What is the GOSPEL?
Mark’s Greek term the gospel, euangelion, which we render as “good news,” was a word that was typically used to describe an imperial victory. When the emperor, Caesar, won a battle or quelled a rebellion, he sent “evangelists” ahead with the good news. In Mark’s writing, Christ’s death and resurrection signals a new victory, a victory that goes far beyond the battles of this world. Jesus conquered all of sin and death, and this good news changes everything.

As Catholics, we are all called to spread the euangelion of Christ the Victor. While some of us may serve as missionaries to distant lands, most of us can be evangelists by simply bearing this good news to those around us. Imagine the impact we would have on the lives of individuals, on the broader culture and the world at large if we each shone forth the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But before we can become sharers of the gospel, we must become familiar with the Catholic understanding of what, precisely, the gospel is. That’s why Brandon Vogt and I recently devoted a whole episode of my podcast, “The Word on Fire Show,” to exploring the question: What is the gospel?

Below you’ll find an edited transcript of the show so you can read it slowly, at your own pace, and reflect on how you can share the good news of our Lord with the people nearest and dearest to you.

Peace,

+Robert Barron
WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD on FIRE
**QUESTION:** Today we’re going to be looking at something a little more fundamental. I’d like to talk about something that Catholic Theologians call the kerygma or the gospel. In Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he talks about the need to recover the kerygma. He said that we’ve missed this a lot, we focus too much on the secondary issues, and we really need to get back into the basic core of the gospel. Bishop Barron, I figure who better to proclaim the core of the gospel than you, especially in a world that so often misses what Christianity is all about. So, let’s start. What is the kerygma, or to ask another way, what is the gospel? How would you sum that up?

**BISHOP BARRON:** It’s a good question. I remember many years ago I was in an Evangelical Catholic dialogue and that was the question that the Evangelicals posed to our side in an almost provocative way, as though to say Protestants clearly know what the gospel is. To them, it will be some version of justification by grace through faith. To the Catholics, what’s the gospel? I would
say two basic things. First, the “euangelion”, the glad tidings, the good news, is fundamentally that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. That’s what the apostles carried around the world. That was the basic message they had, Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. The kerygma in those earliest sermons from people like Peter and Paul is: You killed Him, God raised Him. He didn’t stay dead. The kerygma is the resurrection.

The resurrection implies the second thing, namely, that there’s a new Lord. The old code was “Kaiser kurios”, Caesar’s the lord. He’s the most powerful figure. The resurrection proves that God’s love is more powerful than anything Caesar can throw at us. He’s more powerful than anything in the world. Therefore, Paul boldly proclaims “Iesous Kurios”, Jesus is Lord. He knows that because Jesus was raised from the dead. So I would cluster those two things together, Jesus is resurrected and Jesus is Lord.

Then I’d make another implication. Because Jesus rose from the dead, the early Christians conclud-
ed he is who he says he was. Jesus spoke and acted in the person of God, not simply as one prophet among many. They called him prophet, he accepted that title, but he clearly wasn’t just one more Jeremiah. He was a priestly figure, but not just one more priest. He spoke and acted in the very person of God, and the biblical authors show that in a number of ways in all four of the gospels. The resurrection ratified that claim. Therefore, Jesus is Lord, not just in the sense of he’s the true king, but he’s Adonai. Kurios would have translated for a Greek speaker as Adonai in Hebrew, the Lord. Well who’s Adonai but God, Yahweh? You couldn’t say the sacred name Yahweh, so you said the Lord, Adonai.

To say Jesus Christ is Lord is to say he is God. Now I’ll take one more step in terms of the gospel. What is the gospel? If you were to ask the church fathers that question, they wouldn’t have said justification by grace through faith. It seems to me they would have said, Deus fit homo ut homo fieret Deus: God became man, that man might become God. All the church fathers say that in some way
through their writings. It doesn’t mean that we will turn into God. It means we become sharers in the divine nature. The good news is Jesus is risen from the dead; therefore, he’s the Lord; therefore, he is who he says he was, he’s God. Therefore, we have a chance to participate in the very being of God through him.

I’m kind of pulling out a number of steps, but that’s the kerygma in a nutshell, that’s the gospel. From a Catholic perspective, we may become participants in the divine life because God became one of us. This revelation is proven and ratified by the resurrection. That’s how I’d sum it up.

**QUESTION:** I come from a Protestant background and I know among many Protestants there’s more of a formulaic approach to presenting the gospel. One might say, “Here’s a four step approach for when you’re talking to a total stranger, you can share the gospel with them.” For example, you can walk them down either the “Roman road”(a selection of Bible verses from the book of Romans that present a plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ) or the “paths of the
What is the GOSPEL? (testimonies of Christians). I always felt that that was a bit simplistic. It wouldn’t really land. I think you would probably agree, one of the problems with this version of the gospel is that it pulls Jesus’ message out of the greater story, the great tradition.

You’ve always said that we Catholics need to sort of reintegrate the gospel of Jesus into the great story of Israel. Can you talk a little bit about that?

BISHOP BARRON: Yes, integrating Christ into the ancient Israel tradition is so important because the resurrection is not just this kind of one-off metaphysical wonder like, “Wow look at that, that’s never happened before.” Rather, it’s the climax to a great story. It’s the climax to a long narrative of God’s dealing with the people Israel. What he’s doing in this narrative is he’s shaping a people after his own mind and heart. Saint Irenaeus saw this back in the second Century that God is preparing the world, by way of Israel, for the incarnation. He’s suiting a people to receive him. The kind of tutoring Israel received in the law through the prophets, through the liturgy,
was shaping them so as to receive ultimately the gift of God himself. Jesus is faithful Yahweh meeting faithful Israel.

He’s both fully human and fully divine. He’s the meeting place of God’s faithful love and a human response. In that way, Jesus is the climax of the story of Israel, he’s the true Israelite. He’s the fulfillment of covenant, because the whole point of the covenant was to bring God and Israel together. He’s the fulfillment of the temple, whose whole purpose was to unite Israel and God in prayer. He’s the fulfillment of the prophets, who were there to speak God’s truth to the people. He’s the culmination of Israel.

Now what’s the resurrection? Paul said it exactly right in terms of Israel. The great “Yes!” to all the promises God made to Israel is summed up in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The incarnation (God becoming one of us) coming to its fullest flowering in the dying and rising of Jesus is the good news within the broader context of Israel. You can’t take it out of that context and
say it adequately. It’s like telling someone here’s the climax of the story, but never telling them the first part of the story, like tearing out all the pages leading to the final chapter of a book. When you tell the whole story, the climax is what we might call the gospel, the good news.

The good news is we have a God who has joined himself to us. He did it through a long preparation we call the story of Israel. Now it has come to fulfillment in Jesus, which means, finally, we can become participants in God’s own life. Now there’s the life of the church. The church is the extension of the incarnation across space and time, the coming together of divinity and humanity. We find this “coming together” quality of the church in the sacraments, liturgy, saints, and artistic masterpieces of the tradition. That’s the fuller picture of the gospel.

What’s wonderful is you can say it very quickly. When one of your Protestant friends asks you what the gospel is, use the patristic line, Deus fit homo ut homo fieret Deus. Then translate it into
English: God became man that man might become God. And when they say, “Huh?”, you can explain it to them in the brief formulaic way that I have just outlined, but be reminded that pulling out all the implications of that line is the work of a lifetime.

**QUESTION:** I think many people, especially in America surrounded as we are by Evangelicalism, have a very personalized understanding of salvation and of the gospel. Basically, I sinned and then Jesus died on the cross, and now I’m saved. Me and Jesus are on good terms now. You hinted at it a little bit earlier, but how does the church fit into this larger kerygma, this larger story of the gospel.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Intimately and in many ways. I stand with Henri de Lubac who wrote this great book called *Catholicisme*, “Catholicism”, which he wrote back in the 1940’s. He makes the argument that all the doctrines of a church have a social dimension, that there’s no such thing as a purely individualized or privatized doctrine, including and especially, he would say, the doctrine of salvation. It’s simply wrongheaded to say, “How will I be saved,
how will my soul be saved?” It is better to say, “Well, how are we going to be saved? How are we as a people on the way to salvation?” That’s a better question.

Furthermore, the Church is the means, the privileged means by which God applies the effects of the incarnation. Now, don’t get me wrong, God can do what God wants. Thomas Aquinas says that God is not limited by the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, she’s the privileged means chosen by Christ himself. That’s the Church’s role up and down the centuries, to bring to bear the power of the incarnation. Colonel George always put it this way, you can’t know me apart from my body.

Right now you know me because you can see me, you can see my body. It’s my body that makes me present to you. In the same way, Christ was known through his body in the first century walking around Palestine. Now he’s known through his mystical body, the Church. You can’t know him really apart from that body, so apart from the sacraments, from the papacy, from episcopal leadership, from the saints, et cetera. It is by the Church you come to know Him.
Even when someone says, “Well I came to know him through listening to preaching.” Yeah, that’s the Church. It’s literally the voice of the Church proclaiming him. Anyone that knows Jesus knows him through the Church in some way. We just made that very explicit in our ecclesiology.

**QUESTION:** Let’s get back to Pope Francis. I mentioned in his encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he spent several paragraphs on the kerygma, emphasizing that we need to recover it and make it our first proclamation. In fact, he uses language that’s eerily similar to your own when he says we shouldn’t lead with the moral, we need to lead with the kerygma. What’s he saying there and why is it right?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yeah read any of the New Testament. Now you could distill morality out of the New Testament, and you should. There are moral implications clearly. I would defy anyone to read Paul to the Romans or read the gospel of Matthew or read the book of Revelation, any book in the New Testament, and say the primary message I’m getting here is morality.
The primary message you’re getting is the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ risen from the dead! Salvation offered in the Trinitarian life, I say that’s the message you get. Now that has moral implications, to be sure. I’m not soft peddling morality for a second, but the Bible doesn’t lead with morality, it leads with the kerygma, the basic good news.

That’s what I think Pope Francis is seeing. We should imitate what the Bible itself does. Go back to Jesus himself. Jesus with the woman at the well is a very good example. He addresses her morality but in such a winsome way where she’s totally ready to hear what he’s saying, but he begins with this beautiful exchange about thirst and the offering of water bubbling up to eternal life. That’s what he wants to give you, he wants to give you eternal life.

“Give me this water always that I may never come back to this well again,” she says as she’s drawn into the beauty of what he’s offering. Then, quite rightly he says, well we’ve got some problems to
deal with here first. Then he looks into her sexual life, her married life and all that. That’s the right rhythm. Whenever you’re proclaiming or preaching if you begin with morality you tend to turn people off, especially in our society. Get there, but begin with the kerygma I would say, begin with beauty as I often argue. Pope Francis talked about the “via pulchritudinis”, the way of beauty. That’s the right way to do it I think.

**QUESTION:** I think a lot of people reading this are ordinary people in their regular jobs and families. They’re probably thinking, “Well this is wonderful theology. I understand it and appreciate it, but what are some simple practical examples of how I can share the good news with a friend who has drifted away from the Church, someone who has no conception of what Catholics believe.” If you had two minutes with a person like that, what would you say?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Well it depends on the situation I think, where you are. Has someone opened his heart in some way to you? Has he or
she shared a concern, a question, a struggle? Then I think you go with that. You enter through the door that the person has opened for you. Sometimes people will just say, “Well tell me, what is Catholicism, what is Christianity all about?” In that case, I would talk about Jesus. I would bring forward this infinitely fascinating figure of Jesus Christ. I would talk about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That’s what Paul did, that’s how Paul announced the gospel. Overall, I think it depends on where the person is and what he or she is offering to you. If they’re bringing a question forward, good. Start with that.

There are 1,000 different doors into the Christian thing. A lot of times people will kick open a door and you can go in that one. I’m with Billy Graham and company, I think all Christians but especially Catholics should have the ability to say it clearly, distinctly, succinctly—here’s what I believe, here’s the gospel. I think, too, that we need to be witnessing to the gospel. Pope Paul VI said that people today don’t listen so much to teachers
but to witnesses, and if they listen to teachers it’s only in the measure that they’re also witnesses. You witness to what Christ has meant in your own life, and you share that. You share how he has changed your life. I think those are all good evangelical methods.

**QUESTION:** Who would you say would be some of the models of proclaimers of the gospel, both contemporary and in the past, who really understood how to share the kerygma, the basic gospel?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yeah, well I go back to Billy Graham again, whom I admire very much. Watch Billy Graham’s sermons. A lot of them are on YouTube. They always have the same basic form, which I would say is Augustinian. Namely, you’ve tried this, this, this, this and that and you’ve not been happy, have you? You’ve tried wealth, you thought it would make you happy, it didn’t. You thought pursuing pleasure different ways would make you happy. It didn’t, did it? Of
course everyone knows the answer is no it didn’t. Well I have the thing that will make you happy. That’s effective, that’s a very effective way to do it.

You know, St. John Paul the Second, I think was the other truly great evangelizer in the last century. John Paul is an interesting character because he’s super intellectual, his background was in moral theology. John Paul’s sermons would not be like Billy Grahams. They wouldn’t have had that kind of immediate emotional appeal, but heck, he appealed like mad to young people, didn’t he? Part of it I think was this call to heroism. John Paul had a sense that young people like to be called to a difficult, heroic ideal, and he held that out to them. That was his method. Also, just his vivid personal presence. He evangelized by showing up as the Pope. Those two people were extremely effective evangelizers.

Someone who may have surpassed them both was C. S. Lewis. You look back over the past 100 years, name a more effective evangelizer than
C. S. Lewis. It’s funny, when I was coming of age, in my teens and 20’s no one read Lewis. He was seen as this kind of fuddy-duddy old timer who wrote Narnia. He wasn’t taken that seriously. Then, led by evangelicals, there was this huge Lewis revival. I remember reading *Mere Christianity* many, many years ago and thought it was just fine. Then, maybe 20 years later, I reread it and it had this explosive impact on me. He’s a very effective evangelizer and smart. He uses a very intellectual approach but not in any sort of oppressively academic way. He names the basic Christian understanding in a very compelling way.

Billy Graham, John Paul 2, and C. S. Lewis I think are three of the most effective evangelizers.

**QUESTION:** That’s a good crowd. I’m thinking of not only C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, but his Narnian Chronicles, which have served for a lot of people as a first encounter, or gateway to Jesus. Lewis wrote this letter to a mom who was worried that her young son was so infatuated with Aslan, the Christ figure lion, that he didn’t
really care about Jesus, he just really liked Aslan. Lewis told her not to worry, because what he likes about Aslan he’ll like about Christ, build a bridge that way.

You in your work have talked often about the use of the imagination, of beauty as sort of a gateway into the gospel. Talk a bit about that. How can we use beauty as a way to proclaim the kerygma rather than just a straight intellectual approach?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yeah, and I’ve said many times in our postmodern period, I think leading with the beautiful is a more winsome approach because people are allergic to objective claims to truth and goodness. The beautiful has a more winsome, less threatening quality. Just hear the story, pick up that book, watch that film. As I’ve said, go to the Sistine Chapel or go to Sainte Chapelle. I think that approach is less threatening for people today. As Lewis would say, it evangelizes the imagination. That’s what he and Tolkien and company were all doing very cleverly and in a way where seeds might take root and blossom many.
many years later. Even now people are coming to the gospel because of Tolkien and Lewis. They knew what they were doing by evangelizing the imagination. They were also operating in a world (they’re both at Oxford and then Lewis later at Cambridge) where the beginnings of our skeptical, secular culture were taking hold and people were looking at Christianity as outmoded, old mythologies.

They very cleverly moved outside and around the immediate intellectual objections and they told stories. Lewis, of course, famously would take on atheists in an intellectual way as well. But I think they both intuited there’s a need for this more literary approach, artistic approach. I think that’s very wise.

My personal approach to apologetics and evangelization is an ad hoc approach. You do what works, and don’t get caught in a system that constricts you too much, limits you to only one way. I think you’ve got to be flexible like a good quarterback.
You’re reading the defense and you’ve got to call an audible once in a while. Maybe your strong suit is intellectual apologetics, but maybe the defense has shifted in a way that you’ve got to call an audible and do something different. I think we’ve got to be flexible and have a lot of tools in the toolbox, to shift metaphors now, and not be too restricted by our own prejudices.

**QUESTION:** I want to get back to something you mentioned earlier. You said that today the Augustinian approach works really well. What would you contrast that with, and why the Augustinian approach? What do you mean by that?

**BISHOP BARRON:** I just mean Augustine’s great line from the very first page of *The Confessions*, “Lord you’ve made us for yourself, and therefore our heart is restless until it rests in thee.” There’s no better statement of Christian anthropology, there’s no more succinct summation of it. He names so much in those few words. Lord you have made us for yourself. See, that’s
the whole Christian anthropology: Here I am in my humanity with my different abilities and skills and capacities, but I recognize in me something divine. What I mean is there’s a longing for God, there’s a hunger that only God can fill. The cliché is “there’s a God shaped hole in me.” See, that’s what Augustine meant, that’s the clue that we’ve been made by God.

We bear his image and likeness is another way to put it. The Augustinian perspective is the flipside to that truth. It says that I have a hunger in me that’s so great that nothing but you, Lord, could fill it.

Getting in touch with that longing creates a great bridge to the gospel truth. Cosmological arguments are very good, I love them, but for a lot of people they’re too abstract or distant. The Augustinian approach asks you to look right inside yourself, to look in your own heart. What do you find but a God orientation? It might even be your anger at God or your frustration with God or
whatever, but whatever it is, it’s a connection to God because it’s an infinite longing. Get in touch with that. Follow that desire all the way down, and you’ll find what I mean when I say God. Find that desire in you and follow it all the way down, and that’s what I’m talking about.

God is the objective correlate to the subjective longing. That’s a way to put it abstractly. That’s the Augustinian approach. It’s exactly what Billy Graham used in his evangelical preaching. I think it’s a very existential approach. It’s very close to the heart. Lord you made us for yourself, therefore our heart is restless till it rests in thee. Beautiful naming of the dynamic, isn’t it?

As Lewis said so correctly, it’s at the best moments in life that I am most aware of this, not the worst moments. I am aware of that my heart needs God when tragedy strikes, but I’m more keenly aware at the best moments. When I’ve experienced the greatest satisfaction in my career, or my relationships, or or whatever, and yet I feel I want more
than the world can offer. The world is not enough. It’s not what I really want. At best the world can only offer a sacrament of what I really want. See there’s Lewis with his longing, his joy, this aching. Germans have that lovely word, *Sehnsucht* – this longing of the heart. It’s a beautiful thing.

It’s not that you are frustrated with the world, you recognize the world as sacramental. It’s great, but it’s not enough. Its greatness is indicative of a further greatness. That’s evangelical country. When you move into that country, you’re getting close to the gospel.

**QUESTION:** We’ve looked at several avenues to proclaim the kerygma: through the imagination, through reason, through beauty. What are some places that you’d recommend listeners turn if they want to clarify even more their conception of what the gospel is and how they share it?

**BISHOP BARRON:** A guy that has helped me a lot is N. T. Wright, the great Anglican Biblical Scholar. He’s very good, I think, at naming the
kerygma as the proclamation of the kingship of Jesus. “Christ is King” is maybe his version of the kerygma. He ties this proclamation very closely with the resurrection, of course. He also sees it very much as the climax of the story of Israel, the story of God becoming king. He’s someone that I find very helpful. I mentioned Lewis too. I think he’s really good at naming the heart of the matter.

Then I always go back to the classic people, Aquinas in particular. The church fathers are especially good I think on this stuff because they were pastors. They weren’t academic theologians, they were pastors first and foremost, preachers. Read the sermons of Chrysostom, you’ll get a lot of the gospel there. Read Augustine’s great sermons. They’re very redolent of the gospel. All those people I would say. And if you’re looking for someone contemporary, read N. T. Wright.
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