

## **Gospel Spiral: A Proposal**

### **What is the Gospel?**

Evangelicalism in America is in the midst of unprecedented fragmentation. A fault line has opened up, dividing evangelicals between progressive values of social justice and racial reconciliation, and conservative values of personal responsibility to God and traditional moral norms. Though it may not seem so at first glance, the divide is far more complex than answering the question, “How woke are you?” In fact, there is a more fundamental misunderstanding hiding and working beneath the surface. The fault line runs deep, and at the deepest point of divide is an unspoken disagreement on what is meant by the *gospel* itself.

Before they were known primarily as a voting bloc, evangelicals were known as “gospel people.” But what exactly *is* the gospel? We might just as easily ask what an “evangelical” is,<sup>1</sup> but the answer to that question must, in the end, depend on an agreed upon definition of the gospel. So then, let’s return to

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<sup>1</sup> Historian David Bebbington’s famous “quadrilateral” of conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism hardly holds together in our politicized age. Another historian, Martin Marty, once quipped that evangelicals “are people who like Billy Graham,” but it’s probably truer to our cultural moment to say that evangelicals “are people who like Donald Trump.”

the question of what the gospel is. Is it the good news of our justification by faith? Is it the way to gain the righteousness of Christ through the grace of God by faith alone? How central is the substitution theory of atonement within the gospel? Does the gospel include multi-ethnic reconciliation? Social justice? The victory of Christ over sin, death, and Satan? Did Jesus preach the gospel? How important is the Old Testament for understanding and proclaiming the gospel?

I witnessed this confusion firsthand when I recently asked one of my classes, “When you are sharing the gospel, what *must* be included...what *can* be included...and what *ought to be left out*?” A lively debate followed, in which a few students argued that what usually passes as gospel presentations are actually redemptive-historical biblical theologies (Creation—Fall—Redemption—Consummation). In contrast, they argued that the gospel is not *all* the news, just the *good* part; that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). Some students focused on Ephesians 2:14-16<sup>2</sup> and argued that ethnic reconciliation must be included while others argued that it ought not be, focusing instead on Ephesians

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<sup>2</sup> “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.”

2:1-9<sup>3</sup>. Some viewed the gospel as a worldview while others considered it a presentation to be shared with the aim of personal salvation through a faith-filled response. Amidst the noise of the debate, the only certainty was that they were right and the others were wrong!

Debating the meaning of the gospel isn't a new phenomenon, but it is especially volatile in our postmodern age. In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Frederick Nietzsche declared that "the text has disappeared under the interpretation." Nietzsche stands at the fountainhead of the postmodern hermeneutic, in which meaning is determined by the interpreter and put to use explicitly for power. This has become the de facto hermeneutic of our age—an age where expressive individualism has unseated God, tradition and community in making meaning. This meaning-making power is often wielded by tribes within Christianity attempting to define the gospel over and against other tribes and definitions, without rooting their definition in the external, eternal and authoritative source of the Scriptures. Misunderstanding and confusion abound when the same word means different things to different people, and the resultant fragmentation displays an ugly aesthetic to the

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<sup>3</sup> "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked...[you] were by nature children of wrath...But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved..."

watching world<sup>4</sup>. One need not look far on social media to see evidence of this. One arena that displays this misunderstanding fragmentation clearly is the recent debates<sup>5</sup> about the Statement on Social Justice<sup>6</sup>.

This should not be so. Christ said that the world will know him through both our love *and* our unity (John 17:23). The aim of this paper is to present the gospel in a way that is sourced in the Scriptures and unifies the vertical and horizontal aspects of the gospel, with the hope of unifying the church around the Biblical gospel.

### **The Vertical and the Horizontal**

One reason statements like the Statement on Social Justice exist is that the authors see announcing good news on the horizontal axis (sometimes called “the gospel of the kingdom” and including justice, obedience, love of neighbor, etc.) as “outworkings” of the gospel, rather than definitional components. These things, they argue, are the fruit of which the gospel is the tree. By safeguarding the gospel in this way, they attempt to steer clear of stale religious *legalism* on one side

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<sup>4</sup> Contra Paul’s admonition to “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (Titus 2:10) by our demonstration of faithfulness to a watching world.

<sup>5</sup>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september-web-only/john-macarthur-statement-social-justice-gospel-thabiti.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://statementonsocialjustice.com>

and the slippery slope of theological *liberalism* on the other.

Progressive evangelicals would do well to consider these dangers. In fighting against fundamentalists, many progressives have unwittingly become fundamentalists in their own way. Rather than change the game, they have only shifted the lines of the field. In their primarily horizontal axis gospel, there are a new set of *fundamentals* requiring near total agreement: “wokeness” to social injustices, guilt and repentance for privilege, demonstrated concern for the poor and the immigrant, and antagonism toward Donald Trump. This is a new kind of legalism—albeit one with a liberal veneer.

On the other side of the divide, a strictly vertical axis understanding (sometimes called “the gospel of the cross”) starves the gospel of much of the demonstrated power of the good news of the kingdom to unite all things in Christ (Eph 1:11), creating in its place an anemic gospel of personal salvation of souls. Additionally, it seems unaware of and may contribute to a different danger—the danger of expressive individualism. As modern Christians in the West, expressive individualism is steeped into the cultural water we swim in. We can look back at Descartes’ famous undoubtable truth, “I think, therefore I am,” and see the fountainhead of expressive individual autonomy. Our search for truth and meaning was turned inward. This inward turn has, in our postmodern times, become untethered to God, suspicious of authority and

timid, leading us from “I think, therefore I am,” to “I am who I feel I am...I think.”

This orientation—which neither side of the evangelical divide is immune from—has caused us to view ourselves primarily as autonomous, expressive decision makers. A strictly vertical understanding of the gospel—one in which *I* make the decision to affirm a set of propositional truth statements about what God has done for *me* through the life, death, and resurrection of his son—appeals to this orientation. The irony of the strictly vertical view is that the very thing it seeks to preserve—the authority and glory of God—is emptied by focusing so much on me and my personal salvation through my personal justification by my personal expression of faith. Any inclusion of cosmic and corporate news of the King and his Kingdom threatens the centrality of our individual autonomy, and must be relegated to “implications” and “out-workings” of second-order (rather than “definitional”) importance.

Rather than offering a way out of the chaos, these attempts to give meaning to “gospel” has bogged evangelicals further down into tribalism, in which conservative evangelicals build theological walls to safeguard the purity of the gospel, while progressive evangelicals demand that an ever-growing list of works of justice be included in the gospel. Sadly, this tribalism often sinks to the type of name calling (Social Justice Warriors! Marxists! Racists!) that breaks the ninth commandment and drives a wedge deeper into the

growing divide<sup>7</sup>. Both sides of this debate have valid biblical truths to offer, but those truths are often missed under the noise of the debate itself. Missing from the discussion is a fully-orbed gospel that draws from the New Testament understanding of the good news and unites the vertical and the horizontal axes while remaining centered on the gracious saving activity of God.

### **The Gospel Spiral**

One barrier to a unifying definition of the gospel is a zero-sum, either-or way of thinking. It is either this *or* that. My way *or* your way (which really means, of course, my way!). This way of thinking causes us to view the gospel as either vertical or horizontal, either cross or kingdom, either individual or corporate, either personal or cosmic. Our current theological reality within evangelicalism mirrors our current political reality with a two-party system, in which there are the good guys (us) and the bad guys (them). This causes us to view the two competing definitions of the gospel on a gradient from good to bad, and any movement toward the other is a *slide* away from the good.

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Trueman offers a strong critique of this online name calling culture in a book review published on the gospel coalition:  
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/live-marxs-world-now/>

A better vision for understanding the gospel is a spiral<sup>8</sup>. The center of the spiral is the announcement of good news. The fullness of the biblical story—with all the historical events and salvation motifs—invites us on a trail inward to this unifying announcement. Just as God draws us in, he also sends us out. From this center, the news gains more fullness as it spins out into both the horizontal and vertical axes. And as it spirals around, it integrates kingdom and cross without seams and borders. Finally, the gospel spiral ends by directing us out into action through vocational callings to love God and neighbor with all our lives.

The central announcement of the gospel is that *God has sent his Son in the person of Jesus as the Messiah-King, to live, die, rise, and ascend for us and our salvation, uniting the strands of promise running through the Old Testament*. He is the suffering servant, anointed by God to be wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa 53:4-6). He is God over all the earth, who delivers his people and brings peace and gathers the nations (Isa 40:9-11; 52:7). He is the only begotten son of God, coronated as king in power upon his resurrection, becoming the refuge of the nations (Ps 2). He is the true God who loves justice (Isa 61:8) and who clothes us with garments of salvation (Isa 61:10). He is the true king who sits on

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<sup>8</sup> I am drawing this picture from Grant Osborne's *Hermeneutical Spiral*, in which biblical interpretation spirals from text to meaning through careful study. In our case, the gospel spirals from definitional aspects (justification, adoption, redemption, etc.) to a central announcement.



the throne of David (2 Sam 7). All of these strands are either explicitly declared as gospel in the Old Testament, or are connected to explicit declarations of the gospel in the New Testament.

### **The Gospel is Good News**

One important aspect of this definition is that the gospel is essentially an announcement. The word “gospel” comes to us from the old English words *god* (good) and *spell* (tale). The gospel is the “good-tale.” As we go further back we find the Latin word “evangelium” and the Greek word “euangelion,” both of which mean “good news.” In the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, a message from the emperor was *evangelium*, or news so good that it claimed to change the world for the better. One familiar example of this is the story of Pheidippides, a messenger who ran the (roughly) 26.2 miles from the Battle of Marathon to Athens to declare the good news of their victory over the Persian army.

The Roman emperors falsely claimed to be god-in-the-flesh, and their gospels failed to deliver a good, true and beautiful kingdom. But what they falsely claimed *actually happened* when the true King came and announced the in-breaking of the Kingdom. This gospel of Christ the Lord, the true evangelium, does what all the other “good news” only could claim to do: it both announces *and* performs. It is both a true story of the King’s victory *and* the performative power to save sinners like you and me.

### **New Testament Example**

When John was baptizing in Bethany, he saw his cousin Jesus approaching and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). At first blush, this seems like a purely “vertical” gospel, with its mention of sin removal. Upon closer inspection, however, this statement would have sounded odd to his listeners. John and his audience of devout Jews were familiar with their enscriptured stories, especially the story of the Passover and Exodus from Egypt (Ex 12). The Exodus would immediately jump to the mind of a first century Hebrew listening to John preach about a “Lamb of God.” The Lamb of God would have conjured up images of blood smeared on doorposts, not to pay for sins but to deliver Israel from unjust slavery and suffering at the hands of their Egyptian oppressors. God, seeing the Lamb’s blood, passed over his people and took the firstborn of their oppressors in order to give them freedom and bring them to a promised place of flourishing. The Lamb of God, then, was an image that helped Israel remember that God had once delivered them from injustice. It was also an image that gave them hope that he may do it again. This is a radically “horizontal” good news for God’s people. In a fact neither John nor his listeners would have missed, there is no place in the Old Testament where a Lamb is offered as a propitiatory (sin-bearing, wrath-atoning) sacrifice.

Israel did have an offering to take away their sins. In the annual ceremony of Yom Kippur, two goats were brought before the high priest. One was sacrificed, and its blood was sprinkled over the people to cleanse them. The priest would confess the sins of Israel over the other one before sending it away into the wilderness. This “scapegoat” symbolized the removal of their sin (Lev 16). So what was John doing by calling Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?” He was uniting these two rich salvation motifs through exalting Jesus to the position of God himself.

His language not only hearkens to the Passover and Yom Kippur, but also to Exodus 34:6-7: “The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin [this is indirectly quoted in John’s announcement], but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.’” John is announcing that Jesus is both Lamb and Goat, and even more shockingly, YHWH himself! And as YHWH, he was bringing freedom and justice for the captives (horizontal) and cleansing his people and removing their sin (vertical).

Of course, John does not actually use the word “euangelion,” so perhaps more New Testament proof is needed to show that the gospel is rich with vertical and horizontal news. One often overlooked

source is the gospels themselves. The first four books of the New Testament are each titled “The Gospel of...” Each book then, in ways unique to their author, aim and audience, tell of the climactic entrance of Jesus as the Messiah-King. Each book taps into the rich and varied biblical narrative of redemption and presents Jesus as the promised Hero. Each book says, “*This* is the gospel. The Messiah came to take away our sins and make us right with God again (vertical)! And, the King came to deliver his people from slavery to sin and to inaugurate his kingdom on earth (horizontal)!”

Another often overlooked source is the early gospel preaching of the church. Each of the seven earliest gospel sermons, as recorded in Acts 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8, lead the audience into the grand narrative of redemption with the climactic action of Jesus coming as Messiah-King. Not one of these sermons is strictly vertical, offering a plan of salvation through justification by faith. And not one of these sermons is strictly horizontal, promising justice and peace through following in the footsteps of Jesus. These early sermons proclaim that the Messiah-King has come and is offering salvation *and* a new way of life in his kingdom. These apostolic sermons spiral in—to the central announcement that Jesus, the Messiah King, has come!

### **The Romans Road Less Traveled**

Paul’s letter to the Roman church gives more evidence of a gospel spiral uniting vertical and

horizontal salvation motifs. Typically, the “Romans Road” gospel presentation goes something like this: God (Rom 1-2)—Man/Sin (Rom 3:23)—Christ (Rom 6:23; 5:8)—Response (Rom 10:9-13)<sup>9</sup>. This is certainly part of the gospel, and is a clear and biblical path to personal salvation through faith in the finished work of Christ. And it should be preached! But is this the Gospel Paul is preaching in the book of Romans?

Consider how he begins his letter in Romans 1:1-6: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”

This gospel is more than a path to personal salvation. It is the announcement of good news—that the story of Jesus fulfills the story of Israel. This story has an audience, the Roman church trying to make sense of their identity as a mixed people of Jewish and Gentile heritage. It has a narrator, Paul, who speaks as a witness to the

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<sup>9</sup> A popular example of this is Greg Gilbert’s (good) book *What is the Gospel?*

truth and power of the story (it has transformed him from a prideful Pharisee to a slave of the king). It has a setting, which directs the listener back to the fullness of the Old Testament story promising a Davidic King to set the world back to rights. And it has a hero, the risen Son of God, who demands the allegiance (“obedience of faith”) of the nations (not just the Jews).

Additionally, this story comes with the power for salvation: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). The gospel is the announcement of the climactic moment in the redemption story, the moment when the Son of God—the promised Messiah-King—came in the flesh to redeem fallen humanity, reconcile us (Jews and Greeks) to God and to each other, and give us hope for eternal life in the Kingdom through his death and resurrection.

### **Consummation: New Life and Future Hope**

By his death on the cross, Jesus purchased our redemption as our Messiah-King. But he did not stay dead. In what many scholars believe is the earliest gospel tradition<sup>10</sup>, Paul said, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the

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<sup>10</sup> Scot McKnight, in his book *The King Jesus Gospel*, says that “many scholars think [1 Cor 15] is also among the ‘oldest’ set of lines in the entire New Testament. Scholars think this was the oral tradition about the gospel that every New Testament apostle received and then passed on” (46).

Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor 15:3-5). Through the resurrection of Jesus, God signaled his acceptance of the sacrifice of the Son. The risen Christ, then, gives us the immediate hope of sharing in a new kind of life—a resurrection life in the pattern of Jesus. He sends his Spirit to give us that new life now, a life that will extend into eternity. His resurrection gives us hope that we too will be resurrected in the same way as Jesus. And it will be Jesus who, after putting the world to rights, welcomes us into the new creation, wiping our tears away and making all things new. The kingdom will be consummated, the King will live among us, and the tree of life, lost to us at the Fall, will heal the nations (Rev 21).

Later in the same chapter, Paul continues to unpack the hope of the resurrection for us, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:54-55). This apostolic gospel is the good news of the victory of Jesus, the Messiah-King, through his wounds and resurrection. He has struck the decisive blow, crushing the serpent’s head, and he has offered us entrance into the Kingdom of God. We no longer need to worry about the old tyrant ruling us in darkness. We no longer need to live in bondage, chained to our sinful nature and awaiting death and punishment. We no longer need to live in fear, fighting our neighbors as we claw our way up in life.

The gospel is the means by which we enter into the eternal kingdom of God. But the good news demands a response of faith. While the gospel is more than simply presenting a plan of personal salvation—it is not less! We enter the kingdom through faith and repentance. We turn from our sin and trust God, receiving the gift of the alien righteousness of his Son. *And* we bend the knee in allegiance to the true King, apprenticing our lives to Him in joyful servitude. This gospel is the power that keeps us in the kingdom and unifies us into the multi-ethnic people foretold in Revelation 5:9-10: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” This is good news! This gospel is the power to save and to finish the work God began in us the moment we trusted him.

May this gospel bring us together, even as it saves us and sustains us and brings us all the way home.

Amen.