

“Where to Start? Responding to the Good News of Jesus”
1 Corinthians 15:3-5; John 3:16-18; Acts 2:37-41

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Here we are. On the cusp of a new year.

It's a time to start. Or to start, once again. With a new year comes a sense of freshness, comes a sense of re-setting, comes a sense that the past is behind us, and we can now move forward into something new.

It's a great time to ask the big question: Where to start?

I. The Gospel

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

The gospel message can be looked at from various angles and explained in a number of ways. But here are a few things to highlight from this text:

1. It's about Christ and what He has done, not about us and what we do.

“The content of the gospel is Jesus Christ in the fullness of his ministry, death, and resurrection. The gospel is this and not anything else.” (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 153)

The gospel is *not* about what you and I do. The gospel is news about what someone else has done. The gospel is about *Christ*.

2. It's a story – the true story of God that centres on Jesus' death and resurrection.

Paul says that all of this was “according to the Scriptures”.

Which reminds us that the story of Jesus is part of a wider story. Jesus' coming, His life, His death, and His resurrection are the climax of the big story of God that we discover in the Bible. The gospel is the true story of God that centres on Jesus.

3. It's a story that makes claims about our stories and requires a response.

The cross is sometimes said to be at the very centre of the gospel. And note that Paul gives us a reason why Christ died: “...Christ died *for our sins*”.

And that means that you and I have sinned. We've messed things up. We've rejected God as first and best.

But Jesus came to deal with this problem of sin. And He does it by taking it upon Himself. He does it by bearing the punishment that we deserved for our sins – for our rejection of God – in His own body on the cross. He lays down His life, dying for your sins and mine.

Even if you've heard this message a million times and believed it for as long as you can remember, when it comes to our life in Christ, when it comes to our Christian discipleship, this is and always will be the thing that is of first importance.

"The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is inaccurate to think the gospel is what saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying harder to live according to biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our minds, hearts, and lives by believing the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on." (Timothy Keller, *Center Church*, p. 48).

II. A Response is Required

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3:16-18)

When it comes to our response to the gospel, I think that it's possible that sometimes we want to think the good news of Jesus is like a sunset.

In our culture – and for some of us at a personal level – we might want to think of the gospel as something that's a little bit like this. It's something we can admire. It's something we can appreciate. Maybe even deeply appreciate. But it's something that we gaze at from afar.

When it comes to our response to the gospel, the gospel – I'll say – is more like a bus.

As the bus approaches the bus stop, you have two options in front of you. You can deliberate, but at the end of the day you have to make some sort of decision. Making no decision, or just admiring the bus as it approaches are not options. You have two options in front of you: get on the bus or choose not to.

The writer of John's Gospel tells us we have two options:

Option 1: *Believe*

Options 2: *Choose not to believe.*

The gospel message comes at us and requires us to make a decision.

III. What Shall We Do?

In Acts 2, after the Spirit comes, Peter addresses this massive crowd and gives them a presentation of the gospel message – he tells them the story of Jesus. And after Peter shares this message and declares that Jesus is both “Lord” and “Messiah,” we then read this, starting in verse 37:

“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37)

Which is a great question. And the text goes on:

“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.’

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” (Acts 2:38-41)

In Tim Keller’s book *The Reason for God*, he says that when people ask him the question, “How can I actually become a Christian?”, or in other words, “What should I do in response to the gospel message?”, this is what he says: “It takes two things, and a third.”

And what are those two things?

Keller says on the one hand, “believe in Jesus.” On the other hand, “repentance.”

In Acts 2, Peter starts by saying “Repent.”

The Greek word for “repentance” is the word *metanoia*, which basically means “change your mind.”

So, “brothers, what shall we do?”

“Repent.” “Change your mind about Jesus.” “Change your mind about what matters most in your life.” “Change your mind about which direction you’re going.” “Change your mind about whom you will ultimately trust in for salvation.”

“Repentance” and “believing in Jesus” are basically two sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other.

What’s the third thing?

Involvement in the community of God’s people, the church. We also see this in Acts 2 in verse 41. To be saved is to be saved into a community.

But as brilliant as Tim Keller is, I think there is one more piece that's involved in rightly responding to the gospel.

It takes two things... and a third... and a fourth, I'll say.

And what's the fourth thing?

Peter says in this text, "Repent, and *be baptized*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (verse 38a)

"Be baptized."

Baptism is kind of like an initiation rite into the Christian faith. It's an act where a person gets immersed into the water and then comes back up again – symbolizing our union with Christ. It symbolizes death to our old way of life and resurrection to our new life in Christ.

And baptism is a public declaration of faith. When a person gets baptized, they're saying, "I want my community to know that this is a decision I'm making with my life."

And baptism is a concrete action that demonstrates our repentance and faith. The Christian faith is not just "in our heads" or "in our hearts", but something that takes the whole of our bodies to respond to. Baptism is the symbol God has given us, and Jesus commands us to do this as a way to show – publicly – the faith we have.

So, where to start?

For some of us, we just need to be reminded of the gospel again and keep that in front of us as we enter the new year.

For others of us, maybe a new year means making a commitment to Jesus for the first time – which starts with repentance and trusting in Him.

For others of us, maybe baptism is the next step we need to take. Baptism is not something for the "elites of faith," but an early step of discipleship.