

# Getting and communicating the gospel

Dwell Conference - NYC - April 2008

## Introduction

There are two ways in which, I think, one should 'dwell' in the gospel. The first way is that you must dwell with the gospel *Biblically*. That is, you live with--you deeply reflect upon and grasp--what the Bible means by 'gospel' and you learn to see the gospel of Jesus everywhere in it. That's what Jesus spent so much time teaching his disciples about after his resurrection (Luke 24.) To them the Bible was a mish-mash of narratives, laws, and directions. They didn't see the unifying theme of the Bible--salvation by grace through Christ. The second way is that you must dwell with the gospel *personally*. Colossians 3:16 literally says that--the gospel (the '*word of Christ*') must '*dwell in you richly.*' This means you must have your inner being and character shaped by the gospel. Everything you do must be 'in line with the truth of the gospel' (Gal 2:14.) It is impossible to cover both of these topics today. But since the second kind of dwelling depends on the first kind (and since there are a lot of resources in Redeemer for the second kind--e.g. the Galatians curriculum) I'm going to look at the first. Even so, I can't even cover this topic fully. To dwell with the gospel Biblically not only means I have to understand what the New Testament says the gospel is, but how every part of the Old Testament points us to fulfillment in Jesus. I won't go into this latter subject.

## Part 1 - Getting the gospel

### There is only one gospel.

A generation ago, it would have been hard to imagine evangelicals unable to agree on what the simple gospel is: 1) God made you and you must have a relationship with him, 2) but your sin separates you from God. 3) Jesus, God's Son took the punishment your sins deserved. 4) If you repent for your sins and trust in his work 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.

But many today challenge this way of expressing the gospel. In *A New Kind of Christian* Brian McLaren's character Neo says he doesn't "think most Christians have any idea of what the gospel really is." When his interlocutor responds that he thought the gospel was "accepting Christ as your personal savior and justification by faith not works based on the finished work of Christ on the cross" Neo responds, "Yes, that's exactly what most modern Christians would say....reduc[ing] the gospel to modern dimensions--laws, steps, simple diagrams, complete with a sales close." When pressed on what the gospel is, Neo insists that it can't be reduced to a formula, other than the one Jesus used, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." He then quickly adds

that we shouldn't use that short hand either, since 'every-thing is contextual' and the term 'kingdom' would be opaque to many people today. (*A New Kind of Christian* p.105-106.)

If Neo's views coincide with McLaren's, he is standing in a stream of thought that began in the 19th century in the Tübingen school of German Biblical scholarship, which saw Paul's gospel of atonement and justification as quite different than Jesus' gospel of the kingdom found in the Synoptic gospels. In the mid-20th century, C.H. Dodd opposed Tübingen, proposing there was one consensus gospel message (or *kerygma*) in the Bible which could be outlined. Though the Synoptics emphasized the 'kingdom,' John 'eternal life,' Acts the resurrection, and Paul 'justification and atonement,' these were ways of saying basically the same thing. Countering Dodd, James Dunn in *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (1977) argued that the various gospel formulations in the Bible are so different we can't come up with a single formulation. Dunn and McLaren are not saying that these various gospels in the New Testament are directly contradictory to each other, but that they are so remarkably diverse in their perspective that it is impossible to make a list or outline and point to it and say: 'there is *the* simple gospel.'

I believe we must side with Dodd over Dunn if we are to be true to first century Christians' own understanding of the gospel. Paul in Galatians 1:8 condemns anyone who preaches 'another gospel' than the one he declares. Then in 1 Corinthians 15:10-11 Paul takes pains to show that the gospel he declares is the same as that preached by Peter, John, and the others. "Whether it was I or they, " Paul says, referring to them, "so we preached and so you believed." It would be impossible for Paul to condemn a 'false gospel' and affirm the preaching of Peter as '*the* gospel' without assuming a single, consensus body of gospel content.

But surely there is a big difference between the gospel of Paul and the way Jesus declared the kingdom in the gospels? There are thousands of websites by young emerging Christian leaders who complain that the older evangelical church has been in 'Pauline captivity,' focusing entirely on the individualistic gospel of justification and atonement, rather than on Jesus' sweeping declaration that 'the Kingdom of God is at hand.' But the differences between Paul and the Synoptic gospels are basically superficial. A helpful recent article on this is Simon Gathercole's "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.) (See below.) There *is* one Biblical gospel.

**There are different forms of the one gospel.**

So there must be one simple gospel, yet there are clearly different forms in which that one gospel can be expressed. Someone might complain: "Isn't that the same as saying that there are different gospels?" The answer is—to say there is one gospel in different forms is the Bible's own way of speaking

of it, and we should stick with it. Martin Hengel's *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, makes an excellent case that the early church did not speak of the 'Four Gospels' but of *the* gospel according to Matthew, according to Mark, and so on.

Paul is an example. After insisting there is only one gospel (Gal 1:8) in Galatians 2:7 he speaks of being entrusted with '*the gospel of the uncircumcised*' as opposed to the '*gospel of the circumcised.*' In 1 Cor 1:22-25 Paul says that when he 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. However, 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. 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 of Paul can be discerned in his 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 seems to emphasize 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. The kingdom of God *does* take corporate shape, and it does have major implications for how we live. It is a new order of things, in which money is not made an idol (Mark 10), in which the hungry, the naked, and the homeless are cared for (Matthew 25). 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 is the one gospel?**

What, then, is the one, simple gospel? Simon Gathercole distills a three-point gospel outline that both Paul and the Synoptic writers held in common. 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. (Romans 1:3-4; Phil 2:4ff.) Second, by his death and resurrection Jesus atoned for our sin and secured our justification by grace, not our works (1 Corinthians 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 out 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 (Matthew 19:28.)

If I had to put this outline in a single statement, I might do it like this: **1)** In the person of Jesus God emptied himself of his glory and became human. **2)** Through the work of Jesus God substituted himself for us and atoned for our sin, by grace bringing us into fellowship with him in the church. **3)** At the return of Jesus God will restore creation and make a new world in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever.

The second of these elements was at the heart of the older gospel messages, namely, salvation is by *grace not works*. It was the last of the three elements 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, a grasp of this 3-point outline should make Christians interested in both evangelism and conversions as well as service to our neighbor and working for peace and justice in the world.

### Feeling the Tension

However, it's my experience 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 did a word study of 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 to *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 (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 imperative of the gospel is 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. In Galatians 2:14 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 (Matt 9:35).

When we realize that Jesus is going to some day 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 [www.wheaton.edu/CACE/resources/onlinearticles/MooNature.pdf](http://www.wheaton.edu/CACE/resources/onlinearticles/MooNature.pdf).

## Part 2 - Communicating the gospel

### The gospel and the kingdom

The gospel: 1) ***In the person of Jesus--God emptied himself of his glory.*** Jesus, the promised Messianic King and the divine Son of God was born into the world in a stable, as a poor, humble, and mortal man. He took upon himself a human nature and the life of a servant. He spent his entire life serving others—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising the dead, preaching and teaching. 2) ***Through the work of Jesus--God substituted himself for us.*** Sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, serving as our own Saviors and Lords, putting ourselves where only God deserved to be. In Jesus, God substituted himself for us. He made full atonement and absorbed the punishment our sins deserve, putting himself where we deserved to be. This secured justification and acceptance freely

by grace. 3) ***At the return of Jesus--God will make a new world.*** At the beginning the Triune God created the world to be a place of community, peace and joy. Sin brought evil and suffering into the world. But at the end of history, God will restore this material creation, destroying death, disease, injustice, and suffering of all kinds. It will be a world in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever.

Sometime in the Bible the good news of Jesus is called the '*gospel of the kingdom.*' A new 'kingdom' is an administration, a new order of things. And indeed, the three aspects of the gospel enumerated above brings 'God's new order of things' in three ways:

1) ***It's an 'upside-down' kingdom.*** Many kingdom texts talk the reversal of values in Jesus' kingdom (Luke 6:20ff.) in which the poor, the sorrowful, and the persecuted are above the rich, recognized, and satisfied. Why would this be? It is because Jesus emptied himself of his glory. Though he was rich, he became poor. Though he was a king, he served. Though he was the greatest, he made himself the servant of all. He triumphed over sin not by taking up power but by sacrificial service. He 'won' through losing everything. This is a complete reversal of the world's way of thinking, which values power, recognition, wealth, and status. The gospel, then, creates a new kind of servant community, with people who live out people with a whole alternate way of being human. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition--all these things are marks of living in the world, and are the opposite of the mindset of the kingdom.

2) ***It's an 'inside-out' kingdom.*** Many kingdom texts speak of the inner spiritual nature of the kingdom. The Pharisees put all the emphasis on externals, rather than on a regenerated heart (Luke 11:39-41.) It is not a matter of meat or drink but of peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17.) Why would this be? Jesus took our place on the cross and accomplished salvation *for us*, which we receive freely as a gift. Traditional religion teaches that if we do good deeds and follow the moral rules in our behavior on the outside, God will come into our hearts, bless us and give us salvation. In other words--if I obey, God will come into my life and love and accept me. But the gospel is the reverse of this--if I know in my heart God has accepted me and loved me freely, by grace, then I can begin to obey, out of inner joy and gratitude. We are justified by grace alone, not by works; we are beautiful and righteous in God's sight. Once we get this understanding on the inside, it revolutionizes how we relate to God, ourselves, and others on the outside.

3) ***It's a 'forward-back' kingdom.*** The coming of the Messianic King is in two stages. At his first coming, he saved us from the penalty of sin, and gave us the presence of the Holy Spirit. But at the end of time he will come to complete what he began at the first coming, saving us from the dominion and very presence of sin and evil. He will bring a new creation, a material world cleansed of all brokenness. Christians now live in light of that future reality. We evangelize, telling people about the gospel and preparing them

for the judgment. We also help the poor and work for justice, because we know that is God's will and eventually all oppression will be put down. And we teach Christians to integrate their faith and their work, so they can be 'culture makers,' working for the common good and human flourishing. The 'already' but 'not yet' of the kingdom keeps us either from utopian, triumphalistic visions of 'cultural takeover' or pessimism and withdrawal from society.

### **Embodying the gospel in the church**

A church that truly *dwells* in the Biblical gospel will look quite unusual. Because of the 'inside-out' kingdom/substitutionary atonement aspect, the church will put great emphasis on personal conversion, experiential grace renewal, evangelism, outreach, and church planting. This makes it look like an evangelical-charismatic church. Because of the 'upside-down' kingdom/incarnation aspect, the church will put great emphasis on deep community, cell groups or house churches, and will emphasize radical giving and sharing of resources, spiritual disciplines, racial reconciliation, and living with the poor. This makes it look like an Anabaptist 'peace' church. Because of the 'forward-back kingdom/restoration aspect, the church will put great emphasis on seeking the welfare of the city, neighborhood and civic involvement, cultural engagement, and training people to work in 'secular' vocations out of a Christian world-view. This makes it look like mainline church or perhaps a Kuyperian Reformed church. Very few church movements are able to integrate and inter-relate these ministries and emphases because of a comprehensive view of the Biblical gospel.

### **Preaching the gospel in all its forms**

You would expect the author of this article at this point now to explain how he has perfectly integrated the various aspects of the simple gospel in his 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 nonbelieving 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 everytime.

**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 people with moralist, religious backgrounds as well as those with 'post-

modern,' pluralistic world-views. 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 more traditional upbringing can grasp the idea of sin as the violation of God's moral law. That law can then be expounded in such a way that they realize they fall short of it. In that context, the idea of the wrath of a holy God against sin makes sense. Then 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.'

**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 on 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 whole Bible and so 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 ever preach one form, you are in great danger of giving your people an unbalanced diet of gospel-truth. What is the alternative? Don't use just one gospel form in your preaching. 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. However, Manhattan is also filled with 'post-modern' 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. 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 justify and save them, to give them everything that 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.'

Follow the lead of the texts and vary the form, and then your people will hear all the points. Won't this confuse people? No, it will stretch 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 in the hearts of its 'target' audience, opens them to the other points of the gospel made more vividly in other forms. When you preach several different gospel forms with some regularity, you are more true to the Bible, you make your own listeners more balanced and mature in their understanding, and you make your own church more diverse. Instead of having a homogeneous group taken from just one slice of our pluralistic society, you have a mixed body of people from across our cultural spectrum.

Today there are many who doubt that there is just one gospel. That gives them the warrant to ignore Paul's 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 too one-dimensional. Neither of these approaches are as true to the Biblical material, nor as effective in actual ministry, as that which understands that there is one gospel in several forms in the Bible.