



What is the Gospel? (Part 1)

In the first five centuries, writers in the early church were completely taken by the incarnation of Christ. In their minds, nothing could be more fascinating and lovely than the shocking union of Jesus with our fallen human existence. This is one major difference between what occupied the minds of the earliest Christians and what we encounter in the modern western church today.

In the Evangelical world the incarnation of Jesus barely gets noticed unless it serves as an introduction to preach about his pure sacrifice on the cross. But in reality, the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are all part of one giant movement where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit unite and share their life with humanity in all of its brokenness and sin. Through this monumental movement, we are called away from our fear and failure, and are called to participate in the eternal life of the Trinity.

But it is important for us to understand that the way we formulate and perceive the problem that Jesus came to fix will dictate the way we explain what exactly is happening on the cross. Our modern paradigm for deciphering the cross is usually about satisfying the Father's holiness and justice.

God is holy (legal).
Humanity sins.
Sin must be punished.
Because of love, Jesus is sent to be punished.
Jesus suffers punishment, and God is satisfied.

In this model, Jesus descends into human history as the pure, spotless Lamb of God who suffers the punishment that should be meted out to guilty, unrighteous sinners. The framework that the early church wrestled with was in the context of how the Trinity and their cosmic life could find a way into our brokenness and disease, and be united with us. How can God find us in our hiding and darkness (this called to mind the image of Adam hiding in the bushes) and give us a real place in his life?

The earliest followers of Jesus examined the cross and found Jesus submitting himself to humanity in all of our pain. Lost in the madness of sin, chaos, and confusion, we poured out our wrath and executed the Son of God. But it was exactly here that Jesus penetrated into the depths our darkness and wrong-headedness; it was here that he united all that he is with all that we are as we are entangled in our sin. That is at-one-ment! Jesus is the place where, in divine mercy and grace, heaven and the life of God merge with all that we are as sinners!

God has decisively acted in Christ so that the whole course of human history has forever been altered. The world has been reconciled to God in Christ. The coming of Jesus in the incarnation is part of this "divine conspiracy" where God embraces the human race and changes its course. Humanity has been washed, cleansed, reconciled, given a new heart and life, and lifted up forever in union with God. Jesus said, "It is finished!" We are called to believe and trust that it is done. Will we allow Jesus to actually have the final word? The Father has completely re-told our stories in Jesus. We can trust his version of our story—or we can rely on our own rendering of the story. Everyday everyone of us makes a choice about which reality we will trust and live in! Will you trust in your version of reality? Or will you trust in his?

Apostolic preaching was never an announcement of a hypothetical possibility that you will be given salvation if you believe and get your religion right. The apostles boldly declared God's act of reconciliation through his Son; they also declared that this divine act involved all of humanity. Paul preached about God's atoning work in Christ that involved all people, and he implored everyone to believe this good news and accept it as the new reality about themselves: "You are reconciled—so be reconciled!" The proclamation of the gospel is not just the "offer" of salvation but the "declaration" and "announcement" of God's saving work on behalf of every human being. The mystery of God's reconciling all people in Christ summons us to repentance (having our minds turned around) and faith (trust in what Jesus has made of us). What God has done in saving the world in Jesus stands as our firm basis of a full proclamation of the gospel.

MARKED

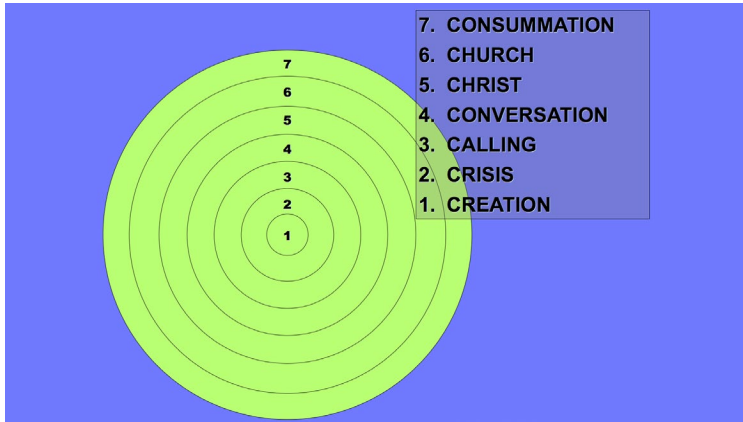
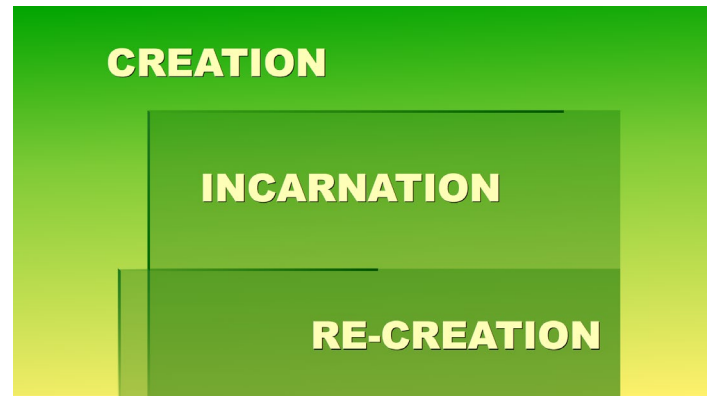
MARRIED

REMADE

Here are some simple ways to remember what Jesus has actually done:

We were MARKED as being made in the image of God. Sin MARRIED that image. Jesus Christ came and REMADE us.

CREATION was damaged by sin. Christ's INCARNATION means he has come to make all things new. Thus, we are called to trust and participate in our RE-CREATION.



CREATION was marred by a CRISIS of sin. But, beginning with Abraham, God continued CALLING people to himself. There followed a long CONVERSATION that led to a deep longing but no solution. So CHRIST came to bring about a new humanity. Now the CHURCH is a living testimony to the fact that God is doing a new thing and recreating people. This will ultimately lead to a CONSUMMATION, as all things will be gathered up into Christ.

Our message is not about “avoiding hell,” it is about letting people in on the news that Christ has already suffered the horror of it to liberate us from its grasp in this life and in the one to come. The fear of hell sidetracks us from the real truth. It is so sad that for many years the church has reduced the Gospel to nothing more than the issue of going to heaven or hell. The Gospel is the unveiling of the mystery of man’s inclusion in the life of God through the person and work of Jesus. The greatest hell that people face is the anguish of the unawareness of their true identity that has been disclosed in Christ. That’s why we feel an urgency to tell everyone the good news that they are fully accepted by God. We believe that something bigger has happened to man in Christ than what happened to man in Adam! God is doing something new in the world, and we are inviting people into the most attractive life possible. And that life can be lived now! We can live in an intimate, daily, constant feedback encounter with the Living God, and also in fellowship with each other. This is the reality of the good news of Jesus Christ!