

# OF FIRST IMPORTANCE: THE SHARED VALUE OF GOSPEL-CENTERED DOCTRINE & PREACHING

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Adults who grew up watching Sesame Street have ingrained somewhere in their brains the song “One of These Things.” This short, four-line earworm accompanied sketches where viewers would be shown a group of four items, one of which was different in some way from the other three. It was like a musical stopwatch: the goal was to identify the item that didn’t belong before the song ended. “One of these things is not like the others, one of these things doesn’t belong. Can you tell which thing is not like the others by the time I finish this song?”

We derive all seven of Sovereign Grace’s shared values from Scripture, but one of them stands apart in its biblical primacy; one of them “is not like the others.” As expressions of biblical teaching given for our good, we rejoice in and celebrate all of these values, but we reserve our most focused attention, our most diligent pursuit, and our greatest passion for one particular value: the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **1. The Imperative of Gospel-Centrality**

Nowhere do we see gospel-centrality more clearly than in the ministry of the apostle Paul. In chapter 15 of his first letter to the Corinthians, we read these famous words: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scrip-

tures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." (1 Cor. 15:1, 3-5)

Paul sets the stage for his argument in this chapter by recalling his founding visit to this city and the founding message of this church plant. His priority then remains his priority now: the gospel. His pastoral strategy is as illuminating as it is instructive. In highlighting the gospel's primacy, Paul immediately puts the topic he's about to address—and indeed, any topic in the Christian life—in its proper context and proportion. Nothing exceeds the gospel in significance, and nothing is to distract from the gospel's prominence. Scripture reserves "of first importance" for only one message. All that God reveals to us is important and necessary (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Some things

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he reveals are of special importance (cf. Matt. 23:23). But there is only one thing of "first importance": the gospel of Christ.

### **Gospel Clarity**

Readers of the biblical gospels, recalling their vast wealth of testimony concerning Jesus, might ask, "Aren't these the gospel?" Mark's account is particularly instructive, carrying the headline "the gospel of Jesus Christ." He then proceeds to narrate the events of Jesus' life: his baptism, ministry, teaching, miracles, confrontations with religious leaders, care for his disciples, as well as his betrayal and trials, his beating and scourging, his agonizing death, his astonishing resurrection, and (in Luke's case) his ascension. In other words, for the gospel writers, the gospel is the story about Jesus and all he did to save us.

Paul's presentation is not at odds with Mark's, but his gaze is more focused. If Mark's gospel is wide-angle, capturing the breadth of Jesus' incarnational glory, Paul's is telephoto, zooming in on the blazing core of Jesus' saving work.

Paul spells out this core of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 with an elegant and highly structured statement. Four verbs summarize the gospel's core content, but the emphasis is clearly on the 1st and 3rd: Christ died and Christ was raised. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures," and

“he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” Christ’s substitutionary death satisfied God’s justice, absorbed his wrath, atoned for our sins, and secured our acceptance before God. His resurrection vindicated him as God’s Son, the divine Messiah, and our Savior and Lord.

### **Gospel Objectivity**

There lies on the very surface of Paul’s gospel something we in our self-focused lives often miss: it is *objective*. The gospel is *news*—the announcement of a concrete, divinely planned, historically accomplished *achievement*. It is all that God did through Jesus to save his people.

This means the gospel is outside of us. It’s not about what we do, what we think, or how we feel. We don’t look inside ourselves to find the good news. We don’t rely on our righteousness for God’s acceptance. Our standing before God doesn’t depend upon my emotions or my achievements. The Christian’s hope for forgiveness and acceptance before God lies completely and forever in Jesus Christ, whose substitutionary death paid for our sins and whose perfect righteousness is credited to us.

It is, indeed, “of first importance.” No better news exists.

## **2. The Logic of Gospel-Centrality**

The heart marveling over God’s mercy in Christ needs no convincing about the gospel’s priority. But in chapter 2 of this letter, Paul makes an even more sweeping claim: “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1-2)

Paul moves from gospel *priority* to gospel *pervasiveness*. The gospel wasn’t just first in a hierarchy of topics but the one topic that governed all others. Paul addresses other topics, to be sure. But for him, the gospel’s truth, theological implications, and life entailments framed and shaped every issue he addressed. This is precisely what we see throughout the letter of 1 Corinthians.

“*Nothing* but Christ? Isn’t that narrow? Won’t such a gospel fixation impoverish a church, or leave a Christian unbalanced in his thinking and living?” Such questions fail to grasp the massive realities behind Paul’s resolve. Far from constricting our lives and vision, the pervasiveness of the gospel lib-

erates us to see and experience ever-expanding, Christ-magnifying glories.

***The Greatest Revelation of God.*** Paul reaffirms his relentless Christ-centeredness to the Colossian Christians, tempted as they were to minimize their salvation and marginalize Christ. “Him we proclaim,” Paul writes, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Col. 1:28). The “him” Paul proclaims is none other than the Christ “who is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), the one who perfectly mirrors the life and nature and character of God. Paul’s language is echoed by the writer to the Hebrews: “He is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3).

The gospel is not merely a theological formulation or abstract truth. It’s the announcement of a Person—infinite in beauty, unrivaled in authority, omnipotent in power, and ever tender towards his own. Constant attention to the gospel keeps our eyes riveted on the One who most fully reveals God to us. As John Piper counsels, “If any person or any power or any wisdom or any love awakens any admiration or any amazement or any joy, let it be the greatest person and the greatest power and the greatest wisdom and the greatest love that exists—Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

***The Divine Disclosure of the Cross.*** Amidst the manifold glories we see in Christ, it is ironic that the most penetrating glimpse comes at the point of Jesus’ greatest humiliation. A critical turning point occurs in John’s gospel when Jesus recognized the arrival of his appointment with the cross: “The hour [the moment of his death; cf. 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:27; 13:1; 17:1] has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:23). Not to suffer but to be glorified: to display visibly the divine majesty and splendor.

This display, however, was not to be one of transfiguration glory. It would appear to be almost the opposite, drawing disgusted gasps and merciless taunts. Yet for those with eyes to see, here was divine glory: the self-giving of the Son of God to rescue undeserving sinners. Here was God’s ultimate self-disclosure, a revelation of divine love and mercy that staggers the guilty heart. The perfect reconciliation of transcendent holiness, uncompromising justice, sacrificial mercy, and resolute love (Rom. 3:21-25; 5:8).

To be gospel-centered, to preach “Christ and him crucified,” is anything

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1. John Piper, *Spectacular Sins* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 32-33

but narrow and restricted. It is only through that gospel that our eyes can be opened to see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

***The Climax of God’s Redemptive Purposes.*** Paul’s ministry also reflected a profound grasp of the fabric of God’s purposes. He resolved to keep “Christ and him crucified” central because all of salvation history culminated in the cross and the empty tomb.

As Paul pondered the cosmos, he saw Christ as the head of all things and his atoning work as the hinge on which all history turned. “In him,” Paul explained to the Colossians, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

The cross was the event that inaugurated the redemption of creation from the curse of the fall. Here was the decisive moment when God acted to reclaim his image-bearers from the guilt and bondage of sin. This was the battlefield where Christ disarmed rulers and authorities, putting them to open shame (Col. 2:15). This was the key moment in God’s eternal plan to sum up the entire cosmos in Christ (Eph. 1:10).

The core of the gospel—Jesus crucified and risen—towers over all reality as the crucial divine act that governs human history. To keep the gospel central, then, is simply to reflect the reality that there is nothing in creation, in history, or in our lives that is disconnected from the cross.

***The Unifying Key to the Bible.*** All of this helps us understand, interpret, and proclaim God’s rich and varied revelation to us in the Scriptures. Unlike the holy books of many other religions, the Bible is not a collection of timeless truths, theological data detached from life and history. God’s revelation in Scripture is *redemptive* revelation. It presents and interprets, and celebrates God’s saving initiatives towards his fallen creation, the bulls-eye of which is those who bear his image. The culmination of these saving actions, the moment to which all lead and in which all find their deepest significance, is the person and work of Jesus Christ. To understand any part of this revelation of God’s saving acts, we must understand its connection to the greatest of all of God’s saving acts: Jesus and his definitive work on the cross.

***Following Christ’s Example.*** It is Jesus himself who gives us this exeget-

ical imperative. After his resurrection, in what surely was the greatest Bible study of all time, Jesus enlightens two crestfallen disciples about what has just transpired in Jerusalem: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). A short time later, Jesus gave a similar lesson to his apostles: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

In his life, death, resurrection, and reign, Jesus fulfilled all that the Old Testament recounted, foretold, patterned, and promised. And for all that follows, from the birth of the New Covenant church in Acts 2 until the consummation of all things at his return, Christ’s person and saving work on the cross is the fountainhead.

Herman Bavinck exemplifies this understanding: “The doctrine of Christ is not the starting point, but it certainly is the central point of the whole system of dogmatics. All other dogmas either prepare for it or are inferred from it. In it, as the heart of dogmatics, pulses the whole of the religious-ethical life of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup>

This is why Sovereign Grace is committed to gospel-centered doctrine and preaching. We are not gospel-centered by happenstance or to jump on a Reformed bandwagon. We are gospel-centered because all of history is gospel-centered. Our doctrine is gospel-centered because all of God’s revelation has, as its unifying core, the person and work of Christ. Our preaching is gospel-centered because the Bible is gospel-centered.

### 3. The Fruit of Gospel-Centrality

A steadfast resolve to keep Christ and his work central is certainly a vital safeguard against pragmatic approaches to life and ministry. A deeper look, however, shows this to be the way of authentic, joy-giving, Christ-exalting fruitfulness.

***A Saving Gospel.*** At the beginning of his great gospel manifesto in the letter to the Romans, Paul claims, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). The

2. Herman Bavinck, *Sin, Salvation, and Christ*, Volume 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.

gospel is more than mere information; it is a force, the very power of God unleashed in the world. It alone has the power to penetrate cold hearts, to pierce hardened consciences, and to give new life to spiritually dead sinners. Our only hope for forgiveness lies in what Christ has accomplished and in what God is pleased to do through the preaching of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:21).

**A Sufficient Gospel.** But the work of the gospel doesn't end at conversion. It is like a seed that takes root in the heart and continues to grow (Col. 1:5-6), shaping our thinking, feeling, and living. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul makes this explicit when he transitions from his rich Christological opening to the letter's body, where he calls for their response: "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Col. 2:6-7). Doug Moo comments, "As they have begun, so they must continue, looking to Christ and Christ alone for all their spiritual needs."<sup>3</sup>

One can hardly open a page to a New Testament letter without finding such sweeping connections between the gospel and every dimension of our existence. We are to "let [our] manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). At every point, we are to ensure that our conduct is "in step with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). We speak the truth about Christ to one another that we may "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Our very destiny as believers is "to be conformed to the image of [God's] Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29).

Every spiritual blessing in the Christian life was purchased by Jesus on the cross and flows to believers through their union with Christ. All that we are and all that we need comes, by grace and through faith, from the all-embracing provision of God in Jesus Christ, applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Gospel-centered doctrine perceives this, gospel-centered preaching proclaims this, and gospel-centered living cherishes and pursues this in faith.

**A Bountiful Gospel.** To place the gospel at the center of one's life is not simply to comply with orthodoxy; it is to get treasure. Paul marvels that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ (Col. 2:3). The

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3. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 175.

bounty contained in the gospel, its provisions, and its promises is endless. It assures us of the love of God, frees us from the weight of guilt, and liberates us from the tyranny of sin. It reorients our hearts with new loves and desires, empowers us to treasure Christ, fight sin, and love others. It comforts us in grief, sustains us in suffering, and works all things together for the glory of God and the good of those he's made his own. It gives us a sure hope as we wait for Christ's return, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Our Greatest Good.** Indeed, the moment still awaits when we will receive the greatest gift of the gospel, dwarfing all of its manifold benefits: *Christ himself*. The gospel doesn't simply bestow impersonal "blessings" upon us; the gospel gets us God! We were separated from him in our sin, objects of his wrath, and destined for eternal judgment. But God, in his love, acted through Christ to remove those barriers, opening wide the way to *himself*. "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). In his presence alone, we will find "fullness of joy" and "pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16). The gospel isn't a means to the goal of personal blessing. Jesus himself is the goal, the all-glorious, all-satisfying end of the gospel.

**Gospel Community.** Gospel-centered doctrine and preaching foster something beyond individual blessing: the privilege of sharing this gospel bounty *together*. The gospel alone breaks down the wall of hostility between people hopelessly divided by sin, selfishness, ethnic hatred, and class prejudice (Eph. 2:14-16). It joins together "strangers and aliens" into a family, the household of God (Eph. 2:19). It constitutes us as God's temple, the very dwelling place of God on earth where he makes his presence most fully known (1 Cor. 3:16).

We love (Rom. 13:8), we encourage (1 Thess. 5:11), we build up (1 Cor. 12:7), we forgive (Col. 3:13), we pray (James 5:16), we bear each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2), we stir one another up to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24). Such gospel fruit isn't to be contained within a church's walls. By "holding fast to the word of life," we endeavor to shine like lights in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation (Phil. 2:15-16) which is desperate for the gospel, just as we once were.

When a church is planted firmly in the soil of the gospel, a culture of grace will inevitably emerge. In addition to our "Seven Shared Values," we in Sov-



ereign Grace also like to speak of “shaping virtues”: humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and grace-empowered godliness. We long for our churches to breathe this heavenly air, produced not by human effort, but through guarding, cherishing, and applying the gospel.

#### **4. Our Highest Value**

This year Sovereign Grace Churches will celebrate its 40th anniversary. Much has transpired, and many things have changed over these years. One thing has remained consistent by God’s mercy: the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the lives of our members, in our churches, in our preaching and pastoring, and in our mission. Any good that has been done, and any fruit that has been borne, undoubtedly derives from this priority.

Whatever purposes God has for our future together, our fervent prayer and deep resolve is to adhere steadfastly to that matter of first and all-pervasive importance. *Nothing is more vital to the ongoing life, health, mission, indeed, the very existence of Sovereign Grace Churches than a growing understanding, a deeper treasuring, an intentional application, and a faithful proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

May the Lord sustain us in this conviction, to the praise of his glorious grace—which comes to us only through the gospel.

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