

Understanding the Gospel

Part 1: What is the Gospel of Jesus Christ

1. The primary concern of all religious expressions is “how does a person gain favor with God and receive life after death?”
2. For Christians, the answer to that question is in “the Gospel.”
 - a) Gospel means “good news.”
 - b) We distinguish “the Gospel,” from “the Four Gospels.”
 - c) Broad sense – the entire teaching about Jesus Christ.
 - d) Narrow sense – (the proper definition) the specific Good News of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.
 - e) John 3:16 – the Gospel in the nutshell.
 - f) Gospel is both definition and proclamation.
 - g) The Gospel is the “power of God for salvation.” (Romans 1:16) If you want to be “saved,” you must hear and believe the Gospel.
3. Divisions between Christian Churches are over the Gospel.
 - a) Getting the Gospel right is very important. “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” Galatians 1:8
 - b) Maintaining the “purity” of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the driving forces of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod since the issue of eternal salvation is at stake.
 - c) There can be no Christian fellowship (gathering around the Lord’s Table) where there are different understandings of the Gospel.
 - d) Are only Lutherans (who get the Gospel right) going to be saved? No! People will be saved from all Christian denominations, in spite of the teachings of their church.
4. The primary issues pertaining to the Gospel are:
 - a) The place of the preaching of the Law (the proper distinction between Law and Gospel);
 - b) The definition of repentance (contrition plus faith);
 - c) The cause of conversion (the role of the human will);
 - d) The understanding of faith (causative or instrumental);
 - e) Justification by grace through faith (how does a person become righteous before God);
 - f) The place of good works (are good works necessary for salvation?).
5. Whenever Christians gather for worship, the Gospel is to be preached.

Next time: The Gospel according to other Christian denominations

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Part 2: Salvation Formulas

How is a person saved? How do we get to heaven? What is the relationship between what God has done (the Gospel) and what we do? There are five basic formulas.

1. The Roman Catholic Church:

Infused Grace (righteousness of Christ) + Sacraments + good works + purgatory = eternal life

Issues: Rejects imputation, no certainty of salvation

2. The Reformed Church (Calvinism):

Limited Atonement + Unconditional election + irresistible grace = faith and eternal life (perseverance of the saints)

Issues: Monergistic, but "How do I know I am elected?"

3. Arminianism (Baptist, Pentecostal)

Universal Atonement + human free will + decision to believe = eternal life (eternal security)

Issues: Synergistic, "How do I know I really decided?"

4. Moral Government Theory (Methodist revivalism, Charles Finney, *Youth with a Mission*, etc.)

Free will (no original sin) + death of Jesus shows how God deals with sin + change man's heart and stop sinning = eternal salvation

Issues: Man is saved ultimately because he stops sinning.

5. Lutheran (Biblical) view:

God's grace (forgiveness and justification) in the Cross of Christ Jesus proclaimed = faith and eternal life.

Certainty of salvation set completely in the work of God.

Next time: The Gospel according to the sects and cults

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Part 3: Salvation and the Cults

What is a cult? Usually two definitions:

- 1) Rejection of key Christian truths.
- 2) Use of psychological technique to gain adherents.

Mormonism: “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints”

1. History: founded by Joseph Smith in 1830. He was visited by the angel Moroni in 1827 and led to the “Golden Plates” buried in a hillside in Palmyra, New York.
2. Translated the plates into the Book of Mormon. Gained followers and migrated West – In Nauvoo, Il Joseph Smith was murdered and Brigham Young led the group to Salt Lake City.
3. Sources: *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price.* (Burning in the bosom)
4. Structure: One prophet leads the Church. Beneath the prophet in authority is the Council of the Twelve Apostles. Local churches are called Wards or Stake Centers.
5. The Temples are not for worship, but for ceremonies for the living and the dead. Less than ten percent of all LDS are allowed to enter these structures. (Temple recommend)
6. Doctrines and Practices:
 - a. God the Father is married and there is a Mother God.
 - b. All men and women who have ever lived on Earth are the spirit offspring of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. “As we are, God was; as God is, so we will be.”
 - c. Jesus and Lucifer are brothers.
 - d. Every person was conceived and born in a pre-existent spiritual realm.
 - e. Temple ceremonies include Baptism for the Dead, Washing and Anointing for the living and the dead.
 - f. Salvation or exaltation, whereby men become gods, based on one's own good works or merit.

Jehovah’s Witnesses: “Watchtower Bible and Tract Society”

1. History: Founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1879. Russell died in 1916, replaced by the second president, Joseph F. Rutherford. Rutherford would slowly revise the doctrine and structure. Under his leadership the organization experienced tremendous growth. Headquartered in Brooklyn, New York – over two million members – Kingdom Halls.
2. Doctrines and practices:
 - a. Rejects the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is not God. He is Michael the archangel.
 - b. The Anointed (144,000) will be in heaven to reign with Jehovah God. The rest of the faithful Jehovah's Witnesses (not of the 144,000) will live forever on a paradise Earth. (Membership in the Watchtower and door-to-door spreading of the message.) Those not members of the Watchtower destroyed by Jehovah God and cease to exist. There is no concept of eternal punishment or hell in Watchtower theology.
 - c. Many false predictions of the end of the world - 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975 and 1989 -caused its membership to maintain a steady upward trend.

- d. Rejecting vaccinations, organ transplants and blood transfusions causing the deaths of many of its members. (vaccinations and organ transplants now acceptable practices.
- e. No involvement in political causes or service in the Armed Forces.
- f. Rejects the practices of celebrating birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Mothers' and Fathers' day.

Christian Science: Church of Christ, Scientist

- 1. History: Mary Baker Eddy (Glover, Patterson) – 1879 in Boston. Influenced by P. P. Quimby, who believed that illness and disease could be cured through positive thoughts and healthy attitudes, by changing one's beliefs about the illness. She claimed that Quimby cured her. (Unity School)
- 2. Sources: *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures*
- 3. Doctrines and Practices.
 - a. Pantheistic - "God is All-in-all. God is good. Good is Mind. God, Spirit, being all, nothing is matter" - rejects Trinity. Life, truth, and Love constitutes the triune Person called God....God the Father-Mother; Christ the spiritual idea of sonship; divine Science or the Holy Comforter"
 - b. Sickness and disease are illusory, the product of a false belief, and not an actual result of sin. (Practitioners)
- 4. Christian Science is in a state of decline.

The Unification Church (Moonies) “Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity.”

- 1. History: founded by Korean Rev. Sun Myung Moon (Lord of the Second Advent) in 1954.
- 2. Source: “The Divine Principle”
- 3. Doctrine and practice:
 - a. Polarity in God – both masculine and feminine.
 - b. According to Moons' theology, man's ultimate destiny is to be married and have a perfect family. Jesus failed to bring about full salvation because he died. A New Age dawned in 1960: `At that time, the marriage of the lamb prophesied in the 19th chapter of Revelation took place. Thus, the Lord of the Second Advent and His Bride became the True Parents of mankind.' (1960 happens to be the year in which Rev. Moon married his wife Hak-Ja Han).
 - c. Brain-washing methods.

The Church of Scientology

- 1. History: Founded by L. Ron Hubbard in 1953 – “Mixing Moonies and Mafia.”
- 2. *Dianetics* – Science fiction becomes a religion – 8 million copies sold.
- 3. Man is an immortal thetan plagued by engrams in the reactive mind. As a result of the build-up of thousands of known and unknown engrams, stored in his reactive mind, man seems to experience problems throughout his life. These engrams have accumulated not only in this life but in many past lives as well through reincarnation. Thus, it is Scientology's purpose to rid the thetan of these unwanted engrams. How is this accomplished? By becoming clear. – e-meter.
- 4. Issues

Next Time: Salvation in world religions

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Part 4: Salvation and other World Religions

In addition to Christianity (2.1 billion), the other major world religions are Islam (1.3 billion), Hinduism (900 million), Buddhism (376 million), Sikhism (23 million) and Judaism (15 million). The non-religious total 1.1 billion – half are theists.

Islam: “submission to the will of God” and a person who submits is called a Muslim.

7. History: Based on the teachings and life of Muhammad (570-632 AD) in Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia (then Persia).
8. Islam is composed of two major divisions — the mainstream Sunni (the largest) and the more radical Shi’ites. The mystical tradition of Sufism includes many Sunnis and some Shi’ites.
9. The Koran, the Torah, the Psalms of the Old Testament, and the Gospel of the New Testament are regarded as holy books. However, only the Qur’an is considered uncorrupted. Islam rejects the Trinity doctrine, the deity of Christ and His Sonship, claiming that Jesus was only a great prophet. Muhammad is considered to be the greatest prophet.
10. Salvation (going to heaven) is sought through observance of the Five Pillars: reciting “there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger,” praying five times per day, fasting, giving alms (donations to the poor), and a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Hinduism: Originated from the ancient religions of India embracing polytheism.

1. Hinduism teaches pantheism; the ancient gods (especially the triad of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva) are commonly interpreted as representations of the various aspects of the divine (Brahman).
2. Human beings progress to the ultimate realization of their oneness with Brahman (often called Nirvana) through reincarnation according to the law of karma.
3. Moksha is when an enlightened human being is freed from the cycle of life-and-death (the endless cycle of death and reincarnation) and comes into a state of completeness. He then becomes one with God.
4. Many of the concepts of Hinduism are incorporated, modified, and expanded upon in the New Age Movement – Yoga, transcendental meditation, shakras – Shirley and Oprah..

Buddhism:

1. Spiritual teachings of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. Developed from Hinduism in 6th century B.C.
2. There are a number of versions or sects of Buddhism generally teaching paths to Nirvana (enlightenment or bliss) though the four noble truths (recognizing existence and source of suffering) and the eightfold path (correct understanding, behavior and meditation). Some variations of Buddhism include traditional Theravada schools of India, Mahayana Buddhism, which became very popular in China and Japan, and Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism) in Tibet. Zen Buddhism popularly taught in America.
3. Salvation is Nirvana – a blissful state of nothingness.

Sikhism:

1. Based mostly in the Punjab province of India, that attempts to blend Hinduism and Islam.
2. Vision and subsequent teachings of founder Nanak in the 15th century AD. Disciples, called Sikhs, follow the one true God named *Sat Nam* ("True Name"). Their main scriptures are contained in the *Granth Sahib* ("The Lord's Book"), compiled by the guru Arjan.
3. Salvation is viewed as a merging with the universal force (as in pantheism) .

Judaism:

1. Began with God's call to Abram (Abraham) to be the father of a great people who would inherit the land of Canaan and be the means of blessing to all mankind (Genesis 12).
2. The children of Abraham's grandson Jacob, who was renamed Israel. The foundation of Judaism is the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy), which tells of the Israelites' bondage in Egypt, their miraculous deliverance in the Exodus, and the giving of the Law through Moses.
3. What is now known as the religion of Judaism originated after AD 70 (destruction of the Temple) as the rabbis, or teachers of the Torah, developed a system of laws and interpretations of the Torah that were eventually codified in the Talmud.
4. Three main branches of modern Judaism: Orthodox (traditional, literal adherence to the Torah as interpreted by the Talmud), Conservative (a middle position advocating traditional beliefs and practices up to a point), and Reform (liberal, non-literal stance on the Torah and Talmud; often non-religious or secular with emphasis on Jewish culture).
5. Kabbalah: The word means secret oral tradition and was coined by an eleventh century Spanish philosopher, Ibn Gabirol. The philosophy developed in Babylon during the middle ages from earlier Hebrew speculation and numerology. An early Kabbalist, Moses de Leon, developed and systematized the philosophy in his thirteenth century work, *The Book of Zohar*.

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Part 5: God Gives – Man Receives by Faith

Christianity is unique in that it is not about what man does or has done, but rather about what God has done. The response of man to God is a response of faith. What is this thing called faith?

1. Is it a general belief in something for which there is no evidence “I accept it on the basis of faith?” There is truth to this as Hebrews 11:1-3 says:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

2. We can also speak of “the faith” as comprising the entire body of Christian truth.
Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test? 2 Corinthians 13:5

Or,

The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:7

3. Primarily, the subject of Christian faith involves three parts:
 - a. Knowledge - knowing the facts concerning Jesus Christ.
 - b. Agreement - agreeing that those facts are true.
 - c. Trust - believing that those facts are applicable to you.

4. Faith comes from hearing the Word of God.
How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. Romans 10:14,17

5. Faith is a gift of God:
For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

6. Theological distinctions:
 - a. Faith is related to promise. Where there is no promise, there can be no faith. Faith without promise is presumption.
 - b. Faith is not causative but instrumental. It is the hand that grasps the promise. We are not saved on account of our faith but rather on account of God's grace.
 - c. Faith is not an idle thought but is produced by the Holy Spirit and grasps the promises of God and produces good works.
 - d. Faith is passive in that we do nothing to produce it, but it is also active in that it actively appropriates what God has promised. “I believe in Jesus for...”
 - e. Faith is built up and strengthened through the means of Grace - Word and Sacrament.