

THE GOSPEL IN ALL ITS FORMS

LIKE GOD, THE GOSPEL IS BOTH ONE AND MORE THAN THAT *By Timothy 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 for a child to grasp and profound enough for the greatest minds to explore. 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, accepted freely by grace, and indwelt with his Spirit until you die and go to heaven.

Today there are at least two major criticisms of this simple formulation. One criticism says 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 says 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 Tübingen school of biblical scholarship, which insisted Paul’s gospel of justification was sharply different from Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom. In the twentieth 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 cannot 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 near you” (Luke 10:9). To be true to first-century Christians’ own understanding of the gospel, however, 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 then it was I or they,” Paul says, referring to Peter and the others, “so we preach and so you believed” (1 Cor. 15:11 ESV). This statement assumes a single body of gospel content.

ONE GOSPEL, MANY FORMS

So yes, there must be one gospel, and 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 speaks of being entrusted with “the gospel of the uncircumcised” as opposed to the “gospel of the circumcised” (Gal. 2:7 ESV).

When Paul speaks to Greeks, he confronts their culture’s idol of speculation and philosophy with the “foolishness” of the cross, and then presents Christ’s salvation as true wisdom. When he speaks to Jews, he confronts their culture’s idol of power and accomplishment with the “weakness” of the cross, and then presents 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 also be discerned in Paul’s speeches in Acts, some addressed to Jews and some to pagans.

The gospel also has other forms. 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 16–17, 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 reveals 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 sociopolitical order (John 18:36). On the other hand, when the Synoptics talk of the kingdom, they lay out the real social and behavioral changes brought about by the gospel. We see in John and the Synoptics two more forms of the gospel—one stressing the individual and the other the corporate aspect of our salvation.

**WHAT, THEN,
IS THE ONE
SIMPLE
GOSPEL?**

Simon Gathercole distills a three-point outline that Paul and the Synoptic writers held in common.¹ He writes that for Paul the good news was, first, that Jesus is the promised messianic King and Son of God come to earth as a servant, in human form (Rom. 1:3-4; Phil. 2:5-11). Second, by his death and resurrection, Jesus atoned for our sin and secured our justification by grace, not by our works (1 Cor. 15:3, 9-10). 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. 8:18-23).

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 many (Mark 10:45), who conquered the demonic present age with its sin and evil (Mark 1:14-2:10), and who 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 also at the heart of the older gospel messages, namely, salvation is by *grace not works*. The last element 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 not only evangelistic conversions but also serving 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—including 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 may 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 that salvation is entirely of grace, not works. It also 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 by how often it denotes 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 (Matt. 18:3) and to believe in Christ's name and be born of God (John 1:12-13) are the same thing—it's the way one becomes a Christian (John 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 6:20-36 show these clear implications of the gospel—that the brokenhearted, 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 is part of his gospel, and if you read Psalm 96:10–13, you’ll know why. The earth will be renewed and even the trees will be singing for joy. If the trees will be able to sing under the cosmos-renewing power of his kingship, what will we be able to do?

If this final renewal of the material world is part of Paul’s good news, we should not be surprised to see that as Jesus preached the gospel he healed and fed as signs and foretastes of this coming kingdom (Matt. 9:35). When we realize that Jesus is going to someday destroy hunger, disease, poverty, injustice, and death itself, Christianity becomes what C. S. Lewis called a “fighting religion” when we are confronted with a city slum or a cancer ward.² 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 God wants put right. Some people downplay the importance of working for justice and peace by pointing to 2 Peter 3:10–12, which seems to say that this material world will be completely burned up at the final resurrection. That, however, 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 “Nature and the New Creation: NT Eschatology and the Environment.”³

PREACHING THE FORMS

You would expect me at this point 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 one studies Paul’s gospel speeches in 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 nonbelieving listener without that person’s eyes glazing over. Some parts simply engage the listener 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 a gospel 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 and those with postmodern, pluralistic worldviews.

There are people from other religions (Judaism, Islam) and 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 Søren 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, which puts the emphasis not as much on “doing bad things” as on “making good things into ultimate things.”

Instead of telling these listeners they are sinning because they are sleeping with their girlfriend or boyfriend, 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, obsession, envy, and resentment. I have found that when you describe their lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not resist much. 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 they are confused about their own identities in a culture of self-creation and self-promotion. They 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.

I have found, however, that many highly secular people over the age of forty 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 synopticlike “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. 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 and 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 someday judge the world and destroy all death and evil without destroying us.

4. I use all the forms and let each group overhear me preaching to the others. No one form of the gospel gives equal emphasis to all the various aspects of the full gospel. If, then, you only preach one of the forms, you are in great danger of giving your people an unbalanced diet of gospel-truth. What is the alternative? Don’t preach just a single gospel form. That’s not true to the varied texts of the Bible, anyway. If you are preaching expositionally, different passages will convey the 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. On the other hand, 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 the obedience Christ’s kingship demands 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, many doubt that there is just one gospel. That gives them the warrant to ignore the gospel of atonement and justification. Others don’t like to admit that there are different forms of that one gospel, because 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 an approach based on the understanding that the Bible presents one gospel in several forms.

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¹ Simon Gathercole, “The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom,” in *God’s Power to Save*, ed. Chris Green (Leicester, UK: Apollos/Inter-Varsity Press, 2006).

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 37.

³ Douglas J. Moo, “Nature and the New Creation: NT Eschatology and the Environment,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006): 449–88. Available online at www.wheaton.edu/CACE/resources/onlinearticles/MooNature.pdf.