

PAUL'S GOSPEL

THE GOOD NEWS WHICH PAUL HAD BEEN
CALLED TO PROCLAIM

By Arlen L. Chitwood

The epistles (Pauline and general epistles, including Hebrews) were written by at least five — probably six — different men (the author of Hebrews being unknown), and certain individual distinguishing qualities and characteristics of the writers can be seen in their writings.

In Paul's case, his extensive use of the word "gospel" — how and why he used the word — forms a major trait which makes his writings different from those of any other writer of a New Testament book. Paul, for evident reasons, appeared almost *obsessed* with this word, using it *far more extensively* than any of the other writers. And he used the word both alone and through qualifying it various ways (e.g., "gospel," "gospel of God," "gospel of Christ," etc.), usually referring to the same thing, though possibly with different emphases.

Paul's writings comprise slightly less than one-third of the New Testament, but of the one hundred thirty-two times that the word "gospel" appears throughout the New Testament — in both its noun and verb forms (*euaggelion* and *euaggelizo* respectively) — almost two-thirds of these occurrences are found in the Pauline epistles.

The word appears twenty-three times in the four gospels, seventeen times in the Book of Acts, six times in the general epistles, and three times in the Book of Revelation. But Paul used the word *eighty-three times* throughout his epistles.

Why did Paul use this word so extensively? The writer of Hebrews only used the word twice; James didn't use the word at all; Peter only used the word four times; John didn't use the word in either his gospel or his epistles, though he used it three times in the Book of Revelation; and Jude didn't use the word in his epistle.

And beyond that, what was Paul referring to when he used this word? The word "gospel" simply means *good news*. What was *the good news* to which Paul referred?

Invariably, people want to associate the word "gospel" with only one thing — *the good news surrounding Christ's finished work at Calvary*. They see the word "gospel" in Scripture, and this is what invariably comes to mind. And, looking at the word after this fashion, they seek to understand

any portion of Scripture where this word appears solely in the light of the gospel of the grace of God.

And, interpreting Scripture after this fashion, they usually end up with a perversion, for the word "gospel" is used *much more often than not* — particularly in the Pauline epistles — referring to good news *other than Christ's finished work at Calvary*.

And erroneously understanding the word "gospel" to refer to Christ's finished work at Calvary, in a text where it doesn't, will not only *do away with* that which the text does deal with but it will also often result in a *perversion* of the message surrounding the simple gospel of the grace of God.

An example of the preceding would be the manner in which I Cor. 15:1-4 is usually understood. The word "gospel" appears in the first verse, and all four verses are usually looked upon as referring to the same thing — the gospel of the grace of God. But both the text and the context reveal that such an interpretation is not correct at all.

Paul used the word "gospel" in connection with that which is stated in verses one, two, and four; but it is evident that this has no reference to the gospel of the grace of God. Salvation in these verses is spoken of as *an ongoing process* in the lives of those to whom he was writing, and it is also spoken of as something which *can be lost*. Neither would be true relative to the

gospel of the grace of God which Paul had proclaimed to them “*first*,” referred to in verse three (referred to apart from the use of the word “gospel”).

And when individuals combine these four verses and attempt to make everything pertain to the gospel of the grace of God, that referred to in verses one, two, and four *is always done away with*; and that referred to in verse three *is often corrupted* (through bringing elements [from vv. 1, 2, 4] over into the gospel of the grace of God which do not belong there).

And this same thing would be true numerous places in the Pauline epistles when the context is ignored and the word “gospel” is made to refer to something which the text doesn’t refer to at all.

Paul’s extensive use of the word “gospel,” particularly his extensive use of this word to refer to something other than the gospel of the grace of God, goes back to his experiences at the outset of his ministry. Before Paul ever launched out on the ministry to which he had been called — to carry the good news rejected by Israel to the Gentiles — the Lord took him aside and taught him all the various things about the message which he was to proclaim. And after this, as Paul went about fulfilling his calling, it was only natural for him to use the word “gospel,” meaning *good news*, to refer to the good news (which the Lord had personally taught him) which he had been

called to proclaim to Christians throughout the Gentile world.

This “good news” had to do with *the mystery* revealed to Paul by the Lord, probably while in Arabia. It had to do with Jews and Gentiles being placed together in “the same body” as “fellowheirs [‘joint-heirs’]” (Eph. 3:1-11); and these Jewish and Gentile believers (Christians), together, possessed a “hope” relative to one day occupying positions of honor and glory with Christ in “his heavenly kingdom” (*cf.* Col. 1:25-28; II Tim. 4:17, 18).

And Paul referred to *the good news* surrounding this message as “my gospel” (Rom. 16:25), “our gospel” (II Cor. 4:3), “the glorious gospel of Christ [*lit.*, ‘the gospel of the glory of Christ’]” (II Cor. 4:4), “the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1; II Cor. 11:7), “the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 1:16; Gal. 1:7), etc. Then, numerous times Paul simply used the word “gospel” alone to refer to this good news (Rom. 1:15; Gal. 1:6).

The fact that the mystery had been revealed to Paul, with Paul called to carry this message to Christians throughout the Gentile world, is the reason why he used the word “gospel” so often in his epistles. It was only *natural* for him to refer to the message which he had been called to proclaim through the use of a word which meant, “good news,” for *the message was good news*.

For the unsaved, Christ’s finished work

on Calvary was “good news.” *As unsaved individuals*, this was *the best news that they could ever hear*. But once *they had been saved*, then they were to hear the “good news” about *why* they had been saved. And, as *saved individuals*, this was, as well, *the best news that they could ever hear*.

And Paul’s ministry centered around *the latter*, not the former. Paul’s ministry centered around proclaiming that which the Lord had revealed to him following his conversion. And the message contained therein dealt with the reason an individual had been saved (*cf.* Deut. 6:23); and it was *the best news redeemed man could ever hear*, which was why Paul let *nothing* stand in the way of his proclaiming this message.

This “good news” had to do with *the greatest thing God could offer redeemed man — positions as co-heirs with His Son, from a heavenly realm, in the coming kingdom*. To reference words which the writer of Hebrews used, it was “so great salvation” (Heb. 2:3).

And Paul’s repeated reference to the message surrounding this offer as “good news” is one of the distinguishing characteristics of his writings.

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