

# The Gospel Revisited

If the gospel is good news, then why do people's eyes glaze over when I share it?

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by Dieter Zander

*Discipleship Journal* Issue #139 January/February 2004

I was abducted by an alien gospel. At least that seems the best way to describe what happened when I was 11 years old. One day during a summertime visit to my aunt's home, I found some matches and played with them in the backyard. As she put me to bed that night, my aunt asked me if I had been playing with matches (she had been tipped off by a neighbor).

Being an 11-year-old, I naturally said no.

"God knows if you were playing with matches," my aunt said sternly. "If you are lying, you are committing a sin. If you die tonight without having your sins forgiven, you will go to hell."

That seemed awfully severe. But having burned my fingers earlier in the day, I didn't want to risk eternal fire. I eagerly asked Jesus to forgive me for lying, playing with matches, and an assortment of other sins. I fell asleep relieved that if I died during the night, I would go to heaven. I was saved!

But had my aunt's "evangelism" really ushered me into the new life that Jesus offers and that the Scriptures describe—a life of love, joy, freedom, and power? Or had I been abducted by a narrow, alien version of Christianity, which consisted only of trusting Jesus to rescue me from hell and then faithfully trying to get others to trust Him for the same rescue?

The Gospel Unloaded?

In one sense, my aunt's evangelistic effort was effective. For 30 years, I have been trying to follow the Jesus I prayed to that night. I have also sought to introduce others to Him. But I have become increasingly frustrated with the evangelism that I received and have practiced. More and more, I've sensed that the gospel I was told—and have been passing along—ignores the substance of life in its hurry to save me from eternal damnation.

This frustration motivated me to revisit some old friends. Anyone raised in the evangelical world will be familiar with these verses:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.—Lk. 19:10

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.—Jn. 3:16

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.—Acts 16:31

For years, my definitions of the key words in these verses went something like this:

*Lost:* Someone who is going to hell because he has not believed in Jesus Christ for the payment of his sins.

*Saved:* Someone who has eternal life because he has believed in Jesus and asked Him to forgive his sins.

*Believe:* To agree that Jesus, God's Son, paid for our sins, thereby giving us eternal life. Generally we show that we believe in Jesus by praying a prayer asking Him to forgive our sins and come into our lives.

*Eternal life:* Life in heaven with Jesus when I die. As millions of evangelicals have been taught to ask, "If you were to die tonight, are you sure you would go to heaven?"

This understanding of the gospel is essentially concerned with how to deal with sin and death, with wrongdoing and its effects. We've got the past covered: Yesterday's sins are forgiven. We've got the future covered: We'll go to heaven when we die. But what about the present? Life—our actual daily existence—is strangely absent from this version of the good news.

### Putting the "Good" in Good News

Shortly after we moved to San Francisco, a neighbor asked me to explain what it means to be a Christian. Raised in a Jewish family, he had never talked with anyone about the essence of Christianity. I rolled out my old presentation: God loves us, but we've all sinned. God sent Jesus to pay for our sins, and if we trust in Jesus' payment, God will forgive our sins and give us eternal life. I've practiced this stuff: My words were clear, my illustrations were clever. But all the while, I found myself thinking, *This doesn't sound like good news. Why must I convince my neighbor that he's bad before the good news will sound good? Really good news ought to sound good even to people who don't feel bad.*

That conversation, and others like it, sent me on a search for the gospel that really is good news. The gospel Jesus announced caused people to run after Him, climb trees to get a look at Him, go without food just to stay around Him, tear the roofs off houses just so they could get close to Him. The gospel I announced mostly caused people's eyes to glaze over.

What my evangelical heritage *had* given me, however, was a determination to listen to Scripture. So I went back to the New Testament and paid a visit to my old friends, those key verses and words I had memorized long ago. The more I studied them in context, the more I suspected that they had been abducted by alien definitions. The gospel that Jesus proclaimed was very different from the gospel I had been proclaiming.

Take Jesus' words in Mk. 1:15, for instance:

The time has come.... The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!

My former definition of repentance—"to be very sorry"—doesn't make much sense in this passage. No one can be very sorry for not having previously known something that has just been announced as news. One can, however, change in response to news. This change in direction is, in fact, the core meaning of the Greek word translated repent: "to turn around from the way you are going."

And what about "the kingdom of God"? This potent phrase played almost no role in the gospel I was used to. Yet it seemed to be nearly the whole substance of Jesus' proclamation: the arrival of a different kind of life, under the reign of a present and powerful God who, according to another version of Jesus' good news in Luke 4, was intent upon restoring, healing, redeeming, and reconciling all of creation (vv. 16–21).

Now this was (and is) good *news*, because news is crucial information about the *present*. Information about the past we call history, and information about the future we call prediction. But Jesus brought good *news*—important information for today.

Over time, I discovered that those key words from my youth had this same life-changing immediacy.

*Lost:* To be out of place, as Jesus makes clear in His series of stories in Luke 15. The sheep is not in the fold with the shepherd. The coin has rolled under the couch. The Jewish son is living with pigs rather than at home with his father.

I'm discovering that people around me *do* feel lost. They don't know who they are, they don't know what they're supposed to do, they don't know what is going to happen to them. In contrast, most people don't feel as if they are going to hell. Jesus' gospel is good news for these people because it addresses the present in which they live, not just an afterlife they are not contemplating.

*Saved:* If a person is lost, then being saved means being found and brought back to a place of belonging. This happened to the sheep, the coin, and the son. In each parable, that which was out of place (lost) was brought back

into the right place (found)—a return worth celebrating. So “being saved” isn’t only about our eternal disposition; it’s about accepting an invitation to return to the right place, as a subject of the kingdom of God.

*Believe:* To trust or depend on someone or something. This is different from professing to believe something. I can say I believe the chair will hold me when I sit in it, but that is merely *professing* to believe. To place myself in the chair, to put my full weight on the seat, is to believe.

So when we ask people to repent and believe the good news, we are not primarily asking them to give intellectual assent to an abstract idea; we are inviting them to place their full confidence in Jesus for their whole life. This is how many people responded to Jesus in the New Testament. Matthew left a lucrative business to follow Jesus. The sick and disfigured journeyed to be near Jesus and risked public ridicule, confident He could heal them. After meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus gave away half his wealth and repaid those he had cheated, completely reorienting his life.

Naturally, this kind of trust involves acknowledging the ways we have lived without trust. Jesus’ death paid for our sins—our choice to trust self and to mistrust God—and forgiveness is available. But forgiveness from our sins is just the precursor to the real drama of salvation. Salvation is not *just from death*, it is *for life*—a life lived with Jesus in the kingdom of God.

*Eternal life:* Jesus Himself defined this one. “Now this is eternal life: that they [my disciples] may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:3). Eternal life, a life of intimacy with God, starts now and continues as we move from this life to the next. Eternal life is not a prediction about our future; it is news about what God is offering us in the present.

#### A Faith of Substance

Sometime in the middle of all this discovery, my neighbor and I went for a run. I blurted out, “I’m rethinking everything I told you a year ago when you asked me what it meant to be a Christian.” This must have intrigued him. “What do you believe now?” he asked.

“I no longer believe that being a Christian is only a matter of having my sins forgiven,” I told him. “The good news that Jesus announced is that we can live our lives with God—which is the best kind of life that is humanly possible. We don’t have to live life alone—taking care of ourselves, being afraid that we don’t have what we’ll need, being intimidated and controlled by things we can’t seem to change, wondering if there’s anything or anyone who can make sense of it all. Jesus’ message is, simply, ‘Turn around and step into a life with God, the kind of life I lived and invite you to live with Me.’ When we accept Jesus’ invitation, believe that what He is saying is true, and follow Him with our whole life, we experience freedom from past sins and future fears—along with contentment, joy, love, and power *today*.”

After I finished, my neighbor said, “Frankly, what you told me a year ago sounded hollow. What you just told me sounds like the substance of your faith.”

That’s the way the gospel now feels to me too. It is the substance of good news for life. For the first time in 30 years of being a Christian, I love to evangelize. Although I dislike the word itself, I have come to understand that evangelism is simply “good newsing” people. It is announcing the presence of the kingdom and its availability through faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, we are “holding forth the word of life” (Phil. 2:16, *KJV*).

This requires, of course, that we ourselves be “good newsed” continually—be immersed in and ravished by the reality of a universe permeated with God’s presence, power, love, and activity. As we enter into an increasing experience of confidence, love, and power, our lives become good news to those around us. We begin to bring to people the same message that Jesus brought: the offer of life with God and the invitation to be His coworker in what He is doing in the world.

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**On Your Own:**

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## Good News for Today

1. In this article, Dieter Zander describes how his original understanding of the gospel focused on the past and the future, while virtually ignoring the ways the gospel touched his life in the present. In a sentence or two, summarize your understanding of the gospel's relationship to your

past:

present:

future:

2. Did Zander's explanation of how the gospel impacts the present change the way you might share the good news of Christ? If so, how?

3. In "A Multifaceted Gospel," Darren Lindblom builds on Zander's ideas about how the good news brings life and hope for today. He identifies five facets of the gospel: reconciliation, justification, regeneration, redemption, and unconditional love. Which of these resonated most deeply with you when you first placed your faith in Christ, and why?

4. Which facet of the gospel is most meaningful to you in your relationship with Christ today, and why?

5. How would you describe that facet of the gospel to an unbeliever using nontechnical, nonjargon words? (For example, if redemption is the facet of the gospel that's most significant to you today, you might write something like this: "I have a deep sense that Jesus has wiped clean my slate of failures in life. I no longer have to live burdened by past mistakes. Rather, I have hope for a new and better future than I ever imagined for myself. That results in a growing sense of contentment with my life today, even in the struggles I still face.")

6. How would you respond if someone without a relationship with Christ asked you this question: "I've heard the gospel called the 'good news,' but I don't really understand what that means. Can you help me understand how the gospel is good news for you in your day-to-day life?"