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The Meaning of the Word GOSPEL

4

Ray L. Huntington

The word GOSPEL is understood by most Christian faiths as the "good news" concerning Jesus. This definition, taken from the Greek word, is technically correct. However, the Book of Mormon teaches that the word GOSPEL encompasses much more. In 3 Nephi 27 Christ defines the gospel using a six-part definition: (1) Christ's coming to mortality, (2) the Atonement, (3) repentance, (4) baptism, (5) the reception of the Holy Ghost, and (6) enduring to the end. By using this definition, we discover that the Gospels truly contain the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The King James Bible prefaces the title pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with the words, "The Gospel According To." Hence, when speaking of the first four books of the New Testament, it is common for many members of the Church to refer to them by their abbreviated title – "the Gospels."¹

The word *gospel* comes from the Old English word *godspel*, which means "god-story."² The English translators of the King James Bible used the word *godspel* as the translation for two Greek words found in the New Testament – *euangélion*, which means "good news," and *euangelízomai*, which means "to proclaim the good news."³ The word *euangelízomai* was used in the Greek language to denote the delivering of wonderful news, such as the announcement of a military victory or tidings of some other joyous occasion.⁴ Thus, in the King James New Testament, the book of Matthew states, "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are

raised up, and the poor have the gospel (or “the proclamation of good news,” from the word *euangelízomai*) preached to them” (Matt. 11:5). Further, the book of Mark records, “And the gospel (or the “good news,” from the word *euangélion*) must first be published among all nations” (Mark 13:10). Within the texts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the word gospel appears fourteen times – five times in the text of Matthew, six times in Mark, and three times in Luke. Furthermore, the word gospel is not used in the text of John. Interestingly, despite its use in the titles and texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (title only), the New Testament does not specifically indicate what the gospel or good news embodies.

The Christian world in general, however, readily accepts the definition of the gospel as the good news about Jesus,⁵ while others define Jesus’ offer of salvation through his death on the cross as the good news. Although both definitions are technically correct, they fail to include several important facets of the good news, which the Lord has revealed to his children through additional scripture. For example, the Doctrine and Covenants informs us that the gospel is the glad tidings that Jesus came into the world and was crucified for our sins, and that through Him all mankind may be saved (see D&C 76:40–42).

The Gospel

While the writings of the New Testament do not specifically define what the good news incorporates, the Book of Mormon provides a precise explanation of what is meant by the word *gospel*. In a six-part definition found in 3 Nephi 27, the Savior carefully explained to the Nephites what the gospel or good news encompasses.⁶ The Savior’s definition of the gospel is specific and deals primarily with his birth, his Atonement, repentance, baptism, the reception of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end.

In 3 Nephi the Savior stated, “Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you – that I came into the world to do the will of the Father, because my Father sent me” (3 Ne. 27:13). The first part of the Savior’s definition of the gospel focuses on his entrance into mortality – a merging of the mortal and the divine – in order to carry out the will of his Father. The importance of Jesus’ physical birth into mortality

cannot be overemphasized. Regarding the significance of Jesus' mortal birth, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin has taught, "Only Jesus, because he is the Only Begotten Son, could make the infinite and eternal atonement so we can be at one with our Heavenly Father. When Jesus was born into mortality, his parents were God the Eternal Father (see 1 Ne. 11:21) and Mary, whom Nephi saw in a heavenly vision as 'a virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins' (v. 15). He is God's Only Begotten Son, the only one who ever has or ever will be born on earth of such parentage."⁷ Christ inherited his mortal nature from his mother, which Elder McConkie states gave him "the power of mortality, which is the power to die, . . . to separate body and spirit."⁸ Moreover, he received his divine nature from his Father, which Elder McConkie has taught gave Christ "the power of immortality, which is the power to live forever; or, having chosen to die, . . . to rise again in immortality."⁹

Elder McConkie continues to explain in more detail that, "It was because of . . . this intermixture of the divine and the mortal in one person, that our Lord was able to work out the infinite and eternal atonement. . . . He had power to live or to die, as he chose, and having laid down his life, he had power to take it again, and then, in a way incomprehensible to us, to pass on the effects of that resurrection to all men so that all shall rise from the tomb."¹⁰

Without the mortal capacity to lay down his life, Jesus could not have performed the "infinite and eternal atonement."¹¹ No wonder the announcement of Christ's mortal birth by heavenly beings included words of jubilation, such as "glad tidings," "good tidings," and "great joy!" For example, the angel who announced the coming birth of Jesus to King Benjamin introduced his remarks by stating, "I am come to declare unto you the glad tidings of great joy" (Mosiah 3:3), and the angel who heralded Jesus' birth to the shepherds declared, "I bring you good tidings of great joy" (Luke 2:10). Finally, Samuel the Lamanite informs us that the angel's proclamation of Christ's future birth brought glad tidings to his soul (see Hel. 13:6-7).

In conjunction with his physical birth to Mary, Jesus made it clear that he came into the world, not to seek his own will, "but the will of the Father which hath sent me" (John 5:30). Isaiah recorded that "it pleased the Lord to bruise him" (Isa. 53:10). In other words, it was because of the Father's will that Jesus sub-

jected himself to the exquisite pain and anguish of both Gethsemane and Golgotha in order to bring about the Atonement. Therefore, Jesus came into mortality to perform the Atonement. In so doing, Jesus let his will be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

Part two of the definition of the gospel focuses specifically on the infinite Atonement wrought by Jesus. In 3 Nephi 27:14, the Savior declared, “And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil” (3 Ne. 27:14). Jesus entered mortality in order to “give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Further, the Book of Mormon makes it clear that without the Savior’s infinite Atonement, all mankind “must unavoidably perish” (Mosiah 13:28). Elder Richard G. Scott has stated, “Each of us has made mistakes, large or small, which if unresolved will keep us from the presence of God. For this reason, the atonement of Jesus Christ is the single most significant event that ever has or ever will occur.”¹²

Consequently, all men and women must come to the Savior, since it is only through Christ and his atoning sacrifice that redemption will come. Thus, there are no quick fixes or alternate plans to which a person may turn for salvation. Indeed, salvation is centered in Christ because of his atoning sacrifice. King Benjamin affirmed this important doctrine when he taught, “And moreover, I say unto you, that there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17).

If there was ever a declaration of good news, it could not surpass the glorious announcement that Christ has made it possible for us to return to God’s presence through his atoning sacrifice. Hence, “the more we know of Jesus’ Atonement, the more we will humbly and gladly glorify Him, His atonement, and His character.”¹³

The third and fourth parts of the Savior’s definition of the gospel are closely linked with the reality of the Atonement. These include the marvelous gifts of repentance and baptism. In 3 Nephi

27:16 the Savior declared, "And it shall come to pass, that whoso repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled; and if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world."

As imperfect mortals, we cannot live in complete harmony with all of God's laws and commandments. "All have sinned" (Rom. 3:23) and have found themselves "in a lost and in a fallen state" (1 Ne. 10:6). What a terrible predicament this would be were it not for the blessings of repentance and baptism. Amulek, Alma's faithful missionary companion, taught that God cannot save individuals "in their sins," since "no unclean thing can enter the kingdom of heaven" (Alma 11:37). Thus, the gifts of repentance and baptism for the remission of sins are an important and wonderful part of the good news. In order to impress upon his sons the importance and necessity of repentance, Helaman taught that Christ "hath power given unto him from the Father to redeem them from their sins because of repentance; therefore he hath sent his angels to declare the tidings of the conditions of repentance, which bringeth power of the Redeemer, unto the salvation of their souls" (Hel. 5:11).

Therefore, "full repentance is absolutely essential for the Atonement to work its complete miracle in [our] live[s]." ¹⁴ Through baptism and our continued efforts to repent of our sins and shortcomings, we can experience the joyous blessings of the Atonement. The prophet Alma reminded us that the Savior's "arms of mercy are extended" (Alma 5:33) toward all men and women through the gift of repentance. Jacob, Lehi's son, rejoiced in the good news of repentance and baptism through the Atonement when he proclaimed:

O the greatness of the mercy of our God, the Holy One of Israel! For he delivereth his saints from that awful monster the devil, and death, and hell, . . . O how great the holiness of our god! . . . And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam. And he commandeth all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, . . . or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God. And if they will not repent and believe in his name, and be baptized in his name, and endure to the end, they must be damned" (2 Ne. 9:19-21, 23-24).

Part five of the Savior's definition of the gospel is receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. In 3 Nephi 27:20, the Savior taught that all mankind must repent and be baptized in order that they "may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost." Receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost is preceded by faith, repentance, and baptism. Without the constant guidance and companionship of the Holy Ghost, it would be virtually impossible to remain in the straight and narrow path that leads to eternal life. Indeed, the Holy Ghost can help each of us "identify and withstand the deception of Satan,"¹⁵ in order to live in greater harmony with the Lord's commandments.

The scriptures attest to the wonderful blessings made available to those who receive the Holy Ghost. The following are just a few of those blessings mentioned in the Book of Mormon: (1) the mysteries of God shall be unfolded by the power of the Holy Ghost (see 1 Ne. 10:19); (2) the Savior manifests himself to believers by the power of the Holy Ghost (see 2 Ne. 26:13); (3) following repentance and baptism comes a remission of sins by the power of the Holy Ghost (see 2 Ne. 31:17); (4) the Holy Ghost bears record of both the Father and the Son (see 2 Ne. 31:18; 3 Ne. 11:32, 36); (5) when we speak or teach by the power of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost carries the message to the hearts of the listeners (see 2 Ne. 33:1); (6) the Holy Ghost bears record of the Messiah (see 1 Ne. 12:18); (7) the Holy Ghost will manifest the word of God to the faithful (see Moro. 8:9); (8) by the power of the Holy Ghost we can know the truth of all things (see Moro. 10:4-5).

The sixth and final part of the gospel is the Savior's charge to endure to the end. In 3 Nephi 27:16-17, the Savior taught, "And if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world. And he that endureth not unto the end, the same is he that is also hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence they can no more return, because of the justice of the Father."

Enduring to the end is one of the dominant themes found throughout the scriptures. If we enter the straight and narrow path through baptism, and strive to "press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, . . . feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end" (2 Ne. 31:20), we shall inherit eternal life. Certainly, the promise and attainment of eternal life through the Savior's atonement and our continued striving to be obedient to

the Lord's commandments constitutes the good news for each of us. What other announcement could be as joyous as this?

Good News

In its broader definition, we often use the term *gospel* to refer to all aspects of the Lord's true church, such as tithing, the word of wisdom, missionary work, priesthood ordinances, and temple marriage. However, the Savior's six-part definition of the gospel encompasses the first principles and ordinances and is much more exclusive. For example, President Harold B. Lee made reference to the more restrictive use of the word *gospel* when he said, "So often I hear my brethren saying something that I wish we would not say quite that way – that the gospel is a way of life. It is not a way of life – it is *the* way to eternal life."¹⁶ Indeed, according to 3 Nephi 27, the way to eternal life consists of believing that Jesus is the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh, whose infinite Atonement has made possible repentance, baptism, reception of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end. Truly, this is the gospel and the good news of our salvation.

Based on the six-part description of the good news in 3 Nephi 27, do the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John contain the gospel as defined by the Savior? A careful examination of these New Testament texts reveals that each of these four books contains the six points of the Savior's gospel. Therefore, it is appropriate and doctrinally correct to refer to them as the *Gospels* of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In support of this, the following list contains examples of each of the six definitions of the gospel as found in the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

1. The Coming of the Savior

Matt. 1:18–25

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise . . ."

Luke 2:6–21

"And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger . . ."

John 1:14 (JST)

“And the same word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Matt. 26:39

“Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”

Mark 14:36

“And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.”

Luke 22:42

“Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”

John 6:38

“For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.”

2. Jesus Was Lifted Up Upon the Cross – the Atonement

The following references contain the account of Jesus’ suffering in Gethsemane and on the cross at Golgotha.

Matt. 26:36–42; 27:26–50

Mark 14:32–42; 15:15–37

Luke 22:39–46; 23:33–46

John 18:1; 19:16–30

3. Jesus Commanded All Mankind to Repent

Matt. 4:17

“From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Mark 6:7–12

“And they went out, and preached that men should repent.”

Luke 5:32

"I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

John 5:14

"Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee."

4. Jesus Commanded All Men to be Baptized

Matt. 3:11

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire."

Mark 16:16

"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."

Luke 3:16

"John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire."

John 3:5

"Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

5. Receive the Gift of the Holy Ghost

Matt. 28:19

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Mark 13:11

"But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premedi-

tate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost."

Luke 12:12

"For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say."

John 14:26

"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."

6. Endure to the End

Matt. 24:13

"But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved."

Mark 13:13

"And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved."

Luke 8:13

"They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away."¹⁷

John 17:4

"I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do."¹⁸

In addition to the New Testament, the Book of Mormon provides us with important information regarding the Savior's specific meaning of the word gospel. Furthermore, the doctrines taught in 3 Nephi 27 allow us to see that the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John truly contain all of the elements of the "good news," and thereby qualify to be referred to as "the Gospels."

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Notes

1. In the Joseph Smith Translation manuscripts, the Gospels of Matthew and John are titled "Testimonies."
2. Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., "Gospel of Jesus Christ," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 559.
3. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1985), 267.
4. Ibid.
5. American Bible Society, *Holy Bible – Contemporary English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1995), 1136.
6. 2 Nephi 31:2–32:6 and 3 Nephi 11:31–41 also define what the gospel encompasses. However, these passages of scriptures do not use the word "gospel" but rather use the word "doctrine." It would appear that the Savior is using these words interchangeably, since the definition of the gospel in 3 Nephi 27 and these two references are quite similar.
7. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Our Lord and Savior," *Ensign*, November 1993, 6.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 471.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Wirthlin, "Our Lord and Savior," 6.
12. Richard G. Scott, "Finding Forgiveness," *Ensign*, May 1995, 75.
13. Neal A. Maxwell, "Enduring Well," *Ensign*, April 1997, 10.
14. Scott, "Finding Forgiveness," 75.
15. H. David Burton, "Bond With Righteous Heroes," *Ensign*, May 1993, 47.

16. Harold B. Lee, "The Gospel, a Solid Wall of Truth," *Improvement Era*, June 1959, 452.

17. This verse is taken from Luke's account of the parable of the sower (see Luke 8:4-15). In verse 13, those whose testimonies are not sufficiently rooted in the good soil of faith and works will not endure to the end. Hence, a strong testimony is vital if we are going to strive to keep all of God's commandments and endure to the end of our mortal probation.

18. Russell M. Nelson used this passage of scripture in his April 1997 conference address to illustrate the importance of enduring to the end. Through His willingness to finish all of the work His Father gave him to do, Jesus becomes our great example of one who endured to the end.