

Paul's Gospel

Evangelion as "the good news of Jesus Christ" is a specifically Christian meaning of the word, and as such was almost certainly developed by Paul within the early Christian community. Paul uses the word more frequently than any other NT writer: 48 times in his uncontested letters. In general, it designates Paul's own personal presentation of the Christ-event.

Evangelion sometimes denotes the activity of evangelization (Gal 2:7; Phil 4:3, 15; 1 Cor 9:14b, 18b; 2 Cor 2:12, 8:18), as does the verb *euangelizasthai* (used by Paul 19 times). Normally, however, it denotes the content of his apostolic message—what he preached, proclaimed, announced, spoke about. Paul realized that his message had its origin in God himself: "God's gospel" (1 Thess 2:2, 8-9; 2 Cor 11:7; Rom 1:1; 15:16). Succinctly, its content was for him "the gospel of Christ" (1 Thess 3:2; Gal 1:7; Phil 1:27) or "the gospel of his Son" (Rom 1:9), wherein the genitive is normally understood as objective, i.e., the good news about Christ, even though in some instances one may detect a nuance of Christ as the originator of the gospel (2 Cor 5:20; Rom 15:18-19). More specifically, the gospel is "the good news of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4), i.e., the message about the risen Christ: "We proclaim not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord!" (2 Cor 4:5), giving to Christ the title par excellence for his risen status. Sometimes, the content is expressed simply as "the faith" (Gal 1:23), "the word" (1 Thess 1:6), "the word of God" (2 Cor 2:17).

Evangelion became Paul's personal way of summing up the meaning of the Christ-event, the meaning that the person and lordship of Jesus of Nazareth had and still has for human history and existence. Hence Paul could speak of "my gospel" (Rom 2:16), "the gospel that I preach" (Gal 2:2; cf. 1:8, 11), or "our gospel" (1 Thess 1:5; 2 Cor 4:3; cf. 1 Cor 15:1), because he was aware that "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor 1:7). Paul was fully aware that his commission to preach the good news of God's Son among the Gentiles (Gal 1:16) was not a message wholly peculiar to himself or different from that preached by those "who were apostles before me" (Gal 1:17); "whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you came to believe" (1 Cor 15:11). Paul recognized himself as the "servant" of the gospel (*doulos*, Phil 2:22), conscious of a special grace of apostolate. He thought of himself as set apart like the prophets of old (Jer 1:5; Isa 49:1) from his mother's womb for this task (Gal 1:15; Rom 1:1), being "entrusted" with the gospel as some prized possession (1 Thess 2:4; Gal 2:7). He experienced a "compulsion" (*ananke*, 1 Cor 9:16) to proclaim it and considered his preaching of it to be a cultic, priestly act offered to God (Rom

1:9, 15-16). He was never ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16); even imprisonment because of it was for him a “grace” (Phil 1:7, 16).

Various characteristics of the gospel in Paul’s sense may be singled out:

(1) Its **revelatory** or **apocalyptic** nature. God’s salvific activity for his people is now made known in a new way through the lordship of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:17); thus, the gospel reveals the reality of the new age, the reality of the eschaton. To this apocalyptic nature of the gospel must be related Paul’s view of it as mysterion, “mystery, secret”, hidden in God for long ages and now revealed—a new revelation about God’s salvation. In the best manuscripts of 1 Cor 2:1-2, Paul equates “God’s mystery” with “Jesus Christ...crucified”, just as he had equated his “gospel” with “Christ crucified” in 1 Cor 1:17, 23-24. Paul viewed himself as a “steward”, dispensing the wealth of this mystery (1 Cor 4:1). It now reveals to Christians the plan conceived by God and hidden in him from all eternity (1 Cor 2:7) to bring humanity, Gentiles as well as Jews, to share in the salvific inheritance of Israel, now realized in Christ Jesus. Even the partial insensibility of Israel belongs to this mystery (Rom 11:25). In presenting the gospel as “mystery”, Paul is implying that it is never fully made known by ordinary means of communication. As something revealed, it is apprehended only in faith; and even when revealed, the opacity of divine wisdom is never completely dispelled. Mysterion is an eschatological term derived from Jewish apocalyptic sources; its application to the gospel gives the latter a nuance that euangelion alone would not have had, i.e., something fully comprehended only in the eschaton.

(2) Its **dynamic** nature. Though “the story of the cross” is not recounted by Paul in narrative form, as it is by the evangelists, the gospel for him is not an abstraction. It is “the power of God”, a salvific force (*dynamis*) unleashed in the world of human beings for the salvation of all (Rom 1:16). The gospel may, indeed, announce a proposition, “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9), to which human beings are called to assent; but it involves more, for it proclaims, “a Son whom God has raised from the dead, Jesus, who is delivering us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:10). It is thus a gospel that comes “not in words alone, but with power and the holy Spirit” (1 Thess 1:5); it is “the word of God, which is at work (*energeita*) among you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13; cf. 1 Cor 15:2).

(3) Its **kerygmatic** character. Paul’s gospel is related to the pre-Pauline kerygmatic tradition: “I passed on to you above all what I received” (1 Cor 15:1-2); and he is careful to stress the “form” or the “terms” (*tini logo*) in

which he "evangelized" the Corinthians. In vv 3-5 there follows a fragment of the kerygma itself, and v 11 asserts the common origin of Paul's gospel.

(4) Its **normative** role in Christian life. For Paul the gospel stands critically over Christian conduct, church officials, and human teaching. It tolerates no rival; that there is no "other gospel" (Gal 1:7) is affirmed by Paul in the context of the Judaizing problem in the early churches, when certain Jewish practices were being foisted on Gentile Christians (circumcision, dietary and calendric regulations). Human beings are called to welcome the gospel (2 Cor 11:4), obey it (Rom 1:5), and listen to it (Rom 10:16-17). It is to be accepted as a guide for life: "Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ: (Phil 1:27). Even Cephas, a pillar of the church (Gal 2:9), was rebuked publicly by Paul in Antioch, when he was found to be not "walking straight according to the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14). Yet for Paul the normative character of the gospel was also liberating, for he mentions "the truth of the gospel" in connection with "the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus" (Gal 2:4), which has to be preserved in the face of the opposition of "false brethren" seeking to undermine it. Hence, though normative, it also liberates from legalisms devised by humans.

(5) Its **promissory** nature. The gospel continues the promises made by God of old: "promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy Scriptures" (Rom 1:1; cf. Isa 52:7). See further Gal 3:14-19; 4:21-31; Rom 4:13-21; 9:4-13. (This characteristic is more fully formulated in Eph 1:13; 3:6).

(6) Its **universal** character. The gospel is God's power for the salvation of "everyone who has faith, the Jew first and also the Greek" (Rom 1:16; cf. 10:12).