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R. C. SPROUL

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## Chapter One

# The Gospel of God

What is the gospel? There is perhaps no more important question for us to answer, because the answer we give will help to determine our eternal destiny. Unfortunately, there appears to be widespread ignorance today among professing evangelicals about what the gospel is. What is its content? What is the good news, why is it good news, and what does it mean to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ? We must understand not only the origin of the gospel but the meaning of the gospel. It is urgent that



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we Christians get the gospel right, because if we don't, we're not going to get much at all right in the understanding of the fullness of our faith in Christ.

The gospel tells us how we can be saved from our sin. If we get it wrong, we are cursed, as Paul says in Galatians 1:6–9. But if we get it right, then we can have hope. It is therefore crucial that we search the Scriptures carefully in order to clearly articulate what God tells us about how we may be saved.

That was the goal of a gathering of evangelical leaders in Washington, D.C., in February 1998. The participants at this meeting agreed that there were some serious problems in the evangelical world that reflected a disintegration of a unity that had been forged as far back as the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century—a unity that had remained solid for 450 years. And even though evangelical churches have had differences in theology on many points, they always maintained a sense of unity when it came to the central affirmation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which was regarded historically by evangelicals as essential to the New Testament gospel.

Around this time, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals met in Philadelphia to consider the most pressing

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theological issue of our day. This group agreed that the most important issue theologically was the gospel itself. As a result of the Philadelphia and Washington meetings, a unified statement of faith was drafted in order to restore unity among evangelicals, particularly in our understanding of justification.

The document is called “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,” and it is divided into two parts. The first part is a summation of the key points that were affirmed. It explains the gospel in the language of the laity, avoiding technical theological statements. The second part provides a statement in more precise theological language, following the format of affirmations and denials. This book will explore the affirmations and denials in order to provide a clear articulation of the message of the gospel.\*

With that as our background, let’s turn our attention to the statement. Affirmation 1 states:

We affirm that the Gospel entrusted to the church is, in the first instance, God’s Gospel (Mark 1:14;

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\* The full statement can be found at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/gospel-jesus-christ-evangelical-celebration>.

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Rom. 1:1). God is its author, and he reveals it to us in and by his Word. Its authority and truth rest on him alone.

The corresponding denial reads:

We deny that the truth or authority of the Gospel derives from any human insight or invention (Gal. 1:1–11). We also deny that the truth or authority of the Gospel rests on the authority of any particular church or human institution.

This first article affirms that God is the author and owner of the gospel. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Rom. 1:1–2). Paul uses the phrase “the gospel of God.” Now when he speaks of the gospel *of* God, he shows us that the message of the gospel is not merely a message *about* God, though it certainly is that. But the word “of” here in the Greek means that the gospel belongs *to* God. It is His announcement. It is His message. He is the origin or the

author of the gospel.

We also see a close connection between the word *author* and the word *authority*. God is the One who declares the gospel in the first place. He is the original author of it, and as the owner and author of it, He is the One who gives the gospel its abiding authority. So, the message that we've proclaimed as Christians, that we've called the *gospel*, is not an idea that some religious teacher came up with in antiquity. Even in the Old Testament, we find hints of the gospel proclaimed, and certainly the New Testament church received the gospel directly from Christ and from His Apostles. We might say that the first great Apostle of the gospel is Christ Himself, but even when Christ proclaimed the gospel, He was fulfilling the will of the Father. It was the Father who sent the Son to make this announcement. It was the Father who authorized the Son to speak it to His contemporaries (John 5:19, 30).

One of the central issues during the Reformation of the sixteenth century concerned our justification. The Reformers argued for the doctrine of *sola fide*, meaning that we are justified by faith alone, apart from works. This is often called the *material* cause of the Reformation. How we are justified is central to the gospel, and it's because

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of the importance of this issue during the Reformation that Protestants became known as *evangelicals*. The word *evangelical* comes from the Greek *euangelion*, which is the New Testament word for *gospel*. The Protestant Reformers were called evangelicals because they believed that in the controversy concerning the doctrine of justification, the central matter at stake was the content of the gospel itself. But behind the whole controversy was the ongoing dispute about authority.

On what grounds did Luther dare to differ from the teaching of his parent church? Luther was forced to admit publicly that in his judgment, it was possible for the pope and church councils to err. He said that he would be willing to change his stance on justification if it could be demonstrated to him that his teaching was out of sync with the Bible. For Luther, the final authority was Scripture and Scripture alone. The crisis moment came at the Diet of Worms in 1521 when Luther was on trial and called to recant his teaching. He replied with the famous statement: “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and by plain reason and not by popes and councils who have so often contradicted themselves, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I

cannot and I will not recant.”

In this statement, the formal cause of the Reformation was given public utterance: Scripture alone has the binding authority on the conscience of the believer. Rome argued that the authority of Scripture rests on the prior authority of the church and that the church is the one that declares the initial authority of Scripture.

Remember that the first affirmation says that God is the author of the gospel; He reveals it to us in and by His Word, and its *authority* and truth rest on Him alone. Only the Word of God has ultimate absolute authority to bind our consciences. Likewise, the denial states: “We deny that the truth or *authority* of the Gospel derives from any human insight or invention. We also deny that the truth or authority of the Gospel rests on the authority of any particular church or on any human institution.” The gospel’s authority rests on God and God alone.

When we declare and preach the gospel, we do so under the aegis of divine authority. We as humans cannot call anyone to believe in Jesus Christ as his or her Savior on the basis of our own authority. Rather, when we preach the gospel, we are simply messengers communicating a message that has its origin in God Himself. That’s what Paul is

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saying at the beginning of his epistle to the Romans. Before he begins his exposition of the content of the gospel, he identifies himself as an Apostle, one who is called of God and set apart by Him, but who is giving a message that is not Paul's invention. Paul's Apostolic authority is not the message's final authority. God declares it. God owns it. God gives it its authority.

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# Do you believe the good news?

Many people think that since God is good, He will accept us as long as we lead good lives. But this isn't good news, because none of us is as good as God. If left to ourselves, we will receive what our lives actually deserve: His judgment.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul explains the gospel, God's good news for sinful people like us. While we could never save ourselves from His just condemnation, God calls us to trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, who alone can redeem us through His righteous life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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