

Are you unknowingly communicating a skewed gospel?

If an unbeliever were to ask you what he must do to inherit eternal life, do you know what you would say? If asked, most Christians would not know how to answer this question accurately. I venture to say that most Christians would end up providing an answer that actually distorts the gospel. I will go on record and say that most Christians have an incomplete understanding of the gospel and their faulty understanding will prevent them from providing an answer that is in complete harmony with the gospel. If you are reading this, it is likely that you are among those who are not able to answer properly due to a faulty understanding of the gospel. I make this claim because a majority of Christians have been taught that inheriting eternal life requires a one-time act.

Hopefully, you agree with the following statement: ***If a person believes the gospel from the heart, he will inherit eternal life.*** If you tell an unbeliever this, you will not be leading them astray. But though this statement is safe to say, most unbelievers will not understand all of the implications behind it. I will go so far as to say that if you are a typical Christian, you also do not understand all of the implications behind it. And if you don't understand all of the implications behind it, how will you be able to explain it to an unbeliever? If you attempt to explain it, you will likely fall back on things you have been taught that actually distort the gospel and then pass these distortions on to the unbeliever.

Here are a few things Christians sometimes say that distort the gospel:

- “If you want to be saved, you need to make a commitment to Jesus.”
- “If you ask Jesus into your heart, you will be saved.”
- “If you pray this prayer, you will be saved.”
- “If you are baptized in the name of Jesus, you will be saved.”
- “If you make a decision to follow Jesus, you will be saved.”
- “ If you give assent to the Apostle’s Creed, you will be saved.”

Some of these statements may seem blatantly erroneous to you. Perhaps one or two might seem less erroneous to you. But one error that is common to all of them is the idea that inheriting eternal life involves a one-time act of faith. This may be the most widespread error in the thinking of Christians living in the 21st century.

You still might be thinking that your understanding of the gospel is complete. So, let me quote from John to help you confirm whether your understanding of the gospel is complete:

“All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me and the one who comes to Me I will NEVER cast out. For I have come down out of heaven not that I should do My will, but the will of the One who sent Me. And this is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all that He has given to Me, I should lose nothing, but I will raise it in the last day. And this is the will of the One who sent Me, that each one who is beholding the Son and is believing into Him may have everlasting Life and I will raise him in the last day” (John 6:37-40).

Most likely, you believe that your understanding of this passage is solid. So, let me discuss the first few words to bring clarity. Jesus said, “The one who comes to me I will never cast out.” What do you think Jesus meant by the phrase, “the one who comes to me?” If you are like most Christians, you assume this is a one-time act of some sort, but it isn’t! If you give an unbeliever the impression that coming to Jesus is a one-time act of faith, you are distorting the gospel.

In the New Testament, acts of faith such as “believing into Jesus,” “coming to Jesus,” “calling upon the name of the Lord,” “believing the gospel,” are normally found in the Greek present tense. Present tense actions in Greek are not one-time happenings. They happen and never stop happening. Therefore, the implications of “comes” in John 6:37 can legitimately be expressed as, “The one who comes to me and keeps coming to me I will NEVER cast out.” John 3:16 is legitimately expressed as, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him and keeps believing into Him might not perish but have eternal life.” Romans 10:9 is legitimately expressed as, “If you confess and keep on confessing with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe and keep on believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (*from the wrath of God that will soon be poured out*).” (*Words in italic font are mine but they are in harmony with Paul’s use of the word “salvation” in the book of Romans. See 13:11, 5:9-10 for example.*)

Let me warn you that if you convey to unbelievers that inheriting eternal life involves a one-time act of faith, you are distorting the gospel.

Perhaps you have never been taught about these basic Greek grammar rules and you are having difficulty reconciling what I am saying with what you have been taught for years. You may choose to ignore me, but you have a responsibility to check this out for yourself rather than assume your understanding is infallible. To demonstrate that what I am saying here is not a matter of opinion, I have included notes from a popular Greek grammar book. This is not a commentary. It is a book that contains facts about the Greek language used by the New Testament writers.

Below, I have provided a quote from the Greek grammar book written by Daniel B. Wallace, about the verb form found in John 3:16. To be transparent and more thorough, I will also say that many factors¹ influence how we should understand Greek verbs in their present tense.

The following footnote (quoting Wallace) contains some fairly technical explanations that not all English readers will understand. But, I underlined three key statements that most English readers will understand and thus, get the main point. In Wallace’s Greek grammar, we read the following:

John 3:16 πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων (everyone who believes)

¹ One key factor that must be considered when interpreting Greek verbs is their “mood.” Present tense verbs in the “indicative” mood most often denotes the idea of customary Greek present. But many participles, like the one found in John 3:16, also convey the customary Greek present. Context can also impact how we are to interpret the present tense verb forms. (Context MUST always be considered.)

The idea seems to be both gnomic and continual: “everyone who continually believes.” This is not due to the present tense only, but to the use of the present participle of πιστεύω especially in soteriological contexts in the NT. The aspectual force of the present ὁ πιστεύων seems to be in contrast with ὁ πιστεύσας. The aorist is used only eight times (plus two in the longer ending of Mark). The aorist is sometimes used to describe believers as such and thus has a generic force (cf. for the clearest example the v.1 at Mark 16:16; cf. also 2 Thess 1:10; Heb 4:3; perhaps John 7:39; also negatively, of those who did not [μὴ] believe: 2 Thess 2:12; Jude 5).

The present occurs six times as often (43 times), most often in soteriological contexts (cf. John 1:12; 3:15, 16, 18; 3:36; 6:35, 47, 64; 7:38; 11:25; 12:46; Acts 2:44; 10:43; 13:39; Rom 1:16; 3:22; 4:11, 24; 9:33; 10:4, 11; I Cor 1:21; 14:22; Gal 3:22; Eph 1:19; I Thess 1:7; 2:10, 13; 1 Pet 2:6, 7; 1 John 5:1, 5, 10, 13). Thus, it seems that since the aorist participle was a live option to describe a “believer,” it was unlikely that when the present was used, it was aspectually flat. The present was the tense of choice most likely because the NT writers by and large saw continual belief as a necessary condition of salvation. Along those lines, it seems significant that the promise of salvation is almost always given to ὁ πιστεύων (cf. several of the above cited texts), almost never to ὁ πιστεύσας, apart from Mark 16:16, John 7:39 and Hebrews 4:3 come the closest [the present tense of πιστεύω never occurs in Hebrews]). – **Wallace, Greek Grammar, Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament, 1996 p. 620-621 Zondervan**

(end of quote)

In conclusion, to accurately proclaim the gospel to unbelievers, we must be very careful not to give them the impression that inheriting eternal life involves a one-time act of faith. We must help them count the cost. To inherit eternal life, they must believe and continue to believe into Jesus. They must come and continue to come to Jesus. They must call upon the Lord and continue to call upon the Lord. They must confess Jesus and continue to confess Jesus, even if threatened with harm or death. If anyone turns away and remains in that condition, he will perish forever.