

## The Biblical Gospel

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The question of what the biblical gospel is must be especially important to ‘evangelicals’, whose very label includes the word ‘evangel’, the English transliteration of the Greek word for ‘gospel’ (*euangelion*). Historically, evangelicals have been concerned to preserve and promulgate the gospel. But precisely what is this gospel? All sides recognize that it is ‘good news’ in some sense. But what is the content of this good news?

Although it is worth saying something about the ‘gospel’ words in the NT, the issue cannot be answered by mere word studies. Some NT books, e.g. John’s Gospel, never use the word ‘gospel’, even though from a thematic perspective they obviously have as much ‘good news’ to tell as books that abound in the ‘gospel’ word-group. In the pages that follow, therefore, after some observations on the relevant words, I outline some of the broader considerations that must be taken on board if we are to grasp what the biblical gospel is. And, finally, I outline the primacy of the gospel in all Christian thought and mission over against competitors and would be usurpers.

### Gospel words

In non-biblical sources before the NT period, *euangelion* customarily referred to the reward given a messenger who brought good news—of military victory, perhaps, or of escape from danger. By an obvious transfer, it came to refer to the good news itself. Modern discussions of ‘gospel’ commonly cite the enthronement inscription, dated 9 BC, from Priene in Asia Minor. In this inscription the birthday of the emperor Augustus is hailed as ‘the beginning of the joyful news (*euangelia*) for the world’. The noun occurs once in the LXX with the meaning ‘reward’ (2 Samuel 4:10), and five times referring to

military 'good news' (2 Samuel 18:20, 22, 25, 27; 2 Kings 7:9).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the cognate verb, euangelizomai ('I announce or proclaim good news', sometimes parallel to kēryssō, 'I preach,' 'I proclaim') is found more frequently. But clearly it is the NT that repeatedly invests euangelion with the meaning 'good news,' just as it is the NT that must establish what the good news is.

The use of 'gospel' to refer to a particular kind of book, as in the phrase [p. 76] 'the Four Gospels', would not have been understood in the apostolic period nor for another century. In the NT period Christians spoke of only one gospel. The first four books of the NT, nowadays called 'gospels', were thought of as records or of witnesses to that one gospel which Paul calls 'the gospel of God . . . regarding his Son' (Romans 1:1, 3). Thus the first book in our NT canon was thought of as 'the gospel according to Matthew', the second 'the gospel according to Mark', and so on. So far as the evidence goes, the first source to refer to the books themselves as 'gospels' is Justin Martyr (mid-second century) who writes that the 'memoirs of the apostles' were called 'gospels' (note the plural form) and were read out to the congregation (Apology i.66).

The distribution of both the noun euangelion and the verb euangelizomai in the NT is extraordinarily uneven. Mark deploys the noun 8 times, and not the verb; at 1:14, it is 'the gospel of God'. Matthew uses the verb once (11:5), and adds 'of the kingdom' to 'gospel' (4:23; 9:35); Luke-Acts arrests the noun only in Acts 15:7 and 20:24, but uses the verb 25 times. The gospel and letters of John use neither. Paul is the NT author most given to 'gospel' words: in the 13 canonical epistles, the noun is found 60 times and the verb 21 times. The scattering of occurrences in the rest of the NT books I shall mention below.

The content of the gospel is briefly given in Mark 1:15: 'The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.' So also is the conclusion to be drawn: 'Repent and believe the gospel.' Thus the gospel is not, in the first instance, the call to repentance and faith; rather, the gospel is the joyous news that grounds the call to repentance and faith. This good news is that the long awaited kingdom, the kingdom of God, is dawning.

Such a formulation, had we space, would bring us into extended reflection on the nature of the kingdom in the NT. Although 'kingdom' can refer to the unlimited sovereignty of God, or to the realm of a particular king, in the NT the word more commonly refers to that invasive aspect of God's sovereignty under which there is eternal life. Everyone is under the kingdom in the first sense, ie under God's sovereignty, whether they like it or not; only those who have passed from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son (Colossians 1:13), those who have been born from above (John 3:3, 5), are under or in the kingdom in the dominant NT sense.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Why a substantial number of writers say that the noun is not found in the LXX, or found only once, is quite unclear.

<sup>2</sup> This sort of understanding of the 'kingdom' in the NT is not necessarily at loggerheads with more recent discussion that affirms the word is a 'tensive symbol'—ie 'the kingdom of God' does not refer to a single entity, but evokes a complex range of notions rooted in the understanding that God is king. See N Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the*

This kingdom has two peculiar features to it. First, the king of this kingdom is commonly said to be God (not least in the common expression 'the kingdom of God') but can also be said to be Christ: 'My kingdom is not of this world,' Jesus said (John 18:36). The point is that all of God's sovereignty is mediated through the resurrected and exalted Jesus (1 Corinthians 15). Before the Sanhedrin, Jesus himself insisted, in the terms of the vision of Daniel chapter 7, that as the Son of Man he would be seen sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Once resurrected, he insists that all authority in heaven and on earth is his (Matthew [p. 77] 28:18–20). It is vital to recognize that these themes are repeatedly underscored in the NT even when 'kingdom' language is not used. For example, in the vision of Revelation chapters 4–5, God is disclosed as utterly transcendent, the one whose throne is above all other thrones. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ, disclosed as the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, the Root of David, emerges from the throne to take the book in God's right hand and open the seals. Thereafter there is a recurring designation of Deity: 'the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb'. In short, this kingdom is God's, and it is no less Christ's. There is no sense of anomaly. The glory of the Lamb's triumph has roots in OT history, OT scripture, even as it is grounded in the person and work of the historical Jesus, and anticipates the unshielded radiance of the new heaven and the new earth.

The second peculiar feature to this kingdom is that King Jesus 'reigns from the cross', as early patristic writers put it. John subtly develops this theme in his passion narrative (John chapters 18–19). Pilate cannot quite grasp what kind of king Jesus is (18:36–37). Is he the kind of king who threatens Caesar (chapter 19)? If he is the king of the Jews, why do these manipulated crowds of Jews reject him as king? 'Shall I crucify your king?' Pilate asks them (19:15). And, of course, he does crucify him, for King Jesus establishes the peculiar nature of his kingdom by dying on behalf of his rebellious people. Pilate may not grasp the theology, but he likes the irony and posts a notice above the cross: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' (19:19).

If the gospel is the gospel of the kingdom, it is no less, as we have seen, the gospel of God regarding his Son (Romans chapter 1). There is no conflict between these two designations, and both drive us to focus on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the King, whose utterly extraordinary mission was to die the odious death of an accursed wretch, in fulfillment of OT patterns and pictures and prophecies of sacrifice. The good news that focuses on Jesus and his cross-work was anticipated, according to Paul, two millennia earlier in the promises given to Abraham (Galatians 3:8), and repeatedly promised in the scriptures (Romans 1:2).

The message that Paul preached was 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Corinthians

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Kingdom (Philadelphia, 1976), pp 29–34; and especially R T France, 'The church and the kingdom of God: some hermeneutical issues' in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, D A Carson (ed) (Exeter, 1984), pp 30–44.

1:18–2:5). ‘Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel’ (2 Timothy 2:8). The gospel is this ‘word of truth’ (Ephesians 1:13). However hidden this gospel might be to unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:3, 4) and to those who try to domesticate it by demands for supernatural proofs and oratorical demonstrations (1 Corinthians 1:21–23), Paul knew that the secret of this gospel’s power lay in the message of the cross, mediated by the Spirit. His aim was to preach in such a way that people were not swayed by his eloquence and rhetoric; he wanted to preach ‘with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power’ so that his hearers’ faith ‘might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power’ (2:4–5). Paul knew that God himself had chosen the Thessalonian converts because his gospel came to them not simply with words but also [p. 78] with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:5). So much is power an accompaniment of this gospel that Paul can insist the gospel is ‘the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes’ (Romans 1:16). This gospel discloses a righteousness from God that is appropriated by faith (1:17), a righteousness inextricably tied to Christ’s sacrifice, by which God demonstrated his justice while justifying the ungodly (3:21–26).

Paul’s grasp of the gospel, with all of its intricate connections with antecedent revelation and all of its comprehensive framework, came to him by revelation (Galatians 1:11–12). Paul knew himself to be entrusted with the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:4; 1 Timothy 1:11, ‘the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me’). The message he preached was not merely the word of human beings but the word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13). In Paul’s proclamation of the gospel, God himself was making his appeal through the apostle (2 Corinthians 5:20). This does not mean that Paul was a disengaged mannequin: far from it, for he writes to some of his converts, ‘We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us’ (1 Thessalonians 2:8). He feels under divine compulsion to proclaim this gospel (1 Corinthians 9:16), and therefore asks fellow believers for prayer that he may discharge this obligation with boldness (Ephesians 6:19), whatever the opposition (1 Thessalonians 2:2) and suffering which he wants younger preachers to experience: ‘But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace’ (2 Timothy 1:8–9).

Paul sees his own apostleship peculiarly bound up with the declaration of this gospel, especially to the Gentiles. He had been chosen to herald this good news, this ‘mystery’ of God’s plan for Jews and Gentiles alike (Ephesians 3:2–7; Colossians 1:24–29). Not surprisingly, he could think of it in personal terms: ‘my gospel’ (Romans 2:16; 16:25), ‘our gospel’ (2 Corinthians 4:3). Yet this was not some simple alignment between message and ego, as if whatever Paul might conceivably have said could properly be called good news simply because Paul said it. On the contrary, the gospel is objectively true, non-negotiable, exclusive: for Paul, a ‘different gospel’ is no gospel at all (Galatians 1:6–7). Therefore, if Paul himself, or even an angel of heaven, should tamper with this gospel or announce something other than the eternal gospel, ‘let him be anathema’ (1:8–9). He could happily tolerate other preachers with doubtful motives, provided their content was the veritable gospel (Philippians 1:12–18). On the other

hand, preachers whose aim was to make money by ‘peddling’ the word of God he despised (2 Corinthians 2:17); while preachers whose content was ‘a different gospel’ or ‘a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached’, instead of ‘the gospel of God’ (2 Corinthians 11:4, 7), he exposed as ‘false apostles’ (11:13; cf 1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 2:17).

Elsewhere in the NT, the ‘gospel’ word-group is rather rare. The verb is [p. 79] used twice in Hebrews (4:2, 6), in a fashion reminiscent of Galatians 3:8: the ‘good news’ that God would act to redeem his people was already announced millennia earlier. 1 Peter 1:12 insists this was only an anticipatory announcement; with the coming of Christ the salvation announced by the prophets (1:10) was actually coming: ‘It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven’ (my italics).

Two passages are slightly anomalous.

(a) In 1 Peter 4:6 the apostle provides a tantalizing mention of the gospel being preached to the dead, quite possibly meaning (as the NIV Bible has it) ‘to those who are now dead’ (but who were alive when they heard it).

(b) One or two have understood “the eternal gospel” in Revelation 14:6 to refer to an announcement of judgment on the final day;<sup>3</sup> many more detect a kind of general disclosure of benevolence in nature or in other religions. It is far more likely that *euangelion* is by this time such a standard term that its content is fixed: we are to understand that in Revelation chapter 14 it is the gospel itself, as outlined above, that is proclaimed ‘to every nation, tribe, language and people’.<sup>4</sup>

### Broader considerations

Although this survey has not cited every passage in which the ‘gospel’ word-group appears, the main lines of its usage are pretty clear. One could add various refinements. For instance, one might ponder what distinctive emphases are underlined by the peculiar choices made by the individual evangelists. Luke’s marked preference for the verb and his entire neglect of the noun (save two occurrences in Acts) might reasonably suggest that he emphasizes ‘preaching the gospel’ rather more than ‘gospel’—in much the same way that John repeatedly deploys the verb ‘to believe’ but avoids the noun ‘faith’. But such a conclusion is somewhat offset by the fact that Mark, who uses only the noun and not the verb, is nevertheless certainly interested in the preaching or heraldic ministry of Jesus (proportionately he uses the verb *kēryssō*, ‘I preach’, much more than either Matthew or Luke). And certainly the content of what

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<sup>3</sup> Eg J Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (London, 1958), p 69.

<sup>4</sup> In this case, of course, the burden of 14:7 is not to provide the content of the gospel, but an eschatological threat if it is ignored. See G Friedrich, ‘euangelion’, TDNT II, p 735; G B Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (New York, 1966), p 182.

Jesus preaches in the gospel according to Mark is nothing other than what all the synoptic evangelists would call the gospel, however many different words they use to refer to it or to describe the activity of heralding it. For similar reason I am unpersuaded by other proposals that some have advanced to explain the unusual distribution of noun and verb among the synoptics.<sup>5</sup>

More important for our purposes is the fact that any responsible biblical theology of 'gospel' must extend far beyond an examination of the *euangelion/euangelizomai* word-group. For reasons that are quite uncertain, the fourth gospel does not use the word-group at all, but the early church quite rightly referred to the book as 'the gospel according to John.' [p. 80] So an integrative theological summary of what the 'good news' is would have to consider John's emphases and themes. Further, the NT writers who use the 'gospel' word-group often deploy synonyms: eg 'word' or 'word of God' or 'word of the cross'. Thus the 'word of the cross' (NIV, 'message of the cross') in 1 Corinthians 1:18 is clearly shown by the context to be nothing other than the gospel (cf 1:17)—and that means one would have to engage in a thorough exegesis of all the cross and atonement passages in Paul, in order to grasp what Paul understands the message of the cross to be. We have already seen that the 'gospel' word-group is linked with kingdom language and with other words for preaching. It is also sometimes parallel with *kērygma*, the content of the message preached.

By the time these and related themes had been properly explored, we would have gained a very comprehensive view of 'gospel' indeed. Shadings and nuance there may be in specific contexts, but from a comprehensive theological perspective the gospel is the good news of the coming of Jesus—who he is, his mission, above all his death and resurrection, the inauguration of the final eschatological kingdom even now, and all that this means for how we live as individuals and as the church, the eschatological people of God, in fulfillment of all the promises God made in the scriptures that led up to Jesus. In content, the gospel is virtually indistinguishable from the *kērygma*; if anything, it is even more comprehensive. But in connotation, 'gospel' insists that this is good news, joyful news, the best news any sentient being in the universe could imagine.

Thus the gospel is integrally tied to the Bible's story-line. Indeed, it is incomprehensible without understanding that story-line. God is the sovereign, transcendent and personal God who has made the universe, including us, his image-bearers. Our misery lies in our rebellion, our alienation from God, which, despite his forbearance, attracts his implacable wrath. But God, precisely because love is of the very essence of his character, takes the initiative and prepared for the coming of his own Son by raising up a people who, by covenantal stipulations, temple worship, systems of sacrifice and of priesthood, by kings and by prophets, are taught something of what God is planning and what he expects. In the fullness of time his Son comes and takes on human nature. He comes not, in the first instance, to judge but to save: he dies the death of his people, rises from the grave and, in returning to his heavenly Father, bequeaths the Holy Spirit as the down payment and guarantee of the ultimate gift he has secured for them—an

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<sup>5</sup> For a typical list of the often-cited redaction-critical distinctions that may be found, see R P Martin, 'Gospel', ISBE II, p 531.

eternity of bliss in the presence of God himself, in a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. The only alternative is to be shut out from the presence of this God forever, in the torments of hell.<sup>6</sup> What men and women must do, before it is too late, is repent and trust Christ; the alternative is to disobey the gospel (Romans 10:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17).

This story-line, and its connection with the gospel, could be fleshed out in a number of ways. But the point is simply this: the good news of [p. 81] salvation through Jesus Christ makes sense in the context of this story-line and in no other. If, instead of this world-view, this storyline,<sup>7</sup> some other is adopted, the good news of Jesus Christ no longer makes sense or is so badly distorted it is no longer the same thing. For instance, if one adopts a pantheistic world-view, then 'sin' takes on an entirely different configuration and there is no transcendent God to whom to be reconciled. In that case, the 'good news' cannot be the announcement of God's reconciling act in the death and resurrection of his Son, by which he bore his people's penalty. If one adopts some naturalistic world-view, something similar could be said. If one holds that history is going nowhere or in circles determined by impersonal fate, then the notion of final judgment and ultimate division between bliss and the abyss is incoherent—and so too the good news that Christ reconciles rebels to their Maker, prepares them for glory, enabling them even now to enjoy foretastes of the kingdom still to be consummated.

It would be easy to document what happens when what may still be called 'the gospel' is detached from this story-line, including this analysis of the core human need. Contrast, for example, the definition of gospel in Erickson, an evangelical theologian, and in Ernst Troeltsch. The former writes:

To summarize: Paul viewed the gospel as centering upon Jesus Christ and what God has done through him. The essential points of the gospel are Jesus Christ's status as the Son of God, his genuine humanity, his death for our sins, his burial, resurrection, subsequent appearances, and future coming in judgment . . . that one is justified by faith in the gracious work of Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. . . . [It is not] merely a recital of theological truths and historical events. Rather, it relates these truths and events to the situation of every individual believer.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, Troeltsch writes, 'The gospel proceeds on the tranquil and childlike conviction that the intentions of the human soul must be realized in terms of the complete lordship of God.'<sup>9</sup> Redemption is 'the development of the God-filled

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<sup>6</sup> I am well aware that a small but growing number of evangelicals have recently subscribed to annihilationism. In my view the evidence is stoutly against them. I have dealt with this difficult subject at greater length in chapter 13 of *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: forthcoming). The language I have used above is simpler and less shocking than Revelation 14:10–11.

<sup>7</sup> What experts in epistemology would nowadays call a meta-narrative.

<sup>8</sup> M J Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1983–85), p 1063.

<sup>9</sup> E Troeltsch, *The Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, 1991 [orig. 1925], p 131.

personality.<sup>10</sup> Doubtless one could, by ripping the words out of their context, understand these latter quotations in a fashion that could be squared with the historic biblical gospel. But they do not drive us in that direction and, in their context, take us elsewhere.

This is not to say that devout and knowledgeable Christians have never disagreed on the exact formulation of the gospel. So far I have tried to avoid forms of expression of the gospel from which believers desirous of remaining faithful to the Bible would want to dissent. But it would be disingenuous to restrict myself to a 'lowest-common-denominator' form of evangelical confession that fails to recognize genuine differences of opinion.

One of the most persistent differences among believers during the past [p. 82] three centuries, so far as the understanding of the gospel is concerned, is tied to the differences between Christians of Reformed conviction and those with Arminian or Wesleyan conviction.<sup>11</sup> The former will think of the gospel as the good news of God taking action to save men and women by the death and resurrection of his Son; the latter will think of the gospel as the good news of God taking action to provide the possibility of salvation for men and women by the death and resurrection of his Son. Both sides will insist that repentance and faith are necessary; both will insist that repentance is human repentance, faith is human faith. But the Reformed believer will want to add that repentance and faith are brought about by God's elective grace, mediated by the Spirit, in those who believe; while the Wesleyan believer will want to add that, although prevenient grace is necessary for an individual to repent and believe, all human beings enjoy such prevenient grace, so that the ultimate distinction between believers and unbelievers cannot be assigned to God but only to the individuals themselves.

The distinction between these two ways of articulating what the gospel is turns out to be not a small one. What appears to be a small difference in wording turns out to have substantial ramifications in practice. Moreover, candour demands that I acknowledge that my own convictions lie unequivocally with the former. Inevitably, there are assorted complications in the heritage of both of these positions. Extrapolated to various extremes, a wide array of disturbing anomalies can be introduced. But it must be said, in the strongest terms, that in their best forms these two streams of understanding have far, far more in common than is sometimes thought. Each of the two thinks the other has distorted the gospel somewhat; neither habitually insists the other side has divested itself of the gospel.

One final distinction deserves mention. For complex reasons many in the Western church came to speak of 'the simple gospel', by which they at one time meant the

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<sup>10</sup> Troeltsch, *The Christian Faith*, p 304 (emphasis his).

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps I should add that the issues at stake surface again and again in the history of the church. There are significant differences in the definition of the issues and in the surrounding politics, but one can easily detect similar polarities of opinion between Augustine and Pelagius, or between the Jansenists and the Molinists in pre-revolutionary France.

gospel summarized in convenient and simple form, usually for evangelistic purposes. The result is that for many today 'the gospel' or 'gospel preaching' refers not to the glorious, comprehensive good news disclosed in scripture but to a very simple (some would say simplistic) reduction of it. Some churches distinguished between 'worship services' and 'gospel services': one wonders which term, 'worship' or 'gospel', has been more seriously abused.<sup>12</sup> Doubtless the motives behind these developments were often excellent. But the fact remains that a variety of serious problems were thereby introduced. For many, evangelistic preaching became identified with simplistic preaching. Worse, 'the gospel' came to be associated in their minds exclusively with the initial steps of faith rather than with God's comprehensive good news that not only initiates salvation but orders all our life in this world and the next. [p. 83]

### **The primacy of the gospel**

Here I want to make only two points:

First, pundits have often noted that many in the Western world have become single-issue people. The church is not immune from such influences. The result is that many Christians assume the gospel (often, regrettably, some form of the 'simple gospel') but are passionate about something on the relative periphery: abortion, poverty, forms of worship, cultural decay, ecology, overpopulation, pornography, family breakdown, and much more. By labeling these complex subjects 'relatively peripheral' I open myself to attack from as many quarters as there are subjects on the list. For example, some of those whose every thought is shaded green will not be convinced that the ecological problems we face are peripheral to human survival. But I remain quite unrepentant. From a biblical-theological perspective, these challenges, as serious as they are, are reflections of the still deeper problem—our odious alienation from God. If we tackle these problems without tackling what is central, we are merely playing around with symptoms. This is no excuse for Christians not to get involved in these and many other issues. But it is to insist that where we get involved in such issues, many of which are explicitly laid upon us in scripture, we do so from the centre out, ie beginning with full-orbed gospel proclamation and witness and passion, and then, while acknowledging that no one can do everything, doing our 'significant something' to address the wretched entailments of sin in our world. The good news of Jesus Christ will never allow us to be smug and other-worldly in the face of suffering and evil. But what does it profit us to save the world from smog and damn our own souls? There are lots of ways of getting rid of pornography. For instance, one does not find much smut in Saudi Arabia. But one doesn't find much of the gospel there, either.

The point is that in all our efforts to address painful and complex societal problems, we must do so from the centre, out of a profound passion for the gospel. This is for us both a creedal necessity and a strategic choice. It is a creedal necessity because this gospel alone prepares men and women for eternity, for meeting our Maker—and all problems

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<sup>12</sup> On the nature of worship, the best recent theological treatment is now that of D Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Leicester, 1992).

are relativized in the contemplation of the cross, the final judgment, and eternity. It is a strategic choice because we are persuaded that the gospel, comprehensively preached in the power of the Spirit, will do more to transform men and women, not least their attitudes, than anything else in the world.

Boice puts it nicely:

[T]he true nature of the gospel also emerges in this understanding of the death of Jesus. The gospel is not just a new possibility for achieving joy and fullness in this life, as some seem to suggest. It is not just a solution to what were previously troublesome and frustrating problems. It is rather something much deeper that has been done, [p. 84] something relating to God, on the basis of which and only on the basis of which these other blessings of salvation follow. Packer says, 'The gospel does bring us solutions to these problems, but it does so by first solving . . . the deepest of all human problems, the problem of man's relation with his Maker; and unless we make it plain that the solution of these former problems depends on the settling of this latter one, we are misrepresenting the message and becoming false witnesses of God.'<sup>13</sup>

A second category of phenomena is in danger of displacing the primacy of the gospel. A litany of devices designed to make us more spiritual or mature or productive or emotionally whole threatens to relegate the gospel to irrelevance, or at least to the realm of the boring and the primitive. The gospel may introduce you to the church, as it were, but from that point on assorted counseling techniques and therapy sessions will change your life and make you happy and fruitful. The gospel may help you make some sort of decision for God, but 'rebirthing' techniques—in which in silent meditation you imagine Jesus catching you as you are born from your mother's womb, imagine him hugging you and holding you—will generate a wonderful cathartic experience that will make you feel whole again, especially if you have been abused in the past. The gospel may enable you to be right with God, but if you really want to pursue spirituality you must find a spiritual director, or practice asceticism, or discipline yourself with journaling, or spend two weeks in silence in a Trappist monastery.

These are not all of a piece. What they have in common, however, is the diminishing of the gospel in order to magnify the current device that is guaranteed to bring you toward wholeness. By contrast, the NT passionately insists that everything we need for life and godliness and a walk in the Spirit is secured for us in the gospel. It follows that if someone chooses to adopt some ascetic practice in order the better to focus on the Jesus of the Bible, the attention is still on Jesus. But if someone so ties asceticism to altered moods or to experiences of 'spirituality' that the gospel itself is virtually ignored or is implicitly dismissed as a sort of initial stage now to be improved by ascetic practice, the name of the game is idolatry. Again, if someone has experienced cathartic relief and

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<sup>13</sup> J M Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, 1986), p 319.

emotional integration after an imaginative 'rebirthing' session, I am glad that the emotional integration has taken place. But we must insist that a better emotional integration could have been achieved by meditating on, say, the passion narratives, or on Ephesians 3:14–21. For then the emotional catharsis would have been tied to what God himself insists is the clearest and most complete demonstration of his love for us in Christ Jesus. In other words, the emotional integration would have been tied to the gospel instead of to something as ephemeral and diverting as manipulated imagination.

This is a time for Christians to return to the basics, the comprehensive basics, and quietly affirm with Paul, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel [p. 85] because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith"' (Romans 1:16–17).

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