

Orbit

The sun orbits the earth, as anyone can plainly see. Except, of course, that it doesn't.

From our subjective viewpoint the sun seems to be circling the earth. From an objective viewpoint – looking into our solar system from the outside – we see the earth is orbiting the sun.

There is a similar problem in theology. We are born not knowing that we are in Christ and that in him we have ascended to heaven (Eph. 2:6, Col. 3:1-4). From our subjective viewpoint we are lost – we don't know where we are (in Christ) or who we are (the Father's beloved children).

Then a day comes when we stop believing we're lost and believe that Jesus has saved us. From our subjective viewpoint we say "I was saved when I believed."

In fact, however, from the objective viewpoint we were saved when the incarnate Son took us up with him in his resurrection and ascension 2,000 years ago.

Subjectively we say the sun "rises" and "sets." We know the sun is not moving; the earth is. There's no harm in using subjective language to describe how the sun appears to us, so long as we don't think that our subjective perspective is the actual, objective truth. We can say the sun is "rising" as long as we don't therefore think that the earth is the center of the solar system.

Likewise, in theology, there's nothing wrong with speaking of our "moment of salvation" so long as we don't think that our subjective perspective is the same as the objective reality.

Unfortunately, many of us think that we are not saved until we say it is so and that we are not included in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit until we have included ourselves by our faith.

But how could that be, really? How could we creatures adopt ourselves into the life of the Triune Creator by anything we do or think? It's not possible. (Rom 10:6). The only way we can be children of the Father is if he makes us so, in and through his Son.

And that is exactly what he has done with humanity. He has adopted us into the circle of his life with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Like our ancestors staring up at the sky, we don't always do a good job of distinguishing our subjective experience from the objective reality. So we've made our relationship with the Triune God too complicated.

When people realized the earth orbited the sun, one factor that convinced astronomers was the complicated nature of the earth-centered model. In a model based on our subjective experience, where we think the sun is orbiting us, the calculation of eclipses and the motions of stars and planets becomes needlessly complicated. Many astronomers were convinced when they saw the relative simplicity of the truth that the sun is at the center.

There are similar problems in theology. One is the fate of unbaptized children. For centuries we have evaluated them from our subjective experience and created needlessly complicated calculations involving "limbos" and "ages of accountability."

When we view life through the objective reality that all are reconciled in Christ, we find a simple solution. Unbaptized children are saved by Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, not by their own work of faith. Therefore they are safe with the Father, Son, and Spirit forever. End of discussion, no need for unbiblical and non-Christ-centered theologies like the age of accountability.

It's not always easy to see what's really happening around us. In the absence of other information, we would agree with the ancients that the sun is circling the earth. Without the revelation of Jesus Christ we might think we need to work to get to God.

Because Christ has come we can see the truth: he has taken us up with him into heavenly places.

This is what we celebrate on this Ascension Sunday. The truth that the whole creation is Christ-centered. Christ doesn't orbit the cosmos, watching us from a distance. The cosmos orbits Christ; the Son is the center of our world, our universe, and our lives. He has taken us up in his life, he has gotten himself into our hearts, and he has made us a part of his relationship with his Dad.

He is risen, and he has raised us up with him!

~ Jonathan Stepp

The Art of Spiritual Conversation, Part 2

When you take apart the word "gospel," you can hear how the word evolved from "good speech," or even better for us fans of Yiddish, "good schpiel". And for all the good schpiels I've heard, I've heard plenty of its opposite—BAD schpiels. And I've decided the word "gospel" needs an opposite, and I've decided to call it "baspel." And thus we come to today's topic:

Is there any baspel in your gospel?

Is your gospel as good as God is? Saint John says that in Him there is no darkness at all; can you say the same about the 'good schpiel' you give when you share your faith? Now of course, my words are always imperfect, just like I am. And it's an amazing gift of grace that the Holy Spirit can take my half-grimy speeches and somehow use them to speak the Word of God to another person. That gives us all the confidence we need to open our mouths at all. But in evangelism, the Spirit is teaching us (the evangelists) at least as much as he's teaching the evangelee.

In my experience, as I have stumbled my way through many 'gospel presentations,' I have not always felt good about my message. I knew God, and I knew that God was wonderful. But somehow my 'gospel' just wasn't as GOOD as the Jesus I knew and loved. But I did the best I could, I tried to express the gospel in novel and interesting ways, and was amazed at how God produced results through my awkward words.

But as the years have gone by, I've grown convinced that there were some non-cosmetic problems with my message. In short, my gospel had some baspel in it. And having a little baspel in your gospel is like having a little hog manure in your ice cream. Even a little bit is too much.

I doubt that I'm done rooting out my baspels, but I have found a few. And I thought I'd share a few with you, just in case your 'ice cream' has some of the same stinky chunks in it:

BASPEL #1: You need to find God.

Forrest Gump was once asked "*Have you found the Lord, Gump?*" And as usual, Forrest's reply was spot-on: "*I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him.*" Saint Paul explained some things about God to some Athenians who were looking for Him: "*He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's not remote; he's near. We live and move in him, can't get away from him!*" (Acts 17 – MSG).

If finding the Lord is my job, then I know I'm without hope. I can't find my keys, let alone the Mystery of the Universe. So for someone like me, it is wonderful news that GOD HAS FOUND ME. In Jesus, God has done the Good-Shepherd thing. He has searched every valley and climbed every mountain to find me, and HE HAS DONE IT. My Shepherd has found me, picked me up, cleaned me up, and taken me home.

BASPEL #2: God will accept you if you have faith.

This one is very common in evangelical protestant circles, so let's spend some time here. "God has erected this huge apparatus in order to save you, and he's ready and waiting to give you this thing called 'salvation,' and all you have to do is push the faith button."

I don't know about you, but the red light on my Baspel Detector lights up whenever I hear the words "all you have to do." When we say "All you have to do is believe," we are turning faith into a work. We're saying that when it comes to the salvation job, Jesus did 99% and "all you have to do" is the remaining 1%.

*[BEEP! BEEP! DANGER, WILL ROBINSON, DANGER! DANGEROUSLY HIGH
BASPEL LEVELS DETECTED! DANGER! BEEP! BEEP!]*

The popular image of heaven is that you arrive at the Pearly Gates, Saint Peter checks your file to decide if he will allow you inside. Usually when this is on TV, he's checking to see if you did enough 'good works.' We evangelicals laugh at this obviously silly theology. Because we know that what he's checking the file for is to see if you "had enough faith." Right?

I know a guy who goes forward at an altar call every week, in the hopes that at least one of those times he will "have faith" in a magical enough way that he will qualify for heaven. As if God is going to open up his skull and look for faith particles, and if it's more than one part per million, then he qualifies for the good place rather than the bad place.

Faith is a HUGE deal, but it in no way accomplishes our salvation. Not even a little bit. When I look over on my desk and see my coffee cup, I am not contributing to its existence in any way. I'm just experiencing it, discovering that it's there. I believe it was Martin Luther who said that faith is like an eye. It doesn't *create* what it sees; it *discovers* what's already there. And the discovery makes all the difference.

My wife loves me, but if I didn't believe that, didn't KNOW that in my soul, then living with her would be hell. It's the same way with God. He's with us. He loves us. Always has, always will. He will never leave us nor forsake us. BELIEVE it. Experience it. Live it. Don't be like the children of Israel who didn't believe the truth about God and about themselves: "*The message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith*" (Hebrews 4.2).

BASPEL #3: God is the problem.

We never come right out and say this, but look at what we usually say about the cross: The Father is extremely upset about our sin problem. He wants...no...NEEDS to destroy us. He needs to kill SOMEBODY. But then Jesus steps in and says "No, FATHER, kick me instead." So on the cross the Father whales on his Son. He gets it out of his system, and then he's allowed to love us again. Now, this makes me think pretty highly of Jesus, but I'm not sure about this 'Father' guy. He seems to have an anger problem. It's like if I was mad at my kid, but decided to kick the dog instead.

But the truth is that Jesus didn't come to save us from the Father. He came to save us from EVIL, from DARKNESS, from DEATH. He defeated them by tasting them on our behalf. Big difference. God is NOT schizophrenic. He does NOT have a variable opinion of you. You are his kid. And therefore, in Jesus, God spared no expense to save you from everything that threatens to destroy you. And he has done it.

BASPEL #4: God is abandoning the earth and evacuating souls to heaven.

This one is a holdover from Greek philosophy that doesn't like matter nearly as much as God does. But the truth is that God likes the earth. Really. And while we, its stewards, have dropped the ball, God is not done with our little planet. In fact, he has saved it, and US with it. Even a brief glance at the Bible will show us this. Creation groans for us humans to get with the program and do our job as God's children. All things in heaven and earth find their head in Jesus, the cosmic Christ. At the end of Revelation, believers don't fly away to heaven. Instead, something new and beautiful comes down to the earth and transforms it.

Or read what the Worldwide Church of God Statement of Beliefs has to say about salvation: "*Salvation is the restoration of human fellowship with God and the deliverance of the entire creation from the bondage of sin and death.*"

Neat, huh? There is *much* more going on in salvation than just getting some souls to some immaterial place called 'heaven.' God is saving the WORLD, and us with it. Tell the gospel THAT way, and it will sound strange and wonderful to the ears around you.

When the news is good, the schpiel is easy.

~ *John Stonecypher*

So, What Are Your Beliefs?

So when someone actually wants to hear about my beliefs (and it happens shockingly often), what do I say? It always comes out differently, but here's a sample of what I might say. I usually start out short and simple:

"I believe in a God who's making the world into a beautiful and good place, and I believe that you and I are part of what God is doing."

IF and WHEN my friend wants to hear more detail (and they often do), I try to emphasize the following:

1. "God made us so we could share in HIS LIFE. I don't believe that God is some really big guy who's all by himself and likes bossing people around. What I've learned from Jesus is that God is the passionate being-together of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God's life is a shared life of love and never-ending adventure. And this God made you and me so that we could share in the relationship the Son shares with the Father and the Spirit. But relationships are hard, and honestly the human race has had a hard time trusting him and loving him back. That's why the whole world (us included) is so messed up. But our Father loves us, and he's doing whatever it takes to fix the world and fix us."

2. "God has come to US. We usually think of religion as 'How to get close to God.' But I believe that, because God loves us, he's already come close to us. The Son made himself part of our world; he made human existence part of his beautiful, intimate, and satisfying life with his Father. This means that in every mundane moment of our lives as human beings, we are experiencing the infinite life of God. THAT is how close God is to us. And he always will be, whether we believe it or not.

3. "God is ALREADY working in the world, and in your life. Through his life, death, resurrection, and continuing presence with us, Jesus is overcoming everything that holds us back from living life to the full--disease, poverty, hunger, shame, alienation, oppression, hate, violence, and even death itself. He will personally complete that work someday, but for now he shares the ongoing work with us. And I believe that [whatever good stuff you're doing] is part of that. When you do that, you're doing God's work and sharing in God's life. When you experience the joy of doing it, you're feeling God's joy. To do good is to participate in Jesus' life with his Father, and we're already part of it. And as we grow to recognize what's really going on in our lives, it changes us inside and out.

4. "Our part is to learn to TRUST God again, to believe in the God Jesus shows us--the Father who loves us and accepts us unconditionally. The Holy Spirit is with us forever to help us to do this. Because the more we trust our Father and live confidently in his rock-solid love for us, the less fear, hate, despair, and greed will make sense to us. And as our thinking changes, we will start to act differently too. As we come to see how much our Father values us, we will start seeing ourselves and others as the precious children of God that we are. We will start treating one another with greater compassion and kindness. These are the ingredients for a changed world, the world God is making with us.

Some people want to hear more. Others don't. And that's okay. Only salesmen need to 'close the deal.' But friends can afford to let God work at his own pace.

~ John Stonecypher

Counseling With Others in the Good News

Have you ever wondered how the Gospel of Humanity and Creation's Inclusion in Christ might impact how you now counsel others? Because we are all included in the Life of God in Jesus, no matter what, it MUST impact our counseling! But how do we wrestle with our union in Christ alongside the transgressions and incongruent living that still arise in our lives because of participating in the lie? How do we wrestle with those incongruences in such a way that we firmly

uphold the Gospel without affirming the transgressions? And how do we discuss the transgressions without dumping a lot of guilt, shame, fear and more religion back on the one we are trying to help?

Rather than elaborating on godly principles (which I will do more specifically in the next issue), see if you can discover what they are by reading this real counseling interaction I had with someone. Names, terms, events and sentences have been changed to protect the innocent. Nothing that would breach confidentiality is noted, AND the person I counseled with has given me express permission to write this article and has read and verified it before publishing!

Those necessary bases covered; here are the basics of how our correspondence went:

Dear Pastor Tim:

Hello. I thought that you might understand me better than some people I know. But I think that you can help me out with this. See I am stuck between some obstacles right now.

One of the obstacles is religion. I don't know where I am and I sure don't want to be like my friend Sylvester. I know when I first talked to you I told you that I wanted to be like Sylvester, but now I don't. I need my own direction in life. I think that being in WCG was actually good for me...even though I did get confused some times.

Another obstacle is a relationship I am having. My ex-girlfriend, Sheila, called and said she was thinking about getting back together with me. Why would I want to do that?! I mean she hurt me way too many times. The first time that she and I were going out she went "slap off" and struck me with an object on my face, literally drawing blood. We broke up because on top of that she started dating another guy. So I said okay and then I split and decided we would stop living together. I saw her in a local YMCA and we started talking and decided that we should try it again. Well she started to stress me out all over again, and I got so depressed I started treating my body bad (and god please forgive me for that) to relieve the stress. When she found out about my attempts to hurt and punish myself, she kicked me in my shin, which hurt because I had just injured it in another accident! Can you believe it? That is the second time she struck me in her anger!

The third obstacle has to do with Sheila, also. Recently I was thinking about going to stay with my uncle in another state, maybe attend college for a few more years and open up a branch of our family business there. I called my uncle and began to work out the arrangements to move in with him. When I told Sheila what I had done, she got all defensive saying that I should have talked to her first.

Now I really don't know what to do, I really don't. I think I need to re-evaluate my life and give it back to God. What do you think? Can you help me or give me some advice?"

Here is how I responded out of the Truth of the Gospel of our Adoption:

Hello My Friend!!

I appreciate you writing me and updating me on your life! It has been awhile. Please try to write or call me anytime! I appreciate your openness and realness with me and continue to admire your humility and vision for a more happy and liberated life!

Here is my response to your three obstacles, in the Light of the Good News of Jesus Christ:

1.) First, the reason you do not want to be like Sylvester is because Jesus has made you distinct.

He has created you to be your own distinct person in union with him and creation. He has also created you to be FREE from any type of religion!! Jesus is NOT religious in any way, and he does not want you to be religious either. Religion binds you, it does not free you! Following Sylvester's way is just another form of religion, rules and rituals designed to make you appear better than or superior to others. In the Father's eye's, we are all equal and should share in His love for everyone and everything in creation. WCG was good for you because Jesus was using WCG to help you see the truth of your inclusion; to embrace it, and be free in it. Now that you have gotten a taste of it, you only want more of it. Going to WCG was like sitting at Jesus' buffet table and eating some of every good thing. Taking in religion is like eating sand with no water around! Yucky!! Relating with others as you REALLY are in Jesus is what frees you!

Please keep up with me so that I can help you remain free in God's grace!

2.) Because you come from Jesus, and Jesus is always with you, you are not meant to be abused or beat up in relationships! You aren't meant to hurt your own self or to be hurt by others! Deep in your heart Jesus is sharing this truth with you so that you can experience yourself and others in his pleasure, avoiding the pain of abuse. In one sense, your decision is an easy one to make! For now, you should stay away from Sheila and pray for her! After counseling with other people you trust, and who REALLY look out and care for your well being, you might even consider reporting Sheila to the police!

The Father does not abuse his children and he does not want us to abuse each other! The Father also does not want us to live in the kind of stress you are experiencing with Sheila, and right now, that is all that Sheila is causing you, STRESS!! True Love is never FORCED upon or overly domineering on anyone, and Sheila is using a lot of force and domination. That kind of behavior is provoked by the evil creatures and you need to avoid it like the plague! Three forms of abuse is three times too much abuse!!! We are the Father's children and none of us are made to engage in hurting ourselves, hurting others, or being hurt by others without serious, negative consequences! Continue to embrace your whole and healed self in Jesus!

The thing that makes this "easy" decision difficult for you is the closeness you have experienced with Sheila! We were all made for relationship with others and, ultimately, you and Sheila were driven to each other because of your share in the relationship and passion of the Father, Son and Spirit. However, we were meant to share in relationship just like God does, with harmony and self-giving, NOT disharmony and selfishness! You can escape the temptation of getting back with Sheila because Jesus has suffered all of our temptations and overcome them for us. He shares with you RIGHT NOW His wisdom, boldness and strength to escape this situation with Sheila. Please call on some close friends to pray with you and support you in your desire to avoid her for now!! I will pray for you, and you should pray to Jesus for yourself, because he is with you and has never left you for one second in this situation, and he never will!!

3.) I believe you are making a good decision to start afresh and continue your schooling! I've witnessed wonderful attributes in you that can only come from the Holy Spirit Who has embraced you! Schooling can often supply the positive, focused and disciplined structure we need in a field of study to reach out in more effective service toward others. Moving to a new state may also keep you from some of the negative forces of your current culture that the fallen creatures are using to try and discourage you.

I, personally, do not believe that you need to re-evaluate your life, because you are already engaged in re-evaluating it!! :-) That is why you wrote me! Also, there is no need for you to give your life back to God because God the Father, Son and Spirit have always had your life in his very capable hands! You cannot go anywhere and flee your union with God in Jesus! You are already so included in His life that he is, even now, helping you to re-evaluate things in the light of Who you REALLY are in Jesus! I believe he inspired you to write me for further affirmation and encouragement in your permanent relationship with Him in Jesus!

Finally, right now, you are not bound in marriage or engagement to anyone except God in Jesus Christ!! :-) This means that you do not owe Sheila any explanation as to why you are going to proceed in your current direction. You should concentrate on being bound to God in Jesus Christ and ask him to help you see how secure you are in Him! This godly assurance will give you the courage to face everything else in life with more stability and wisdom, and you can make your decisions about relationships and other things in life with more of Jesus' actual peace and joy!

I hope this letter has helped you. If I have been unclear in anyway, ask the Holy Spirit to clarify His Truth and make it plainer to you! Triune God loves you more than he loves himself, and He likes you very, very much!

Continued Peace, Love and Blessings to You in Jesus, Who has already helped you to overcome all of this in a victorious way in his own human life!

~ Tim Brassell

Matthew 22:1-14

In Matthew 22:1-14 Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a wedding banquet. "Many are called but few are chosen," he says. Does this story give us permission to keep believing in the God who includes some people and rejects others?

However we interpret this parable we cannot embrace an interpretation that violates the person of Christ - he is the Word of God. He is the one in whom everyone has been made right with God and given eternal life (Rom. 5:18.) He is the one in whom the whole world has been reconciled to the Father (Col. 1:19-20.)

Whatever Jesus means he cannot be contradicting the reality of who he is as the person in whom all humanity exists (Heb. 1:2-3) and the person in whom all people (both Jews and Gentiles) have been made into one new humanity (Eph. 2:14-16). To be faithful to the person of Christ means to believe in the person who is the embodiment (literally) of the union between God and humanity, even when believing in him means we don't have all the answers.

In the light of Jesus, who is invited to the banquet? Since all things are reconciled in Jesus and he is the head of one new humanity, "the invited" is all of humanity.

The first word of the parable is inclusion. The Father says to the world "you are all included." The Father excludes no one, but we all try to exclude ourselves with various excuses. He has to send out servants to persuade us to come in. The Father has to persuade us to come to a party and have fun! That's how sick we are.

Once the banquet starts there's one guy that wants to be there on his terms - wearing the clothes

he wants, not what is appropriate to the banquet. When the Father excludes him he only does so to stop the guy from ruining the party.

This is a parable about faith. We are all included in the Son and all are destined for the party that is the wedding supper of the lamb. But we all don't believe and we all come up with excuses about why we don't want to believe and be there.

The lack of wedding clothes on the one guest represents the ultimate in not believing. He is so disbelieving that he doesn't even know he's at a wedding banquet.

This is the very definition of hell: to be in Christ, reconciled to the Father; and present at the wedding supper of the lamb, and to still not believe it! Such a disbelieving person will ruin the party so he has to be put away where he can do no harm.

Just like sometimes I have to send my 4-year old to his room when he is ruining dinner for the rest of the family by throwing food and running wild. When I hold him and put him in his room there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, but he never ceases to be my son and he never ceases to be included in the family and invited to the party.

In fact, at any time he can believe his inclusion and begin enjoying the party.

~ Jonathan Stepp

Tertullian of Carthage on the Gospel

We're sometimes asked "Are you sure the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I've never heard it before." Many people find difficult to believe, for example, that the ascended Son of God remains forever incarnate, fully human and fully God forever. In this light we find it helpful to go back to the ancient Christians who saw the gospel in light of humanity's adoption into the Triune Life.

Around 190 A.D. Tertullian of Carthage wrote about the assurance of eternal life that we have because humanity is now permanently adopted into the Triune Life through the Son's permanent incarnation. Here's what Tertullian wrote:

Jesus is still sitting there at the right hand of the Father, man, yet God—the last Adam, yet the primary Word—flesh and blood, yet purer than ours . . . He keeps in His own self the deposit of the flesh which has been committed to Him by both parties—the pledge and security of its entire perfection. For as "He has given to us the earnest of the Spirit," so has He received from us the earnest of the flesh, and has carried it with Him into heaven as a pledge of that complete entirety which is one day to be restored to it. Be not disquieted, O flesh and blood, with any care; in Christ you have acquired both heaven and the kingdom of God. Otherwise, if they say that you are not in Christ, let them also say that Christ is not in heaven, since they have denied you heaven. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, Chapter 51.

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