

The Less Good News

Introduction

When someone asks us how you become a Christian, Christians generally respond by telling them the 'good news', one possible presentation of which is provided in our *Good News* document.

The purpose of this document is to explain why we believe our approach to presenting the good news is helpful, why it contains some of the details it does, and what problems we are seeking to avoid in choosing this presentation.

The Christian community has understood and presented the gospel message in many different ways across the centuries and across many different cultures; but, in practice, in the West there has been for many years a very restricted message, even if it has been presented in many varied and creative ways.

Evangelistic messages have mainly been produced by people from one small section of the Christian community, and they often reflected the priorities and concerns of that small group. This narrow expression of the gospel message has been enthusiastically and widely communicated, to the extent that it effectively defined the 'true' message for many Christians, whether or not they liked or agreed with it.

There is a growing understanding that this narrow 'traditional' gospel message has serious weaknesses. It may be the case that this message was used for many years because it was considered to be effective: it may have had its weaknesses, but people 'came to Christ' through it. But in recent years, popular Western culture has changed significantly, and a message which used to be effective now makes little, if any, sense to most of the people around us.

One response to this cultural shift is to find news ways to package and explain the traditional message; another response is to find a different message: go back to the pages of the New Testament and start again, looking for ways to communicate an authentic gospel message which is relevant to the people we meet.

We have been seeking to develop an approach to the gospel message and how to communicate it which is closer to the message found in the pages of the New Testament, and which can be comfortably used by Christians from many different traditions.

Details

If we can identify the problems created by many of the traditional ways of expressing the good news, this gives us an opportunity to shape a way of communicating it which avoids these problems.

There are five main points here.

- Our choice of words really matters.
- The traditional forms of words mainly concentrates on issues which no longer matter to people.
- The traditional form of words differs from the original message.
- The traditional form of words creates problems for the new Christian and for the Church.
- Clearer words can create a better start for Christian life and growth.

There is just one other point to mention in passing. Most of the Bible consists of narrative: stories, letters and dialogues; a great deal is in the form of poetry and song. Where there are doctrines and rules, these are presented in the context of a story. The *Good News* we offer is constructed as a story which can be told, heard and responded to, rather than a set of doctrines which must be either believed or rejected.

We tend to understand and present Christian truth in abstract, objective terms. But the Bible says very little about abstract ideas: it is mostly about relationship and incarnation – about real people, in a specific place and time. When God chose to finally and fully reveal Himself, he did not send a book of timeless truth: He sent a Person. As if to underline the point, that Person did not leave behind a set of writings: He left behind a community and His Spirit to guide them.

We have a message, but it is not a message of abstract truth: it is a story, told by people who are living the story, and encountered within a community.

Our choice of words really matters

It is important that we get the core message right: this is partly because the truth matters, and partly because the truth works: the truth sets us free because it is effective.

In particular, the content of the gospel message – the precise form of words we use at the point when someone is seeking to become a Christian – really matters. If you go into a shop to buy a new phone, you may talk with a salesperson who will tell you all about the benefits of various options: you listen to all this, but take it with a pinch of salt.

We are familiar with the fact that salespeople don't always tell us everything we need to know. But when you make a decision and say 'yes' to one of the offers, you are presented with a contract to sign – and this, you know, you need to read carefully. Whatever was said up to this point was only the sales pitch, but what you actually sign up to will commit you – for several years in the case of a phone contract; at other times, for the rest of your life.

Whether you like it or not, people see an evangelistic message as a sales pitch: it may be convincing, but nobody believes it is the whole story. However, when someone responds to the evangelistic message, you sit down with them and tell them: if you would like to become a Christian, this is how you do it.

People understand that the gospel message we present at this critical moment is, in essence, the contract. Everything so far is just the preamble, but the words used at the

point when they commit themselves define what they actually sign up to. This may sound like a technicality, but the issues are deeper than that.

If the words used at the point of conversion are, in some way, inadequate or mistaken, this is likely to create problems later on, because words are important. But the words also matter because they both express and shape our understanding of the Christian life. Our understanding changes our behaviour, and our behaviour changes our future. We focus our attention on (we talk and pray and sing about) forgiven sins and the joy of knowing we are going to Heaven; we spend far less time exploring what the new life we have been given might look like here and now.

The traditional words are irrelevant

One reason for reviewing the traditional gospel message is that it mainly concentrates on issues which no longer matter to people. Christians talk a great deal about things the people around us don't understand and don't consider to be relevant. When we talk with one another, this is not a big problem: every group has its own specialised interests and jargon. But when we talk with people outside the Church, it matters greatly.

By way of contrast, Jesus talked constantly about things the people around Him understood and considered to be important: even if they didn't understand all He was saying, His hearers gathered and listened because they knew it was important. We might be able to learn something from Him here.

We traditionally offer a message of salvation ("You will go to Hell unless you repent"), but Jesus preached a message about the Kingdom of God ("Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven") and offered the promise of life ("Whoever believes in Me shall not perish but have everlasting life").

Most people today are not interested in salvation, but they are very interested in structural injustices ('kingdom issues') and in how to live – and Jesus talks a great deal about God's Kingdom and about how to live.

- 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. (John 3:16)
- Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. (John 5:24)
- You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:39-40)
- The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

The traditional message of salvation ignores the message which Jesus preached, and replaces it with a message which neither Jesus nor the early disciples would have recognised.

While the message in the *Good News* document can be criticised in many ways, and will inevitably be improved upon, it is an attempt to construct a statement of the

Christian good news which achieves two basic goals: firstly, it makes sense to the people we are speaking to; and secondly, it would be recognised as a presentation of the good news by Jesus and the early disciples.

The traditional words differ from the original message

What we are describing as the ‘traditional gospel message’ presents a limited and distorted view of God and salvation. Our retelling of the gospel message is, inevitably, also limited and distorted, but (we hope) less so in some key areas; it seeks to address some of the more obvious problems with the traditional message.

The traditional gospel message goes something like this.

- You are a sinner and destined for Hell, so you need to be saved.
- If you believe in Jesus, your sins will be forgiven and you will go to Heaven when you die.

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? You have to trust in Him as your saviour and believe that he died for your sins. Sometimes, we tell people they need to believe that Jesus died in their place, as a substitute. None of these beliefs are particularly difficult, and it is all entirely internal – no changes to the way you live are required, or even implied. Sometimes we tell people they need to pray, read the Bible and go to church, but only after they have already signed up.

This message is remarkably consistent, even if it is packaged in many ways. For example, The words ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’ are often missing, but they are implied and clearly understood by most people who hear the message. Also, to be fair, the traditional gospel message does not literally start with ‘you are a sinner’ most of the time: they generally start with some variation of ‘God loves you’. For example, the ‘Four Spiritual Laws’ start with “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” But, in this context, God’s plan for your life is for you to go to Heaven, which you cannot do because you are separated from Him. The ‘God loves you’ bit only functions as the preamble to the key point, which is that you are a sinner.

The only significant variation comes when the promise of salvation is made to those who ‘trust in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord.’ This would, potentially, make a massive difference to the message and its impact – if the meaning of Jesus’ Lordship was clearly explained. But, although we constantly refer to Him as ‘Lord Jesus’, the concept and relevance of Jesus’ lordship is hardly ever taught in church, few Christians have much practical grasp of the doctrine, and even fewer seek to explain it in the context of an evangelistic message.

This traditional message starts by creating unnecessary conflict: “You are a sinner,” to which the normal person responds with an emphatic, “No, I’m not!” and then you generally spend the rest of your time together explaining the Biblical definition of sin, the concept that everyone in the world is a sinner, and therefore, according to the Bible (which, at this point, they do not believe) they must be a sinner.

It is an exhausting and unproductive conversation, and explains why (when you have the choice) you wait as long as possible before introducing the traditional gospel message – you only start to use this language after someone has already responded to the initial evangelistic message.

The traditional message also starts (in theological terms) with the Fall, when the Bible starts with the creation. The message of the Fall makes perfect sense to the Christian giving the message, because we are very familiar with both creation and the Creator; but the person being talked to does not share this starting point, and it is hard to understand a Fall when you have no idea where we have fallen from.

The Fall is also problematic because it has a central place in our theology, and this creates a significant conceptual gap between us and the people we are speaking with – as well as creating a gap between us and the early Church. We feel unable to present the gospel message without reference to the Fall, but the evangelistic messages in the New Testament completely ignore it.

It has been suggested that the early Christians did not need to talk about the Fall because it was a detail which all their hearers knew, understood and believed. However, when you examine their evangelistic messages, it is clear that the bulk of the content consisted of other details which their hearers already believed, so it is hard to understand why this one ‘key’ point would have been left out on that basis.

And, as a matter of historic record, the Fall was not an important part of the doctrine or culture of first century Judaism: it was hardly mentioned, and then only in passing. They did sometimes refer to Adam and other aspects of the creation story, but this does not mean that the story of the Garden of Eden was understood primarily as an account of the Fall as we understand it today.

So, unlike the early Church, we make the Fall central to our gospel message; we also, strangely, tend to ignore the resurrection, which the early Church did focus on. The very first sermon (Acts 2:14-36) talks about the resurrection three times. The resurrection is central to New Testament teaching and preaching. The early church preached ‘Jesus and the resurrection’, to the extent that people sometimes thought ‘resurrection’ was the name of another god (Acts 17:18), but our traditional gospel presentations often completely fail to mention it.

The traditional words create problems

There are several other consequences of offering people this traditional message. When we contrast it with the one we find in the Bible, we can see that it changes the nature of the salvation being offered. There are a few obvious details which are implicit in the traditional message.

- Salvation is about what happens after I die, not about this life, here and now.
- Salvation is about me as an individual, not about belonging to the family of God and functioning as part of the new creation.
- Salvation is about giving mental assent to a doctrine, not about a loving and committed relationship with a person, acknowledging Jesus as Lord and gladly serving Him.
- Salvation is about my happiness, security and well-being, not about sacrificial loving and serving, loving God with everything I have, loving my neighbour as myself, bringing peace and justice to this world and seeing God’s Kingdom come.

In short, the traditional gospel message is irrelevant, individualistic, hedonistic and academic. It teaches people that the Christian faith has nothing to do with the real world: you believe the right doctrine, receive your ticket to Heaven, and then you can continue to live the rest of your life as if nothing has happened.

After people sign up (after they come to the front, pray ‘the prayer’, or whatever we ask the to do to indicate their assent to our message), we then give them the small print: you are expected to attend church on a Sunday, pray sometimes and read the Bible every now and then. And perhaps, if you are very keen, you can tithe. All these things relate to the real world, but they are presented as additional extras – and none of them are part of the gospel message we find in the New Testament.

Salvation from sin is clearly an important issue, but it is only one small aspect of the much larger ‘life in all its fulness’ which Jesus offers us. His life encompasses community and global reconciliation, truth and peace and love and joy and justice (and much more) as well as forgiveness of sins: if we preach a limited and distorted gospel, it is no surprise if we get limited and distorted Christians as a result.

Clearer words can create a better start

Having noted some of the problems with the traditional form of words used to communicate the gospel message, it should be clear that the words we offer as an alternative should go some way towards avoiding these problems and creating a better starting place for Christian life and growth. We want to go beyond just avoiding some problems and move towards communicating more effectively the most important beliefs, values and priorities we find in the New Testament.

As already noted, the words we use matter. We have talked about how a person ‘becomes a Christian’ because this language is widely used within the Church and we are talking at this point to people in the church. But we try to avoid the word ‘Christian’ when talking with people who are not yet in the Church because it has a number of unhelpful cultural associations, and is used at times as a synonym of ‘good’.

Instead of talking about ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ a Christian, we prefer to talk about ‘following Jesus’. This moves the conversation from being about a status or an abstract category to being about an activity and a relationship. Following Jesus is something you do by choice and something you start to do at some point in time, not something you drift into or find yourself doing by accident of birth or culture.

It is clear from the pages of the New Testament, even if it is not clear in much of our current evangelism, that you cannot start to follow Jesus and continue to live the way you did before. If you follow Jesus, then you join Him in what He is doing: His mission becomes yours. Following Jesus is not something to attempt lightly, not a minor change to give you a more fulfilled life: it will turn your life upside down.

Jesus repeatedly warns people to count the cost of following Him before they start: instead of trying to get as many people as possible to sign up and commit themselves to Him, He warned them not to do it unless they were ready. If we are following Him, we too should aim to prevent people from making that commitment before they really mean it. (Which, to be clear, is not the same as really understanding it – who does?)

Another problematic term to avoid is ‘salvation’ – partly because few people understand what it means, and partly because it has become so familiar as a piece of religious jargon (everybody recognises the question, “Are you saved?”) that any meaning is drowned out in all the associations the term has.

But we can use the Biblical teaching about salvation, even if we do not use the problematic jargon. In what is arguably the clearest definition of salvation in the pages of the New Testament, Paul says: “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” (Romans 10:9-10).

This passage clearly identifies the Lordship of Jesus and the resurrection as the two central planks of the Christian faith. This is consistent with the teaching and examples we find throughout the in the New Testament: His followers relate to Jesus as Lord, and understand that this Jesus is a real human being Who lived and died and is alive again because He was raised from the dead. It also recognises that you need both belief and action: an inner conviction is not enough.

In another key passage (Matthew 28:16-20), Jesus commanded His followers to ‘make disciples’ – a term which was well understood and very meaningful to the early Church. As a disciple, you are someone whose life revolves around spending time with your Rabbi (your Master and Teacher) so that you can learn from him (it was always a ‘him’ in those days) and become like him. We, too, are to spend time with Jesus so that we can learn from Him and become like Him: this is not a one-off event, but a life-long journey; not a new priority which takes its place alongside all my other commitments, but a new life which reshapes all my priorities.

There is one final point to make concerning the clarity of our gospel message. We generally think that we are seeking to explain how you can have your sins forgiven and thus gain peace with God. But, if Jesus died for the sins of the world, then the sins of the world have been forgiven.

What this means is that the lost are not lost because their sins condemn them, they are lost because they reject the relationship which has been made possible through the forgiveness of their sins. They are not lost because God will turn His back on them, but because they choose to turn their back on Him. When we talk about forgiveness, the message is not about how you can gain it, but how you can know it, be sure of it, live in the light of it and enjoy it to the full.

The gospel message really is good news: it is not the message that God has to turn His back on you and punish you unless you repent; it is the message that God loves you and has already forgiven you; all that is needed for your salvation has already been accomplished; all you have to do is to be willing to receive the gift which is being offered to you.

It is also the message that the love God has for you is the love He has for all people. The gift of love, acceptance, forgiveness and a new start is offered to me as a gift to all people. I cannot receive this love but refuse to give it; I cannot accept forgiveness but refuse to show it. The glorious gospel message sets me free both from the sin of my past and the self-centredness of my present, free to embrace the fulness of a life which seeks the best for all people, everywhere.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
- Strong Foundations: <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>

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