

# "We Prioritize the Gospel Above All" // 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 // *Be the Movement* #1

I had a friend in college who told me that on his track team in high school he always finished in the top 3 for every event he ever ran, except for one where he came in LAST. He said that happened at one of his first meets--an away meet, on a course he'd never run.

He said the whole bus ride there he had his headphones in, trying to go all Michael Phelps and get his game face on. He was feeling good when he got there, and kept the headphones on through the whole warm up. He said at some point he saw his coach was up explaining things to everybody, and he said his coach was waving his arms and pointing but he couldn't hear what he was saying because his headphones were on. But he didn't think his coach would be saying anything all that important--basically in cross country you just run, right?

Well, he said, the race started and he said he took off and got way ahead of the entire field. It was about a 5K run, part of it through the woods. He said, "I was out of sight of whomever was in 2nd place, feeling good, about 4K into the run--One kilometer to go, when I came to a fork in the trail. One direction had a blue arrow; the other had a yellow," he said, "I didn't know which way to go. That's obviously what the official waving his arms had been trying to explain. So," he said, "here was my dilemma. If I waited for the next runner to catch up to see which way he went, I'd squander my lead. So I chose the path that FELT right and just ran."

It did not lead me to the last kilometer home, he said. It led me on another 7K loop. He said--I made pretty good time on that loop, but when I got back to the finish line, all the fans were gone. Stadium was empty. Our whole team was already on the bus, and our bus was the only vehicle left in the parking lot. "I never even broke stride," he told me. "I ran to the bus, climbed on, made eye contact with no one, made my way back to my seat and put back on my headphones."

The point is, **it doesn't matter how well you run, if you're running the wrong direction.**

We're going to spend a few weeks talking about the direction of our church. We're going to look at some **core texts of Scripture** that define us as a church, the essential Christian life, and our mission.

In the midst of all the uncertainty that is going on, this is a **good time to recalibrate.**

We say our mission here at TSC is to **create a movement of DMD in RDU and around the world**. The title of this series is "Be the Movement." During this season where we are not able to come together the way we usually do, we can still *be the movement*.

\*\*It's going to require some extra leadership and extra initiative, but I know you are up to the task. *Be the movement*.

Works consulted:

"First Things First: Jesus Above All, Matthew 28:1-10," sermon, Bryan Loritts

"The Gospel-Shaped Life," sermon, Tim Keller

"The Centrality of the Gospel," sermon, Tim Keller

"Jesus + Nothing = Everything (parts 1 & 2)," sermons, Tullian Tchividjian, 2012

**Our mission is shaped by 4 values I am going to preach through the next four weeks.** Each is deeply anchored in the teachings of Jesus, and I'm going to show you that. Here they are. **At TSC...**

1. **We prioritize the gospel above all**
2. **We do whatever it takes to reach all people**
3. We aim to **make disciples not converts**
4. We believe every member is to be sent (**send every member**)

**This week, I want to discuss "Gospel Above All."** BTW, these aren't new values, btw, just ways of stating clearly the values that have guided us for two decades.

1 Cor 15 if you have your Bibles. Today, I want to show you how in his letter to the Corinthians, as in all of his letters, **Paul prioritizes the gospel above everything.** For Paul, the gospel is in a special class all by itself.

**\*\*1 Cor 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,**

- **\*\*First** importance implies that other things were important to Paul, too, but these other things weren't of **FIRST** importance. *First* importance means it is in a class all by itself.
- **\*\*In fact, earlier in his letter Paul makes a statement that some scholars say had to be an exaggeration. In 1 Cor 2:2 he said, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."** Here's why they think that's an exaggeration: Paul talks about a lot of stuff in his letters to the Corinthians besides Jesus' D, B, R.

But here's why Paul said it: Everything else Paul said ultimately connected back to it. The gospel was his one agenda, his priority, his authority, his blueprint for action.

**\*\*The church at Corinth, you see, was a mess, like Pastor Curtis showed us when we took communion last week. **My wife said after PC's message:** "Hearing how messed up the 1st century church at Corinth was makes me feel better about our church."**

- The Corinthian church had all kinds of moral problems--some really dysfunctional family situations; there was doctrinal confusion, ethnic strife, political tensions, cult of personality, and so on.
- But Paul said, "My answer to all that is simply Jesus Christ, and him crucified." The solution for all those things is in grasping Christ and him crucified and having that at the center.

**\*\*Listen to what he said in chapter 3:10: According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. There can be **no other foundation** for anything in the church other than the message of Christ! **Everything else is built on it**, and anybody who builds on it should **take care** that what they build is consistent with it and an outgrowth of it.**

**In 1 Cor 9**, Paul explains he's personally willing to change anything about his life if it gets him a better hearing for the gospel. He'll set aside his preferences, his ethnicity, his culture, his politics--anything, if it means being able to reach more people with the gospel. **22 "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might**

save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel..." 16 ...For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! I can't let anything get in the way!

So, all throughout this letter, Paul shows that he prioritizes the gospel above all. So, let's ask, first, WHY?

## (Why is the gospel of 'first importance' in our mission?)

Real quick before we answer that: let's make sure we all understand what we mean by gospel:

The gospel is the message that because you and I are condemned in our sin, Christ came to earth to do for us what we could not do for ourselves: he lived a perfect life and died in our place so we could be forgiven. He lived the life we could not live and then died the death we were condemned to die. The key word in the gospel is "substitution."

**\*\*We say that you can summarize the gospel in four words.** Do you know what they are? "Jesus in my place." A friend of mine says, "The gospel is the good news telling us that the determining factor in our relationship with God is Jesus' work for us, not our work for him. His commitment to us, not our commitment to him. His obedience for us, not our obedience to him."

And this substitutionary work has given birth to a new creation and new, radical way of living--a life committed to kindness, and justice, a new unity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

This gospel message, Jesus said, is the only message by which we can be saved. To be saved someone must hear the message, believe it, repent of their sins and accept Jesus' offer to save them. Which leads to our first reason for why the gospel is of first importance in our mission:

### 1. Without the gospel, people are lost

- It doesn't matter what good we do in the world if we don't preach the gospel. Apart from the gospel, people are lost for eternity.
- Apart from Christ--whatever earthly things we engage in, no matter how good, they simply will not last. Poverty relief; social activism; good business; kindness toward our neighbors or the immigrant or the oppressed; standing for marriage and morality; raising healthy families--all these things are good--they show love for our neighbor and they glorify God, but apart from the gospel message, ultimately people are lost.
- And that's most important, right? We say we care about alleviating suffering--and we do. But the worst kind of suffering has to be eternal suffering.
- \*\*\*I've heard it said that Jesus spoke about hell more often and more vividly than anything else. He described hell in blood-curdling terms. Jesus! The Author of Love! If that's true, it must be a crucial truth and we have to pay attention to it.<sup>1</sup>
- The preaching of the gospel is the one thing given exclusively to the church. Lots of organizations can work for good business and poverty relief and marriage and morality and social change, but the gospel is given to the church. It's the most important message and God gave it to us to preach and that means that anything and everything else we could do has to take a distant backseat to that.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller

- Let me say to you: **Apart from Christ--apart from you believing and receiving the gospel, you are lost.** Even if you get everything else in life, you will lose it all without him. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?
- **\*\*One thing I pray for my kids** is that they will be able to see life through the lens of eternity. When they see people who are rich, and popular, and successful, I tell them that they **have to consider** not just how those people live, but also how they *die*: usually unhappy, unfulfilled, and separated from Christ. Have you received Christ?

**So that's the first reason it is above all**--it is the only message by which people can be saved, and it's given exclusively to us, the church, to proclaim.

## 2. Without the gospel, there is no power in Christianity

Back to 1 Cor 15: Notice what Paul says in the opening verses of that chapter: **1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you...** ARE BEING. That's progressive language.

Ongoing salvation. It's not just that you *were* saved ONCE by believing the gospel, you are also "being saved" by it-- active, present tense. Don't get confused here: there's 2 dimensions of salvation. There is what we call "positional salvation," where you accept Christ and in an instant your sins are forgiven--all of them; you are given the righteousness of Christ--made complete in him; and you are permanently adopted into God's family, once and for all. It's like when you adopt a child. Legally, that's not a gradual process. In one instant the child goes from being in one family to being in another. That's what happens when you accept Christ. It's what we call "positional" salvation, and it's NOT what Paul is talking about here. What Paul is talking about here when he says you "are being" saved is "progressive salvation." He's referring to your growth in maturity and Christlikeness for the rest of your life.

And how does that happen? Where is the power for that growth? It's in the same place that your initial salvation came from. Believing the gospel. See (vs 2)? "**Holding fast** to the word of the gospel." You grow in Christ the same way you begin in Christ--by holding fast to the gospel; re-believing it; meditating on it.

- I grew up thinking the gospel was only the entry rite of Christianity; the ABC's; the door through which you entered, the diving board off of which you jumped into the pool of Christianity. And thus, the gospel was primarily a message for unbelievers.
- **But that's not all the gospel is for Paul.** The gospel is not just **the diving board off of which we jump into the pool of Christianity**; it's the pool itself. Not just the ABC's, the A-Z. We grow in Christ not by moving beyond the gospel, but by pressing deeper into it.
  - **That's why Paul says he is determined to know nothing** but Christ and him crucified. **For whatever** he is talking about, he's coming back to Jesus Christ and him crucified for clarity in what he should do and the power to do it.
  - **Charles Spurgeon** famously said that at the end of every message he would plow a trough back to the gospel, because for whatever he was talking about, the power *to do it* came from believing and clinging to the cross.
  - Write this down: **The fire to do in the Christian life comes** only from being soaked in the fuel of what **has been done.** *Only when we realize that we can do NOTHING to impress God are we motivated from the heart to do EVERYTHING to please him.*
- **That's the second reason why our gospel** has to be above all. A church without the gospel at the center is a church without power.

Let me show you one more place in Corinthians where Paul teaches this: **2 Cor 3:18, "...beholding the glory of the Lord (in the face of Jesus Christ), we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.**

- How do we grow in our love for God? We see more of Jesus.
- How do we grow in obedience? In self-control? In the fruits of the Spirit? We see more of Jesus.
- What should I be doing every time I stand here and open the Bible for you? Helping you see Jesus. **I used to teach the Bible** like a book of heroes to emulate: "Be a man after God's own heart like David; dare to be a Daniel. Trust like Timothy. Move like Moses. Believe like Barnabas. Persevere like Paul. Smack 'em like Samson." (I could do a whole series.)
- \*\*Or I thought of it as a book of rules to obey. Did you know there are **1663 commands** in the Bible? 613 in the OT; 1050 in the New. The Christian life was like playing a game of **whack-a-mole**. You'd master a few of the 1663 one week but these others would pop up, and so the next week you'd focus on that.
- Many contemporary teachers of God's word approach the Bible primarily like a book of **practical advice**-- look at what it says about leadership and parenting and happiness and money.
- The Bible is not primarily any of those things, however. It's about Jesus. It's not a collection of heroes for you to emulate--it's the story of a Savior you can hope in, and adore. It's less a book of religious duties you need to do for God and more the story of what he has done for you; the story of a Savior who came to rescue us because we had broken all the rules and rejected the advice and were now so messed up that we couldn't put it all back together again so he did it for us.

If we want to be a church that fulfills our mission, the gospel has to be at the center. If we want to be a church with any kind of power, the gospel has to be at the center. It's like Martin Luther, the 16th century Reformer said, **"The gospel is the doctrine on which the church rises or falls."**

So, finally, let me ask: **How could we go wrong at TSC with this?**

## **Things that compete with the Gospel Above All at TSC:**

### **1. Putting a greater emphasis on 'do' than 'done'.**

- In many churches, the emphasis starts to get put on what Christians should do instead of what Jesus has done.
- Many churches in the old South where I grew up were focused on what Christians should wear, how they should talk; movies and music and dress standards.
- At many churches today, the focus is all on what the **social activism** of a Christian should look like; what kind of politics you should have.
- Sometimes in churches like **ours the focus shifts to what good Christians do** IN THE CHURCH: faithful attendance, volunteering, giving, being in a small group, one-on-one discipleship. **Good Christians are tired Christians.**
- Hear me: **these are all good things, but they are not the message of the gospel.** The gospel is not about what you should do, but what Christ has *done*. And in holding fast to the message is where the power is. Holding fast to the message is what enables us to do the good works of mercy and justice and compassion.

- Which is **why we say that in every message, there ought to come a point where the pen** goes down and the eyes go up, and you stop saying, “Oh my God, look at all these things the preacher is telling me I have to do for you,” and start saying, “Oh my God, look at what you’ve done for me!” And you worship.
- The emphasis of our message should never be on what Christians do, but what Jesus has done.

Here’s the second one I fear:

## 2. Taking conversion for granted

- Churches can lose their gospel focus by taking the conversion of its members for granted. People who grow up in the church usually adopt their community’s morals; they believe in God, they participate in the church activities, obey the laws and are generally not bad people. But Jesus said that’s not enough. if you are going to enter the Kingdom of God, he said, **“You must be born again.” (John 3:3)** (\*\*Keep in mind, Jesus said this to a super religious guy who believed all the right things and observed all the right practices and thought that he was fine!)
- There must come a time where you acknowledge your sin and cast yourself on the mercy of God and receive him as Savior. And he comes into your life. When that happens, it will show up in a change of heart. Jesus said that the born again heart starts to love different things--it starts to want to seek God; it starts to find sin repulsive. It’s not that you become perfect, but you develop a distaste, a disdain for sin.
- Friend, has that change happened to you? Have you had a moment where you humbled yourself and received Christ and gave yourself fully to him?
- Have you been born again? Have you?
- \*\*Jonathan Edwards, who led in our country’s first Great Awakening, said this: **“Almost every natural man who hears of hell flatters himself that he shall escape it.”** But you won’t escape it. **The only way to escape it is to be born again.** Unless you are born again by a special act of God that changes your heart and washes away your sins, you will never enter the Kingdom of God!

The third thing that competes at our church with the Gospel Above All:

## 3. Prioritizing preference over mission

- In 1 Cor 9 Paul said that he would put aside all his preferences for the sake of the gospel. To reach more people for Jesus, he’d become a Jew to the Jew; to the Gentiles he’d become a Gentile.
- He’d do whatever it took to make the gospel accessible to all people. He’d lay aside any preference; he’d be more muted about certain political opinions and cultural perspectives if it meant getting a greater hearing for the gospel.
- We’ve said that the way to know you’re in a truly gospel-centered church is that at some point you feel uncomfortable! Because we might do something to reach somebody else that’s not designed for you.
- If you want to be in a place where everyone around you shares your preferences and mirrors your politics, what you want is a Christian Country Club, not a church, and I can point you to several all over the South where you can find that.
- But here, we’re going to put the Gospel Above All for the sake of reaching people even when it at times makes us uncomfortable.
- As Bryan says, there should be no ethnic home team in the church of JC.

OK, last thing that threatens the Gospel Above All here at TSC:

#### 4. **Prioritizing uniformity in secondary things**

- Again, for Paul to say that the gospel was of *first importance* means there were other important things to him, but the gospel alone was of FIRST importance, and Paul wouldn't let any of those secondarily important things get in the way of the 'first importance' thing. That included not only his preferences, but also his perspective, opinion, or agenda on any secondary matter that got in the way of preaching the gospel.
- We see this clearly in the life of Jesus, several times--one of the clearest: occurs in Luke 12 v13–21. A younger of two brothers comes to Jesus, accusing his older brother of leveraging his position to cheat him out of an inheritance. Now, if you've read the Old Testament at all, you know immediately that justice is close to God's heart, so Jesus cares about issues of injustice. Yet instead of giving a specific—you might even say political—answer to this dispute, we see Jesus pull back from adjudicating it so that he could instead warn both of them about the idolatry of money and preach the gospel to them both because, in light of eternity, that's ultimately a more pressing question. Unless they repent and believe the gospel, they perish. You understand no question is as important as that one. It's of *first importance*.
- To be clear: this is not to say that Christians don't speak to justice or political issues. Individual Christians must. Individual Christians should get involved at all levels seeing justice and shalom happen in society. It's just for us, the church as an institution, we focus our platform on the one thing of first importance, the preaching of the gospel. And if that means, as a church, that as we preach the gospel and proclaim his standards of justice, we pull back from offering political solutions or interpreting individual situations and circumstances, so be it.
- Helpful: ORGANIZATION VS ORGANISM?

"Gospel above all." All the other values we're going over come off of this one. We have to get this right.

"Gospel above all" is what unites us--and what defines our success in this season. Be the Movement. Be a gospel above all movement.

#### Conclusion/Music

\*\*A few weeks ago I told you about **Count Z who in the early-18th century started** one of the greatest mission movements in history. **His one line motto that defined the movement** and his life: **"Preach the gospel, die and be forgotten."** Preach the gospel, die and be forgotten.

Summit, I think that should be our motto too. For our church. For me individually.

So, my questions for you:

- Have you received it? Have you been born again? You can right now. Pray this... Let us know by texting JESUS to 33933.
- Have you given yourself to the gospel mission? Who in your life needs to hear it?

