

Gospel

Mark 1.1, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Question: What is the Gospel?

Key Verses: Romans 1:16; Acts 20:24; Galatians 1:6-9

What is the Gospel? The word literally means “Good News.” It is plastered all over church in sermons, slogans, and songs. Yet it seems to mean different things to different people. It’s kind of like the word *love*. “I love you” can have radically different meanings. Misinterpretation can lead to some really awkward encounters. That’s true with “Gospel” as well. Because it’s such a key word for Christians, let’s see if we can clarify this important concept.

In one sense, the Gospel is the summary of the Christian message. That is, the Gospel is the content of what we preach. Paul uses it this way in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” In a broader sense, the Gospel is biography. Specifically, it is the story of Jesus’ life and death. The New Testament opens with four Gospels, individual narratives of Jesus’ ministry. So Gospel can be a message or it can be a narrative. Both are Christian. However, *gospel* was not originally a religious word. Indeed, it originated as a political term.

The Gospel and Politics

In every major city across the Roman world there were couriers bringing “good news” from the capital. Town criers bellowed, “Hear ye, hear ye.” The crowds gave their attention because they knew it was an important (and usually positive) announcement. By and large, the good news of the Roman heralds hovered around the highest leader of the land. When the Emperor got married, for example, the good news was relayed by official ambassadors to all parts of the kingdom. They wanted the subjects to know that the Emperor would be able to pass on his heritage to the next generation. Likewise, when the ruler sired a child, the message was proclaimed far and wide. Aside from Emperors, Generals also generated good news after a successful military campaign. Couriers carried the official script to cities and suburbs: “We won the war, our enemies are now our subjects—Good News”. Military, marriage, and procreation were the common core of the political *gospels*. Their contents were inscribed on parchment, stones, and pillars so the populous could celebrate and rally around their ruler. That is important sentence. Read it again, “so the populous could celebrate and rally around their ruler”!

One example from 9 B.C. was found in the city of Priene. An inscription of Octavian reads: “Because providence has ordered our life in a divine way . . . and since the Emperor through his epiphany has exceeded the hopes of former good news (*evangelia*), surpassing not

only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future will surpass him, and since the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of his good news [may it therefore be decreed that]”

Set aside for a moment the obvious blasphemy and political propaganda. This inscription clarifies the purpose of a “gospel”. The good news was to unify the populous around a political figure who could promote and protect their prosperity. Christians adopted this term for exactly the same reason. They wanted to promote their Emperor, Jesus, who could promote and protect their spiritual prosperity. Christians made this claim in direct opposition to the Emperor’s fallacious claim to be the ruler of the world. By the very use of the term, they were claiming a counter narrative to Imperial Rome. They were suggesting that the Emperor had been trumped by Messiah. As near as we can tell, this claim was first made by young John Mark, as he recorded Peter’s preaching in the capital city of Rome.

The Gospel and the Gospels

Most New Testament scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel written. If that is true, he wastes no time confronting the Imperial powers. He opens with this foray: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Technically, this kind of introduction is called an *incipit*. The purpose of an *incipit* is to set the tone for the rest of the book. In short, he tells his reader that this biography is a political narrative about the victory of his hero, Jesus. Mark offers two political titles for Jesus in this opening sentence, “Messiah” and “Son of God”. The first is Jewish, the second Roman, both mean the same thing.

Every Jew would know the basic meaning of “Messiah”. The word literally means, “The One Anointed.” It referred primarily to the regal son of David who was to reestablish his kingdom to its ancient apex. He would conquer Israel’s enemies, sit on a royal throne, and restore the order and purity of the Temple. He would be king, liberator, and national hero. *Messiah* could mean more but it could not mean less.

Of course, the title *Messiah*, was mostly lost on Mark’s Roman reader. They knew little about Jewish Messiah hopes or the history of ancient Israel. What a Roman Christian *would* understand, however, is the term “Son of God.” That is the title all his friends and family used to refer to the Emperor. This world ruler had divine rights. The Emperor’s forefathers attained divine status. During the time Mark penned his gospel, the Emperors were pressing to be worshiped among the Pantheon even during their lifetimes not just postmortem. So in a sense, Mark opens the gospel with two political terms. One is Jewish, the other is Roman and both portray him as the highest world ruler. That’s inflammatory if read correctly!

Who talks like that? According to tradition, John Mark was the teenager while Jesus ate the Last Supper upstairs in his home. As the Apostles gathered for the final meal in the upper room, his mother Mary provided the room. Undoubtedly young Mark strained to hear Jesus’ final sermon. He likely heard Judas’ footsteps as he exited early for a dastardly deed. He was

probably aware when Jesus escorted the remaining Apostles to the private Olive grove in Gethsemane, likely owned by his family as well. That's why he knew where to go when the soldiers knocked on his door looking for Jesus. Try as he might to outrun the troops, he arrived too late to the garden to warn Jesus of his impending arrest. He raced into the night wearing nothing but a tunic. When a soldier caught him by the collar, he wrangled loose and ran for his life. Mark 14:51-52 records this odd event of a secret stalker. Who else could it be but John Mark? Though his actions may have been ill advised, they were, nonetheless, brave.

In the garden he risked his life to protect Jesus during a political fall-out. Is it any wonder that in Rome he promoted Jesus as a political ruler? This young man accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). Again, he failed to finish what he started. For that reason, Paul refused to allow him to reengage on his second itinerant tour. So he made his way to Rome as an amanuensis for Peter, the other "pillar" Apostle. Like so many of us, John Mark had a history of failure but a heart to keep promoting Jesus. This time, by all counts, he got it right. His Gospel begins where Jesus' own life ended—as a political figure, destined to rule the world.

The Gospel and the Church

For Mark, the Gospel is a big deal. He uses the word eight times in sixteen chapters. By contrast, Matthew only has four uses, Luke two, and John zero. While that may seem surprising, it is appropriate. The Gospel is not the story of Jesus *for* the church but the proclamation of salvation *through* the church. That's why we see the word far more after Acts 2 when the church was established. The gospels use some form of the word twenty-three times before Jesus' death. The rest of the New Testament has a hundred uses after Jesus' resurrection.

Simply put, the purpose of the Church is to announce Jesus as the emperor, king of kings, ruler of heaven and earth. The Gospel is the good news of a new lease on life where an individual can have his or her sins forgiven. That's true but truncated. Our good news is not merely new life for an individual. It is the good news of a new nation. We call it the Kingdom of God and it is a global *and* eternal enterprise. Jesus is our emperor and we are his envoys. This is not merely our Gospel, it is our obligation. Paul puts it this way, "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

Because this announcement is of quintessential importance, Satan will work overtime to make sure it doesn't receive a full hearing. From the time of the Gospel was written until our own day, there has been a concerted Satanic and cultural attack against message of Jesus' reign. We are to be vigilant not only in proclaiming the Gospel but keeping it pure. Listen to Paul's invective against the Galatians who had polluted his preaching. Galatians 1:6-9, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble

you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”

There is only one true Gospel of Jesus. Yet many attempt to distort it. Some dilute the Gospel for their own pride and power. Others are pawns of demonic forces trying to distract us from God’s global agenda. They will do everything in their power to keep Jesus off his throne. Conversely, we will do everything in our power to put him on his throne. This is not merely a metaphor. Through his church, Jesus reigns in this world. Ours is the responsibility and privilege to be his couriers, announcing to far-flung places this singular truth that we have a king named Jesus who sits on the ancient throne of Israel in God’s heaven to bring healing to God’s earth.

This message is so badly needed. This Good News is so desperately overdue. Let the declaration of the Apostle Paul become your own: “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

Key Points:

- The word “Gospel” literally means “Good News” and was originally a political term.
- Mark was the first Christian writer to use the term and did so in direct opposition to the Emperor’s false claims to be the divine ruler of the world.
- The Gospel is the announcement of the Church even more than the description of Jesus’ life. Our prime directive is to proclaim Jesus as the world ruler through the Kingdom.

Action Step: Ask two questions of yourself: (1) If you claimed Romans 1:16 for your life, would your friends and family have enough evidence to defend your claim? (2) What practical step(s) can you take to make Acts 20:24 a reality in your schedule this week?

Further Resources: Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel* (2011).