



THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

*Foundation document for the
GIST Committee*

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The Gospel, or Good News, is the message that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come to save people from their rebellion against God. Rebellion against God is an utter catastrophe so the Gospel needs to be heard and shared throughout the community and indeed throughout the world. There is no greater message to be heard than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the message of God acting to restore our relationship with him. This was not because he destroyed the relationship. Far from it, the problems are all on our side and he has acted through Jesus his son to bring reconciliation. The wonder of this goes further. Apart from the tragedy of us both ignoring him and defying him, our deepest problem is that God is perfect and just but we are neither. Even with our distorted sense of justice we can see that he is right when he tells us in the Bible that when judged by his perfect standards we are irretrievably guilty.

God is famously the one who loves. This appears to create a dilemma for God. It runs something like this: If God acts according to the justice of his nature we are all condemned forever. He has love for us but if he doesn't condemn then his justice is destroyed.

His solution was to send his beloved Son to become one of us. He acted as a substitute for us. He lived the perfect life we should but don't live. He was betrayed and judicially condemned, although innocent, and then died on a cross to receive the punishment we should receive but he shouldn't; the good one in the place of the bad. Then on the third day he rose victorious over the death which haunts us all. He has ascended to the Father as Lord of all.

That is the Gospel. It is historical reality, a unique person completing work that only he could do. People benefit from this by placing their trust in him alone for reconciliation with God. This of course involves abandonment of any other hope of peace with God.

The ministry of GiST is to use the teaching of the Bible to equip and encourage Christian people to speak the gospel to our secular society in the areas of contemporary ethics, public policy and cultural engagement. For this to be done from a biblical perspective two aspects must be taken into account. The first deals

with the application of the ethical and other normative standards of God's word to each issue. That is, for example, if the issue is gambling, then the biblical teachings in the areas of greed, wise use of resources, wise care of our families and so on, when applied, will go a certain way in helping people to understand God's expectations. It will only go a certain way because in this, as in all areas addressed by GiST, exposing the rights and wrongs will leave many with crippling burdens of guilt and perhaps hopelessness. In others it may actually reinforce pride because they are not enslaved to the particular problem.

Therefore, the second perspective, the hope of the gospel, is required to complete the biblical picture. Through the hope of forgiveness in Jesus Christ lives paralysed by bad behaviour can be changed.

The need for this gospel focus is provided in summary form in Ephesians 2:1-10. The Apostle writes to the Christians at Ephesus and addresses their status and condition before their conversion to Jesus. Then he shows what a perfect solution Jesus and his work was for them. The broad statements are applicable to all people and in all ages.

THE PROBLEM

In the opening verses 1 to 3 he sets out the problem faced by all people who have yet to come to faith in Jesus. "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

There are three serious problems described here (or perhaps better, three perspectives on the one problem) of human rebellion against God. They are dead in sin. Secondly they are enslaved to the world, forces of evil and sinful desires. Thirdly they are under God's anger.

The first problem deals with the fundamental concern of human spirituality. In the natural, or better, fallen state people are spiritually dead; dead in trespasses and sins. In other words there is deadness to God and therefore no receptivity to

his claims of loyalty and obedience. The word “dead” is not mere hyperbole but should be seen in contrast to less stark terminology. If humanity had a “sick” or “troubled” relationship with God then the solution would be education, change of environment or some therapy or perhaps encouragements. The term clearly shows that when God and his ways are presented the call will be met with deadness.

Secondly, he refers to the way of life as enslavement to “following the course of this world” which is the consensus of humanity living without regard to God or eternity. It is also enslavement to the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit who is now at work in the sons of disobedience” whereby forces of evil influence and even control the behaviour of people separated from God. In addition the deadness to God and enslavement to evil is expressed as living “in the passions of your flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind”. This refers not only to our base desires but all the human passions that are essentially self-centred.

All of this describes a very grave condition but also explains why there are so many evils in our community. Clearly, if they could be solved this would be a better place for us to live.

However, the third problem is the gravest of all because humanity outside Christ is described as “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”. It would be cruel and selfish in the extreme if the Christian community addressed issues without the hope of the gospel. At best, even if effective to bring change it would leave people without hope for eternity under the anger of God.

The sad reality is that when the ethical and other normative standards of God’s word are presented to the spiritually dead and enslaved there is no real change that results. At best there will be knowledge of sin but no change. The solution, God’s solution, is required.

THE SOLUTION

After the hopeless situation of mankind is given, the Apostle writes, “But God”. All is hopeless from the human point of view but God’s solution overcomes all. He writes,⁴ “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he

loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

There are several points made by the Apostle that are relevant for the work of GiST.

Firstly, that God is rich in mercy and love, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us”. This mercy and love is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ as he says in the following verse, “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ”. This life in Christ comes through his substitutionary work whereby through his perfect life the Christian gains righteousness, through his sacrificial death, forgiveness, and through his resurrection new life. He reminds his readers that it is “by grace you have been saved”.

Then he proceeds to speak of the extraordinary change of status for the Christian with the words, “And raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” The full significance of that cannot be explored now but it is sufficient to say that this massive change of status leads to changes in attitude and behaviour. For a person to have such a privilege automatically implies a new life with ethics that conform to God’s standards alone. It also leads to great glory to God, “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Secondly, the Apostle shows with compelling clarity that these blessings are received by faith, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast”.

This blessing is by faith alone because the Apostle excludes all works and boasting, and ascribes all glory to God. It is the end of guilt and pride.

Thirdly, we should take great care in observing what he says about this salvation. Salvation is by faith and this brings us into union with Christ. Therefore all that applies to him applies to us. His death is our death and therefore there is no more condemnation. His resurrection is our new life and his ascension to the Father's right hand is our acceptance and security. The outworking of this union with Christ has the further implication described in verse 10, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Christians live in a manner that increasingly conforms to the good works that God has prepared for them. They are works in conformity with his ethical and other normative standards.

In summary we see that apart from faith in Christ people are spiritually dead and in need of life. They are behaving in ways that are destructive and are in need of change. They are also under God's just condemnation and in desperate need of rescue. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God's solution.

As people hear the gospel and experience the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and are directed by him to Jesus Christ they will find salvation. Through faith in him people are made alive, become new creatures, part of the family of God, reconciled to God and set on a path toward a changed life.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE MATTERS DEALT WITH BY GIST

When Christians speak to our community in areas of contemporary ethics, public policy and cultural engagement, there is only limited value in presenting the norms of God's word, however specific the application may be, without the gospel. Change is always needed and for true change the gospel is essential. Otherwise it will only be a reminder to a lost world of its deadness, enslavement and condemnation. Expressing the gospel presents the hope of the reality of changed lives as people in response to the gospel experience union with and hence a new life with Christ.

It should also be remembered that the presentation of the gospel into such issues is also required by the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). The Church has the

responsibility of making disciples among all peoples and in every sphere. Disciples of Christ by definition are people who have heard the gospel, responded to the gospel and participate in spreading the gospel as part of the body of Christ.

It could be thought that including the gospel is not suitable if making submissions to the government or similar institutions. However, in the New Testament and particularly in the Book of Acts we see God's servants often interacting with the leaders of the community. Inevitably, their message was the gospel.

The Apostle Paul, as far as we are told, didn't raise 'the slavery issue' with Felix or Festus or the 'sexual immorality problem' with Agrippa. Perhaps he actually did (we don't know) but we certainly do know that in his opportunities to address such people he spoke of Christ. He even went so far as to seek to persuade them to come to Christ in faith. It would be very strange for any to claim to be biblical and do anything less; unless they have become ashamed of Christ.

It is sometimes thought that God's people have the responsibility of presenting God's standards or God's law so that pressure can be applied that people must, although not converted, adopt those standards and laws. Such thinking not only defies the truths already considered in Ephesians 2 but also flies in the face of Jesus' most strident preaching. He reserved his strongest words for the Pharisees who were exactly as described above; outwardly conformed but inwardly unmoved. He spoke of them as whitewashed tombs full of dead men's bones. It would seem to be entirely contrary to God's word to set out deliberately to create a Pharisaic community. The desperate need is for every issue to include the hope of the gospel.

There is one further simple outworking of the gospel in the lives of God's people. We have been shown love, grace, compassion, patience and mercy in Christ. Therefore as we speak to those who do not yet know Christ we are obliged to do so with love, grace, compassion, patience and mercy.

It is the hope of GiST to work according to this biblical framework in dealing with issues in the areas of humanity, sexuality, the environment, education, economics, culture and government. Through this it is hoped to provide a full picture of God's justice and grace to a fallen world.