

#1 Centred on the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning again, and can I just add my welcome again to those of you who might be visiting or who are new to our church. This morning you've just joined us at the beginning of a new series, as Elder Stephen has already mentioned, where we'll be thinking through some core convictions of our church, and we want to go through this series just to help us to shape our thinking and our life together as a church, to know what we are really all about, or as Elder Stephen put it, what our church DNA is.

So that's what we're going to be going through today, as we start on our first conviction, being centred on the Gospel. There should also be an outline in the bulletin, and that will help you to follow along, but let's pray.

Heavenly Father, will you cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see your majestic love and authority, and will your spirit be working amongst us this morning to help us to see you for who you really are, and to see the glory of the Gospel in the face of Jesus Christ.

For your Son's glory, we pray. Amen. Now, about six and a half years ago, I was speaking at our very own church's youth camp. In fact, there will be some amongst us today who were present that day.

And at the beginning of one of my talks, I asked them this question. I asked them, What's the name of our church? Simple enough, they all knew the answer.

[1 : 3 9] Kuching Evangelical Church, they all shouted. Great, I said. Who here knows the meaning of the word evangelical? Total silence.

Puzzled stares. Some fidgeting. No one did. And to be honest, I can't blame them. Because I wonder, if I were to ask the very same question to you this morning, I wonder how many of us would be able to say what evangelical means.

And certainly over the past year, there has been a lot of confusion over the meaning of that term. In America, for instance, a lot of people think of an evangelical as someone who professes to be a Christian.

It's very likely to be a white male who supports the Republican Party and Donald Trump. And who is probably against gun control. That's certainly the impression you get from reading some of the news media.

It's very much seen as a political term. Here in Malaysia, last year, a group of NGOs got together and called for the government to ban evangelical churches.

[3 : 0 3] Now, what did they mean by evangelical? Among other things, they said it had to do with the doctrine of salvation by grace. So that's a good start.

But then they went on to say that the evangelical movement only started in 1942 in America and had a tendency towards religious extremism and liberal social attitudes.

Now, I'm not sure how they did their research. But I can assure you that evangelicals go way back further than 1942. It's not American in origin.

And that liberal social attitudes is certainly not the defining characteristic of an evangelical. But that still leaves the question, what is an evangelical Christian?

And what does it mean to belong to an evangelical church? It's actually a very important question, isn't it? After all, we are Gu Jing Evangelical Church.

[4 : 12] Furthermore, our entire movement was started nearly a century ago by an evangelical group, the Bonio Evangelical Mission.

And indeed, we now use that label as the name for our denomination. And so that means we explicitly identify as an evangelical church who belong to an evangelical movement.

And it would be a real shame, wouldn't it? A tragedy, even, if we call ourselves evangelical. But we cannot explain what it means. It would be somewhat equivalent to a Gu Jingite who is ignorant of why we have a cat statue and a cat museum, what Colomy is, where Carpenter Street is.

And so this morning, as we begin our series on the core convictions of our church, we're going to begin with what it means to be an evangelical.

And although there are several ways we can define that word, I'm going to keep it simple. Now, sometimes when people hear the word evangelical, they ask, is that the same thing as being evangelistic?

[5 : 38] Well, no. Evangelical and evangelistic are two different words with two different meanings. But they are related.

To be evangelistic is to seek to share the gospel with others. And so an evangelistic event, for example, means an event where the gospel will be proclaimed to non-Christians.

But to be evangelical, quite simply, is to be centered on the gospel. Centered on the gospel.

And so an evangelical Christian is a gospel-centered Christian and an evangelical church is a gospel-centered church.

That's what evangelical, in a nutshell, means. The word gospel, you see, it comes from the Greek word evangelion or evangel, which simply means good news.

[6 : 45] And so that's why the words evangelism and evangelical both have the word evangel. And that is all to do with the gospel.

One is about sharing the gospel and the other is about being gospel-centered. But this leads to a follow-up question.

So what's the difference still between being evangelistic and being evangelical? Isn't being centered on the gospel just another way of saying wanting to share the gospel?

Well, not quite. This is where I believe our passage this morning, Galatians 1-2, can help us. So do make sure that the book of Galatians is open in front of you.

And I'm just going to make two points from the passage this morning. I originally had three but I realized that it would make the sermon simply too long so we'll just have two.

[7 : 48] And number one, to be gospel-centered means to hold fast to the truth of the gospel. And number two, to be gospel-centered means to live in line with the truth of the gospel.

And then I'm going to show you just a couple of implications it has for our church as a whole. So firstly, to be gospel-centered is to hold fast to the truth of the gospel.

Now, what is the book of Galatians all about? It's not too long ago that we as a church studied this book. And I suspect that many people think that Galatians is about this question.

How does someone become a Christian? And then we say, oh, the answer is not by works, but by grace through faith. And that's why Paul talks so much about being justified by faith that is being declared righteous before God.

And that's why he's so negative about the works of the law. But actually, that's not quite accurate. Yes, the book of Galatians definitely helps us understand how someone becomes a Christian.

[9 : 12] It does have plenty to say about justification by faith. But the main issue the book of Galatians is answering is not so much how does someone become a Christian, but rather how should a Christian keep going on as a Christian?

how should a Christian keep going on as a Christian? And Paul's answer is going to be the same way one becomes a Christian, by the gospel.

You started with the gospel, you continue by holding on to the gospel. And let me just show you this from just somewhere just slightly outside our passage this morning, Galatians 3, verse 1 to 3, which summarizes the main theme of the letter very well.

Galatians 3, verse 1 to 3. Paul writes, you foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

I would like to learn just one thing from you. Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish after beginning by means of the Spirit?

[10 : 45] Are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? You see, the Galatian Christians are trying to do the impossible. They're trying to finish the Christian race by means of the flesh instead of the Spirit.

You see, it appears that some people have appeared on the scene and convinced them that they needed something extra to complete their Christian pilgrimage. Quite likely in their case, it means getting circumcised.

They needed Jesus plus something else to keep pressing on. And so Paul pleads with them, no, my friends, that's the wrong path.

You need to continue your spiritual life, your life in the Spirit, the same way you started. And how did they start?

Well, in verse 2, Paul says that they began the Christian life by hearing and believing the gospel. That's when they received the Spirit.

[12 : 00] That's how they became a Christian. But here's the thing. Paul goes on to say that in verse 5, that they continue on by hearing the gospel, by continuing believing what they heard.

As we continue to respond to the word of the gospel, God's Spirit continue to work in us to grow us. So you become a Christian by the gospel, and then you live as a Christian by holding fast to the gospel.

Or in theological terms, you are justified by faith in the gospel, and then you are sanctified through faith in the power of the gospel.

That's so important. Too many Christians today believe that the gospel makes you a Christian, but then you live the Christian life by something else, whether that's good works, or spiritual disciplines, or something like that.

But to leave the gospel behind would be like unplugging the power cord to your fridge. You rob yourself of all power.

[13 : 23] And so we have to hold fast to this gospel. But what is this gospel? it's good not to assume that we know.

Imagine that you are visiting another church with your teenage son for the first time, and then you are given their church bulletin, and you read the notice, and it says this.

The youth are having their meeting next week at Robert's house. See Lisa for details. Team B is in charge of refreshments.

Well, good luck to your son knowing how to find the youth group. He has no idea who Lisa is, how to get to Robert's house, and what is actually going to happen at the youth group should he actually dare to attend.

The knowledge is assumed. And time and time again, in the past decade, I keep meeting people who grew up in churches all their lives, but have not heard or understood the gospel.

[14 : 36] The knowledge has been assumed. But Paul doesn't assume, which is why, as always, we find him summarizing the gospel contents of this good news in Galatians 1, verse 3 and 4.

Let me read it. Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. What is the gospel? it might be helpful to think of it from two angles both referred to in these verses.

The first angle is what I will call the universal angle of the gospel. God has won. This present evil age, in which we have a world cursed with earthquakes and floods and landslides, where the structural injustices of racism and sexism and extreme poverty exist, where cancer and heart disease and brain tumours and dementia are all prevalent, it will one day all be gone.

There's a new world coming, a new age coming. Jesus is going to renew all of creation, be Lord of all, and God will be glorified forever and ever.

[16 : 14] That's the universal angle of the gospel. We're going to be delivered from this present evil age. But that's also the second angle, what I'll call the personal angle of the gospel.

How does this deliverance from this present evil age happen? Well, it's right there at the beginning of verse 4. through Jesus who gave himself for our sins to rescue us.

See, the gospel is about Jesus, a person, this chosen king who gave himself as a sacrifice and died in our place.

And in so doing, he dealt with our biggest problem, our biggest barrier to God and enjoying life with him in the new age, our sin, our rebellion against God.

But if you trust in him, and only if you trust in him, will you be part of this new world coming.

[17 : 28] That's the gospel according to Galatians chapter 1, verse 3 and 4. have you ever grasped this gospel?

I hope so. For according to Paul, no other gospel works. And that's why Paul is so astonished in verse 6 when people don't hold fast to this gospel.

Verse 6, I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all.

And that's why verse 8, even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you, let them be under God's curse.

to be gospel-centered is to be captured by the wonder of the gospel in Galatians chapter 1, verse 3 and 4, and to reject counterfeit gospels.

[18 : 36] Now, counterfeits are designed to look like the real thing, aren't they? And the opponents that Paul were dealing with would have brought alternative messages that sound like the real gospel.

they would have talked about God. They would have talked about Jesus. They would have talked about grace and peace and rescue.

All those words are found in the gospel summary of verses 3 and 4. It sounds like the same thing. But it's how they mix those elements together.

and because they threw in the element of circumcision, your gospel became not just Jesus, but Jesus plus circumcision.

And Paul says, that's no gospel at all. And it's easy to do the same today. A church, for instance, can certainly talk about God and Jesus and grace and peace and rescue or salvation.

[19 : 54] And so we could easily make the mistake of thinking, oh, they are gospel centred. But what if they threw in an extra element? In the previous generation, a church might say, oh, to really progress as a church, we need Jesus plus tongues.

Or they might say, we need Jesus plus miraculous signs. They felt the need to enhance the gospel. But when we throw in those additions, we are really subtracting the gospel.

Today, some enhance the gospel not by adding an extra element, but by redefining its content. And so one version of the gospel that comes up often is one that also often talks about rescue.

But it's rescue primarily from financial heartache for material abundance. Or another one says, we are rescued from negative self-thoughts for self-confidence.

false. But Paul says, don't desert the true gospel of Galatians 1 verse 3 and 4 for a different one.

[21 : 19] Stay centered on the true gospel. But why should we hold fast to this gospel? Why should we have confidence that this gospel is enough to see us true?

and we don't need something extra? Well, the answer lies in the nature of this gospel. Come back with me to chapter 1 verse 11 and let me explain what Paul is doing here.

In chapter 1 verse 11, all the way to the end of chapter 2, Paul is defending both his own credentials as well as the credentials of the message he brought.

It seems as if his opponents had dismissed him as somebody who had no qualifications. Who is he? The nobody seemed to be their approach.

And as a result, Paul's gospel was also dismissed. But notice how Paul shows that this gospel cannot simply be thrown away into the rubbish bin just like that.

[22 : 31] Let's follow his defense. Number one, he says that this gospel is not of human origin. It's divine. You can see that in verse 11.

The gospel I preach is not of human origin. It's not dream up by human beings. Indeed, as C.S. Lewis once put it, what human being could have imagined the message of the gospel?

And then notice it's not received from human beings. Verse 12. Paul didn't see it in the cinema. He didn't find it in the Hollywood script. He didn't hit upon the idea in a te-tarik session.

Then number two. Notice this gospel is given through a revelation from Jesus Christ. That's what he says in verse 12 again.

He has seen the risen Jesus Christ, who has revealed to him the essential truth of the message. And so that already should give us confidence in this gospel.

[23 : 41] It's a supernatural message, divinely revealed, authored by God himself. But there's one more thing Paul says.

Number three, perhaps most importantly, this gospel is transformative. Look at verse 13 onwards.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Paul lays out his credentials now. He was no ordinary person. He was a zealous Pharisee. He was a genius, wise beyond his years, and he was 100% convinced that this group of people called Christians were 100% wrong.

They had rejected the traditions of their forefathers with this strange new message called the gospel. And so they were worthy of persecution, and that's what he's going to do.

[25 : 07] And so what Paul is really saying to his opponents is, I was once like you. But what happened? Let's continue, verse 15.

But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son in me, so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later, I returned to Damascus. See, he had an encounter with Jesus, and the gospel transformed him inside out.

From being a persecutor of the church, he became a preacher to the Gentiles. From one who hated this message of the crucified Jew, he became the beloved and the lover of this Jesus, going all the way, even to Arabia, to proclaim this message.

Why hold fast to this gospel? Because it is utterly transformative. God's gospel did the work.

[26 : 31] You see, this is how the gospel works. The great British preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones, once made this distinction. The gospel, he said, is good news, not good advice.

What is advice? Advice is something you can do. And it hasn't happened yet. That's why you can do it. And what is news?

News is a report about something that has happened. And you can't do anything about it. It's already happened. You just heard it. You just hear it. It's been done for you.

All you can do is respond to it. And this, Martin Lloyd Jones said, is the key difference between Christianity and every other religion.

All other religions, he said, gives advice. And they drive everything you do on fear. So imagine, he says, a king that goes into a battle against an invading army to defend his land.

[27 : 43] If the king defeats the invading army, he will send back to the capital city messengers, very happy envoys. He will send back good newsmen, if you like, with his report.

They will come back and they will say, the enemy has been defeated. It's all been done. You can rejoice. You can conduct your lives in this peace which has been achieved for you.

But what if, he says, the invading army has broken through? Well, he says, the king will send back military advisors instead.

The advisors will come and they'll say, all right, people take up your positions. Swordsmen over here, archers over there, commanders up there. We have to fight for our lives.

And Martin Lloyd Jones says, every other religion sends military advisors to people. Every other religion says, you know, if you want your salvation, you are going to have to fight for your life.

[29 : 00] Every other religion is sending advice, saying, here are the rituals you have to keep, here are the laws and regulations you have to do. Swordsmen over here, archers over there, fight for your life.

But not Christianity. Christ did not send advisors, he sent messengers. He sent people with good news, not good advice.

Christians are good newsmen. We send a message that it has all been done, the victory has been won, this historical event of salvation, is complete. And when you hear good news like this, how do you respond?

Well, Martin Lloyd Jones says you want to pray, you want to serve, you want to please the person who saved you. It transforms you.

And that's why Paul was so upset when people turned to a different gospel. because they are turning to a gospel with no power.

[30 : 13] They are turning to a gospel with no freedom. He's upset not because he's being nitpicky, not because he's just a grumpy old man. It's because he loves them so much that he hates seeing people hurt themselves and settle for something that cannot transform them.

I would never want to see you guys settle for something that will never transform you. I want to see the gospel transform your lives.

But how exactly does this gospel transform? This brings us to our second point.

Secondly, to be gospel centered is to live in line with the truth of the gospel. It's to live in line with the truth of the gospel.

come down with me now to Galatians chapter 2 verse 11 and let's have a look at how the gospel initially transformed Peter.

[31 : 32] Now Peter very much believes in the same gospel as Paul. He would wholeheartedly affirm Galatians chapter 1 verse 3 and 4 and at the end of verse 11 we learn how the gospel initially impacts Peter.

he had been eating with the Gentiles. Now that's a big deal to a Jew like him. This is a person who in Acts chapter 10 says that he has never eaten anything impure or unclean.

Nor will he want to eat with those who do. But the gospel has caused a revolution in his worldview. His new relationship with Jesus has now reoriented his relationship with others.

In this case the Gentiles because he's worked out the implications of the gospel. If the gospel says that you are saved by faith in Christ alone regardless of whether you are Jew or Gentile that must mean Christ is what unites you.

The old things that divided you like food laws no longer matter. to use a modern scenario imagine if Peter was a landlord in KL today.

[32 : 56] Let's imagine that he rents out property for Christian gatherings. Previously he would have included in the notice Chinese tenants only.

No ducks getting people allowed. if you ever lived in KL before you would have seen those notices. But when Peter encounters the gospel the notice changes.

All welcome those from Africa invited to apply. you see the gospel transforms our worldview.

It transforms how we think and how we act. And a gospel centered church will be one where we all help each other keep working out the implications of the gospel.

Let's just take one example. Perhaps right now as I know there are some in our congregation that you know someone facing a trial at this moment.

[34 : 02] Perhaps it's health related or it's a relationship issue of some sort. You know that this person is feeling worried about it.

She cannot help but doubt God. And you could just say don't worry everything will turn out okay. But what if your encouragement came out of a gospel worldview instead, you will say sister, I cannot look into the future.

I'm not God. I cannot say that everything will be okay. I don't know that. But remember the cross? Well, that's evidence that God does care.

Remember the resurrection? that's evidence that God is in charge. We know this is our God, this is our gospel. And we will care for you because that's what God's people do.

You are encouraging the person to hold fast to the gospel in the midst of her doubts and you yourself are being motivated by the gospel to serve the person as Christ served you.

[35 : 24] You encourage the other person to live in line with the truth of the gospel by living in line with the truth of the gospel yourself.

And that's why Paul gets so upset when Peter doesn't live in line with the truth of the gospel, but we drew from fellowship with the Gentiles out of fear of others.

He's not upset because Peter rejected the gospel message. That's not what happened. He's upset because Peter is not allowing the gospel to impact his life as it did earlier.

He allowed fear of others to get the better of him. That's what it says in verse 12. And in so doing, notice that Peter led others astray, although I'm sure it's unintentional.

Look at verse 13. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

[36 : 34] You see, if we as a church fail to live in line with the truth of the gospel, we could actually bring unintentional harm to others.

That's how serious it is. Imagine a church that says it believes in the gospel. But let's audit the life of the church.

church. They have Bible studies. They have prayer meetings. They have people serving on various rosters. Looks good so far.

But dig a little deeper and you soon work out that people go to Bible studies with no joy. It just happens to be one of the rules that Christians are supposed to keep.

And so they say, oh well, okay, let's do it. Some of them can't keep up. And so they drop out. Others serve, but they are wary because they want to please others.

[37 : 36] But they can't keep up either, especially when some of the other folk only ever seem to complain. What has happened is that on paper, the church believes the right things about the gospel.

And do the right things expected at an evangelical church. But the gospel is not actually shaping their life together. And both the Christian, who is part of this community, and the non-Christian on the outside looking in, they look at this state of affairs and they conclude, this gospel isn't anything exciting.

It's not as incredible as the Bible claims it to be. And so they start straying, looking for something better.

But imagine a church that does so. Imagine a church like this. They also have Bible studies and prayer meetings people serving.

And at first glance, you probably can't tell this church apart from the other church that I just described. They're doing the same things, having the same activities.

[39 : 02] But dig deeper, and it becomes clearer. People are serving joyfully because they're not looking to their service to prove that they are good Christians.

Christians, they know that they don't need to prove anything because they're already accepted in Christ. They try to be gracious rather than simply grumble.

When they give feedback, it's not out of a sense of superiority because they have nothing to boast in apart from the cross. People go to Bible studies not simply to fit the picture of a good Christian, but because they truly love Jesus and are excited to get to know him better in the company of others.

And people might even be willing to confront others the way Paul did Peter if they think their brother or sister in Christ is not living in line with the truth of the gospel.

They are connecting the gospel to their service and conduct. Imagine this kind of community. It will have a powerful impact.

[40 : 18] People can really see that the gospel is something truly incredible. Both churches believe the gospel, but only one is truly gospel centered.

church. So this is what it means to be an evangelical church. It is to be centered on the gospel, to hold fast to the truth of the gospel, and to live in line with the truth of the gospel.

gospel. And if that's what we are, coaching evangelical church, well, what are some implications for us this morning?

Let me just briefly point out a couple. Number one, don't ever make the mistake of thinking that the gospel is only for non-Christians.

I hope that I've sufficiently showed you the difference between evangelistic and evangelical. The gospel wonderfully is what saves people, which is why we want to share it with our non-Christian friends.

[41 : 31] But the promises of the gospel is what sustains us as Christians. The gospel reminds us in trials that there is a new world coming.

The gospel encourages us in our struggles with sin, telling us that the penalty for sin has been paid for. The power to fight sin is now available to us. The gospel transforms us when we are tempted to look to our service in church or our work in the world for security by showing that our status is completely secure in Christ.

And on and on it goes. And that's why in church we need to hear the promises of the gospel every single week. In church, in our groups, we need to be taught how to live in line with the truth of the gospel and to help each other to do so.

In other words, we cannot make the mistake of assuming the gospel. It's that every opportunity we get, we need to speak of Jesus to one another, his redemption, his justification, his cleansing, his victory, his teaching.

And I hope that every Sunday here at KEC, we will try our best to do that. We are far from perfect, of course, but this is our aim.

[43 : 00] And number two, recognize gospel doctrine and gospel culture go together. Recognize gospel doctrine and gospel culture go together.

That's how a pastor called Ray Otlin puts it. You see, in Galatians chapter 2, verse 11 to 16, the doctrine of justification created a culture of inclusion.

The Gentile is no longer left out. The life of the fellowship of Christians have been transformed. We find this kind of dynamic over and over again in other parts of the New Testament.

In Romans chapter 5, verse 1 to 11, this same doctrine of justification creates a culture of hope. Since we have been justified by faith, Paul says, we can boast in the hope of the glory of God, which means we can suffer well.

In Ephesians chapter 2, the doctrine of regeneration creates a culture of humility. It is the gift of God that we have been saved, so no one can boast.

[44 : 12] And so that means here at KEC, we don't just want to be orthodox and sound in our doctrine. Know the gospel, yes, of course, but don't stop there.

Let the implications of the gospel work out in your life. Think. what would you do differently because of the gospel? How would you relate to that person because of the gospel?

What would you prioritize as a result of the gospel? Ray Otlin puts it this way. He says, if a church only has gospel doctrine, but no gospel culture, it will result in hypocrisy.

And if a church only has a gospel culture, but is forgetting its gospel doctrine, it will result in fragility because the basis for that culture is being lost.

but if a church has both gospel doctrine and gospel culture, it will have power because it will exhibit something that the world does not have but longs for.

[45 : 29] And because we have the message to tell them what that something is, it is the gospel. Well, that's all I have time for.

but church, I really want you to understand this. To live up to our name as Gu Ching Evangelical Church, we must be a gospel-centered church.

There's no other way. That's at the core of our conviction. But if we are willing to go this way, God will be pleased to do great things in us.

I pray. I pray. I pray.