

The Gospel in All its Forms

Like God, the gospel is both one and more than that.

by Tim Keller

The gospel has been described as a pool in which a toddler can wade and yet an elephant can swim. It is both simple enough to tell to a child and profound enough for the greatest minds to explore. Indeed, even angels never tire of looking into it (1 Peter 1:12). Humans are by no means angels, however, so rather than contemplating it, we argue about it.

A generation ago evangelicals agreed on “the simple gospel”: (1) God made you and wants to have a relationship with you, (2) but your sin separates you from God. (3) Jesus took the punishment your sins deserved, (4) so if you repent from sins and trust in him for your salvation, you will be forgiven, justified, and accepted freely by grace, and indwelt with his Spirit until you die and go to heaven.

There are today at least two major criticisms of this simple formulation. Many say that it is too individualistic, that Christ's salvation is not so much to bring individual happiness as to bring peace, justice, and a new creation. A second criticism is that there is no one “simple gospel” because “everything is contextual” and the Bible itself contains many gospel presentations that exist in tension with each other.

No single gospel message?

Let's take the second criticism first. The belief that there is no single basic gospel outline in the Bible goes back at least to the Tubingen school of biblical scholarship, which insisted Paul's gospel of justification was sharply different from Jesus' gospel of the kingdom. In the 20th century, British professor C.H. Dodd countered that there was one consensus gospel message in the Bible. Then, in turn, James Dunn argued in *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (1977) that the gospel formulations in the Bible are so different that we can't come up with a single outline.

Now hundreds of websites of young Christian leaders complain that the older evangelical church spent too much time reading Romans rather than Jesus' declaration that “the kingdom of God is at hand.” But to be true to first-century Christians' own understanding of the gospel, I believe we must side with Dodd over Dunn. Paul is emphatic that the gospel he presents is the same as the one preached by the Jerusalem apostles. “Whether it was I or they,” Paul says, referring to Peter and the others, “so we preached and so you believed” (1 Cor. 15:10-11). This statement assumes a single body of gospel content.

One Gospel, Many Forms

So yes, there must be one gospel, yet there are clearly different forms in which that one gospel can be expressed. This is the Bible's own way of speaking of the gospel, and we should stick with it. Paul is an example. After insisting there is only one gospel (Gal. 1:8), he then speaks of being entrusted with “the gospel of the uncircumcised” as opposed to the “gospel of the circumcised” (Gal. 2:7).

When Paul spoke to Greeks, he confronted their culture's idol of speculation and philosophy with the “foolishness” of the cross, and then presented Christ's salvation as true wisdom. When he

spoke to Jews, he confronted their culture's idol of power and accomplishment with the “weakness” of the cross, and then presented the gospel as true power (1 Cor. 1:22-25).

One of Paul's gospel forms was tailored to Bible-believing people who thought they would be justified by works on judgment day, and the other to pagans. These two approaches can be discerned in Paul's speeches in the book of Acts, some to Jews and some to pagans.

There are other forms of the gospel. Readers have always noticed that the kingdom language of the Synoptic Gospels is virtually missing in the Gospel of John, which usually talks instead about receiving eternal life. However, when we compare Mark 10:17, 23-34, Matthew 25:34, 46, and John 3:5, 6 and 17, we see that “entering the kingdom of God” and “receiving eternal life” are virtually the same thing. Reading Matthew 18:3, Mark 10:15 and John 3:3, 5 together reveal that conversion, the new birth, and receiving the kingdom of God “as a child” are the same move.

Why, then, the difference in vocabulary between the Synoptics and John? As many scholars have pointed out, John emphasizes the individual and inward spiritual aspects of being in the kingdom of God. He is at pains to show that it is not basically an earthly social-political order (John 18:36). On the other hand, when the Synoptics talk of the kingdom, they lay out the real social and behavioral changes that the gospel brings. We see in John and the Synoptics two more forms of the gospel – one that stresses the individual and the other the corporate aspect to our salvation.

What, Then, Is The One Simple Gospel?

Simon Gathercole distills a three-point outline that both Paul and the Synoptic writers held in common. (See “The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom” in *God's Power to Save*, ed. Chris Green Apollos/Inter-Varsity Press, UK, 2006.) He writes that Paul's good news was, first, that Jesus was the promised Messianic King and Son of God come to earth as a servant, in human form. (Rom. 1:3-4; Phil. 2:4ff.)

Second, by his death and resurrection, Jesus atoned for our sin and secured our justification by grace, not by our works (1 Cor. 15:3ff.) Third, on the cross Jesus broke the dominion of sin and evil over us (Col. 2:13-15) and at his return he will complete what he began by the renewal of the entire material creation and the resurrection of our bodies (Rom 8:18ff.)

Gathercole then traces these same three aspects in the Synoptics' teaching that Jesus, the Messiah, is the divine Son of God (Mark 1:1) who died as a substitutionary ransom for the many (Mark 10:45), who has conquered the demonic present age with its sin and evil (Mark 1:14-2:10) and will return to regenerate the material world (Matt. 19:28.)

If I had to put this outline in a single statement, I might do it like this: *Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God fully accomplishes salvation for us, rescuing us from judgment for sin into fellowship with him, and then restores the creation in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever.*

One of these elements was at the heart of the older gospel messages, namely, salvation is by *grace not works*. It was the last element that was usually missing, namely that *grace restores nature*, as the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck put it. When the third, “eschatological” element is left out, Christians get the impression that nothing much about this world matters. Theoretically,

grasping the full outline should make Christians interested in both evangelistic conversions as well as service to our neighbor and working for peace and justice in the world.

Feeling the Tension

My experience is that these individual and corporate aspects of the gospel do not live in easy harmony with one another in our preaching and church bodies. In fact, many communicators today deliberately pit them against each other.

Those pushing the kingdom-corporate versions of the gospel define sin in almost exclusively corporate terms, such as racism, materialism, and militarism, as violations of God's *shalom* or peace. This often obscures how offensive sin is to God himself, and it usually mutes any emphasis on God's wrath. Also, the impression can be given that the gospel is "God is working for justice and peace in the world, and you can too."

While it is true that the coming new social order is "good news" to all sufferers, to speak about the gospel in terms of doing justice blurs the fact of salvation being all of grace, not works. And that is not the way the word *gospel* is used in the New Testament.

Recently I studied all the places in the Greek Bible where forms of the word *gospel* were used, and I was overwhelmed at how often it is used to denote not a way of life – not what we *do* – but a verbal proclamation of what Jesus has *done* and how an individual gets right with God. Often people who talk about the good news as mainly doing peace and justice refer to it as "the gospel of the kingdom." But to receive the kingdom as a little child (Mt. 18:3) and to believe in Christ's name and be born of God (Jn. 1:12-13) is the same thing – it's the way one becomes a Christian (Jn. 3:3, 5).

Having said this, I must admit that so many of us who revel in the classic gospel of "grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone" largely ignore the eschatological implications of the gospel. Texts like Luke 4:18 and Luke 6:20-35 show the implication of the gospel that the broken-hearted, unrecognized, and oppressed now have a central place in the economy of the Christian community, while the powerful and successful are humbled. Paul tells Peter that attitudes of racial and cultural superiority are "not in line" with the gospel of grace (Gal 2:14). Generosity to the poor will flow from those who are holding fast to the gospel as their profession (2 Cor. 9:13).

In Romans 2:16 Paul says that Christ's return to judge the earth was part of his gospel, and if you read Psalm 96:10ff you'll know why. The earth will be renewed and even the trees will be singing for joy. And if the trees will be able to dance and sing under the cosmos-renewing power of his Kingship – what will we be able to do?

If this final renewal of the material world was part of Paul's good news, we should not be surprised to see that Jesus healed and fed while preaching the gospel as signs and foretastes of this coming kingdom (Mt. 9:35).

When we realize that Jesus is going to someday destroy hunger, disease, poverty, injustice, and death itself, it makes Christianity what C. S. Lewis called a "fighting religion" when we are confronted with a city slum or a cancer ward. This full version of the gospel reminds us that God

created both the material and the spiritual, and is going to redeem both the material and the spiritual.

The things that are now wrong with the material world he wants put right. Some avoid the importance of working for justice and peace by pointing to 2 Peter 3:10-12, which seems to say that this material world is going to be completely burned up at the final resurrection. But that is not what happened to Jesus' body, which retained its nail prints, and Doug Moo makes a case for the world's transformation, not replacement, in his essay on "Nature and the New Creation: NT Eschatology and the Environment" available on line at <http://www.wheaton.edu/CACE/resources/onlinearticles/MooNature.pdf>.

Preaching the Forms

You would expect me at this point now to explain how we can perfectly integrate the various aspects of the gospel in our preaching. I can't because I haven't. But here's how I try.

- 1. I don't put all the gospel points into any one gospel presentation.** I find it instructive that the New Testament writers themselves seldom, if ever, pack all of the aspects of the gospel equally in any one gospel address. When studying Paul's gospel speeches in the book of Acts, it is striking how much is always left *out*.

He always leads with some points rather than others in an effort to connect with the baseline cultural narratives of his listeners. It is almost impossible to cover all the bases of the gospel with a non-believing listener without that person's eyes glazing over.

Some parts simply engage her more than others, and, to begin with, a communicator should go with those. Eventually, of course, you have to get to all the aspects of the full gospel in any process of evangelism and discipleship. But you don't have to say everything every time.

- 2. I use both a gospel for the "circumcised" and for the "uncircumcised."** Just as Paul spoke about a gospel for the more religious (the "circumcised") and for the pagan, so I've found that my audience in Manhattan contains both those with moralist, religious backgrounds as well as those with postmodern, pluralistic worldviews.

There are people from other religions (Judaism, Islam), people with strong Catholic backgrounds, as well as those raised in conservative Protestant churches. People with a religious upbringing can grasp the idea of sin as the violation of God's moral law. That law can be explained in such a way that they realize they fall short of it. In that context, Christ and his salvation can be presented as the only hope of pardon for guilt. This, the traditional evangelical gospel of the last generation, is a "gospel for the circumcised."

However, Manhattan is also filled with postmodern listeners who consider all moral statements to be culturally relative and socially constructed. If you try to convict them of guilt for sexual lust, they will simply say, "You have your standards, and I have mine." If you respond with a diatribe on the dangers of relativism, your listeners will simply feel scolded and distanced. Of course, postmodern people must at some point be challenged

about their mushy views of truth, but there is a way to make a credible and convicting gospel presentation to them even before you get into such apologetic issues.

I take a page from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* and define sin as building your identity – your self-worth and happiness – on anything other than God. That is, I use the biblical definition of sin as idolatry. That puts the emphasis not as much on “doing bad things” but on “making good things into ultimate things.”

Instead of telling them they are sinning because they are sleeping with their girlfriends or boyfriends, I tell them that they are sinning because they are looking to their romances to give their lives meaning, to justify and save them, to give them what they should be looking for from God. This idolatry leads to anxiety, obsessiveness, envy, and resentment. I have found that when you describe their lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not give much resistance. Then Christ and his salvation can be presented not (at this point) so much as their only hope for forgiveness, but as their only hope for freedom. This is my “gospel for the uncircumcised.”

- 3. I use both a “kingdom” and an “eternal life” gospel.** I find that many of my younger listeners are struggling to make choices in a world of endless consumer options and are confused about their own identities in a culture of self-creation and self-promotion. These are the people who are engaged well by the more individually-focused presentation of the gospel as *free grace not works*. This is a lot like the “eternal life gospel” of John. However, I have found many highly secular people over the age of 40 are not reached very well with any emphasis on personal problems. Many of them think they are doing very well, thank you. They are much more concerned about the problems of the world – war, racism, poverty, and injustice. And they respond well to a synoptic-like “kingdom gospel.”

Instead of going into, say, one of the epistles and speaking of the gospel in terms of *God, sin, Christ, and faith*, I point out the story-arc of the Bible and speak of the gospel in terms of *creation, fall, redemption, and restoration*. We once had the world we all wanted – a world of peace and justice, without death, disease, or conflict. But by turning from God we lost that world. Our sin unleashed forces of evil and destruction so that now “things fall apart” and everything is characterized by physical, social, and personal disintegration. Jesus Christ, however, came into the world, died as a victim of injustice and as our substitute, bearing the penalty of our evil and sin on himself. This will enable him to some day judge the world and destroy all death and evil without destroying us.

- 4. I use them all and let each group overhear me preaching to the others.** No one form of the gospel gives all the various aspects of the full gospel the same emphasis. If, then, you only preach one form, you are in great danger of giving your people an unbalanced diet of gospel-truth. What is the alternative? Don't preach just one gospel form. That's not true to the various texts of the Bible anyway. If you are preaching expositionally, different passages will convey different forms of the one gospel. Preach different texts and your people will hear all the points.

Won't this confuse people? No, it stretches them. When one group – say, the postmodern – hears a penetrating presentation of sin as idolatry, it opens them up to the concept of sin as grieving and

offending God. Sin as a personal affront to a perfect, holy God begins to make more sense, and when they hear this presented in another gospel form, it has credibility.

When more traditional people with a developed understanding of moral guilt learn about the substitutionary atonement and forensic justification, they are comforted. But these classic doctrines have profound implications for race relations and love for the poor, since they destroy all pride and self-justification.

When more liberal people hear about the kingdom of God for the restoration of the world, it opens them up to Christ's kingship demanding obedience from them in their personal lives. In short, every gospel form, once it hits home, opens a person to the other points of the gospel made more vividly in other forms.

Today there are many who doubt that there is just one gospel. That gives them the warrant to ignore the gospel of atonement and justification. There are others who don't like to admit that there are different forms to that one gospel. That smacks too much of "contextualization," a term they dislike. They cling to a single presentation that is often one-dimensional. Neither of these approaches is as true to the biblical material, nor as effective in actual ministry, as that which understands that the Bible presents one gospel in several forms.

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