

# the boring gospel

## *Rediscovering the Lion behind the Kitty*

We are Christ's ambassadors, commissioned to make disciples in this new millennium. With this in mind, we need to be sobered by recent history. An alarming percent of "Christian" teens turn their back on Christ when they get to college and the number of bible-believing Christians in our nation continues to decline to a projected 4% of our generation — the Millennials.

Our greatest need is to rediscover the gospel's potency and clarity. The vast majority of gospel presentations I've heard — and even the ones I gave in my teen years teaching 5-Day Clubs — are remarkably similar. I've chosen to use the [Four Spiritual Laws](#) to represent them because it is quite probably western Christianity's our most popular and influential gospel tract. But what's even crazier than how similar our contemporary gospel presentations are is how very different they are from the gospel presentations in Acts and the gospel explanation in Romans.

I'm not saying that we've lost the essential truths of the gospel, but rather that our *presentation* of the gospel is boring, like a little, declawed kitty that can be conveniently ignored. It's high time to rediscover the Lion behind the kitty.

I pray that this brief refresher on gospel themes (and our pale modern-day equivalents) will draw us from hesitant, hazy ideas of the gospel to a crystal-clear understanding and a passion to share. And, as we explore, may we be drawn to the cross, clinging to God's mercy and refreshed by His grace.

## *Were in Serious Trouble & Need Rescue*

**Salvation** is at the core of the gospel, both in the Acts presentations and the explanation in Romans:

*And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be **saved**. (Acts 2:21)*

*And there is **salvation** in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be **saved**. (Acts 4:12)*

*Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this **salvation**. (Acts 13:26)*

*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. (Romans 1:16)*

However, the word "salvation" has (through overuse) turned into Christian-ese for simply "becoming a Christian". This [story from R.C. Sproul](#) hits the nail on the head:

*Several years ago, I was walking across a courtyard on the campus of Temple University in Philadelphia. I was alone, minding my own business, on the way to the faculty lounge in the School of Theology, when suddenly out of nowhere a gentleman stood in front of me blocking my movement. "Are you saved?" he demanded. I wasn't quite sure how to respond to this intrusion and the first words that came into my mouth were, "Saved from what?" What I was thinking, but was given the grace to refrain from saying, was that I'm certainly not saved from strangers coming up to me and asking me questions like this.*

When I said, "Saved from what," I think my friend was as surprised by my question as I had been by his and he kind of lost it. He stammered and stuttered and wasn't quite sure how to respond to the question, "Saved from what?" "Well, you know what I mean," he replied. "Do you know Jesus?" That brief encounter left an impression on me.

*On the other hand, of course, I was delighted in my soul that somebody cared enough about me. Even as I was a stranger, this person was concerned enough to stop me and ask about my salvation. But what distressed me was that it was clear that though this man had a zeal for salvation, he had little understanding of what salvation is.*

If you had absolutely no experience with Christianity and somebody asked you if you were saved, you'd be looking over your shoulder and asking "from what?", as Sproul just explained. This is because the word "saved" actually means "rescued" and it implies that you're in some kind of serious trouble. When a boy is assigned a history paper he doesn't usually scream "save me!" (though he may be sorely tempted) — no, he screams for salvation when he falls out of a boat and can't swim. When his very *life* is in danger, or something equally serious, he cries out for somebody to rescue him. So this is what the gospel presentations in the Bible imply: **We are in serious trouble and need to be rescued.**

But our typical gospel presentations barely hint that we're in danger — and it's even more rare for them to explain what the danger is. Here's the closest the Four Spiritual Laws gets:

*2. Man is SINFUL and SEPARATED from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life. (Law 2)*

Even though the words "sinful" and "separated" are in all-caps, they aren't compelling to your average teenager. Here's the

average teen's response to the "danger" of Law #2: "Sinful": sure I'm not perfect, I've made mistakes — but everybody has! And, *duh*, I'm separated from God, everyone on the planet is. I'm not not going to get bent out of shape about missing God's love and plan for my life — after all, I've got my *own* plans (well, actually, I saw them on MTV).

The words of the 2nd Spiritual Law just don't pack the weight that **we're in serious trouble and need to be rescued.**

*Rescued... from what??*

As Sproul's story shows, the whole idea of Salvation and Rescue begs the question: "Rescued... from *what*?" From myself? From sin? From hell?

The answer is surprising: **You need to be saved from God.** The first hint of this comes from Peter's summary of the good news to Cornelius (Acts 10:36):

*As for the word that He sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all), you yourselves know...*

Peter's not talking about warm-fuzzy-feeling peace; he's talking about *warfare* peace. Why do we need peace with God? Because the relationship between the human race and God isn't exactly like the US and Canada. It's more like the Cold War with an extremely lopsided arms-race — and you can guess which side has all the nukes. As Paul put it in Romans 1:16-18:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation ... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed ... for the wrath of God is revealed from*

## *heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*

So, not only can we say we need to be saved from **God**, but more particularly, we need to be saved from **His wrath** or **His anger**.

At Cornelius' house, Peter gets even more detailed than "God's anger". He shows that **we need to be rescued from God's anger in His coming judgment** by explaining that Jesus is going to judge the living and the dead. Paul does the same thing when he discusses "righteousness, self-control and the coming judgment" while witnessing to Felix in Acts 24 and when he presents the gospel to the Areopagus (Acts 17):

*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.*

You might argue: Why didn't Peter talk about God's wrath or the coming judgment at Pentecost or in the temple or in front of the council (Acts 2, 3, or 4)? Because in each of these situations, the Jews *know* they're in serious trouble when Peter explains that the guy they betrayed and murdered has been raised from the dead and is exalted as Master and Messiah. They're pretty scared as it is, even without being given the details on **God's anger in the coming judgment**.

## *Why is God so mad at me?*

Most Americans will agree that they've made mistakes — even that they've sinned and that they're far from perfect. The problem is that, on balance, they think they're basically good people. "Nobody's perfect," we say, "but I'm just as good as the next guy". We compare ourselves with each-other and so we have a relative standard of goodness and badness. And it's true: compared to the *bad* people you see in movies and hear about on the news, we're pretty good.

But that's *relative* goodness, not absolute. The idea that we're basically good people is a deception that comes from being stranded on a rebel planet far from God's presence. As Jesus says to the rich young ruler, *no, you're not a good person*. You're a bad person. Jesus does this by **comparing him to God** instead of the people around him. You say, "Hey! That's not fair! Why should I have to compare myself to God?! I can't measure up to Him!!" Why, you ask? Because soon you'll find yourself standing in front of Him.

In His presence, angels cover their feet *and* their faces so that they will neither see, nor be seen. They're crying out "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of armies; the whole earth is full of His glory!" and their cries shake the foundations of the entrance and the whole temple is filled with smoke. Flashes of lightning come from the throne, and rumblings and peals of thunder and in front of the throne seven torches are burning, which are the seven spirits of God.

When we come into God's presence, we fall flat on our faces, just like Isaiah and John, and we acknowledge how wretched we are. We've got *nothing* we can say to earn our way to heaven. We don't need a little help; we need a complete rescue. **We aren't**

good people — compared to God, we're wicked and we deserve nothing but punishment.

## Obsessed with Getting Clean

The gospel presentations in Acts are obsessed with forgiveness: washing away the wrong we've done. We need to be washed clean; we need God to forgive us for our sins. As Ananias says to Paul: Why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and **wash away your sins** (Acts 22). This reminds us that baptism primarily and most plainly represents washing away sin (as Peter mentions in 1 Peter 3) and only secondarily does it represent being united in Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul repeats the refrain of forgiveness of sins at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:38) and in front of King Agrippa (Acts 26:18). Peter does the same in the temple and at Pentecost:

*Repent therefore, and turn again, **that your sins may be blotted out**, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus (Acts 3:19-20)*

*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins**, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)*

We typically mention forgiveness (it's a sub-point under Law 4 in the Four Spiritual Laws), but our focus is on Jesus dying in *our place* (substitution) and *paying for our sin*. I admit that Jesus' payment for us is part of salvation's details, but it's not the focus in Acts. In fact, the idea that Jesus' death is connected to payment or substitution *isn't even mentioned*. Instead, **the concept of getting clean, righteous and forgiven — getting our sins blotted out — is crazy-important**. This

ties in perfectly with the idea that God's anger is boiling over at our sin.

## Raised from the Dead

When I was a teenager, presenting the gospel to kids at 5-Day Clubs, I would forget the resurrection because I was so obsessed with Jesus death on the cross as payment for our sins. This is the polar opposite of the emphasis in all the gospel presentations in Acts. Often it's not even mentioned that Jesus was crucified — just that He died. In front of the Areopagus, Paul doesn't even mention that Jesus died — he just says that God raised Him from the dead and leaves it at that.

The resurrection is regarded as the capstone proof of Jesus' deity, as Paul makes clear in the introduction of his letter to the Romans:

*the gospel of God ... concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was **declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord...***

Paul is pairing Jesus' humanity (descended from David according to the flesh, fulfillment of the messianic prophecies) and Jesus' deity (declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness). But what is the resurrection doing in here? It proves Jesus' deity by declaring — with power — that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

You'll see throughout Acts that Peter and Paul use the resurrection as the powerful, capstone proof of the gospel. It

didn't really hit me how controversial this was until I read Felix explaining Paul's case to Agrippa:

*they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive (Acts 25:19)*

A mummy walking? This is a significant truth-claim, it's no wonder both Peter at Cornelius's house and Paul in Pisidian Antioch bring out some proof:

*But God raised Him from the dead, and for many days He appeared to those who had come up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now His witnesses to the people. (Acts 13:30-31)*

*but God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. (Acts 10:40-41)*

Again, the resurrection is mentioned in the Four Spiritual Laws, but briefly — as a sub-point under Law 3, nowhere near the priority or prominence it's given in Acts. Sometimes we think we don't have to argue or prove that Jesus rose from the dead because our listeners seem to accept it. What we don't realize is that they accept it the same way they accept that Sleeping Beauty woke from her magical sleep — "that's just what Jesus does!". They accept it as a fairy tale, instead of a historical fact which was documented by eyewitnesses who gave their lives for it. **We need to give the resurrection priority and argue for it because it is the capstone proof God has given.**



When his listeners are pierced with guilt and cry out "what do we do?!", Peter's response is: **repent**. It's the same way in the temple (and 3 other Acts gospel presentations):

***Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)***

***Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus (Acts 3:20)***

But why is it that in half the gospel presentations in Acts, it seems like "repent" is the only thing they need to do to be saved and in the other half it's only "believe"? Are there *two* things they need to do to be saved? Why do the gospel presentations always include one or the other but never both?

The reason is that repentance and faith both refer to the same thing. Repentance is "turning", but it's not turning from bad things to good things; it's turning from bad things **to God**. As Paul says in Lystra,

*We bring you good news, that you should turn from these empty things **to a living God** (Acts 14:15)*

*For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and **how you turned to God** from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the*

*dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1  
Thessalonians 1:9)*

**Turning from sin to God implies trusting God to save you**, as the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 6:1: a foundation of **repentance from dead works and of faith toward God**. Notice that we're not turning from *bad* deeds to *good* deeds; no, we're turning from our sin to God in an attitude of faith. It's awesome how Hebrews uses the term "dead works" to make it clear that repentance involves turning away from all the good things we try to earn our salvation with — *these themselves are sin*, the sin of pride and self-reliance. Repentance involves turning away from our prideful attempts to earn our way to heaven and instead turning to God for salvation; running to Him and trusting Him to rescue us.

**Trusting God for forgiveness of sins implies turning from the sins**. Asking for forgiveness implies that you're sorry. You can't genuinely ask God to forgive you of downloading music illegally or looking at pornography *while still clinging to these sins*. Not that you'll be perfect or even that you won't sin in these ways again, but simply that asking for forgiveness implies that you're genuinely sorry for what you've done.

Notice that in the gospel presentations, "repent" and "believe" aren't "suggestions", "offers" or "invitations". They are commands — God's command, sent out through Jesus Christ, then the Apostles and now through all Christians as Christ's ambassadors. The gospel isn't just about doing a 180 and turning away from sin, **it is a command to turn from sin to God, trusting Him alone to save us**.

## *Response: Baptism*

This blows me away. Almost unanimously, our gospel presentations end with an invitation for our listeners to repeat a prayer, commonly known as the Sinner's Prayer. Granted, sometimes we also ask them to fill out a card or walk down the aisle, but almost invariably, we ask them to say a prayer to God. Not only is the Sinner's Prayer nowhere in scripture, the whole *idea* of responding to a gospel presentation with prayer is *nowhere in the book of Acts*. What's even more amazing is that there is a *different* response called for right after the gospel is presented: **baptism**.

At Pentecost, when his listeners cry out "What shall we do?!", Peter *doesn't* say: "Repent and follow after me in this prayer to God..." No! He says "Repent and **be baptized**..."

At Cornelius's house, when Peter preaches the gospel and all the Jews are amazed because the Holy Spirit is falling on the Gentiles just like He did on the Jews, Peter *doesn't* say, "Can anyone stop these people from praying the Sinner's Prayer and filling out dedication cards?" No! He says, "Can anyone withhold **water for baptizing these people?**"

When Philip explains the gospel to the Ethiopian, he doesn't say: "Look! I believe in Jesus, what prevents me from praying to receive Him into my heart?" No! He says, "Look, here is water! **What prevents me from being baptized?**"

I could go on and on with Lydia (Acts 16:15), the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:33), the Corinthians (Acts 18:8) and others. The point is this: the **believing response to the gospel is a response of baptism**, not reciting a prayer, filling out a card or walking down an aisle.

I don't know exactly why God chose to have it this way, but it could be that the act of being baptized is public and conspicuous. You have to make more of a definite decision. It also is heavy with symbolism and is a visual and physical way to show your decision to trust Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. Again, I'm not exactly sure why, but this much is clear: **the action of obedience, to show outwardly your inward decision to trust Jesus isn't praying a prayer; it's being baptized.**

*Now Go*

May we respond to Christ's great commission and go to secular social circles to share with clarity the core gospel elements with people who are under God's anger — and appropriate the gospel to ourselves, a people all too prone to drift from grace back to works in our attempts to please God and grow in holiness.