

Article 1: The Gospel

David Hankins

IS THE GOSPEL “GOOD NEWS” FOR EVERY SINNER?

EVERY PERSON IS SAVABLE. This is the central claim of the first article in the Traditional Statement entitled “The Gospel.” I have been a gospel preacher for forty-five years. From my youth, shortly after my commitment to follow Christ, I have pursued the calling to proclaim to all people that God has made a way for them to find forgiveness by sending his only Son, Jesus of Nazareth, to die for their sins. This wonderful, astounding message is the gospel which literally means “good news.” There was never any lack of clarity in those who taught me or any doubt in my mind that the message was intended for everyone. This meant more than that it should be preached to everyone. It also meant that everyone—any morally responsible person who heard it—could respond to and receive the saving provision the gospel announces.

I assert that this traditional understanding of Southern Baptists about the salvation of sinners includes this proposition: God meant for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be good news for everyone; God meant for it to be bad news for no one.

THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS

I write these words a few days into the New Year, having just completed an extensive and enjoyable celebration of the Christmas holidays. Although many allow the message of the first advent to get lost in secular celebration, I am always blessed by the seasonal emphasis with its pageants and carols and preaching on the birth of Jesus. The message of Christmas is cause for celebration for the likes of us, sinners one and all. We ought to be as thrilled as the shepherds who first heard the amazing announcement from the angel:

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you *good news* of great joy which will be for *all the people*; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11, emphasis mine).¹⁷ The gospel is the story of God’s plan for his creature, man. It is a story of everlasting love. It is a story of eternal planning. It is a story of waiting and watching, and sacrificial giving. It is a story of redemption. It is good news. It is *the good news*.

The gospel story began in eternity past, when God according to his own counsels decided to have a race of creatures with whom he could express covenant love. He placed them in an environment completely suitable for them where they might create with him, reign with him, and fellowship with him. He knew they would be tempted to sin and would succumb. He knew this rebellion would corrupt them and his creation. He knew it would seem to Satan and sinners that evil had ruined it all. But before the foundation of the world, he had a plan that would overturn the blight of sin, defeat Satan and evil, and make his beloved creatures fit for life in an unsullied, incorruptible kingdom.

The gospel story centers in Jesus Christ, God’s one and only Son. His coming had been prophesied for centuries. By the time the angel announced his birth, the people had been languishing a long time. Now, in the fullness of time, the one whose name means “God saves” had come to save his people from their sins. The price of salvation was his own horrific death. But through that death, God’s justice was satisfied, and Jesus was raised to life. The good news that was announced to the shepherds was now to be announced to the whole earth: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Euangelion is the New Testament word generally translated “gospel.” It literally means good news. It is the message sinners everywhere need to hear. In the words of the “gospel” hymn:

Sinners Jesus will receive: Sound this word of grace to all / Who
the heavenly pathway leave, All who linger, all who fall. / Come,

and He will give you rest; Trust Him, for His word is plain; / He will take the sinfulest; Christ receiveth sinful men!¹⁸

We must begin our conversation about soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, with the declaration that this subject is good news for Adam's race. This good news of salvation in Christ is objective, sufficient, exclusive, and available to all.

THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYONE

The additional and pivotal claim we are making is that this gospel, this good news, is for *everyone*. It is in the heart of God to desire the salvation of every person he created. I expect no objections from the Christian community to Article 1 for its centering the gospel in the person and work of Jesus. But the further point of this affirmation and denial is that the salvation proclaimed by this gospel, though not finally received by all, is in fact available to *all*. When God made provision in Christ, he had a universal scope in mind. All persons were potential recipients of this magnanimous, magnificent salvation. Are we justified in making such a claim? Can we really know the mind of God on this matter? Is it more than a gesture toward equity or a sentimental view of God? I submit that this view is the *plain* teaching of Scripture and is foundational to the plan of God for redemption. The gospel is not the gospel if it is not for everyone.

God's Word Declares It

Note three of the texts from the list of supporting passages. Because New Testament scholars have made the case extensively in numerous works that these verses declare that the gospel is for everyone, I will offer only a brief review.

John 3:16

There is a prevailing opinion that John 3:16 is the most significant verse in the Bible. It has been memorized, quoted, placarded, distributed, translated,

and preached perhaps more than any other single verse of Scripture. It has been called the gospel in superlatives, the Bible in miniature, the little gospel, and the gospel in a nutshell.¹⁹ It deserves all this attention because it succinctly declares what the gospel is (eternal life made possible through faith alone in God's only Son) and who the gospel is for (the world). If there were no other verse to appeal to regarding the intention of God toward sinners, John 3:16 would be sufficient to make it clear. The verse teaches:

1. God loves the world. He is not disinterested, dispassionate, or spiteful regarding people. He loves them enough to sacrifice his Son for them.
2. He loves the *whole* world. The word for world in the Greek is *kosmos*, that is "the whole human race."²⁰ God's love and resultant offer of eternal life is for all humans.
3. The verse further asserts the universality of the gospel's intent by the word "whoever," translating the word *pas* which is used in the New Testament 1,228 times and is regularly translated whoever, all, and every. In John 3:16, "The best translation is: 'Anyone who believes.' The idea is non-restrictive. The idea is anyone . . . anywhere . . . anytime."²¹

1 Timothy 2:3–4 and 2 Peter 3:9

Added to the remarkable salvation invitation for all people in the verse above is the clear declaration of God's intent as expressed in 1 Tim 2:3–4 and 2 Pet 3:9:

"This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim 2:3–4)

"The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." (2 Pet 3:9)

Only by the most tortured eisegesis can one avoid the profound truth that God desires all sinners to be saved. Some interpreters, in order to maintain

that God does not intend the gospel for everyone, suggest that the “all” in these verses means “all of the elect” or “all kinds of people” or something less than every individual human being. Timothy George writes, “This is a strained exegesis that is hard to justify in every case. Unless the context requires a different interpretation, it is better to say that ‘all means all.’”²²

God’s Covenant Displays It

It is not only individual Scriptures like those above that teach the gospel is good news for everyone, but also the whole trajectory of Scripture points to the universal design of God for all people to benefit from his love. God is not a localized deity who cares for only one tribe. He is the Creator of all men and calls all to himself.

This is noted early in God’s call to Abraham. It begins with “I will make you a great nation” but ends with “. . . in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (see Gen 12:2–3). Although the nation of Israel often believed that the blessings were just for them, God always intended that they would be his servants so that all the world could be reached for his glory. As the prophet Isaiah declares:

He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isa 49:6)

Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees because they thought the Messiah was just to benefit them. And the Apostle Paul had to counter the Judaizers who didn’t understand that the wall of partition (Eph 2:14) had been broken in Christ and that the mystery had been unveiled that salvation is for the Gentiles, too (Col 1:26–27). In too many instances, the Jews, the Pharisees, and the Judaizers said to certain people, “God’s plan is not for you,” but Jesus along with the rest of the writers of the NT roundly condemned such thinking. How can the church conclude from the providential sweep of God’s plan for the ages that the gospel is not for everyone?

God's Gospel Demonstrates It

When we say the gospel is good news for everyone, we do not mean that everyone will be saved. We are simply declaring that because of God's offer in Jesus Christ, everyone could be saved. Romans 1:16 is instructive on this issue:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Rom 1:16)

The enabling act in the sovereign design of God, which makes it possible for anyone and everyone to come to salvation, is the gospel (its particulars and its proclamation). When the gospel is heard, its inherent power makes all sinful hearers able to respond. The failure of some sinful hearers to be saved is solely because of their refusal to believe. John 3:18 tells us that those who believe are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already. There is no deficiency in the power of the gospel or in the willingness of God to save.

The New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833/1853) reads: “We believe that the blessings of salvation are made free to all by the Gospel; that it is the immediate duty of all to accept them by a cordial, penitent, and obedient faith; and that nothing prevents the salvation of the greatest sinner on earth except his own inherent depravity and voluntary rejection of the gospel; which rejection involves him in an aggravated condemnation.”[23](#)

In the gospel, God has done all that is necessary to bring otherwise helpless sinners to the point of salvation. With that being done, sinners must receive or reject the gospel offer. God, in his sovereign plan, has chosen neither to coerce nor prohibit the sinner's choice in salvation. Only God (and the sinner himself) knows why sinners, having been enabled by the gospel to believe, choose as they do. As we try to understand why some are saved and others are lost, we must be careful that we do not misinterpret Scripture, malign the character of God, or minimize the love of God by suggesting that his desire for some sinners is to simply ignore them or to damn them instead

of to redeem them.

WHEN THE GOOD NEWS IS BAD NEWS

Is there any scenario in which the gospel (which is good news) would be bad news to anyone? If they were excluded by God from being afforded the gospel's provision and, from the day of their birth, were only passing time until a sure and certain consignment to an eternity in hell, then indeed, that is bad news.

The implication of Calvinism is just that. God's salvific intent was always only for a select number. He picked them out before time began (unconditional election), caused events so that they would with certainty be redeemed, and left all other human beings to just as certainly perish in their sins. This interpretation of soteriology is good news for some and bad news for the rest.

Do Calvinists really teach that the gospel was always only intended by God for some sinners and that decision was made by God prior to creation? Consider the following comments by Reformed theologian Loraine Boettner: "The Reformed Faith has held to the existence of an eternal, divine decree which, antecedently to any difference or desert in men themselves, separates the human race into two portions and ordains one to everlasting life and the other to everlasting death [hell]." Boettner goes on to say that Calvinists "believe that from all eternity God has intended to leave some of Adam's posterity in their sins, and that the decisive factor in the life of each is to be found only in God's will."²⁴

According to T. H. L. Parker in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Augustine is the father of these views. Parker explains:

The conclusion, to which Augustine was not afraid to go, is that mankind is from all eternity divided into two classes of elect and non-elect. The elect, of whom there are from all eternity a fixed number (known only to God) will in time believe and at last be saved. . . . The non-elect are so because God has rejected them on account of their sin, and they are justly, as sinners,

condemned to eternal punishment. . . . God was in no sense a passive spectator before the event, but as the sovereign Lord determined the eternal lot of each man and therefore foresaw how he would deal with each man and what should become of him.²⁵

Augustine was unmoved by the apparent arbitrariness of God's actions. He thought that it was impertinence to question the goodness of God on these matters. He pled ignorance on one hand because God's purposes are unsearchable; then, on the other hand, proceeded to give an answer to the dilemma, declaring it is a good thing for God to give sinners what they deserve even as he shows other sinners his mercy.

Subsequent theologians adopted Augustine's views, but none was more prominent than John Calvin. Parker writes, "We turn to Calvin, with whose name predestination is popularly linked. Yet Calvin himself thought that he was merely reproducing Augustine's doctrine."²⁶ Parker, appealing to quotations from a translation of Calvin's 1559 edition of *Institutes*, continues,

Calvin's definition, it will be remembered, stated that "eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others" (iii.21.5). There is no question here of a mere taking out of the elect from the mass of mankind and of overlooking the rest. Calvin will certainly speak of "passing over" and "setting apart," but he sees the passing over as a deliberate excluding by God, determined in eternity: "those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children" (iii.23.1). This he determined, therefore, before the sin for which the reprobate would in time be condemned had been committed. More, God willed the fall of man: "man falls, the providence of God so ordaining" (iii.23.8).²⁷

James P. Boyce, the oft-cited founder of Southern Seminary, says this regarding the Decree of Reprobation in his *Abstract of Theology*:

The Scriptural statements as to Reprobation are that God, in eternity, when he elected some, did likewise not elect others; that as resulting from this non-election, but not as efficiently caused by it, he passes by these in the bestowment of the special favors shown to the Elect, and, as in like manner yet further resulting, condemns men because of sin to everlasting destruction, and while they are in the state of sin and condemnation, he effects or permits the hardening of their hearts, so that his truth is not appreciated, but actually rejected.²⁸

The preceding survey illustrates that Calvinism, at least in its historic and standard form, does not teach that everyone is savable. Those holding this view do not concur with Article 1 of the Traditional Statement. They affirm the position that God pre-temporally elected certain individuals for eternal life, which makes their faith response inevitable, while not electing all others, which makes their faith response impossible.

It is well known, however, that Calvinism (like many other theological systems) has within in its ranks numerous variations of belief. Chief among these variations is the attempt to salvage the idea that “God desires to save every sinner” from the ravages of the “horrible decree” of double predestination.

One such view is commonly referred to as “single predestination.” This was the position of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. A self-described Calvinist and hero to most Southern Baptists, including me, Spurgeon goes to great lengths to separate the decree to elect and the decree to pass by. In a sermon on Rom 9:13, Spurgeon begins with this strong disclaimer about his understanding of this subject: “Do not imagine for an instant that I pretend to be able thoroughly to elucidate the great mysteries of predestination.” Instead, he is willing to “give you what I think to be a scriptural statement of the fact, that some men are chosen, other men are left.”²⁹

Spurgeon basically argues that God’s decision to elect is alone causative for salvation but his decision not to elect is not in any way causative for condemnation. He writes, “All the glory to God in salvation; all the blame to men in damnation.” He insists it is not possible or necessary to reconcile the

two arguments and deflects objections to his view with an appeal to mystery and to some sort of fideism. He adds, “It is not a matter of understanding; it is a matter of faith.”³⁰

The “single predestination” view is widely held among people who self-identify as Calvinists.³¹ They believe it permits the concept that God really desires the salvation of all, even though he does not elect all which is a prerequisite for being able to respond to the gospel. This stripe of Calvinist appeals to mystery, as did Spurgeon. But isn’t this really a case of clear contradiction? The logical result of electing only some is the certain condemnation of the rest.³² In other words, the result to the non-elect is the same whether you style God’s activity as “double predestination” or “single predestination.” It is God’s choice alone that rescues sinners from hell or leaves them in their sin to face eternal judgment. According to these views, God has chosen for only some to be rescued.³³

Another variation of Calvinism that attempts to affirm God’s love for all sinners and his desire to save everyone posits that God has two wills, his hidden (or secret) will and his revealed will. They assert that while it is God’s revealed will to desire the salvation of all, his hidden will is that only some (the elect) be saved.³⁴

The hidden/revealed wills theory is flawed in numerous ways, including a destruction of confidence in the revealed will. How can one be assured of God’s revelation in Christ, the truth of gospel claims, or salvation for anyone in particular if these may be secretly countermanded by God’s hidden will? Additionally, this theory doesn’t solve the problem its proponents have with the question of God’s desire to save everyone. The revealed will (God desires to see all saved) is trumped by God’s hidden will (only some are intended for salvation). This makes the claim that God desires to save all a mere charade.

Because we deny the notion that the Bible teaches that only some humans are the objects of God’s desire to save, we reject the theological interpretations described above as Calvinism. We applaud the attempt of some Calvinists to try to hold to their understanding of election and, at the same time, to affirm that God desires to save all. However, those attempts that just appeal to mystery or paradox are puzzling because they want to

affirm simultaneously two contradictory claims. Those proposals for a hidden/secret will are more troubling because they claim to affirm God's desire to save all but do not believe he really does. If these views do not make the affirmation that God desires the salvation of everyone a central tenet, then they have diminished the good news of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

By God's design, everyone is savable. We affirm that the gospel is for everyone. We reject the concept that only a select few are capable of responding to the gospel while the rest are predestined to an eternity in hell.

The article on the gospel is first in the Traditional Statement because it sets the boundaries for the further discussion of the doctrine of salvation. Subsequent chapters will address the implications of the belief that God desires to save everyone on subjects such as grace, election, and sovereignty. Whatever conclusions one makes of the various aspects of God's plan of salvation, if it cannot be maintained that everyone is savable, then the good news for all has become bad news for most.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boettner, Loraine. *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 6th ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948.
- Boyce, James P. *Abstract of Theology*. 1887. Reprint, Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2006.
- George, Timothy. *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative—Our Response*. Nashville: LifeWay, 2000.
- Keathley, Kenneth. *Sovereignty and Salvation: A Molinist Approach*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011.
- . "The Work of God: Salvation." In *A Theology for the Church*, rev. ed., edited by Daniel Akin, 543–600. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014.
- Lumpkin, William L. *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. Rev. ed. Valley Forge: Judson, 1969.
- Neumeister, Erdmann. "Christ Receiveth Sinful Men." Translated by Emma Bevan. In *The Baptist Hymnal*, edited by Wesley L. Forbis. Nashville: Convention, 1991.
- Olson, Roger E. *Against Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.
- Robertson, A. T. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. V: The Fourth Gospel and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Nashville: Broadman, 1932.
- Spurgeon, Charles. "Jacob and Esau." Sermon 239, delivered on January 16, 1859. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons05.xvi.html>.
- Vines, Jerry. "Sermon on John 3:16." In *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, edited by David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke, 13–28. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010.
- Ware, Bruce A. "Divine Election to Salvation: Unconditional, Individual, and Infralapsarian." In *Perspectives on Election*, edited by Chad Owen Brand, 1–58. Nashville: B&H, 2006.

- [17.](#) All Bible quotations in this chapter are from the New American Standard Bible.
- [18.](#) Neumeister, “Christ Receiveth Sinful Men,” hymn 563.
- [19.](#) Vines, “Sermon,” 13–14.
- [20.](#) Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 50.
- [21.](#) David Allen, correspondence, in Vines, “Sermon,” 24.
- [22.](#) George, *Amazing Grace*, 94.
- [23.](#) Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 363. See pp. 360–67 for The New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833) with 1853 revisions.
- [24.](#) Boettner, *Predestination*, 83, 104. Olson, *Against Calvinism*, 103, concludes that this view “is crucial to all true Calvinists; it is the heart of their system of soteriology.”
- [25.](#) *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, s.v. “Predestination.”
- [26.](#) Ibid.
- [27.](#) Ibid.
- [28.](#) Boyce, *Abstract of Theology*, 356.
- [29.](#) Spurgeon, “Jacob and Esau,” par. 1–2.
- [30.](#) Ibid., par. 17–19.
- [31.](#) George, *Amazing Grace*, 88–89.
- [32.](#) Olson, *Against Calvinism*, 104–10.
- [33.](#) Ware affirms “single predestination.” He writes, “As this relates to unconditional election, yes it is absolutely true that the elect most surely and certainly will be saved, and that the non-elect are just as certainly left in their sinful condition to experience the consequences of their sin.” Ware, “Divine Election,” 39.
- [34.](#) See Keathley, *Sovereignty and Salvation*, 42–62, for his chapter which summarizes how theologians have tried to manage the question, “Does God Desire the Salvation of All?” For a similar treatment, see Keathley, “The Work of God,” 557–86.