

LEADING IN EVANGELISM

4

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

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Summary

Although the New Testament is clear that there is one gospel, it also shows us many ways of expressing this gospel. How might we think about how the 'classic formulation' of, say 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, holds together with the emphasis on the kingdom of God in the gospels, and Paul's emphasis elsewhere on the Lordship of Jesus, as primarily expressed in the resurrection?

Might four 'trajectories' help us?

1. The first is looking back. The New Testament consistently underlines the origins of the gospel in the Old Testament.
2. Then to look to the other end of time, and to the gospel's relationship with eschatology. The New Testament offers us a vision of a future when the world is healed, evil and death destroyed, and God is all in all.
3. The New Testament closely links the gospel and the Church, seeing the Church not just as a result of the gospel, but also as a demonstration and even catalyst of the gospel. The gospel invites us to join God's people, as they work with him in his kingdom for the transformation of the world.
4. The New Testament often speaks of the gospel in terms of power. What are the links to the gospel and the work of the Spirit, to personal transformation, to the call to discipleship?

In sum, the heart of the gospel in the New Testament seems to be Jesus, with his life, teaching, miracles and death, summed up in the resurrection, whereby he is declared the Lord of all and the king in God's kingdom. It is in Jesus that God recreates his world, and summons humanity back into its true calling in the transformed new heavens and new earth.

Introduction

I feel nervous writing this paper. The gospel is precious to all of us, and we have all had to resist attempts at rewriting it, and probably all have a wariness of recent debates about what is and is not the gospel. I am also aware of how the gospel is holy ground, and I hear Paul's admonition about there being just one gospel (and his condemnation of those who preach another gospel) in Galatians 1 or 2 Corinthians 11 ringing my ears. Lord, preserve us from error, and please guide us by your Spirit.

Yet, there is something going around which calls us to see the gospel in greater and fuller perspective. Not to rewrite the gospel, but an invitation to see it as greater and deeper and more profound than it has sometimes been viewed and proclaimed.

Might we see this short paper, then, as an invitation to follow Augustine in seeing the gospel as being like the ocean, and to wade deeper and further out into its depths?



The 'Classic' Formulation

There are some classic formulations of the gospel in the NT, and maybe the most famous is 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (especially verses 3-5). Paul talks of this being 'the good news' which he proclaimed and on which the Corinthians stand and by which they are saved. It is 'of first importance' and something that Paul has 'received' (New Testament language for foundational tradition, when it comes to belief and practice). It is that Christ died for sins, was buried and rose again, appearing to Peter and the 12, to Paul, and to others.

This is the 'classic' formulation that have been formed by. The gospel is the death of Christ in our place on the cross, where he dealt with sin and death, and evangelism is announcing this, grounded in the witness of the first apostles and disciples.

But this is not the only way the New Testament talks about the gospel. Here are some examples, then a much bigger question.

- 2 Corinthians 11:4 seems to formulate coming to faith by means of the real Jesus, the real Spirit, and the real gospel. The way the text is set out implies that these are not three different matters but rather three aspects of the same thing. So, we can think of the gospel as being the proclamation of Jesus, and receiving the gospel by the Spirit.
- Romans 1:1-4 sets itself out as a statement of the gospel; it is 'the gospel concerning his Son'. The unpacking of that statement, though, does not mention the cross, nor the forgiveness of sins. Instead, it looks back to the Old Testament ('descended from David according to the flesh') before focusing in on the resurrection ('declared to be the Son of God with power... by resurrection from the dead') and culminating in what feels like a banner headline, 'Jesus Christ our Lord'. The gospel here is how the Messiah Jesus is Lord of all by virtue of the resurrection.
- There are other declarations of the gospel in the New Testament, which have the ring of credal statements. Romans 1:1-4 is one such. So also 1 Timothy 3:16. Paul can say, 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel' (2 Timothy 2:8). Romans 10:9 appears to be significant too in this regard, with Paul trying to state the gospel in as short a compass as he can – 'if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved'.
- When it comes to Acts, we see Peter and Paul in action preaching the gospel. Notable by its absence is 'the classic formulation'. The context of the preaching seems to be crucial in determining how the gospel is announced. When a Jewish audience is in view, Scripture is to the fore (e.g. Acts 2:14-36; 13:16-41), locating Jesus within the wider story

of God in the Old Testament. When there are pagans, Paul appeals to the natural world (Acts 14:15-17); when philosophers, to more intellectual references (Acts 17:22-31). The cross is rarely mentioned, on one occasion not even Jesus. It can be argued that Luke is assuming a knowledge of the gospel in his readers, and so does not feel the need to repeat it in each evangelistic sermon, but it is striking nonetheless.

Already we have different gospel declarations. This does not mean that there is more than one gospel (Paul is clear that there is a true gospel, and then a different gospel, which is no gospel at all), but it does mean that there are different aspects of the gospel. We have a gospel that is bigger than these individual affirmations, including the 'classic formulation'.

It is also worth noting, in passing, that when the early church continued to reflect on the gospel, they began to think in increasingly Trinitarian terms, culminating in the great Creeds. This lies outside the scope of this paper, but it does suggest to us wider perspectives in which to consider what we mean by the gospel.

And we also note the place of contextualisation when it comes to communicating the gospel. The culture, contexts and thought worlds of the audiences to the apostolic proclamation are deeply significant, and affect what is said and how it is said.

What About the Gospel and the Gospels?

Perhaps most striking of all is just how different the Gospel narratives are from the rest of the New Testament. Of course, this has been used to drive a wedge between Pauline Christianity and that of the Gospels, but this is to move way beyond observation into speculative interpretation. Maybe in reaction to this line of thought, orthodox Christians have either glossed over the differences or attempted a synchronistic mish-mash of the two, with varying degrees of success.

Mark is quite clear that what he is writing is 'the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1) – he is writing the Gospel. What he writes is an account of the teaching, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Luke writes 'an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us', deriving his work from the testimony of those 'who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (Luke 1:1, 2). All four Gospels arrange their material to give a narrative of Jesus's life, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection. They have different emphases, but for the Gospel writers, the gospel is what Jesus said and did.

Within this, the emphasis is on the kingdom of God. The synoptic Gospels have 76 different references to the kingdom, or 103, including the parallels. John's equivalent seems to be 'eternal life'. Mark makes the link between the gospel and the



kingdom explicit, when Jesus's very first words in his Gospel link the two: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news' (Mark 1:15). Matthew makes a similar link, when he book ends a major section of Jesus's teaching and healing with an all but identical phrase which conflates gospel and kingdom: 'Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people' (Matthew 4:23; compare 9:35). The gospel is about the kingdom, and this is manifest in the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus.

When we ask what the kingdom looks like in the Gospels, we have a nexus of ideas and practices:

- The word of God bearing fruit.
- The healing of the sick.
- The Lord's favour, especially towards the poor.
- The compassion of Jesus.
- Jesus challenging political and religious power.
- The fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in the person / the kingship of Jesus.
- The gathering of sinners and other social outcasts around Jesus.
- A lifestyle of discipleship or following Jesus, based on a very different way of looking at the world from the ways of power and privilege in the world.
- The recalibration of the Law and the Temple around the person and calling of Jesus.
- The establishing of the Lord's supper as a proleptic expression of God's kingdom.
- A pattern of prayer.
- Jesus fulfilling the OT vocation of the Messiah in his suffering and death.
- The eschatological fulfilment and anticipation of God's kingship on earth.

Although Jesus does speak a lot about forgiveness, it is notable that the forgiveness of sins is not as central to the kingdom of God as it is announced in the Gospels as we might expect from the vantage point of the 'classic formulation'.

A Way Forward

So, how are we to think of the gospel in ways which are faithful to the Gospels and their emphasis on the kingdom of God, and also to the 'classic formulation' and the other New Testament perspectives?

We can already draw out some clear lines of commonality:

- The gospel revolves intimately and inextricably around Jesus. There is a sense in which we need go no further than saying that the gospel is Jesus. To announce the gospel is to proclaim Jesus.
- The gospel is about the kingdom of God, as it is fulfilled and expressed in Jesus. This is the perspective and vocabulary of the synoptic Gospels.
- The gospel is about the kingship or the Lordship of Jesus, as it is most fully declared and enacted in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is closest to the 'classic formulation', but locates the gospel in the wider perspective of kingdom.

We can develop and sharpen this thinking by locating the gospel in the wider biblical narrative – by looking back to its Old Testament origins, and by looking forward, tracing how the rest of the New Testament and the early Church understood the gospel and its implications.

Tracking the Gospel

1. ITS OLD TESTAMENT ORIGINS

It is striking to note the emphasis in the New Testament on the origins of the gospel in the Old Testament. When Paul writes that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised according to the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, emphasis added), and that the gospel concerns the Son of God, 'descended from David according to the flesh' (Romans 1:3), this (in part at least) is what he has in mind. In the Gospels, Matthew opens his account of the life of Jesus by locating his ancestry within Israel's history (Matthew 1:1-17), something Mark also does from a different angle (Mark 3:23-38). There are numerous Old Testament prophecies cited, both explicitly and implicitly, and Jesus is viewed as fulfilling various types and ant-types from the Old Testament story. The Gospels show us Jesus as the new Moses, the new David, the giver of



the new Law, the new Exodus, the new Wisdom of God, as reconstituting and recalibrating Israel, as being in his body the new Temple, and so on. More specifically, the language of kingdom has a direct line from the Old Testament language of the kingship of God. The New Testament enables us to say that it is in Jesus that God's kingship is most profoundly and directly fulfilled and expressed.

There is another theological sense in which we must not lose the freshness and newness that breaks into the world in Jesus. There are as many discontinuities as there are continuities, and the New Testament is full of people struggling to make sense of Jesus and his kingdom, even from within an Old Testament framework. Nonetheless, we must say that the gospel is to be seen as growing out of Old Testament soil.

Practically, this means that the gospel is to be understood in terms of key Old Testament frames, such as:

- Creation and new creation.
- Fall and redemption.
- Sacrifice and atonement.
- Covenant, faithfulness, trusting in God.
- Exodus.
- Law, freedom and a vision for personal and social flourishing.
- Revelation from God.
- A communal life, centred on God.
- Land and place.
- Wandering in the wilderness and coming to the promised land.
- Kingship, peace and justice, safety, human and social flourishing.
- Exile, and homecoming.
- Judgement, personal and social accountability.
- Wisdom.
- A life of prayer, individually and corporately.

What we have is a large and panoramic vision of human life, lived in relation to God, who is living and active, loving and holy, real and interventionist, and who desires for himself a people with and through whom he wishes to extend his rule of love, peace and justice to all nations and people. He takes the initiative in all of this, but invites a collaboration and partnership with and through his people. The foundation for life is a rich mixture of personal and communal prayer, worship and holiness of life, to the glory of God and the blessing of the world.

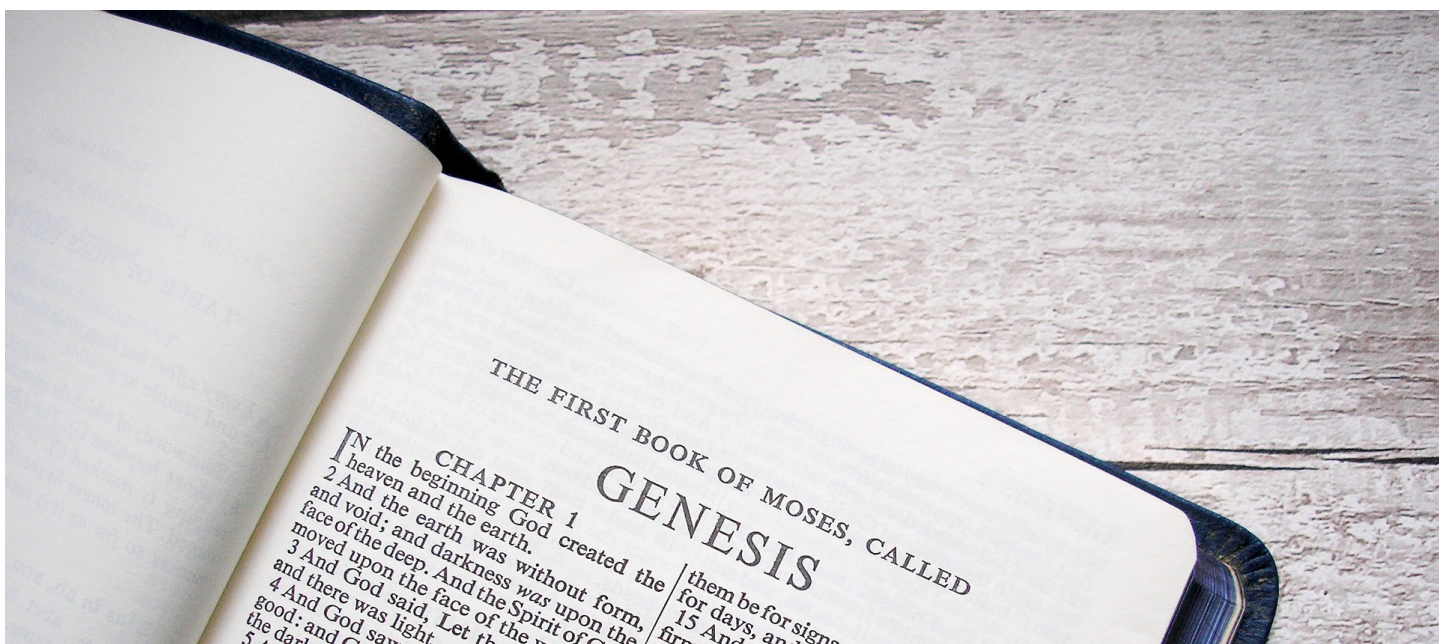
From this viewpoint, the gospel announces itself as the gracious initiative of God, the king of the whole earth, who calls to himself a people to be for the display of his glory and the extension of his kingdom to the whole earth. In the words of Isaiah 40, Jerusalem is the 'herald of good tidings' (the gospel), announcing that exile is over, that the glory of the LORD is to be revealed to all people, and declaring "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9, 2, 5, 9). The gospel is strikingly:

1. About God;
2. A sharing of a communal vocation for the people of God; and
3. An announcement that the Lord is king.

2. THE GOSPEL AND ESCHATOLOGY

If we look to the opposite end of time, and view the fulfilment of the gospel in terms of eschatology, we find similarities with the Old Testament gospel vision and developments.

The New Testament uses the language of 'the renewal of all things' (Matthew 19:28). Interestingly, the context for the phrase is Jesus seated in kingly power, with the 12 apostles as the fulfilment of the vocation of the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus, similarly, speaks of the fulfilment of the supper he is instituting for his disciples, in terms of kingdom, this time 'my Father's kingdom' (Matthew 26:29). The eschaton is seen as the Messianic banquet.



It is quite clear that there is to be a judgment of all, in terms of alignment with Jesus. The predominant New Testament language though is wider than this, less focused on the individual, more on the people of God and the future of the earth and humankind, with the glory of God as the vision and animating force of the new creation. If we follow passages such as Colossians 1:15-20 and Romans 8:18-25, we can see God's ultimate aim as being the healing, reconciliation and freedom of all creation, with the power of the cross of Christ being how this enormous feat can be accomplished, and with a special anticipatory role for the people of God. There is something properly universal (even if not universalist) in this vision: Christ comes as the new Adam to restore all in the old Adam (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49). The end envisaged as the restoration of all humanity and the whole creation, freed from the rule and power of death through the decisive humanity of Christ, with the glory of God in Christ at the heart of all things. To view this through the lens of the book of Revelation, we see that 'the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 11:15). The judgment is the removal of everything that stands opposed to the reign and rule of the Lord Almighty and his suffering Messiah, the end of Babylon and the various beasts, the destruction of death and Satan, the vindication of all those who were faithful to the Lamb, and the fulfilment of the vision of Eden for all the earth.



We are clearly in apocalyptic territory here, and there is a strong strand of the New Testament which views the achievements of the cross of Christ in these terms. Galatians 1:4, for instance, talks of how Christ 'gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age', and Colossians 1:13 of how God 'has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son'. Here the gospel is about the turning of the ages through the triumph of Christ over evil on the cross – 'everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Corinthians 5:17). Darkness and death, all the powers of the old age, have been defeated on the cross, and the victorious Christ has ushered in the new age, the age of the Spirit and the fullness of the kingdom of God. 'And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new'' (Revelation 21:5).

Without wanting to deny the reality of personal judgment, it seems to me that the eschatological emphasis of the New Testament is on the victory of God in the renewal of all things, the fulfilment of God's good purposes for his creation and for all people, the triumph of the people of God in Christ as they act with him in their role as agents of this cosmic reconciliation, and the glory of God at the heart of the world's good future.

This feels a step away from the traditional heaven and hell view of eschatology, but it seems more authentically and truly

biblical to me. It aligns with the anticipation of the gospel in the Old Testament, and restores the New Testament emphasis on God's glory and his vision for the future of the heavens and the earth in the new creation, with life as it should be, all gathered in worship and celebration in the marriage supper of the Lamb.

This has profound implications for our understanding of the gospel.

1. It is, in a proper sense, universal. God is concerned for the future of humanity and all creation. This is not a spin off, but a central aspect of his heart in the gospel. This does mean that 'the five marks of mission' are right to include marks 3-5 in their definition, and also means that it is right to include them under the category of 'gospel'. This approach confronts a Platonic Christianity, which separates spirit and matter, and sees salvation primarily in terms of a saved soul going to heaven after death, but rather reorients things so that it is the earth that is redeemed and restored, and humanity's initial vocation to be stewards with God in loving and tending his creation is retained as central.
2. It sees the Church in the light of an anticipatory group of people, living out in advance the vocation of all redeemed humanity. Evangelism is both demonstration and proclamation – a showing of what life in the new heavens and new earth will be like, a life of freedom from the powers and of worship to Christ, in whom God has shown forth the truly human life.
3. It shows us a magnificent vision of Christ, in which his two natures (as fully human and fully divine) are crucial. He is the true human being, the new Adam and the ultimate Adam, living out the human vocation perfectly. And he is, in his humanity, fully divine, as he takes on himself the suffering kingship of God. He is truly cosmic, the heart of creation, and he is truly human.



its evangelistic vocation. It is the Church embodying the gospel.

When we reflect on Jesus's practices of community building in the Gospels, we may take it a step further. The invitation to 'tax collectors and sinners', to the poor and the outcasts, to the Gentiles, to the disciples and to the crowds in the Gospels is an invitation to eat in the kingdom of God (e.g. Matthew 14:15-24), it is an evangelistic invitation. From this perspective, once more the Church embodies the gospel, even is the gospel.

Paul states this in Ephesians, with its high doctrine of the Church. The Church is 'the fulness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:23). The cross of Christ brought about reconciliation between people groups and inclusion for all through Christ in 'the household of God' (2:11-21). In the Church 'the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus' (3:6). It is 'through the Church [that] the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (3:10).

Arguably the primary metaphor for the Church in the New Testament is that of the body of Christ (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:27; Romans 12:5; Ephesians 1:23). Paul writes about 'discerning the body' in 1 Corinthians 11:29, where the language seems to refer as much to the body of the Church as it does to the body of the Lord in the bread and wine. To be baptised is to be baptised into Christ Jesus (Romans 6:3), but it is also to be 'baptised into one body' (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The practice of the early Church confirms the link between the gospel and the Church. The Acts of the Apostles is the story of the founding of churches all-round the Mediterranean. Paul's letters are about the health and sustainability of the churches which he and others had planted. For the apostles, to preach the gospel was inseparable from the founding of churches. The great confrontation around justification by faith in Galatians is as much about the horizontal relationships in the church as it is about the vertical relationship with God; if Gentiles believers are being excluded from the people of God by a cultural and religious practice apart from the sole factor of the grace of Christ, then it is no longer the gospel, argues Paul. To turn that around, the gospel is to be understood as God's grace in Christ which admits all, regardless of background, into God's people. The gospel has an inescapably ecclesial aspect.

I labour the point to show that the Church and the gospel go together. To see the Church as separate from the gospel is not a New Testament way of viewing things. Our individualistic Western culture makes it hard for us to see this, especially if we are from a Protestant stable. Biblically, the gospel can be seen as a gracious invitation from God to join his people, by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the power of the Spirit. God has chosen to live amongst his

4. This perspective on the gospel gives us real and true hope. It is oriented towards a future in which the planet and all creation is assured, in which the major issues dividing humanity are dealt with, and in which God in Christ is shown to be wise, loving, powerful and supreme, bringing about this glorious future.

3. THE GOSPEL AND THE CHURCH

Historically, ecclesiology and missiology have not had much to do with each other. If there was a connection it was in the sense that Church was the end of mission – those who respond to the gospel are added to the number of the Church. Happily, there is now an increased recognition that Church is integral to mission, may even be the prime method of God's mission in the world.

The centrality of the people of God is readily apparent throughout Scripture. The Old Testament shows us God calling his people to be his vehicle for bringing blessing to the world (e.g. the call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3), to be his covenant people, 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). This language is picked up in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Peter 2:9) – the vocation of God's people is to be priestly, to bring God's kingdom to bear in the world, to 'proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (ibid). This is the Church being the Church in

people, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit. To encounter God is to be in the Church, and to be in the Church carries the possibility of the experience of the living God in Christ by the Spirit. The Church is the showcase and the living out of the gospel.

4. THE GOSPEL AND POWER

By 'power' here, I am thinking of how the gospel 'is the power of God for salvation' (Romans 1:16), rather than the power dynamics of human relations and institutions.

In the Gospels, we have multiple examples of the power of Jesus over sin, suffering, sickness, the elements, the demonic and death. He palpably and demonstrably brings transformation in every realm – the spiritual, the physical, the social. The New Testament foresees a radical personal change for the disciples of Jesus, as symbolised in dying to sin and rising to new life in baptism. The call of the gospel is to follow Jesus, to take up our cross and follow in his steps. The life of the disciple is to be transformed more and more into his likeness, walking as he walked, serving the purposes of God in the world.

This has implications for our understanding of the gospel. First, there is the assumption of ongoing personal transformation through the grace of Jesus. The gospel carries a call to repentance, and an invitation into a lifestyle with Jesus – a life of prayer, commitment to his people, holiness of life, a sharing of his priorities around the poor, peace and justice, and a sharing of faith. Traditionally, justification and sanctification have tended to be separated, as if the gospel is a doorway into an altogether separate land of holiness. The call to holiness of life, the life of discipleship and following Jesus, is, however, all of a piece with the gospel.

Secondly, the gospel is spiritual power, which enables and enacts this change in us. There is an important theological link between believing the gospel and receiving the Spirit of the risen Jesus (e.g. Romans 8:9, 11; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 3:2, 3). The gospel is fundamentally supernatural, in that it enables that which is not possible naturally, by virtue of an act of God. The gospel is access into the kingdom of God, into God's presence, to his future for a world transformed by his power and love in Jesus. Faith or believing the gospel is the gateway to receiving the Spirit of Jesus. There is continuity between the message of the gospel, and the means by which we are saved and called into a holy life.

Western Protestantism is particularly vulnerable to missing this, allied so closely to modernity as it is. If the gospel is viewed as essentially cognitive, thoughts to be understood, then these elements of spiritual power, liberation and life-change can easily be obscured, marginalised and even lost.

The gospel, then, is a call to change, and an invitation to such change through the power of its life-giving message, as it is enabled through the Spirit.

Summary and Conclusion

These trajectories, when mapped onto the preliminary conclusions we had reached from looking at the gospel in the Gospels, gives us a broader canvas within which to consider the gospel.

Fundamentally, the gospel is about Jesus – 'that foundation is Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 3:11). We must resist the reification of the gospel, making it a 'thing' or even a commodity. The gospel is a person, Jesus. And it is the supremacy and authority and majesty of Jesus, shown and declared in the resurrection, which is the focus of Christian hope, both personal and for the world. This Jesus is the one in whom all the hopes and aspirations of the Old Testament people of God are fulfilled. In this Jesus, God's presence and kingdom come into the world. By his death on the cross, he breaks the power of all the earthly powers arraigned against God and his rule and which hold humanity in degradation, despair, alienation and destruction. By his resurrection from the dead, he is declared the king of God's kingdom, the one who will lead the transformation of the world into what it was always intended to be, the place where earth and heaven overlap in the glory of God. The gospel is an announcement of this king and his rule, what he has achieved and what he invites us into.

The four trajectories enable us to nuance this:

- The gospel springs from the categories of kingdom, covenant, and wisdom in the Old Testament (amongst others). Its origins are fundamentally about Israel's vocation to bring God's blessing to the whole world.
- The telos of the gospel is best viewed apocalyptically – as the destruction of evil, the liberation of God's world from the powers ranged against God and his rule (including sin, Satan and death), with the central vocation of the people of God in this liberation.
- The gospel is an invitation to join the people of God, the locus of so much of God's reconciling work in the world, and the epicentre of his presence and purposes.
- The gospel is an announcement of the kingship of Jesus, seen most fully and clearly on the cross, and a summons to all to follow him in personal transformation and a life of discipleship, serving his kingdom in the world.

It is perhaps salutary to remember that understandings of the gospel have varied throughout history, with different ages emphasising different aspects. The sermons of Acts also show us how different contexts and audiences necessitate an appropriate contextualising of the gospel, drawing out particular aspects of the gospel which are most germane and appropriate to the situations and people to which and whom it is preached. The question, 'What is the gospel for our age?' does not mean a rewriting of the gospel, but rather an application of the gospel to our times and contexts.

In conclusion, the 'classic formulation' of the gospel must still be central. The heart of our faith is 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2:2). The broader biblical context of

the gospel, though, enables us to locate the ‘classic formulation’ within the wider message of God’s kingdom – his purposes to liberate, heal, and transform the earth and the whole cosmos, filling it with his glory. The humanity of Jesus, as well as his divinity, comes centre stage, as he redeems the human race, relaunching the human project as rulers of God’s renewed creation. The gospel thus addresses the vocation of humanity and the world’s future; through personal conversion, through joining the people of God, the renewed humanity fulfils the original vocation of Adam and Eve, and of Abraham, and of Moses, Isaiah, to follow our king and redeemer in serving, loving, healing and transforming the world around us.

In practice, this will mean an understanding and articulation of the gospel along these lines:

- Jesus Christ as its heart and substance. Jesus, the fully human one, through whom God breaks in to the world by the power of the Spirit to fulfil his ancient plans and purposes for the world. This happens supremely on the cross, where Jesus breaks the power of sin and death, and through his resurrection, when he is demonstrated to be king of all.
- The gospel is about Jesus giving us access to the kingdom of God – that power and presence of God, active in the world. This is grace, healing, equality, human flourishing, and divine power, although very different from how we might have previously imagined it.
- The gospel is about liberation from guilt, shame and fear, and from those things which enslave our lives and poison our relationships, and cause us to despair of the future.
- The gospel is shown in the reconciled community of the people of God, reconstituted by Jesus. The gospel is an invitation to join the Church, and to join with Jesus in his mission through the Church of bringing love and healing and hope to the world.
- The gospel is an ‘on ramp’, which sets us going in certain directions in following Jesus – prayer and worship; commitment to the Church; serving and loving the world, especially the poor; suffering and experiencing spiritual power; declaring the kingdom of God in Jesus; personal transformation; and the hope of everlasting life in God’s renewed heavens and earth.
- Alternative images for the gospel might be to think of it in terms of a stone thrown into a pond (there is a centre, but it sets up ripples which spread outwards) or of an archery target (again with a centre, but also with outwardly spreading related bands). If the centre is the kingship or Lordship of Jesus and his coming kingdom, then many things follow from this.

There is so much more to be said, doubtless many omissions and errors here. May this paper be an invitation to consider again the power and glory of Christ in the gospel of God, and a summons to live and proclaim this great announcement of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God.

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Appendix – Implications for Evangelism

If this theology of the gospel is accurate, there are major implications for the evangelistic task of the Church. Here are a few of them:

1. How can we ensure that *Jesus is the central subject of the gospel*? The gospel is not primarily talk about God (or sin and forgiveness, or peace and justice, or ecology and so on), but is about Jesus. And not Jesus as an idea or history or a text, but as the living Lord. Talking about Jesus is the Church’s central evangelistic task.
2. How can we talk of Jesus as Lord? If the gospel is about Jesus as the king of God’s kingdom, through his life and death and resurrection, *how can we proclaim the kingdom* as he did? How can we make all five marks of mission part of church life, without losing the primacy of marks 1 and 2? How can we preach Jesus as the powerful Lord of all the world, who can liberate from all other powers?
3. How can we include *Old Testament thought* in our proclamation of the gospel, especially in a culture that is far away from familiarity with the Bible? Is there a task of Christian education alongside gospel proclamation?
4. How can we link up the *gospel and the Church* in our thinking, evangelism, and practice? How can the whole Church be an agent of evangelism? How can this link with church planting? How can we include the invitation to join God’s people in their task, shared with God for the transformation of the world?
5. How can we make sure that there is a clear link between *the gospel summons and the life of holiness and discipleship*?

Resources

This is a short and rather random list of suggestions:

- The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God, Dallas Willard (HarperCollins, 1997), especially chapter 2.
- How God Became King: Getting to the Heart of the Gospels, Tom Wright (SPCK, 2012).
- [‘What is the Gospel?’ with N. T. Wright.](#)
- [‘What is the Gospel?’ with Scot McKnight.](#)
- [Evangelism Culture Webinar](#), with Christian Selvaratnam, Jay Moon and Bud Simon.