



BSFL: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; ETB: Romans 15;
TGP: 1 Corinthians 15:1-28

One of the recently restored mosaics in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Dating to early in the 4th cent., this is one of the oldest continuously operating churches in the world.

THE GOSPEL OF Jesus Christ

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (11/09/2014)

BY STEVE BOOTH

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” My 2-year-old grandson Asher has already been to enough birthday parties to know the routine. Into the room enters someone holding a cake mounted with small sticks ablaze, and the song begins. The song stops, one person blows out the fire, the rest clap, and the party begins! Asher may not understand everything, but he knows this is a special event; for some reason everyone is happy, and ice cream usually follows.

Pre-Christian Usage

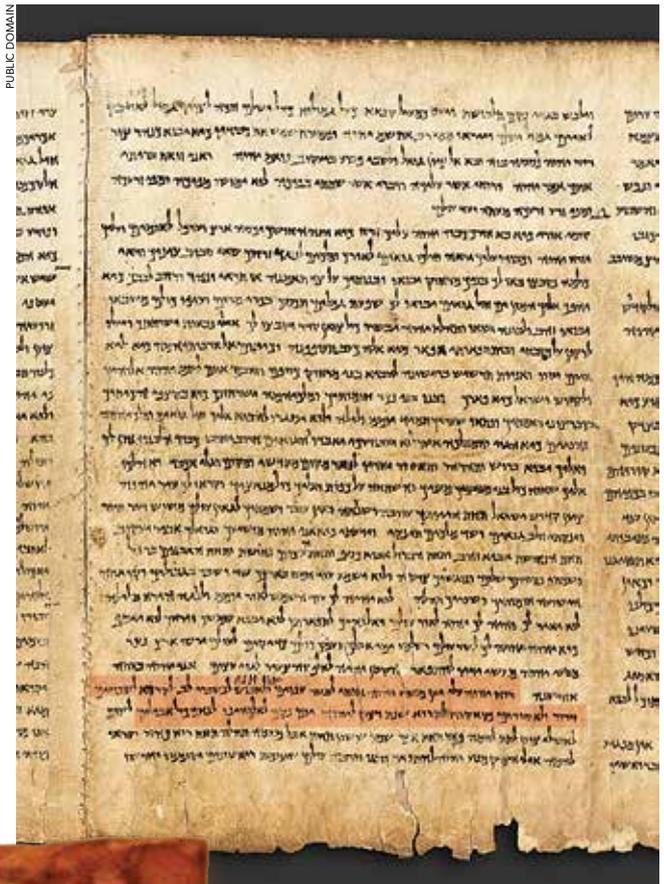
In the ancient world, the Greek word for announcing such a happy event was *euangelion*—good news. Translated “gospel,” this was a secular word long before it entered into Christian vocabulary. From it we get our English noun, “evangelism.” *Euangelion* occurs in differing contexts, such as the birth of a child, report of a battle victory, or in announcing an upcoming wedding. These were joyous events, in contrast to life’s difficult and cruel circumstances.

People considered being the messenger who brought good news to be an honor. Most were eager to be the first to deliver good news. For example, a courier would race from the battlefield as fast as he could. His outward appearance telegraphed the good news ahead of his words: face shining, waving a palm branch, his spear decked with laurel. Raising his right hand, he loudly shouted, “Greetings...we are victorious!” Citizens responded in joyous celebration; they draped temples in garlands, offered sacrifices, and commenced celebratory games.¹

Euangelion could also refer to the reward a messenger received for delivering a joyous report—a crown, monetary gift, or special honor.² One example of this usage occurs in the Greek translation of 2 Samuel 4:10. Here David recounted that after a key

Right: Section of the Great Isaiah Scroll, which was found in Cave 1 at Qumran. At over 24 feet long, this was the largest of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered. The highlighted text is Isaiah 61:1-2.

Below: Excavated in 1938 at the Agora in Athens, Greece; stamped terra-cotta tokens dated to the 4th cent. BC. These are stamped with the name of the border commander, Xenokles of Perithoidai, Greece. Such tokens were presumably used as passports for the border and for messengers reporting to and from military headquarters. Being able to convey good news was considered an honor in Hellenistic culture.



before Jesus’ birth.³ The proconsul of the Roman province of Asia decreed that Caesar Augustus’s birthday, September 23, would mark the beginning of the new year, coinciding with the start of the civil calendar. The proconsul “published” the pronouncement in marble in cities throughout the province and placed it in the temple dedicated to Rome and Augustus in the capital city of Pergamum.

The relevant portions read as follows (emphasis added):

Providence...has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a **saviour** for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, and to create order

everywhere;... and where-
as **the birthday of the God**
[Augustus] was the beginning
for the world of the **glad tidings**
[in the Greek, the 'Euangel']
that have come to men through
him;...that the reckoning of
time for the course of human
life should begin with **his** birth.⁴

In the New Testament

The noun *euangelion* appears in the New Testament seventy-six times; the related cognate verb translated “to announce good news,” fifty-four. Jesus came preaching the gospel of God (Mark 1:14). His message was simple: “The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!”⁵ Jesus explained that His ministry fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy, which included preaching good news to the poor (Isa. 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19).

The apostles continued this evangelistic ministry by proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:42). This One who had proclaimed the gospel was indeed Himself the good news. As the church spread the message of Christ, *euangelion* became the shorthand descriptor of the content of their preaching (15:7) and later the written record of Jesus’ life and ministry (Mark 1:1). The fact that the secular usage of *euangelion* described Caesars’ benefactions illustrates an early contextualization of the gospel message itself.

Paul understood this new technical term for the Christian message. He employed *euangelion* sixty times and the related verb *euangelizo* twenty-one times.⁶ From *euangelizo* comes the English verb, “to evangelize.” Paul believed God had entrusted him with this message, hence he could call it “my gospel” (2 Tim. 2:8). He did not believe the message was his alone, for he spoke of “our gospel” (2 Cor. 4:3) and “the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1).

At times Paul used both the verb



Temple in Pergamum honored Emperor Trajan, who ruled AD 98–117. Trajan received his position by appointment rather than inheritance. An emperor coming to power was hailed as good news, *euangelion*.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BOB SCHATZ (11/28/16)

and noun forms of this root together: “Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, *the gospel I preached to you*” (1 Cor. 15:1, emphasis added). What is this gospel Paul “gospelized”? Nowhere does Paul give a full-blown description of all aspects of his gospel message (although Romans perhaps comes close). This is likely because the recipients of his letters already knew much of that information. The core of the gospel preaching was established early on and was passed along beginning with the eyewitnesses then to each subsequent generation of converts.

Paul stated he also had received this teaching, and as a reminder, he summarized it for the Corinthians—Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection (vv. 3-4). Paul then enumerated six individuals or groups who were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Lord, including himself (vv. 5-8). These eyewitnesses were

crucial as Paul emphasized the importance of the resurrection, both Jesus’ and ours. Paul was also careful to emphasize the continuity between the old and new covenants. This gospel message is both ancient and current. Everything transpired just as the Old Testament had foretold. Paul knew there is only one true gospel, even though some would attempt to distort its message. Once twisted, it is no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-9).

Implications of the Gospel

But why is the gospel *good news*? The good news is so good because the bad news is so bad. Jesus called for repentance because we are sinners. Paul stated that one element of the gospel is that God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus on the final day (Rom 2:16). Judgment and joy belong together because Jesus is both Savior and Judge.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NYC (337/33)

Above: A Roman sarcophagus lid from the Byzantine Era shows the last judgment as Jesus separates the sheep on His right from the goats on His left.

ries in Spain and Gaul, resulting in a sustained era of peace for the empire.

Lower left: Mesopotamian terra-cotta figurine of a woman carrying a baby in a cradle; painted with red slip; about 2000–1600 BC. Hellenists used *euaggelizo* to announce a happy event, such as the birth of a child.



Left: The Altar of Peace in Rome commemorates Caesar Augustus's victory.

Holy Spirit, the church will continue to faithfully proclaim this good news (*euangelion*) of the kingdom to all nations, and then the end will come (Matt. 24:14). 📖

So what is the gospel?

The gospel is the good news that the only true God, the just and gracious creator of the universe, has looked upon hopelessly sinful men and women and has sent his Son, God in the flesh, to bear his wrath against sin through his substitutionary death on the cross, and to show his power over sin and death in the resurrection from the grave, so that everyone who turns from their sin and themselves and trusts in Jesus alone as Savior and Lord will be reconciled to God forever.⁷

The gospel points to God's care and provision for us. He proved His great love for us in that while we were still sinful, Christ died for our sins (Rom. 5:8).

The gospel carries two implications. First, those who have not yet trusted Christ must hear and receive the

gospel (Col. 1:5,23; see 2 Cor. 11:4). Second, those who have received the gospel must share it with others.

Consider some New Testament verbs that accompany *euangelion*: preach (1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Thess. 2:9), proclaim (Col. 1:23), speak (1 Thess. 2:2), teach (2 Tim. 1:10-11), make clear/known (1 Cor. 15:1), and present (Gal. 2:2). As mentioned above, Paul also combined the verb and noun, "gospelizing the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:18; 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:7; Gal. 1:11). The gospel of Jesus Christ is something we must make public. Like Paul, we are compelled to declare it!

The inauguration of the new age began with a birth announcement in Bethlehem, not by a Roman procurator but by an angel: "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news [*euangelizomai*] of great joy that will be for all the people. Today... a Savior was born" (Luke 2:10-11). Empowered by the

1. Gerhard Friedrich, "εὐαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγέλιον, προεὐαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγελιστής" (*euangelion*, good news) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 722. Common also in such contexts was the expression "to make good news sacrifices" (*euaggelivlia quvein*) in gratitude to the gods for some benefaction.

2. Moises Silva, "εὐαγγέλιον" (*euangelion*, good news) in *New Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, rev. ed., vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 306–307.

3. The Priene Calendar Inscription was discovered in the ancient city of Priene in modern-day Turkey.

4. Ernest Barker, *From Alexander to Constantine: Passages and Documents Illustrating the History of Social and Political Ideas 336 BC to AD 337* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 212.

5. Mark 1:15; all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

6. Paul could employ the verbal form *euangelizo* (εὐαγγελίζω, to proclaim) in the common use of good news, as in the positive report Timothy brought Paul in Athens about the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:6), but he seemingly kept to the spiritual use of gospel when using the noun.

7. Zane Pratt, "This is the Gospel," *IMB*, September 2, 2016, imb.org/2016/09/02/4674/.

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