

GOSPEL THEOLOGY

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Redeemer Church in New York City wants to encourage a movement of churches, ministries, and leaders that are seeking to reach our great global cities for Christ, united and empowered by a commonly held 'Gospel DNA'.

At the core of what we are calling 'DNA' are the classic doctrines of the Biblical gospel. Nevertheless, in giving these talks/papers I did not start with gospel-theology. One reason was that it is too big a topic to cover in this format. We can't hope to lay out even in brief outline, the content of a full gospel-centered (therefore evangelical) theology. And there was another reason not to start with this. Plenty of churches who formally subscribe to gospel doctrines do not have a ministry that is actually gospel-driven. It is easy to think that if you have the gospel down accurately in your head then your ministry is automatically shaped by it as well. That's not true. Gospel 'DNA' is a set of strategic ministry values and priorities that arise from sustained reflection on the gospel and its implications. So first we looked at what those priorities are, since we find that many churches that believe the gospel often miss them.

Nevertheless, we want to ultimately be more theologically-driven than program driven, and therefore we need to spend lots of time reflecting on the truths of the gospel itself. So in this paper I want to address some of the current discussions and conflicts we see now on the nature of the gospel, and to provide some starting points that (I hope!) we can agree on. If we get these points down, we can then move forward in our theological reflection on how the gospel affects our ministry. ¹ Those three points are: ***the gospel is not everything, the gospel is not a simple thing, and the gospel affects all things.***

I. THE GOSPEL IS NOT EVERYTHING.

A. What is the gospel?

Simon Gathercole sees a three point gospel outline that both Paul and the synoptic gospel authors have in common: a) Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God come to earth as a servant in human form. b) By his death and resurrection Jesus atoned for our sin and secured our justification by grace, not our works. c) At his return he will renew of the entire material creation and will resurrect our bodies.² Don Carson says in his turn that the gospel is '*the coming of Jesus—who he is, his mission, above all his death and resurrection, the inauguration of the final eschatological kingdom...and all that means for how we live as individuals and as the church...*'³

¹ I should here suggest some reading but what a difficult task—to give a short reading list on the nature of the gospel! I propose some very short resources and one very long one. On the short side: D.A.Carson's two papers, "The Biblical Gospel" in S.Brady, ed. *For Such A Time As This* (Evangelical Alliance, 1996) and "The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:1-19)" available several places on the internet. For a short book of essays: most of the chapters in C.Green, ed. *God's Power to Save: One Gospel for a Complex World?* (IVP, 2006) are very helpful. For a full systematic gospel theology I would recommend Herman Bavinck's four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, now in English translation through Baker books. I feel it has the best balance of gospel factors we will mention in this paper.

² Gathercole's essay is in C.Green, ed. *God's Power to Save: One Gospel for a Complex World?* (IVP, 2006).

³ Carson, page 5 available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/1996_biblical_gospel.pdf

Looking at both of these summaries (which I think are very similar) I offer my own, parallel version: Through the person and work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, God saves sinners by grace, rescuing them from judgment for sin into fellowship with him now in the church and eventually in the new heavens and new earth. To receive this salvation we must repent and believe this gospel.

I have always liked the heart of the gospel to be 'God saves sinners' ever since years ago reading this part of J.I. Packer's famous 'Introduction to John Owen's Death of Death':

God saves sinners. God—the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father's will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and Son by renewing. **Saves**—does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. **Sinners**—men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, unable to lift a finger to do God's will or better their spiritual lot.⁴

When I look back over Carson, Gathercole, Packer and my own formulation, I see three recurring themes.

B. Recurring themes

1. The Life of Jesus – Incarnation. God himself has come down and taken on a human nature and become a servant in order to save us.

Note: Without the doctrine of the incarnation, unless Jesus is God himself, his death on the cross has no meaning, or at least does not have salvific significance.

2. The Death of Jesus – Atonement. In Jesus, God substitutes himself for us and, on our behalf, pays the debt, defeats the evil powers, bears the curse and divine wrath, secures for us a salvation by grace, not by our works.

Note 1: Without substitution, the death of Jesus doesn't actually save us, it only clears the way for us or enables us or motivates us to do something to save ourselves.

Note 2: I don't see substitution as 'one model' of the atonement, but as the heart and common thread that runs through all the 'models'—whether it be redemption and the language of the marketplace; propitiation and the language of the law court; defeat of the powers and the language of the kingdom; taking the curse and the language of the covenant; sacrifice and the language of the temple, rejection/expulsion and the language of exile and homecoming.

3. Resurrection of Jesus – Eschatology. Jesus secures new life through the Spirit now, life in heaven at death, and life with God in the new heavens and new earth with the people of God in the future.

Note 1: Without the resurrection, we don't know *that* salvation was accomplished, nor do we understand *what* salvation was accomplished (the new birth, the presence of the future new age, our inheritance in heaven, the final victory over evil and death on earth.)

⁴J. I. Packer, "Introductory Essay to John Owen's *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, available many places on the Internet. One is <http://www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/deathofdeath.html>

Many classic gospel presentations include ‘repent and believe’ as the final part of a gospel presentation. That is completely appropriate, but Carson points out that, technically, repentance/faith isn’t part of the gospel proper but rather a directive about what we are to *do* with the gospel. (Mark 1:15 seems to make that point.)

C. The implications.

1. The gospel is primarily about our relationship to God. Not everything the Bible teaches can be considered ‘the gospel.’ The gospel is not a set of general doctrinal truths, but primarily news about the historical events of Jesus’ life. The very word ‘gospel’ has as its background a news report about some life-altering event that has already happened. The gospel then is good news, not good advice. It is not some a ‘way of life’ or something we do, but rather something that has been done for us and that we must respond to.⁵ The gospel is, then, what we must believe in order to have our relationship with God put right and to be saved.⁶

It is therefore important to realize that the gospel is primarily about how our alienation with God is addressed and removed by the work of Christ. All other alienations in life flow from that. We can see this in Genesis 3. Because we are alienated from God we are alienated from ourselves—we experience shame and fear (3:10.) Because we are alienated from God we are also alienated from one another (3:7-where Adam and Eve must put on clothing, and 3:16 that speaks of alienation between the genders; also notice the blame-shifting in the dialogue with God.) Because we are alienated from God, we are also alienated from nature itself. We now experience sorrow, painful toil, physical degeneration and death (3:16-19.) In fact, the ground itself is ‘cursed’ (3:17; Rom 8:18ff.) Nature itself is broken and subject to decay.

There are all our problems—1) psychological alienation within ourselves, 2) social alienation between individuals and nations, races, classes, and 3) finally physical alienation, including hunger, natural disasters, disease, and death. And they all result from our alienation from God. Therefore, ultimately, all human problems are symptoms, and our separation from God is the cause. Since the gospel is primarily about the removal of that first alienation, then it is the one thing that goes after the cause of all our other problem, rather than only treating the symptoms.

2. The gospel and its results should be neither confused nor separated.

What is the gospel? It is not about everything the Bible teaches. It is about how our relationship with God is put right through the work of Jesus Christ. What are the results of the gospel? They include the eventual healing of the world, of all the other alienations that resulted from the disruption in our relationship to God. Racism, hunger and poverty, the ravaging and exploitation of the environment—all these enormous problems will ultimately be solved on judgment day because the rupture in the relationship between God and humanity has been mended through

⁵ Mark 1:1; Luke 2:10; 1 Cor 1:16-17; 1 Cor 15:1-10.

⁶ This means that the saying, ‘preach the gospel; use words if necessary’ is misleading. If the gospel was primarily about what we must do to be saved, that could be communicated as well by actions (to be imitated) as by words. But if the gospel is primarily about what God has done to save us, and how we can receive it through faith, that can only be expressed through words. Faith cannot come without hearing. This is why we read in Gal 2:5 that heresy endangers the gospel, and why we learn in Phil 1:16 that a person’s mind must be persuaded of the truth of the gospel. Eph 1:13 also asserts that the gospel is the word of truth. Phil 1:12; Eph 6:19; Col 1:23- all teach that we advance the gospel through verbal communication, particularly preaching.

Christ. The gospel is not just incarnation and atonement but also resurrection—Jesus is the first-fruits of the future renewal of the world. Therefore, the gospel—what Jesus has done to put us right with God—points forward to the day when we will be put completely right in every other way.

The gospel and its results/implications must be carefully related to each other—neither confused nor separated. This is very close to Luther's dictum that 'we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that remains alone.' His point is that true gospel belief will always, necessarily lead to 'good works,' but salvation in no way at all comes through or because of good works. Faith and works must never be confused for one another, nor separated. In the same way, if your alienation from God is healed, you other alienations *will* begin to be healed within and around you partially now and fully later. Gospel-changed people will be moved to serve our neighbors and use our gifts and resources to alleviate psychological, social, and physical suffering, because of the hope and love the gospel brings. (See below under point #3.) So again, these two things—the gospel and its results—must not be confused or separated. To overgeneralize, there are those 'on the right' who over emphasize the distinction and don't stress enough how the gospel leads always to community and justice and peace, and there are those 'on the left' who under emphasize the distinction and give the impression that gospel work is making the world a better place.

I have heard people preach this way: 'The good news is that God is healing and will heal the world of all its hurts, therefore, the work of the gospel is to work for justice and peace in the world.' The danger is that the 'good news' becomes a divine rehabilitation program for the world, rather than an accomplished substitutionary work. And 'believing the good news' become the joining of that program, rather than the reception of a finished work. In other words, the gospel becomes primarily a salvation by practice instead of a salvation by faith.

As J.I.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 relationship with his Maker, and unless we make it plain that the solution for these former problems depends on the settling of this latter one, we are misrepresenting the message and becoming false witnesses of God.'⁷

3. Keeping the gospel primary yet keeping ministry balanced.

There is always a danger that church leaders and ministers think of the gospel as merely a minimum standard of doctrinal content, and as a result are more energized by thoughts of teaching 'more advanced' doctrine, or of deeper forms of spirituality, or of intentional community and the sacraments, or of 'deeper discipleship', or of psychological healing, or of social justice and cultural engagement. When these things are a) not seen as dynamic results of the gospel (because the gospel is seen as elementary, simplistic truths) or b) if they are mistaken *for* the gospel, then these things become primary in the preaching and teaching of the church rather than the gospel. The gospel as outlined above is no longer understood as the 'fountain-head', the dynamic at the center from which all other things—spirituality, spiritual growth, theological reflection, community, cultural engagement, work for justice—proceed. The result is that the gospel is not at the center of the preaching, the thinking, the life of the church. Something else is. And often, as a result, there are not regular conversions. The gospel is not preached with a kind of convicting 'sharpness' that takes believers *and* non-believers and 'reveals the secrets of the heart' and gives them a sense of God's reality, even against their wills (1 Cor 14:24-25.) The gospel is not preached with a variegated richness either. 1 Peter 2:12 and

⁷ Quoted in Carson, "The Biblical Gospel."

context indicates that the angels never tire of looking into and exploring the wonders of the gospel. It can be preached from innumerable stories, themes, and principles from all over the Bible. When the gospel is either confused with or separated from these other endeavors, preaching becomes mere exhortation (to get with the church's program) or informational instruction (to inculcate the church's values and beliefs.)

Anyone who has read the rest of these papers knows that I believe belief in the gospel leads to care for the poor and cultural engagement as surely as Luther said true faith led to good works. 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. (See point #3 below.) But just as faith and works must not be separated nor confused, so the results of the gospel must not be separated from the gospel itself, but neither should they be confused with it.

4. Preaching and deeds of love.

A lot of people ask this. 'If the resurrection is part of the gospel, then isn't the healing of the world of all its hurts, 'part of the gospel' so that rehabbing homes and caring for the poor is as much gospel work as evangelism?'

Well, if you mean by 'gospel work' that caring for the poor *spreads the gospel as much as preaching does*, I think the answer has to be no. Not only does the Bible say over and over that the gospel is spread by preaching, common sense shows us that loving deeds, as important as they are as an accompaniment of preaching, don't bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Notice again, the Luther-type of relationship between faith and works. Jesus said that loving community among is necessary for the world to know that God sent him (John 17.) Sharing our goods with each other and the needy is a powerful sign to non-believers. (See the relationship between witness and sharing in Acts 4:31ff and Acts 6.) But loving deeds, though they embody the truths of the gospel, and they cannot be separated from the preaching of the gospel, should not be confused with it.

One of the problems with some of theologizing among progressive evangelicals is that it tries to base social concern and cultural engagement almost completely on the future aspect of the gospel--the coming kingdom, the restoration, and so on. The argument is- 'this is what wants to do in the future, so you need to do this work as well.' That reasoning is valid up to a point, but there is some danger in making it the only mainspring of how we work in the world. It can subtly lead to thinking of the salvation as not resting and believing in a finished work but mainly as taking part in an ongoing work. If you look at someone like Jonathan Edwards (e.g. 'The Duty of Christian Charity') you will find that he bases his concern for the poor and society on the already accomplished aspect of the gospel-cross, substitutionary atonement, and forensic justification. If you do it Edwards' way, then you can call your church to a robust loving-your-neighbor and seeking-the-city's-peace and still have a gospel message that converts people and turns them from their sin vs. God in repentance. If you over-emphasize the kingdom-future aspect, then sin becomes more a matter of wronging other human beings and you lose the message that sin is ultimately against God.

When Paul speaks of the renewed material creation, he says the new heavens and new earth are guaranteed to us because on the cross Jesus restored of our relationship with God as his true sons and daughters. Romans 8:18ff. teaches, remarkably, that the redemption of our bodies and of the entire physical world happens when we 'receive our adoption.' As his children we are *guaranteed* our future inheritance (Heb 9:15, Eph 5:5.) And because of that inheritance, the world is renewed. The future is ours because of Christ's finished work in the past.

II. THE GOSPEL IS NOT A SIMPLE THING

We have made the point that the gospel is not everything. But now we must make another point that balances out this one. The gospel cannot be boiled down into a single simple formula with two, three, or four points that must be recited every time, with everyone, in every place. I do not mean that the gospel can't be *presented* simply. Rather I am resisting the trends, mainly among conservative evangelicals, toward creating a single, standardized, gospel presentation that must be used everywhere, and which becomes an informal test of orthodoxy. Here are three reasons why we cannot put the gospel into a single, one-size-fits-all presentation.

A. The Bible itself doesn't give us one standard gospel outline.

Dr Lloyd-Jones often pointed out in his close, slow exposition of Paul's epistles that Paul regularly puts 'the gospel in a nutshell' of a sentence or two. Each time it is different, of course.

Paul in Galatians 1:8 condemns anyone who preaches 'another gospel' than the one he declares, and in 1 Corinthians 15:10-11 he 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. And yet it is clear that the ways various Biblical writers express the gospel differ in significant ways.

The Synoptic gospels speak about the 'kingdom' constantly, while that phrase is virtually missing in the gospel of John, which usually talks instead about receiving eternal life. Certainly, there is no contradiction. 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 basically the same move. And yet we should not argue that the differences between 'eternal life' and 'the kingdom' are merely semantic. They convey different aspects of God's salvation. As many 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.

On top of this we have Paul using both the term 'kingdom' and 'life' but more centrally, the concept of 'justification.' So is this different gospel? Of course not, but Paul, more than the Synoptics and John. Stresses the 'law court' or 'covenantal' inter-canonical theme. Which leads us to our next point.

B. The gospel must be tied to the Bible's story-line and themes.

I. Two ways to read the Bible

Theologians talk about how we must read the Bible both ‘synchronically’ and ‘diachronically.’ To read the Bible synchronically is the Systematic-Theological method (STM) which tends to deal with the Scripture topically. It organizes what the Bible says by its categories of thought: “*It’s about God, sin, the Holy Spirit, the Church, marriage and family, prayer*” and so on. It looks at every text on a particular topic and then synthesizes them all into a coherent set of statements or principles. It is especially sensitive to the unity of the Bible, how there is a Biblical view of God, humanity, sin, grace, the world, and so on. We believe we can read the Bible this way because it has a single author—God. In this perspective, the gospel appears as God, sin, Christ, faith. It brings out the *means* of salvation, namely the substitutionary work of Christ and our responsibility to embrace it by faith.

To read the Bible diachronically is to read along its historical and narrative arc, and this is called the ‘Redemptive-Historical’ method (RHM) which tends to deal with the Scripture historically. It organizes what the Bible says by stages in a history or by the plot-line of a story: “*It’s about God creating the world, about the fall, about God’s re-entry into history to create a new people for himself and eventually about a new creation out of a marred and broken world through Christ*.” It is to discern the basic plot-line of the Bible as God’s story of redemption as well as the themes of the Bible (e.g. covenant, kingship, sanctuary) that run through every stage of history and part of the canon, climaxing in Jesus Christ. This approach is especially sensitive to the differences in historical eras and Biblical authors. We believe we can read the Bible this way because we believe that God used real human beings to write his revelation. In this perspective, the gospel appears as creation, fall, redemption, restoration. It brings out the *purpose* of salvation, namely a renewed creation.

There is no ultimate reason why these two approaches have to contradict, since the Bible is definitely a human book, yet a divine book. Having said that the STM carried out in isolation from the RHM can produce a Christianity that is rationalistic, legalistic, and individualistic. The RHM, carried out in isolation from STM, tends to produce a Christianity which loves narrative and community but shies away from sharp distinctions between grace and law, truth and heresy.

2. Reductionism and inter-canonical themes

In his essay ‘The Biblical Gospel’, Don Carson warns against reductionistic versions of the gospel that do not tie it into the Bible’s story line. Carson elsewhere has posited that there may be 20 or so ‘inter-canonical themes’ that hold the Bible together. You could tell ‘the gospel’ from beginning to end through any of them. But no one of them gives the full picture. Here’s an example:

HOME/EXILE

At creation made for

A place of rest and shalom

Sin is/results in

Self-centeredness destroying shalom

Israel is

Exiled in Egypt, then Babylon

Jesus is/does

Rejected but resurrected Lord who breaks the power of death

Restoration

The Garden-City of God

YAHWEH/COVENANT

At creation made for

A faithful, covenant love relationship w/God

Sin is/results in

Unfaithfulness causing God’s curse and wrath

Israel is

Called to faithfulness, but is unfaithful

Jesus/does

Suffering servant but new Covenant Lord who takes the curse of sin

Restoration

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

KINGDOM

At creation made for

God’s kingdom and kingliness

Sin is/results in

Idolatry causing enslavement

Israel is

Looking for a true judge/king

Jesus is/does

Returning true king who frees us from the world, flesh, devil

Restoration

The New Creation

a. Theme: The Exile and our homecoming

Home is a place where life fully flourishes—spiritually, physically, and socially. It is therefore a place of rest and *shalom*. It is a place where physical life and health is sustained, where our most intimate love relationships are nurtured. The story of the human race, however, is one of exile

and a longing for homecoming. Death and disease have marred and ruined God's good physical creation. Also, society is a Babel—selfishness and pride, exploitation and violence mar and ruin human community. The world as it is is not our home. We were made for a place without death or parting from love, without decay, disease and aging. We are, therefore, 'exiles' and 'aliens' here. Why? Because the human race turned from God to live for themselves, and therefore were turned out of the Garden of God and banished from the face of God, our true home. We are alienated from God, our true selves, one another, and from the creational environment. The

Question: "How can we be brought home? How can the creation be healed and restored? How can death and decay be overcome?"

Answer: Jesus leaves his own true home (Phil 2,) was born away from home, wanders without a place to lay his head, without a home (Mt 8:20,) and is finally crucified outside gate, a sign of exile and rejection (Heb 13:11-12.) He takes our place. He experiences the exile, the alienated state, that the human race deserves. He is cast out so we can be brought home. This is summed up in Luke 9:30- Jesus death and resurrection is the ultimate exodus, the ultimate escape from exile. When he rose from the grave, he broke the power of death and is a living foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth that will be our true home. He will reconcile 'all things' (Col.1:16-20) and make the world again into the Garden of God. (Rev.21:1-8)

Related Themes:

Rest and Sabbath Sin has left us restless. How can we enter God's rest?

Justice and shalom The fabric of the world is broken. How can we restore shalom?

Trinity and community We were made for personality and interdependent community. Why? We reflect the Triune God.

b. Theme: The Covenant and its fulfillment

Yahweh reveals himself to be the faithful, covenant God. In the covenant relationship, the covenant lord becomes *our* God, and we become *his* people. A covenant is absolutely binding. The Lord always does what he says: he is absolutely faithful to his word and promises. In turn he asks us to be faithful as well, to do what we say. This poses a problem. We continually break our word.

Question: How can God be *both* faithful and true to his Law and word *and* yet faithful and committed to us? how can God be holy and still love his people? How do the holiness and love of God relate in the covenant? As the exile/homecoming theme points to our need for world-Healer, the Yahweh theme shows us our need to be saved from our transgressions of the Law.

Answer: On the cross both the law of God and the love of God were fulfilled and satisfied. Isaiah points to a 'resolution' when he speaks of the need for both a Covenant Lord *and* a Suffering Covenant Servant. Jesus takes the curse of the covenant, so the blessing of the covenant could come to us. (Gal 3:7-14) He fulfills the covenant promise of Gen 3:15—he is wounded and yet destroys the work of Satan. He fulfils the Abrahamic covenant: Jesus truly is the blessing that comes to all nations. His life as the perfect sacrifice fulfils the Mosaic laws (Heb 8-10.) This answers the great question—are the covenant blessings of God conditional or unconditional? The answer is yes. Jesus, as the obedient and faithful covenant servant absolutely fulfilled the conditions of the covenant through his life and suffering in our place, making it possible for him, as our faithful covenant Lord to love us *unconditionally*. At the cross both the law of God and the love of God were fulfilled and satisfied. In the City of God there is no more curse (Rev 22:3.) Why? Because of the work of the Passover Lamb of God, who bore the sins of his people. We will be his people—his bride--and he will be our God (Rev 21:2-3.) History is

consummated in the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19.) The ultimate love relationship we were built for will be fulfilled.

Related Themes:

Righteousness and nakedness We experience shame and guilt. How can our sins be covered?

Marriage and faithfulness We long for true love and closure. How can we find it?

Presence and sanctuary We are made to flourish in the presence of God. How can we stand in it?

c. Theme: The Kingdom and its coming

As the exile/homecoming theme points to our need for world-Healer, and the Yahweh theme shows us our need to be saved from our transgressions of the Law, the Kingdom theme shows us the need for a Liberator from Idols. Jesus is not only the Resurrected Healer and the Suffering Servant but also the Returning King. (cf. Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn.) The 'kingdom of God' is the kingship and rule of God. The search for a true leader, 'judge' and king absorbs much of the history of God's people. The people continually fall away from submission to the rule of God and instead serve idols, which oppress and enslave.

Question: "how can any king be powerful enough to liberate us from slavery this great?"

Answer: God himself must come. Mark 1:1-3 says that Jesus is the divine-king returning to take up his kingdom (cf. Is 40:9-11 and Mrk 1:1-3, 14-15.) The power of Christ's kingly rule is here now among gathered Christians (Lk 17:20-21) liberating people from false masters and enslaving idols (Mt 12:28-29.) And yet it is not here fully (all his disciples are to pray for it to come-Mt 6:10) and at the end of time we will receive it in completion (Mt 25:34.) Among the disciples, the kingdom is a new human order in which power, money, recognition, and success are no longer valued—but rather service, generosity, humility (Luke 6:17ff.) Why? Jesus' kingship is not like human kingships, for it wins influence through suffering service, not the exercise of coercive power. We too enter it not through strength but through the weakness of repentance and the new birth (Jn 3) and becoming like a little child (Matt 18:3-4.) The kingdom comes in weakness and suffering (Acts 14:22); in Jesus' kingdom the last will be first (Mk 10:31) Why? Jesus, the true king saves us by suffering, losing power, giving all away, and dying. This king bears our judgment, rather than bringing it. Thus he shows himself to be true King and the only master who will not oppress or enslave us. The City of God contains the throne of God (Rev. 22:3) from which the renewal of all things proceeds (Rev 21:6.) This is the ecstatic enthronement of Psalms 96-98. When God returns to rule, even the trees and hills will clap their hands and sing for joy (Ps 96.) The freedom and joy of the kingdom of heaven has come to earth.

Related themes:

Image and likeness. Loving God supremely is the only way to truly love anything else and become yourself.

Idolatry and freedom. Serving God supremely is the only way to freedom.

Wisdom and the word. Submission to the Word of God is the way to wisdom.

Sum: There is no contradiction between these different ways of getting the gospel across. The Bible's single story-line tells us **a)** What God wants for us (creation) **b)** what happened to us, what went wrong with the world (fall) **c)** what God has done in Jesus Christ to put things right (redemption) and **d)** how history will turn out in the end as a result (restoration.) But this story can be (and is) told multiple ways, using multiple themes, since both sin and salvation are multi-

dimensional. This doesn't mean that you can't present the gospel simply. This doesn't mean that the gospel isn't what we said it was under point #1 above. However you begin to flesh out the gospel, even in a very brief way, you will put it into the context of one or some of these themes, and when you do that you will shade things a bit toward some aspects of the Biblical story and away from others.

3. Insights from the 'RHM'. The RHM way of reading the Bible brings out three crucial things that inform our gospel theology.

a) *It gives us a dynamic view of our place in redemptive history.* The RHM tells that we are now in a particular period of redemptive history (between the first and second coming of Christ). This is the period of the "already-but-not-yet" of the kingdom of God, which sets us apart from the epoch previous to and following this one. John Stott, in "The Now and the Not Yet" in The Contemporary Christian (IVP, 1992) shows what a powerful effect this theological category has on our practice. This understanding of our place in redemptive history keeps us from fundamentalism (the "not yet Christians"), Pentecostalism (the "already" Christians), and Liberalism (in some ways too "not yet" and in other ways too "already"). It keeps us from over- or under-discipline, from over- or under-emphasis on evangelism or social concern, from over-optimism or under-optimism about revival, and so on. A-historical (STM) understandings of the Bible lead constantly to these extremes. By the way, Jonathan Edwards noted these same three enemies of true revival--Dead orthodoxy, Enthusiasm, and Heterodoxy.

b) *It gives us a more corporate and less individualistic approach to ministry.* The RHM understands that the goal of salvation history is not simply a 'right relationship' with God and live in heaven forever. The goal of redemption is really 're-creation'. The end is not escape from earth into heaven, but heaven "coming down" to transform the earth. The church, then, is not simply an aggregation of people who help one another find God, but it is called to be in this world a sign of the coming new creation. We are to embody the 'new humanity' that Christ is creating. All of this drastically undermines the pietistic, individualistic, privatistic Christianity that can be the result of the STM approach. While the STM approach points us more to how we as individuals get peace with God and 'live right', the RHM framework calls us to live our lives out as a 'counter-culture', a new nation, in which our business practices, race relations, artistic expressions, family life, etc., show the world what humanity could be like under the Lordship of Christ. And the RHM emphasis on 'new creation' calls us to be concerned for the social and material world, since God's ultimate salvation will not only redeem the soul but the body and the physical world as well.

c) *It gives us a more Christ-centered understanding of the Bible.* The RHM sees the purpose of each epoch of redemptive history as being the progressive revealing of Christ. God could have poured our judgment on mankind in the Garden, therefore the only reason there is any history is because God has purposed to send his Son into the world, to pour out judgment on him and thereby bring salvation. Jesus is the only reason there is human history, and therefore he is goal of human history. Thus everything God says and does in history explain and prepare for the salvation of his Son. Every plot-line in the Bible finds its 'happy ending' in Jesus. Preaching and teaching from an RHM framework tends to be less moralistic and legalistic. (However, it can miss out on practical application—but that's a different paper.)

C. The Gospel must be adapted to different cultures.

We have covered this under 'Missional and Contextual' but it would be important to note here that there cannot be one standardized gospel presentation because cultures are too different. Paul is an example. 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. Luke provides three summaries of Paul's gospel preaching. In Acts 13, we see him communicating to Jews and Gentile God-fearers. In Acts 14, we hear his message to non-educated pagans, and in Acts 17, we read a digest of a sermon to philosophers and educated pagans. It is instructive to see the different ways that the capacities and beliefs of his audience shapes the way Paul both presents and argues for the gospel.

1. Paul's gospel to Jews and Gentile God-fearers. Acts 13:13-41

Throughout vv.16-25 Paul appeals to authorities that his hearers respected. He uses these authorities to remind them that we need to be saved by grace through great deliverers who God sends, and then reminds them that the Bible has predicted a final, great Savior, who John the Baptist recognized as Jesus. Finally, in v.31, he refers to the eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Christ (as Peter always did). So Paul's case for the gospel is: a) Jesus life and death fits the Scripture's prediction of the Messiah, b) the greatest prophet, John the Baptist, recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and c) we have evidence for the reality and truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ. Paul makes a case that the resurrection of David's descendant was predicted in Ps.2:7, Isaiah 55:3, and Ps.16:10 where David says that God will not let "the holy one" decay. "How can that be, since David *did* decay?" asks Paul. He reasons "therefore it must be that the Messiah from David's line would be raised and never see decay" (v.36-37) So the heart of the gospel message is not that a teacher has come to show us how to save ourselves, but that a Savior has come to die and be raised for us. Finally, Paul gives the hearers a choice. He says that in Jesus we can receive "*forgiveness of sins*" which is available for "*everyone who believes*" (v.38-39). Then he introduces his famous word "*justification*" and insists that through belief in the life and death of Christ for us, we can be "justified", i.e. made "just" or righteous before God. Then Paul brings warning. He says that by obeying "*the law of Moses*" we cannot be justified from our sins and made right with God (v.39) and finally ends with a blunt statement that those who scoff at the great thing God has done in Christ will perish (v.41).

2. Paul's gospel to non-educated pagans. Acts 14:15-17.

Though a brief summary of Paul's talk, the differences are clear. First, the two talks were different in the citations of authority for its argument or "case". In Acts 13 he appealed to two authorities recognized by the audience: the Scripture and John the Baptist. But in Acts 14, these pagans do not know or trust the Hebrew Bible. So Paul appeals to what they can see about the natural world around them. First he points to the greatness of creation to show them that this indicates a Creator God ("*God, who made the heaven and earth and sea and everything in them*"- v.16). Then he points to the greatness of "providence", how in the midst of the immense forces of nature, they nevertheless are given food and "joy"--they are given what is necessary for life. In other words, Paul does not reason from the Scripture (called "special revelation" by the theologians), but from what people can see about the nature of the world and life (called "general" revelation). Essentially, Paul reasons like this: "Look at this and this and that about the world and your life. I can account for them--these things are there because there is a God who made and manages everything in the universe." Second, the messages were different in the emphasis and time spent on points of gospel content. It is hard to miss that the Acts 13 speech talked little about the nature of God and much about the person and work of Christ. In Acts 14

all the stress is on the nature of God. Paul shows that there are not many gods--each of whom has limited regions and specific ranges of power--but only one God who made everything (v.15), and who has absolute power over everything (v.17). This “abstract” of the speech shows that Paul did allude to Christ, when he said, “*in the past, he let all nations go their own way*” (v.16). This means that now something momentous has occurred. In 17:30-31, we see Paul saying, “*in the past, God overlooked such ignorance...but now he commands all people everywhere to repent...by the man he has appointed.*” Just as in Acts 17, he probably spoke about one who God had sent into this world. In summary, Paul in Acts 13 could assume that they knew who God was in general, and he could focus on the features of Jesus. But in Acts 14, has to spend more time laying a foundation of the nature of God, and gives less time to develop the work of Christ. Third, they were different in the specifics of the final appeal. In Acts 13, the people are told to stop relying on the law for their justification with God, and look to the work of Christ (13:39). This is “the gospel for moral people”. Paul is saying, “sin makes you imperfect, unjustified--receive Jesus for forgiveness.” In Acts 14, however, the people are told to stop worshipping “worthless things” (v.15), or idols. The word translated “worthless” means “vain, ineffective”. The people are told to stop serving false gods that cannot satisfy. This is “the gospel for immoral people”. Paul is saying, “sin makes you a slave, in bondage and unfulfilled--receive Christ for reality and freedom.” Paul characterizes God as “living” (v.15) as opposed to the deadness of their false gods; he identifies God as the source of “joy” (v.17) as opposed to the vanity of their false gods.

To whom would Paul make such a talk today? It would be appropriate for very irreligious people, and especially the more immoral and less educated types. Why? a) Such people cannot be talked to from the Scripture, b) they are very aware of being in bondage to various false gods (through addictions, habits they cannot break, etc.), c) and they need to have God pointed to as more powerful than their bondages (v.15) and as the source of the joy they seek (v.17). With secular people we have to begin with “where people are”--to find out what we see about the world and life that they “see” too. For example, secular people “see” that human beings have value, but they cannot account for it, unless they acknowledge God as the source of it. In other words, we will have to reason as Paul did. We may start with the human longing for love and community, for personal significance and meaning, for freedom. In any case, we will then point to Christ who is both the explanation and the solution for everything we see.

3. Paul's gospel to educated pagans. Acts 17:24-31.

This address has been much analyzed. I only want to compare it to the other two messages to different audiences. Notice also that, again, Paul does not appeal to Scripture, since the pagans would not respect Scripture. Notice too how the Athenians, like the pagans in Lystra, lacked a Biblical doctrine of God, so Paul had to work on that first before the facts about Christ could make sense to them. So again we see him spending much more time on fundamentals about God and human nature and reality. Most interesting is how the “two sides” of God's nature that Paul taught cut against both the Epicureans and the Stoics views of life. The Epicureans saw the gods as personal, but remote and uninvolved with human affairs. They were “happy hedonists”, teaching that life consisted of following your desires. The Stoics on the other hand saw God as a kind of life force controlling everything, but not a personal being to know and obey. They were pessimists, teaching that life consisted of following your duty. To the Epicureans, Paul said, “God is near and he is a Judge--you cannot do anything you want!” To the Stoics, Paul said: “God is personal and Savior--you can know hope and freedom!” He was telling the Epicureans not to make an idol of pleasure, and he was telling the Stoics not to make an idol of duty.

III. THE GOSPEL EFFECTS ALL THINGS

We have argued that 1) the gospel is ‘not everything’, that it must be distinguished from its results and implications, and that 2) the gospel is extremely rich, not able to be packaged in a single standard form. This puts us in a position to make our third contention. In contrast to point #1 and building on point #2, we argue that the gospel affects virtually everything.

A. Carson on the effects of the gospel.

In his paper ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ’, Carson surveys the ethical directives of 1 Corinthians. (While I already quoted him in our paper on Grace Renewal, here I quote him at greater length.)

One of the striking results of this summary of the gospel...is how cognitive the gospel is. Here is what is to be understood, believed, obeyed; here is what is promised, taught, explained. All of this must be said, loudly and repeatedly, in a generation that feels slightly embarrassed when it has to deal with the cognitive and the propositional. Yet something else must also be said. This chapter comes at the end of a book that repeated shows how the gospel rightly works out in the massive transformation of attitudes, morals, relationships, and cultural interactions.

The first four chapters find Paul pained at the divisions in the Corinthian church, different factions associating themselves exclusively with one hero or another—Peter, Apollos, Paul, and, probably the most sanctimonious of the lot, the “I follow Christ” party. What the apostle works out is how this is a betrayal of the gospel, a misunderstanding of the nature of Christian leadership, a tragic and bitter diminution of the exclusive place of Christ. Chapter four shows in a spectacular way that there is no place for triumphalism in the church of the blood-bought, in the church led by apostles who eat everyone’s dirt at the end of the procession. In chapters 5 and 6, the gospel of Christ the Passover lamb prescribes that believers must, in line with Passover, get rid of all “yeast”—and this works out in terms of church discipline where there is grievous sexual sin. Relationships are transformed, with the result that lawsuits bringing brothers into conflict before pagan courts becomes almost unthinkable, and casual sex is a massive denial of Christ’s lordship. In chap. 7, complex questions about divorce and remarriage are worked out in the context of the priorities of the gospel and the transformed vision brought about by the dawning of the eschatological age and the anticipation of the end. Chapters 8-10 wrestle with how believers must interact with the broader pagan culture over the matter of food offered to idols, with the central example of the apostle Paul himself demonstrating in dramatic fashion what cheerful and voluntary self-restraint for the sake of the advance of the gospel actually looks like—and even how such a stance is tied to a proper understanding of the relationship between the new covenant and the old. Relationships between men and women are tied, in 1 Cor 11:2-16, not only to relationships in the Godhead, but also to what it means to live “in the Lord”—and thus to the gospel. The blistering condemnation of Corinthians practices at the Lord’s Supper (“In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good,” 11:17) is tied not only to the barbarous insensitivity some Christians were displaying toward others, but also to the massive failure to take the cross seriously and use this Christ-given rite as an occasion for self-examination and repentance. The ways in which the carismata or pneumatika of 1 Cor 12-14 are to be exercised is finally predicated on the fact that all believers confess that

Jesus is Lord, all believers have been baptized in one Spirit into one body, and above all that the most excellent “way” mandated of all believers without exception is the way of love—the most important member of the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love that are deeply intrinsic to the working out of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A Christianity where believers are not patient and kind, a Christianity where believers characteristically envy, are proud and boastful, rude, easily angered, and keep a record of wrongs, is no Christianity at all. What does this say, in concrete terms, about the communion of saints, the urgent need to create a Christian community that is profoundly counter-cultural? What will this say about inter-generational relationships? About race? About how we treat one another in the local church? About how we think of brothers and sisters in highly diverse corners of our heavenly Father’s world?

Just as Paul found it necessary to hammer away at the outworking of the gospel in every domain of the lives of the Corinthians, so we must do the same today....It does not take much to think through how the gospel must also transform the business practices and priorities of Christians in commerce, the priorities of young men steeped in indecisive but relentless narcissism, the lonely anguish and often the guilty pleasures of single folk who pursue pleasure but who cannot find happiness, the tired despair of those living on the margins, and much more. And this must be done, not by attempting to abstract social principles *from* the gospel, still less by endless focus on the periphery in a vain effort to sound prophetic, but precisely by preaching and teaching and living out in our churches the glorious gospel of our blessed Redeemer.⁸

Carson’s point is that—though the gospel is a set of truths to believe, it cannot remain a set of beliefs if it is *truly* believed and understood. The gospel creates a whole way of life and affects literally everything about us. This is what the Scripture teaches. The gospel is a power. (Rom 1:16-17) It creates new life in us (1 Cor 4:15; 1 Peter 1:23-35; Col 1:5-6)

B. The Richness of the Gospel

Returning to the simple outline of the gospel we mentioned under point one, we know that a) The Son of God emptied himself and came into the world in Jesus Christ, becoming a servant, b) he died on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice, c) and he rose from the grave as first fruits of a whole new world. These three truths can be teased out to see how rich the gospel is. Here is a way to account for what Carson says, that the implications of the gospel are so endless.

I. The incarnation and the ‘upside-down’ aspect of the gospel . Because Jesus was the king who became a servant, we see a reversal of values in Jesus’ kingdom administration (Luke 6:20ff.) In Jesus’ kingdom the poor, the sorrowful, and the persecuted are above the rich, recognized, and satisfied. The first shall be last. 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

⁸ This paper can be found at http://www.thesurgeonfellowship.org/Downloads/feature_Sp08.pdf.

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 gospel.

2. The atonement and the 'inside-out' aspect of the gospel. The Pharisees put all the emphasis on externals, rather than on a regenerated heart (Luke 11:39-41.) But the kingdom of God 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. Religion is outside-in, but the gospel is inside-out. 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. The resurrection and the 'forward-back' aspect of the gospel. Jesus is resurrected but we are not. He has inaugurated the kingdom of God, but it is not fully present. 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 understands the implications of the Biblical gospel (who lets the 'word of God dwell in us *richly*' Col 3:16) 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 'upsidedown' 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.

C. The Centrality of the Gospel

The gospel is not just the A-B-C's but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is not accurate to think 'the gospel' is what saves non-Christians, and then, what matures Christians is trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the

gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our mind, heart, and life by believing the gospel more and more deeply as our life goes on. We spoke to this in the 'Grace Renewal' chapter, but here is more.

1. 'Two thieves' of the gospel.

Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." These errors continue to "steal" the gospel from us. The theological terms for these two thieves are *religion* and *irreligion* or *legalism* and *antinomianism*. More colloquial terms could be *moralism* and *relativism*. Another set of terms (sure to offend some people) would be *conservative* and *liberal*. On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace without truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what *is* true for us. But "truth" without grace is *not* really truth, and "grace" without truth is not really grace. Jesus was full of grace and truth. Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license and either way, the joy and power and "release" of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other.

"I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe" (vs. antinomianism)

"I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope" (vs. legalism)

2. Application.

a) Approach to discouragement. When a person is depressed, the moralist says, "you are breaking the rules--repent." On the other hand, the relativist says, "you just need to love and accept yourself". But (assuming there is no physiological base of the depression!) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say: "something in my life has become more important than God, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness". The gospel leads us to repentance, but not to merely setting our will against superficialities. It is without the gospel that superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. The moralist will work on behavior and the relativist will work on the emotions themselves.

b) Approach to love and relationships. Moralism often makes relationships into a "blame-game". This is because a moralist is traumatized by criticism that is too severe, and maintains a self-image as a good person by blaming others. On the other hand, moralism can use the procuring of love as the way to "earn our salvation" and convince ourselves we are worthy persons. That often creates what is called "co-dependency"--a form of self-salvation through needing people or needing people to need you (i.e. saving yourself by saving others). On the other hand, much relativism/liberalism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You only relate as long as it is not costing you anything. So the choice (without the gospel) is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. But the gospel leads us to do neither. We do sacrifice and commit, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others we are acceptable. So we can love the person enough to confront, yet stay with the person when it does not benefit us.

c) Approach to sexuality. The secularist/pragmatist sees sex as merely biological and physical appetite. The moralist tends to see sex as dirty or at least a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. But the gospel shows us that sexuality is to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely without conditions. So we are not to seek intimacy but hold back

control of our lives. If we give ourselves sexually we are to give ourselves legally, socially, personally. Sex only is to happen in a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage.

d) Approach to one's family. Moralism can make you a slave to parental expectations, while pragmatism sees no need for family loyalty or the keeping of promises and covenants if they do not "meet my needs". The gospel frees you from making parental approval an absolute or psychological salvation, pointing how God becomes the ultimate father. Then you will neither be too dependent or too hostile to your parents.

e) Approach to self-control. Moralists tell us to control our passions out of fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Liberalism tells us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach. The gospel tells us that the free, unloseable grace of God "teaches" us to "say no" to our passions (Titus 2:13) if we listen to it. This is a whole-person based approach, starting with the truth descending into the heart.

f) Approach to other races and cultures. The liberal approach is to relativize all cultures. ("We can all get along because there is no truth".) The conservatives believe there is truth for evaluation of cultures, and so they choose some culture as superior and then they idolize it, feeling superior to others in the impulse of self-justifying pride. The gospel leads us to be: a) on the one hand, somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since there is truth), but b) on the other hand, we are morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone. Christians will exhibit both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility. For example, gays are used to being "bashed" and hated or completely accepted. They never see anything else.

g) Approach to witness to non-Christians. The liberal/pragmatist approach is to deny the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. The conservative/moralist person does believe in proselytizing, because "we are right and they are wrong". Such proselytizing is almost always offensive. But the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. a) First, we are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. b) Second, we are freed from fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have the favor of God by grace. c) Third, there is a humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. d) Fourth, we are hopeful about anyone, even the "hard cases", because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were likely people to be Christians. e) Fifth, we are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness. All these traits not only create a winsome evangelist but an excellent neighbor in a multi-cultural society.

h) Approach to human authority. Moralists will tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, cultural customs) too much, since they rely so heavily on their self-image of being moral and decent. Pragmatists will either obey human authority too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (since they may only obey when they know they won't get caught). That mean either authoritarianism or anarchy. But the gospel gives you both a standard by which to oppose human authority (if it contradicts the gospel), but on the other hand, gives you incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when you could get away with disobedience.

i) Approach to guilt. When someone says, "I can't forgive myself", it means there is some standard or condition or person that is more central to your identity than the grace of God. God is the only God who forgives--no other "god" will. If you cannot forgive yourself, it is

because you have failed your real God, your real righteousness, and it is holding you captive. The moralist's false god is usually a God of their imagination which is holy and demanding but not gracious. The pragmatist's false god is usually some achievement or relationship.

j) Approach to self-image. Without the gospel, your self-image is based upon living up to some standards--whether yours or someone's imposed upon you. If you live up to those standards, you will be confident but not humble. If you don't live up to them, you will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can you be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble. For you are both perfect and a sinner!

k) Approach to joy and humor. Moralism has to eat away at real joy and humor--because the system of legalism forces you to take yourself (your image, your appearance, your reputation) very seriously. Pragmatism on the other hand will tend toward cynicism as life goes on because of the inevitable cynicism that grows. This cynicism grows from a lack of hope for the world. In the end, evil will triumph--there is no judgment or divine justice. But if we are saved by grace alone, then the very fact of our being Christians is a constant source of amazed delight. There is nothing matter-of-fact about our lives, no "of course" to our lives. It is a miracle we are Christians, and we have hope. So the gospel which creates bold humility should give us a far deeper sense of humor. We don't have to take ourselves seriously, and we are full of hope for the world.

l) Approach to "right living". Jonathan Edwards points out that "true virtue" is only possible for those who have experienced the grace of the gospel. Any person who is trying to earn their salvation does "the right thing" in order to get into heaven, or in order to better their self-esteem (etc.). In other words, the ultimate motive is self-interest. But persons who know they are totally accepted already do "the right thing" out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God's sake, and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes "doing the right thing" a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end.

m) Approach to the poor. The liberal/pragmatist tend to scorn the religion of the poor and see them as helpless victims needing expertise. This is born out of a disbelief in God's common grace or special grace to all. Ironically, the secular mindset also disbelieves in sin, and thus anyone who is poor must be oppressed, a helpless victim. The conservative/moralists on the other hand tend to scorn the poor as failures and weaklings. They see them as somehow to blame for their situation. But the gospel leads us to be: a) humble, without moral superiority knowing you were "spiritually bankrupt" but saved by Christ's free generosity, and b) gracious, not worried too much about "deservingness", since you didn't deserve Christ's grace, c) respectful of believing poor Christians as brothers and sisters from whom to learn. The gospel alone can bring "knowledge workers" to a humble respect for and solidarity with the poor.

CONCLUSION

Our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness comes from a failure a) to think out the deep implications of the gospel, b) to grasp and believe it through and through, and c) to use the gospel in a radical way. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts and thinking and approaches to absolutely everything. We believe that if the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will look very unique. People will find both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility.