, 17).
Relationship	Fellowship	Every believer has an eternal relationship with God, but fellowship—the quality of that relationship—varies according to obedience and love (Jn 14:21).
Trust	Commitment	Salvation comes through trust in Christ as Savior; commitment to Christ as Lord reflects discipleship, not a prerequisite for eternal life (Acts 16:31).
Damnation	Discipline	Unbelievers face eternal judgment; believers may experience temporal discipline from God’s fatherly love (Heb 12:5–11).
Grace	Law	Salvation is by God’s free grace, not obedience to law (Rom 6:14; Gal 3:22–25).

The A-Truth / B-Truth distinction safeguards the gospel from being weighed down by discipleship requirements. A-Truths are complete and accomplished solely by Christ. B-Truths require the believer’s active response as part of growth. When these categories are confused, a performance-based gospel emerges, assurance becomes unstable, and the freeness of salvation is obscured.

Properly distinguishing them ensures believers rest confidently in Christ’s finished work while pursuing maturity, obedience, and reward as grateful responses—not as conditions for eternal life.

Conclusion

The gospel is good news because it is clear, complete, and entirely rooted in the finished work of Christ. Scripture defines it with precision: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. All who believe in Him receive eternal life. Nothing more is required, and nothing else can contribute to what God has already accomplished.

Keeping the gospel distinct from discipleship safeguards both truth and assurance. The Christian life matters profoundly, but it flows from salvation—not into it. When the message of eternal life is complicated with calls to obedience, surrender, or personal resolve, the freeness of grace becomes obscured, and the simplicity of faith is lost. The New Testament’s pattern is consistent: salvation rests on Christ alone; growth follows as the believer responds to His grace.

Dr. Harry A. Ironside, a beloved Bible teacher of the early 20th century, often emphasized the importance of faithfully communicating the gospel. He illustrated this with a sobering story. He said that once he read an account of a young married woman traveling with her infant child on a train during the winter along the eastern states. The weather was severe; snow and sleet were falling so hard that a snowplow was clearing the tracks ahead of the train.

The woman, unfamiliar with the area, asked the conductor to ensure she got off at the correct stop. The conductor assured her he would. Still uneasy, she repeated her request when he passed again, and he again promised to see that she was not forgotten.

A businessman sitting across the aisle overheard the exchange. Wanting to help, he leaned over and told the woman he would watch out for her and make sure she got off at the right station, describing the location confidently as the first stop after a nearby city. This comforted the mother greatly.

As the train continued, the man repeatedly reminded her when her stop was approaching. Eventually, when the train reached what he thought was the correct location, he helped her and her baby off into the blinding snow. He returned to his seat, trusting that she was safely on the platform. Moments later, the conductor came by, looking for the woman, and realized that she had been left at an emergency stop in the middle of a field. The train crew returned to search, but tragically, the woman and her child were found frozen to death.

Ironside drew the lesson plainly: if it is so serious to give wrong directions in matters of temporal life, how infinitely more serious is it to give false or unclear directions regarding eternal life? Misleading a person about salvation can have consequences far greater than any earthly mishap. Faithful, accurate communication of the gospel is not optional; it is a sacred responsibility.⁹

For this reason, the gospel must remain as God gave it—simple, sufficient, and grounded in Christ’s finished work. Our task is not to improve it, expand it, or attach conditions to it, but to proclaim it plainly so that its saving power can be received by faith.

⁹ Harry A. Ironside, *Illustrations of Bible Truth* (Moody Press), illustration “A Victim of Wrong Information.”