CONTRIBUTORS

**Scot McKnight**
**Michael Horton**
**David A. deSilva**
**Julie C. Ma**
**Shively T. J. Smith**

# FIVE VIEWS ON THE GOSPEL

Michael F. Bird and Jason Maston, editors

COUNTERPOINTS
BIBLE & THEOLOGY

This book models charitable dialogue while also exposing key differences among approaches. Its contributors reflect not only theological but also contextual and disciplinary diversity. I learned not only about the diverse frameworks but also more about Calvin, Wesley, and other historical theology. I found myself agreeing with much in each essay and hoping that such dialogue can help us synthesize the best insights of each, while keeping Jesus's identity and work at the center.

***Craig S. Keener,*** F. M. and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary

"Gospel" is perhaps the most important word and concept in the Bible, but it nonetheless runs the risk of becoming a buzzword that is overused and underdefined. *Five Views on the Gospel* avoids this risk by bringing several scholars into conversation to discuss in detail what they believe the gospel is–and isn't. This book is warmly recommended for pastors, students, and scholars alike as they seek to better understand and explain the biblical gospel.

***Brandon D. Smith,*** Chair of the Hobbs School of Theology & Ministry and Associate Professor of Theology & Ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University; cofounder of the Center for Baptist Renewal

Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). What exactly is the "gospel"? "Gospel" is a term meaning "good news" in the original Greek. What exactly is the "good news" preached by Jesus and his apostles? If you were asked this question, how would you define "gospel"? The answer is not necessarily a simple one. For the New Testament authors often seem to define "gospel" somewhat differently. It should not surprise us, therefore, to observe differences in how five scholars in this volume present and defend their understanding of it. This volume is a wonderful contribution to the discussion and will be a valuable resource, not only for theologians and pastors but also for those of us who want to see lives powerfully transformed by the "gospel."

***Michael Licona,*** Professor of New Testament Studies, Houston Christian University

For Christians, the gospel is a crucially important theological topic, well-deserving of extensive and penetrating discussion. Bird and Maston have brought key voices into conversation about the nature and implications of the main message of Jesus and the apostles. While disagreements are highlighted, this book isn't a competition between views; it's an opportunity for clarification, refinement, and for readers to ponder the width, height, and depth of the glory of the good news of the Messiah. This is one of my favorite volumes in Zondervan's Counterpoints series, and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in the gospel and its effects.

***Nijay K. Gupta,*** Julius R. Mantey Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary

This valuable resource brings together five articulations of the gospel, each with different yet mostly complementary framings and emphases. It challenges us to pay attention to aspects of the gospel that are found in Scripture but may not have as prominent a place in our own formulations and traditions.

***Tim MacBride,*** Principal, Morling College, Australia

Drs. Bird and Maston have assembled a learned group of scholars with different definitions of the gospel to offer readers a clear, informed, and provocative dialogue about the gospel. The result is an accessible conversation about the most important question in the world: What is the gospel of Jesus Christ? As readers from different theological traditions turn each page, they might be moved to shout, "Amen!" while others might be provoked to declare, "Oh my!" Yet they will likewise walk away from this book, longing to know more about the gospel and about the Christ whom it announces as good news for Jews, for gentiles, and for the cosmos as they seek the most faithful way to preach and teach it to anyone with ears to hear.

***Jarvis J. Williams,*** Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

At first, the five contributors of this volume seem like strange bedfellows. Then, the editors invite us to sample their offerings over conversations. Engaging with biblical evidence and with each other, each contributor demonstrates how sin, salvation, the centrality of Christ, and discipleship are enacted within their tradition. A gospel feast for thought.

***Jean K. Luah,*** Assistant Professor, Singapore Bible College

If all the "gospel-centered" ministries were listed in one spot, I suppose Microsoft Excel itself couldn't contain the list. Yet, to the surprise of some, there are different schools of thought on how to briefly describe what precisely the gospel is. The benefit of putting this discussion in a five-views book is that one can see interactions among the diverse outlooks. Readers may enter this book not knowing these discussions are occurring, or they might arrive leaning toward one perspective. Either way, after reading the book, they will have a better understanding of the starting points, why there are differences, and the main areas of emphasis. Possibly something we can all learn from this book is that the gospel is as deep and rich as it is simple and straightforward. Because the gospel is central to what Jesus and the apostles preached, this discussion is worth having, and this book does an admirable job of overviewing some of the different perspectives.

***Patrick Schreiner,*** Associate Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

This book is a theological treasure, offering deep, well-articulated perspectives on the gospel from a diverse range of voices. Each author presents a compelling and thoughtful argument, making it an invaluable resource for anyone seeking a richer understanding of the gospel's depth and breadth. As someone rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, I appreciated seeing my perspective well represented by Dr. deSilva, while also being challenged and enriched by views beyond my own. *Five Views of the Gospel* is a gift to the church, exemplifying how Christians can engage in meaningful, charitable dialogue even amid theological differences.

***David Donnan,*** Global Methodist Elder;
Host, The David Donnan Podcast

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*Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*
*Two Views on Women in Ministry*

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Dr. Horton has written and edited more than forty books, including award-winning titles such as *Justification* (2 vols.) and *The Christian Faith*, as well as many popular titles, including *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*; *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*; and *Putting Amazing Back into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel*. His most recent book is *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual but Not Religious" in Antiquity*, the first of three volumes in his Divine Self series, an intellectual history of "spiritual but not religious" as a phenomenon in Western culture.

**Julie C. Ma** (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is Professor of Missiology and Intercultural Studies at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma. She previously served as a Korean missionary in the Philippines (1981–2006) and as Research Tutor of Missiology at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, UK. Her publications include *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits: Pentecostal Ministry Among the Kankana-ey Tribe in the Philippines* (Peter Lang, 2000), and *Mission Possible: Biblical Strategies in Reaching the Lost*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Regnum, 2016), and numerous articles published in different journals. She has also contributed articles to collected works in different books and dictionaries/encyclopedias. She served as a general council member and executive committee member of Edinburgh 2010. She also served as the president of the Asian Pentecostal Society from 2008–2010.

**Jason Maston** (PhD, Durham University) is Associate Professor of Theology and Associate Dean, School of Christian Thought, at Houston Christian University. He is the author of *Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism and Paul* and has coedited several works, including the Reading in Context volumes (Zondervan Academic) and *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*.

**Scot McKnight** (PhD, University of Nottingham) has been a professor of New Testament for more than four decades and is now a visiting professor of New Testament at both Houston Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Centre (England). He is the author or editor of more than ninety books, including *The King Jesus Gospel*, *The Blue Parakeet*, *Pastor Paul*, and *Kingdom Conspiracy*.

**Shively T. J. Smith** (PhD, Emory University) is Associate Professor of New Testament at Boston University School of Theology and has spent over twenty years in the study of Bible, theology, and religion. In 2021 the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church honored her with the exemplary teacher of the year award. Smith is also the author of two books, *Strangers to Family: Diaspora and 1 Peter's Invention of God's Household* and *Interpreting 2 Peter Through African American Women's Moral Writings*. She has also written numerous essays. She serves as editor for the SBL's Semeia

Monograph series and as associate editor of the New Testament for the *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 3rd edition. Smith is also a commissioner for the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and serves as a board member for the National Council of Churches and Friendship Press Board of Translation Utilization, which oversees the use of the NRSV, RSV, and NRSVue. Smith has emerged as a sought-after scholar, teacher, preacher, and writer who is dedicated to the service of academic theological studies and ecumenical conversations in the public square.

# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| *CR* | *Corpus reformatorum*. Edited by C. G. Bretschneider, H. E. Bindseil, et al. 101 vols. Halis Sazonum (Hall): Schwetschke; et al., 1834–1963. Repr., New York: Johnson, 1964 |
| LXX | The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) |
| NCBC | New Cambridge Bible Commentary |
| NICNT | New International Commentary on the New Testament |
| *NTS* | *New Testament Studies* |
| SBLMS | Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series |
| *WJW* | *The Works of John Wesley*. 14 vols. London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872. Repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958 |
| WUNT | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament |

# INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

MICHAEL F. BIRD



## What Is There to Debate?

Christianity became a global religion through many factors including colonization and migration, but above all through evangelization. Christianity is a missionary religion, and missionaries have gone out to places as remote as Iceland, Mongolia, Peru, and Zimbabwe, embedded themselves within Indigenous communities, and made forming international networks something of an artform since the days of the earliest church in Jerusalem. Although there are still several unreached people groups and still many places in the world where the free and unhindered promotion of religion is prohibited, nonetheless the gospel has spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This very day, there are Christians in Jerusalem, Jena, Jakarta, Jalal-Abad, and Jackson. That is the case because Christians, wherever and whenever they went, whether as migrants or merchants, as soldiers or slaves, as laity or clergy, both men and women, took with them the Christian message, the evangel, the gospel. They took it with them and rooted it in their own setting. They built churches, set up ministries, and did the work to which the gospel called them.

But what is the gospel? The gospel is something that every Christian should know, understand, and be able to articulate on the spot. We are baptized in the story of the gospel, and the Lord's Supper is a regular celebration of the gospel. We habitually read from books called "Gospels." We are told that we should support evangelism—that is, the active promotion of the gospel. Our churches sponsor missionaries and parachurch ministries whose primary business is the advancement of the gospel. There is even a broad Protestant coalition called

"Evangelicalism." The evangel, the gospel, is so ubiquitous that its content and concerns should be self-evident to all people of Christian faith.

And yet the topic of the gospel, what one might think is undebatable, is debated. Yes, we all agree that the gospel has something to do with God and Jesus, salvation, and faith, but after that it can get contentious and confusing. Theologians and pastors disagree on what the gospel is in essence, what to emphasize in the gospel, what problem the gospel is trying to rectify or remedy, how we should respond to the gospel, and what the implications of the gospel are for the church, mission, individual piety, and everyday life. No wonder there is an industry of books trying to clarify the substance of the gospel, its meaning, and entailments for contemporary audiences.

The complexity over defining the gospel is not merely a result of our unsanctified souls, a deficiency in religious education, or even a creeping worldliness in the church. Discussion over the gospel is generated by the very necessity of articulating it for diverse audiences. The gospel is not a mathematical formula. It is more like the performance of a dramatic story about God and his Son, and all performances have to be scripted, interpreted, translated, and communicated to audiences.

The first thing we must note is that there is a diverse testimony to the gospel in the biblical materials. If we compare some passages from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 4:16–31; 23:1–56), Paul's epistle to the Romans (Rom 1:2–4; 3:21–26; 5:1; 8:1–3), Peter's speech to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:34–43), Paul's speech at the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 17:22–31), and the Petrine and Johannine letters (1 Pet 2:1–10; 1 John 1:5–2:2), we would find a cluster of commonalities as well as some individual iterations of the gospel. The question is whether we have a diverse witness to the one gospel or whether the New Testament conveys several different versions of the gospel.[1]

The second thing that should be borne in mind is that one must tailor the gospel to the audience one is preaching to because the audience might know nothing of Christianity, have misconceptions about Christianity, or even interpret Christian concepts through the lens of

1. James D. G. Dunn, "Methodology of Evangelism in the New Testament: Some Preliminary Reflections," in *New Testament Theology in Light of the Church's Witness: Essays in Honor of I. Howard Marshall*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, Grant Osborne, and Ray van Neste (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 25–40.

their resident social, cultural, and religious framework. I can tell you from experience that what John 3:16 means to me, a Christian theologian, is not what it means to a Buddhist shopkeeper in Thailand. A Muslim man in Eritrea might be affronted by John's reference to Jesus as God's "only begotten Son" (KJV). A science student at a Czechian university might think of John's Gospel as somewhere between myth and science fiction. The words, "God," "love," "sin," and "world" have different meanings in different contexts. In order to share the gospel with anyone, the gospel must be contextualized. On the one hand, the fact that the gospel is translatable into different languages and contexts is a strength. On the other hand, it presents a problem since there are some seven thousand languages in usage in the world today and a constant flux of cultures and contexts into which we have to speak the gospel. How do you speak the word of the gospel to a refugee family from Syria living in Idaho compared to speaking the gospel to a gay Gen-Z teenager with Pakistani parents working as a graphic artist in multicultural London? How does one live a life "worthy of the gospel" at the Waco Walmart, at a university in Nigeria, or in a retirement village in Swansea?

Third, our respective Christian traditions and Christian experiences will make us naturally gravitate toward certain ways of articulating the gospel or preferring some articulations over others. For those of us who live within a Christian tradition derived from the Latin West, we are naturally inclined to think of the gospel as the answer to the problem of sin and guilt and the solution as "righteousness," however "righteousness" is understood. For those of us who live within a Christian tradition derived from the Orthodox family of churches, we are naturally inclined to think of the gospel as the answer to the problem of death and condemnation and the solution as new life and participation "in the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). Consider also how the gospel might resonate differently with people who experience socioeconomic affluence or alienation, whether your ancestors were slaves or slave owners, or whether the dominant culture around you is secular, Islamic, or Christian. Whether consciously or unconsciously, our respective religious traditions, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox and our socioreligious location are going to shape the way we explain the good news that God "loves" us and that Christ died "for" our sins, because the meaning of "love" and "for" can be construed in several different ways.

As you can tell, there are many debates to be had because there is much to dissect, deliberate, and discuss concerning the gospel. The gospel matters. It is the center, boundary, and integrating point for Christian faith, the touchstone of authentic Christianity, and what drives the church's mission. If that is so, then getting the gospel right and wielding it rightly, will be a task of first importance. To that end, in this volume we are pursuing a multi-perspectival exploration of the gospel: its biblical foundations, its meaning, and its various entailments. We have assembled a fantastic and diverse collection of authors, each of whom have a deep love for God, an abiding faith in Christ, a commitment to advance the gospel, and a history of Christian service. They are at the top of their respective fields when it comes to scholarship, and they hail from diverse traditions and contexts. This book brings them all together to explain and explore the gospel both individually and as part of an ongoing conversation.

Obviously, we have not been able to incorporate every single perspective, tradition, and theology into this discussion. Accordingly, we did not solicit perspectives from Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, or dozens of Protestant perspectives. But what we have included is, I think, a diverse sample of views that will speak to churches, mainly Protestant churches in the Anglophone world, and help them think evangelically about the gospel. The views included in this volume are:

**King Jesus:** A view of the gospel rooted in Scripture's storyline that places an emphasis on the identity of Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

**Reformation:** A view of the gospel indebted to the legacy of the Reformation that places emphasis on God's grace, justification by faith, and union with Christ.

**Wesleyan:** A view of the gospel that accents the free offer of grace and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

**Pentecostal:** A view of the gospel that focuses on Jesus and the Spirit as the power for faith, forgiveness, and freedom.

**Liberation:** A view of the gospel that centers on the holistic redeeming and liberating work of the gospel and how it addresses the entire human condition.

As part of the exploration of the gospel in this volume, we have asked the contributors to address several things to make these conversations happen.

First, the contributors were asked to write about the gospel with a view to explaining what the gospel means to them in light of their reading of Scripture, from the perspective of their religious tradition, and from the crucible of their own experiences. To that end, we have asked each contributor to do several things:

1. Provide a Twitter length opening definition and summary of the gospel.
2. Explain the proper context for understanding the gospel. Is it the Old Testament, first-century Judea, the Roman imperial cult, human sin and fallenness, the Reformation, the surrounding culture, the experience of oppression, or something else? Why do we need the gospel?
3. Identify the primary biblical texts that express the gospel and how it is to be understood.
4. Explain how people are meant to respond to the gospel and what benefits are promised to us in the gospel.
5. Answer the question, "What does it mean to live a life worthy of the gospel?"
6. Provide further thoughts on the content, meaning, and significance of the gospel as required.

This is the task the contributors were given, but this volume is more than stating what the gospel means for them; it included an additional task. The nature of Zondervan's Counterpoints series is that it does not allow authors to state their own position, then leave their perspective siloed and juxtaposed. Instead, it helpfully asks the contributors to enter into dialogue with each other. That is why the second task that each of the contributors was assigned was to write responses to each other in order to provide a mixture of mutual affirmation and critical interaction. This allows us to observe patterns of convergence as well as points of difference among the views. It makes for a beneficial exercise to see these learned biblical scholars and theologians wrestle with each other about the gospel.

## A Summary of the Gospel Perspectives

Scot McKnight presents the **King Jesus Gospel** position. According to McKnight, the New Testament gospel is indebted to the storyline of Scripture, a story that climaxes in the revelation of Jesus the Messiah, the king, who rescues his people and makes them his royal subjects. What is more, the gospel is something that Jesus preached, it was a gospel about a kingdom, and a kingdom is a people ruled by a king. The context for understanding the gospel is the intrusion of evil into the world, the eschatological promises for redemption given in Scripture, and the empires of the ages that represent the sum of anti-God forces in our world. McKnight believes that the gospel calls for people to surrender to God in faith, embrace the lordship of Jesus, and live out the gospel story of healing and hope in our own everyday lives. The biblical texts that McKnight regards as paramount for understanding the gospel are Isaiah 40:3, Mark 1:15, Acts 2:36, 38, 13:38–39, and 1 Corinthians 15:3–5. The impact that the gospel makes is for believers to submit to Christ by adopting a pattern of life typified by Christoformity with cruciformity.

Next, Michael Horton expounds the **Reformation Gospel** position indicative of the Calvinistic and Westminster tradition. Horton takes as central Jesus's work as prophet, priest, and king, who imputes righteousness to believers, taking them from condemnation to righteousness. He closely coordinates the gospel with a forensic understanding of justification by faith. Viewed this way, the context of the gospel is the biblical narrative of plight and solution, with the plight construed as curse and condemnation, and the solution construed as righteousness and eternal life. The texts that Horton regards as the most salient for his case are Luke 18:9–16, Acts 15:8–11, and Romans 4:3–6, with manifold references to Romans and Galatians along the way. For Horton, the gospel demands faith, not a passive faith but a faith that yields holiness and obedience. To live a life worthy of the gospel means, under Horton's Reformed perspective, to ensure that faith operates in, through, and for love.

David A. deSilva articulates a **Wesleyan Gospel** that has currency in Methodist circles and various holiness movements influenced by John and Charles Wesley. For deSilva, the gospel is the story of how

God's grace undoes the penalty and power of sin and concurrently draws us into a life of holiness. The context for the gospel is the conviction that human beings have failed to worship God and need a change of heart to render to God the holy worship due to God as our Creator and Redeemer. Several texts are central in that articulation for deSilva, including John 3:3, Romans 6:1–11, 13:11, and Hebrews 12:14. He sees the gospel calling people to faith, the experience of new birth, a sense of assurance, with the Spirit given as a power toward perfection. Believing the gospel should result in intentional discipleship, a reliance on the Holy Spirit, divesting oneself of sin, and investing in a Christian community.

Julie Ma advocates for a **Pentecostal Gospel** shaped by her Asian heritage and ministry experience and resourced from the Pentecostal tradition. Ma contends that the gospel is principally concerned with the liberating work of the Holy Spirit. The gospel meets our need to escape marginalization and to receive blessings. Human beings are alienated from God and need to return to the abundant, precious blessings that God designed us to enjoy. What stands in the way is not only our sin but the sinful institutions and structures around us. Biblical texts that strike Ma as important include Luke 4:18–19, Acts 1:8, 2:1–12, and 1 Corinthians 12:7–9. The benefits that the gospel confers are empowerment for our own participation in the mission of God in our world. The result of our gospel-experience should be, argues Ma, a holistic spirituality where we seek to care for each other in body, mind, and spirit.

Shively T. J. Smith presents a **Liberation Gospel** in the tradition of African-American experience and religious testimony. For Smith, the fact that Jesus died a slave's death means that the gospel is concerned with liberation, both spiritual and social, to set people free from the forces of death and exploitation. The context for the gospel is the human experience of depravation caused by our own sinning and deprivation caused by the sinful behavior of others. Manifold texts speak about the human experience of illness, poverty, ethnic and racial discrimination, gender bias, social-class stratification, dispossession, disinheritance, and marginalization. Thus, for Smith, biblical texts that she finds important are stories like the good Samaritan from Luke 10:25–37 and others that speak about and emphasize human dignity and accompaniment as a necessity for resolving human misery, exploitation, and struggle.

The gospel, then, should drive persons toward caring for others and dismantling systems that harm people and even creation itself. Smith believes that when the gospel is practiced, it results in the witness of inclusion, equality, and freedom. An essential benefit of the liberation gospel, in Smith's mind, is championing our moral responsibility to each other.

## How This Book Will Benefit You

Not long ago, the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) put out its own catechism, which, in the second question, asks and answers the following:

> What is the Gospel?
>
> The Gospel is the good news that God loves the world and offers salvation from sin through his Son, Jesus Christ (Ps 103:1–13; Isa 53:4–5; John 3:16–17; 1 Cor 15:1–5).[2]

The ACNA catechism prioritized the gospel in its instruction to believers because the gospel obviously matters. All our contributors, whatever their disagreements on major or minor details, agree that the gospel matters. It mattered for church history, it matters still for our contemporary mission, and what we believe about the gospel permeates every aspect of Christian thought and practice.

The apostle Paul expounded the gospel to the Corinthians because it was something of "first importance" (1 Cor 15:3). In the second century, the church father Irenaeus, a chief opponent of many heresies, declared the gospel "handed down to us in the scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith."[3] In many ways, Irenaeus is similar to Calvin who said that "The Spirit, promised to us, has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of-revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with the very doctrine which is commended by the gospel."[4] The gospel



2. James I. Packer et al., *To Be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 23. Also available at https://anglicanchurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/To-Be-a-Christian.pdf.

3. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

4. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.9.1.

is what Irenaeus believed he was defending and what Calvin believed he was recovering during the Reformation.

But what is at stake is more than doctrine, dogmatic beliefs about God, about Jesus, and about salvation. There are manifold implications that follow on from what we make of the gospel. The gospel is more than doctrine, because the gospel creates a type of gospel living, gospel spirituality, gospel mission, and gospel-centered communities. This is why the apostle Paul called on the Philippians to live a life "worthy of the gospel" (Phil 1:27) and for the Corinthians to exercise "obedience" that accompanies their "confession of the gospel" (2 Cor 9:13). Concerning the Christian life, the third-century church father Origen exhorted readers, "Guided by God through Jesus Christ, let us walk in the great and life-giving way of the gospel, in hope that we may now traverse it until we reach its end."[5] We find something similar in the seventeenth century with John Wesley, who expressed in a letter his belief that the gospel is both proclamation and a pattern of life: "Go on in the work where to God has called you, and He will do all things well. I hope our preachers preach and live the gospel—I am."[6]

Contemporary theologians have restated the same thing for ethics and pastoral ministry. According to theologian Oliver O'Donovan: "The foundations of Christian ethics must be evangelical foundations; or, to put it more simply, Christian ethics must arise from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Otherwise it could not be Christian ethics."[7] In terms of pastoral ministry, Derek Tidball writes: "Pastoral work is simply bringing to full flower the bud of the gospel," and, "The gospel determines everything about the pastor—his motives, authority, methods, and character are all governed by the good news of Jesus Christ."[8]

One might allege that being gospel centered is a fad, a good marketing gimmick, because attaching the word "gospel" to something is just a trendy way of arguing that it is important. But the gospel is important for

5. Origen, *Comm. John* 32.1.1, cited in Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 516.

6. John Wesley, "To George Merryweather," Dec. 20, 1766. Cited in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1960), 5:34.

7. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 11.

8. Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1997), 100, 120.

determining the identity of Jesus, the human predicament, the meaning of salvation, understanding our mission in the world, and above all for grasping the glorious and majestic nature of God. According to the late John Webster:

> The best evangelical theological work emerges from the delight in the Christian gospel, for the gospel announces a reality which is in itself luminous, persuasive, and infinitely satisfying. That reality is Jesus Christ as he gives himself to be an object for creaturely knowledge, love, and praise. To think evangelically about this one is to think in his presence, under the instruction of his Word and Spirit, and in the fellowship of the saints. And it is to do so with cheerful confidence that his own witness to himself is unimaginably more potent than any theological attempts to run to his defense.[9]

The aim of this book is not to problematize the gospel, not to make the gospel opaque or obtuse by inundating readers with a myriad of perspectives or by burying them in scholarly details. Quite the opposite. The objective of this book is to help readers appreciate the richness and depth of the gospel, to grasp the different ways the gospel can be proclaimed and applied, to notice diverse scriptural witness to the gospel, to exhort the churches to attain clarity and conviction about the gospel, and to consider the ministry of the gospel as a task that the entire church, both lay people and clergy, have responsibility to undertake. The gospel requires knowing, teaching, preaching, guarding, going, giving, living, and loving in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accordingly, the objective we are pursuing is that readers may come away from this book knowing God better (see Eph 1:17) by wrestling with the manifold wisdom of God as it is given to us in the gospel, so that we might better delight in the gospel, live a life worthy of it, and carry it with us in our life, work, and service.



9. John Webster, "Jesus Christ," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. T. Larsen and D. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60.

CHAPTER ONE

# THE KING JESUS GOSPEL

SCOT MCKNIGHT



On any given day, on any social media, one will discover the word *gospel* being used for what one thinks is most important: from love to God to salvation in Christ to justification by faith to Jesus himself to the story of Israel to justice to social justice to peace to one's political party. Americans, living as they do in what one might call a post-Christian nation, are acclimated to framing their best idea as the gospel. It is the Christian's deepest claim and most important belief. Yet it is surprising how diverse the claims are when using the word. Listen, if you will, to the mainline, to the evangelical, to the Christian nationalist, to the progressive, to the social, racial, and economic justice warriors—listen to the preacher and prophets and pamphleteers of our age—and the gospel arises with the force of demanding claims. To call something "gospel" is to make the ultimate claim.

The Billy Graham gospel illustrates our point. Though similar gospel presentations preceded him, it was Graham who perfected what many today would call the gospel of personal salvation:[1] God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life; though created in God's image, you were actually born in Adam's sin and stand eternally guilty before God, which means eternal punishment in hell after death; but God

1. Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 75–93.

loves you and sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you on the cross where he absorbed the punishment for sin on your behalf; if you turn to Jesus and trust him for your salvation you will be delivered from eternal punishment and experience eternity in heaven, in the presence of God and the saints. I have in another context called this the "soterian" gospel, the gospel of salvation (*sōtēria* is the Greek word for "salvation").[2] This understanding of the gospel is framed by an individual's need for salvation and how personal redemption can be found through faith in Christ. This gospel for Billy Graham, and now his son Franklin, is the beginning and end of all discussions. It is their ultimate message with an eternal claim on the entire world.

Yet, I have many friends who would frame the gospel in other terms. If one frames the gospel as justification by faith, the framework is slightly different than the above, which frames it as personal salvation. If one frames it as reconciliation, the problem changes because the solution changes. If one frames it in more systemic terms—not just personal—or more cosmic terms—that is, in terms of evil or injustice, again changing the solution changes the problem the gospel resolves. The solution, in other words, determines the problem. We can reverse it: the problem determines the solution. What term frames the gospel is always the solution, so I prefer to think that our gospeling is more about a solution determining the precise problem than the problem determining



2. For this chapter I am indebted to my earlier book on this topic. See McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*. It is not possible in this short chapter to document the literature deserving mention, but I have provided some indication of scholarship. Of particular delight to me in writing this essay was the discovery of a book at the recommendation of my friend, Brad Nassif, who suggested I read Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The Apostolic Gospel* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2016). He sees the primary content of the gospel to be Christology and the secondary, as it were, to be the benefits or blessings of the gospel, a distinction I have maintained for some time now, and his third theme is the demand or the response to the gospel. See also Bradley Nassif, "What is the Gospel in Eastern Orthodoxy?," in *Living the Gospel of Jesus Christ: Orthodox and Evangelical Approaches to Discipleship and Christian Formation*, ed. Mark Oxbrow and Tim Grass (Oxford: Regnum, 2021), 9–20. I have long benefited from approaches similar to mine by N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 39–62; Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 120–39; Matthew W. Bates, *The Hermeneutics of the Apostolic Proclamation: The Center of Paul's Method of Scriptural Interpretation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). Gorman's thesis that the gospel is good news *about* Jesus and good news *for* us gets it just right (p. 124), as he too distinguishes the content of the gospel from its benefits.

the solution.[3] The two (problem and solution) are not, however, independent, but they correlate with one another into a harmonic perception of the gospel, into an ultimate claim on life.

Because gospel is so central to the Christian faith—it is in fact *the* Christian faith—theologians are summoned to the table to define it. I offer my "tweet" definition of *gospel* and then a brief explanation before turning to some questions about gospel and gospeling.

## Gospel Tweet

The *gospel* is the announcement or proclamation of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of Israel's hope who through his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension conquers sin and death—personal, systemic—in order to unleash the redemption of God—that is, the kingdom of God, for the transformation of humans and systems.

In an even shorter tweet, the gospel is the story about Jesus.

In one word, Jesus.

## Gospel Explanation

For there to be a "gospel" there must be a context, a story, a narrative that gives rise to a solution called the gospel. As stated above, in hermeneutical terms, it is the solution that often determines the problem. If the solution is Jesus, and I will demonstrate this (I hope) to everyone's satisfaction in the next section, a need for Jesus must be also shown. I assume that conclusion—namely, that *Jesus's coming is the solution* to a problem, and that means we need to seek for a problem for which Jesus is the solution. The solution Jesus offers to the Galileans and Judeans of his day was the *kingdom*, which could be translated the "empire" of God. More than one hundred times this word is found in the Synoptic Gospels, even if it is rendered into "life" and "eternal life" in the Fourth Gospel. If Jesus's embodiment and announcement of the kingdom are the solution, we need to find the problem in the aching desire for and expectation of God's kingdom breaking into the world.

3. For discussions of plight and solution, see E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, repr. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2017); and Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

The standard soterian model thinks the problem is the sin of Genesis 3 because the solution is the atonement of Romans 3, and one could reverse that sentence if one prefers. Without denying the importance of the themes of sin, salvation, and atonement in Christ, we need to recognize that Paul's solution is Paul's and should not be imposed on Jesus. Jesus announced kingdom because kingdom was the expectation, so I begin with Jesus.

First, Jesus's kingdom is the kingdom *of God*, or as Matthew prefers, the kingdom *of heaven*. This is an immediate piece of polemics: a kingdom of God, or of heaven, as Jonathan Pennington has demonstrated, transcends and thus stands over against a kingdom of humans, of men, of human kings.[4]

Second, to call the kingdom that Jesus inaugurates the kingdom *of God* is to undo a temporary accommodation. To use "of God" with "kingdom" makes us think of that oft ignored transition in the work of 1 Samuel 8 where God's people desire a kingdom like that found among other nations. Prior to this, God was the sole king, but after the appointment of Saul and then David as kings, God—this is to me the best term—*accommodates* to Israel's desire. Yet it is not the best of God's plan for humans in God's world. The plot of the Bible for those who think kingdom is the solution is theocracy moving to monarchy and then to its fulfillment in Christocracy.[5]

Third, this plot toward Christocracy in the divine plan reveals fundamental categories of both problem and solution. If Jesus brings kingdom and if he is the king in this kingdom, then the *problem* was human subjects not living under the world's true king and the *solution* is humans living under Jesus as lord and king—that is, as Messiah. I have now entered into the narrative of what we often call *sin*, though I don't think we need to obsess about that specific term, as *rebellion*, *disobedience*, *transgression*, *idolatry*, and others work just as well—especially the biggest term of all: *evil*.[6] In the sweep of the Bible from Genesis to

4. Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014).

5. McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 29–33.

6. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 79–127. On sin as agent and as systemic, see Matthew Croasmun, *The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Revelation, sin is personal/individual, corporate, cosmic-spiritual, and cosmic-systemic, and any gospel that does not deal death blows to the comprehensiveness of sin is inadequate. Rejection and repudiation of God's lordship and the lordship of Jesus are core meanings of sin.

Christocracy is the core of the gospel, as it is a declaration about Jesus and, in fact, is a declaration by Jesus himself. Put differently, the gospel is a message about Jesus and his identity in the plan of God. Eastern Orthodox scholar Theodore Stylianopoulos, after sketching some prominent voices defining the gospel, summarizes it in these terms:

> The essence of the gospel is the Christology, or perhaps better the "Christ-devotion"—the experiential understanding and prayerful celebration of who Christ is and the significance of his saving work as lived and believed by the apostolic community of faith.[7]

Notice his wording: *the Christology . . . who Christ is . . . and the significance of his saving work*. To carry through with this, even Jesus must preach that gospel if we want to say he preached the gospel. Did he preach himself? The answer to that question is an affirmative also to each of these sub-questions: Did he make himself the center of God's plan? Did he have an egocentricity about his message? Did he call people to follow himself? Yes, yes, yes. That's gospeling.

A test I have for assessing any articulation of the gospel is this: Did Jesus preach what this person says is the gospel? I ask this of the Bridge Diagram. Of the Four Spiritual Laws. And of every gospel I hear. I do not mean some aren't cobbling together verses from the Bible to form their version of the gospel, for that happens often. No, what I mean is simple: Did Jesus explicitly preach the gospel someone claims is the gospel? If Jesus didn't preach it, I ask why someone thinks they've improved Jesus's own gospel. I ask why anyone who thinks Jesus is the Lord would also think Jesus *didn't* preach their gospel? This assessment is not being heavy-handed but rather springs from my disturbances over what some claim to be the gospel.

7. Stylianopoulos, *Apostolic Gospel*, 16.

Fourth, this king and his kingdom should not be reduced to personal redemption, but it also should not minimize it either. The word *kingdom* entails five elements if we comprehend kingdom as something intelligible to first-century Galileans and if we approach kingdom on the basis of evidence in the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament).[8] (1) For there to be a kingdom, there must be a king. In that world that king was the God of Israel, who is now revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. For there to be a kingdom, (2) there must be a rule by that God and by Jesus. Unlike the rule of the Roman emperors, the rule of this king is both by way of redemption and by governance. The prototypical redemptive act of God in the Bible is the exodus liberation that is embodied in the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. But this God governs in this kingdom as well, and hence the Hebrew term *Adonai* is applied to Jesus as *Kyrios*. The redeeming agent becomes the Lord of the kingdom. For there to be a kingdom, there (3) must be a people whom this God has redeemed and over whom this God governs. The people of this God in the Bible is Israel as fulfilled in Jesus as the church. For there to be a kingdom, there must be (4) an ethic or law through which the redeeming, governing God of the kingdom reveals life for those in the kingdom. Again, this is the law of Moses as fulfilled in the teachings of Jesus (e.g., Matt 5:17–48) and then articulated in fresh ways by the apostles as life in the Spirit. Finally, for there to be a kingdom, there must be (5) a land, a territory, or a location. Kingdoms are not abstractions and purely spiritual realities, a view that has too often been the attraction of Christians who seemingly have little sympathy for the Old Testament or Judaism. Recently Dale Allison has demonstrated that kingdom and territory must be connected if we want to talk about the meaning of kingdom for Jesus.[9] The word "kingdom" in the Old Testament over and over and over refers to a territory, and that's how Josephus uses the term too. In the Old Testament that territory is the land, but the land promise in the New Testament (and I recognize we are treading here on somewhat contested terrain) is both the physical land and the embodied, mobile location of followers of Jesus taking up space in various locations across the Roman Empire. For instance, Matthew 5:13

8. McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*. I rely on this study throughout my essay.

9. Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 164–204.

should be translated, "You are the salt of the *land*." That land promise is not extinguished, for even in Revelation the final vision is of a "New Jerusalem" (see Rev 21–22). Space matters. The temple is the heart of the land promise, and in the New Testament the people of Jesus are the (mobile) temple of God (e.g., 1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19; Eph 2:21–22; Rev 3:12).

If Jesus is the king and the people of God are the people of his kingdom, then the ethic of Jesus is the way of life for kingdom people. The ethic of Jesus, as is the case for the entire New Testament ethic, is an ethic of relations with others and is not reducible to personal piety and individual spiritual formation, regardless of how singularly important those are for personal discipleship to Jesus. Hence, the ethic of Jesus becomes systemic. An ethic practiced by a people forms itself into a living agent, and that living agent acts upon the people in some manner to remind the people how to live as kingdom people. Since that ethic-as-living-agent is about the kingdom, that systemic impact as such becomes a kingdom constraint.[10] The ethic of Jesus for the kingdom people, then, is a systemic order of kingdom living.

This leads now to a more expansive articulation of the gospel, beginning with brief words about the context.

## Context

At issue in any discussion of the gospel today is whether Jesus and the apostles are responding to the Roman empire's routine "good news" declarations about the emperor, a military victory, or the Pax Romana.[11] Did they derive their use of gospel from the Old Testament texts, as, say, is found in LXX 2 Samuel 4:10; 18:20, 22, 25, 27 and Jeremiah 20:15—where it means news—or in the more Jesus-sounding Psalms (40:9 [39:10 LXX]; 68:11 [67:12]; 96:2 [95:2])—where it is about public announcements of the saving work of God—or in the even more early Christian-evoking lines from the prophets (Isa 40:9; 52:7; 61:1; Joel 2:32 [3:5 LXX]; Nah 1:15 [2:1])? In his so-called inaugural sermon in Nazareth from Isaiah 61, words are put on the lips of Jesus that lead most to think his usage, at least, derives especially from Isaiah (cf. Luke

10. Croasmun, *Emergence of Sin*.

11. Adrian Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana: War, Peace and Conquest in the Roman World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

4:16–30, esp. vv. 18–19). That Qumran has texts (4Q521; 11Q13) that sound the same lends credibility to a Jewish origin for the Christian usage of gospel. Were the authors of the New Testament using a "hidden transcript"—saying "gospel" but meaning subversion of Rome and the imperial cult? Can we even detect such double-layered speech? Were they swiping Rome's term and so participating in social resistance, dissidence, and foot-dragging?[12] To the point, then, too, is that Paul's language of gospel, prominent as it is, had audiences who at least would have known Rome's use of "gospel" as empire announcements, and one has to wonder if Paul didn't make use of that context when he turned to this term. Unless Paul was profoundly naive to usage, we must conclude that when Paul said "gospel" and tied it to Jesus as Lord, his audience would have said "Caesar is not." Which doesn't make it so much a conscious anti-imperialism as it expresses the inevitable conflict when two lords are on the stage.

How to adjudicate? The topic has become political at times, so much so that one wonders if it is not present politics determining what one chooses to pull out of the ancient world for framing the discussion. If one thinks Jesus used the term "gospel," as I do, then we at least begin with the conclusion that Jesus drew from Isaiah and the Jewish tradition to express his eschatology and gospel: the day promised and predicted has now come to pass. But there is no reason to force an either-or decision. Paul's usage had relevance in the context of the Roman Empire, and that relevance entailed some level of resistance. I'm dubious that Paul's intentional, overriding agenda was to subvert the Roman Empire and its imperial claims or even the imperial cult. To be sure, the claim that Jesus was Lord entailed subversion at some level, but forming the entailment

12. Discussion is intense. Compare G. N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9–62; Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013). See also Christoph Heilig, "Methodological Considerations for the Search for Counter-Imperial 'Echoes' in Pauline Literature," in *Reactions to Empire: Proceedings of Sacred Texts in Their Socio-Political Contexts*, ed. John A. Dunne and Dan Batovici, WUNT 2/372 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 73–92; Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT 2/392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); Laura Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship," *NTS* 67.1 (2021): 55–72. For a broader work, see Drew J. Strait, *Hidden Criticism of the Angry Tyrant in Early Judaism and the Acts of the Apostles* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic; 2019).

into the vanguard of the Pauline gospel makes subversion of the emperor too prominent. What Drew Strait has made clear is that one cannot separate religion from politics in the empire: one's politics entailed the imperial cult, and the imperial cult was fundamentally political.[13] The tension in the Apocalypse of John, then, is not simply the temptation or practice of idolatry but that participation in the Roman cult was simultaneously denial of the lordship of Jesus. Thus, any gospel claim in the first century that had some publicity was both eschatology rooted in the Jewish Scriptures and at the same time a call for believers to turn from the gospel of the empire.

## The Texts

Which texts are we to bring into play if we want to form what can be called a "biblically grounded" gospel? How do we frame a theology of the gospel in a way that is both biblically shaped (the primacy of Scripture) and also recognizes the great tradition of the church?[14] Here one's personal preferences must become conscious enough to let the texts of Scripture challenge our thinking. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the gospel is defined most of the time by our favorite ideas (Jesus, justification, justice), but if we want to catch the inspiring vision of Jesus as his disciples heard it, we must do our best to get back to his world and hear this term "gospel" as Jesus and the first followers used it. We have to search for texts where gospel is defined as explicitly as possible, even if the results challenge our cherished ideas.

First, the summary statement of the evangelist Mark defines gospel. He opens with "the beginning of the gospel about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1, my trans.), and this is articulated by Mark to be the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3. Here the gospel is the announcement of the arrival of God's agent of redemption. It's about a person. Then we turn to Mark's own summary of the message of Jesus at Mark 1:15:

> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

13. Strait, *Hidden Criticism*.

14. Scot McKnight, *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).

Jesus summons his audience (Galileans are in view) to turn in repentance and to trust in the "gospel" or "good news," which in this context is surely the good news of the arrival or inauguration of the kingdom of God (cf. 1:14).[15] Jesus is the agent and announcer of that kingdom's arrival. If our five-point articulation of kingdom is at all correct, the gospel for Mark's Gospel is a message about Jesus as the bearer of good news—that is, the dawn of the kingdom in and through him. When Jesus articulates ethics for his followers in Mark 8, he connects the paradigm of his life as the embodiment of the gospel itself: "whoever loses their life for *me* and for *the gospel* will save it" (8:35, emphases added). Jesus and the gospel are inseparable.

Second, we need to observe that "gospel" becomes a *genre* by the end of the second century CE because the entire text of each of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—is the gospel itself. I could perhaps rephrase this. One might say "gospel" is not genre, that the genre of each of the Gospels is biography, but that the biography of Jesus is the gospel. Which leads to the twisty sentence that the gospel is a biography as the biography of Jesus is the gospel.[16] The title to each paragraph of each of the four Gospels should begin with the word "Jesus," which should then be followed by a verb about what he says or does. The myopic concern of the Gospel writers is exclusively Jesus: he is the subject of each paragraph and by far the most sentences. Gospel as genre (or biography as genre) then articulates that the gospel is the story about Jesus.[17] That the church entitled each of these books as "The Gospel according to . . ." ought to have taught us that the gospel itself is on display.

Third, the gospel is preached by the apostles in the book of Acts seven, perhaps eight, times: 2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 10:34–43 with 11:4–18; 13:16–41; 14:15–17; 17:22–31 and perhaps one could add Stephen in 7:2–53. What we can observe to those who read such sermons is that these gospeling events are framed by Israel's story (not our

15. George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996); Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

16. See Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 3rd ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020).

17. Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

personal salvation), the apostles tell the whole story of Jesus, they frequently summed the gospel in language about Jesus's identity (e.g., Acts 2:36: Lord and Messiah), they learned to adapt the gospel to new audiences (e.g., Acts 17:24–31), only after these points of substance did they call their hearers to respond in repentance, faith, and baptism (2:38–39; 3:19–21; 10:43; 13:38–39), and they also issued forth statements about the benefits of turning their lives over to Jesus as king (2:38; 13:38–39).

Fourth, it is worth pausing to read carefully the following verses in Acts that summarize the gospel down to a word or two. Our first two passages speak about the gospel that is *about Jesus*, and that's it.

> **Acts 8:35:** Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him **the good news about Jesus**.

> **Acts 11:20:** Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them **the good news about the Lord Jesus**.

In Athens, Paul adds the resurrection to Jesus:

> **Acts 17:18:** A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news **about Jesus and the resurrection**.

In other places we find Jesus as the Messiah. Notice below that gospeling is the attempt to convince fellow Jews that Jesus was in fact Israel's long-awaited Messiah:

> **Acts 18:5:** When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews **that Jesus was the Messiah**.

> **Acts 18:28:** For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that **Jesus was the Messiah**.

Gospeling for the apostles was as it was with Jesus: healings and exorcisms were the power of the gospel at work. The apostle did such "in the name of Jesus":

> **Acts 19:13:** Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke **the name of the Lord Jesus** over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "**In the name of the Jesus** whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out."

> **Acts 20:20–21:** You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

And in Rome the gospel is about the kingdom of God, as Paul sought to persuade them about Jesus. Kingdom and Jesus are all but identical content in gospeling:

> **Acts 28:23:** They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, **explaining about the kingdom of God**, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets **he tried to persuade them about Jesus**.

> **Acts 28:31:** He proclaimed **the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ**—with all boldness and without hindrance!

The gospel sermons of Acts, it is now clear, were gospeling sermons that sought to persuade people about the identity of Jesus of Galilee as the true Messiah and Lord. When the gospel was reduced to its basic terms, *those terms were identity terms about Jesus*.

A momentary summary: To gospel is to tell people about Jesus in the context of the story of Israel and, in particular, to announce that the long-awaited Messiah/king and his kingdom have been launched through the life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Fifth, we turn now to two texts that *explicitly state* what the gospel is, and they must be cited in full.

> Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.
>
> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Cor 15:1–8)

The opening paragraph here makes abundantly clear that just as Jews passed on their traditions, Paul is passing on the traditional gospel. That gospel is then explicated in lines about the life of Jesus in the second paragraph: the life of Jesus (implied), his death, his burial, his resurrection, and his appearances. If we continue through verse 28, we get his ascension (cf. Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:9–11; perhaps 7:59–60; 1 Cor 15:24–25; Col 3:1; Heb 1:8; 4:14–16; 1 Pet 3:21–22; Rev 1:13; 4:2, 9–10; 5:6, 13)[18] and his return and the completion of the work by handing all things over to the Father. The gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is (1) about Jesus, (2) it fulfills anticipations and promises in the story of Israel, and (3) it brings forgiveness of sins. What frames this gospel is the story of Jesus—the gospel in these lines tells facts about the life of Jesus. This summary suits the gospel sermons of Acts very well. The gospel for the apostles—this is the apostolic gospel tradition—is the story of Jesus fulfilling the story of Israel.

18. Douglas B. Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011); Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine*, ed. Michael Bird (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020).

We next turn to 2 Timothy, ignoring the authorship debate and taking the text as canonical and realizing at the same time that there's nothing here inconsistent with 1 Corinthians 15:1–8:

> Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.
>
> Here is a trustworthy saying:
>
> If we died with him,
> we will also live with him;
> if we endure,
> we will also reign with him.
> If we disown him,
> he will also disown us;
> if we are faithless,
> he remains faithful,
> for he cannot disown himself. (2 Tim 2:8–13)

Our focus is on the opening line ending with "this is my gospel," which could be translated more literally as "consistent with" or "according to" my gospel. Those lines are the standard by which Paul measures the gospel. "This is" perhaps is too narrow, but it is too narrow only by a smidge—the facts of Jesus are to remember him as the Messiah, to affirm his resurrection, and to frame his story as one connected to King David. The ethic of the Christian in the "trustworthy saying" is nothing less than Christoformity or cruciformity.[19] Once again, the gospel's substance determines the substance of the Christian life, and

19. Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); idem, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); idem, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Scot McKnight, *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christoformity in the Church*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019).

that substance is all about Jesus. The message in the gospel is a message *about* Jesus, not us, even if it is also *for* us.

A final point, one that I have wanted to put on the table sooner but believe this is the best location. The gospel about Jesus is a message that he has come *for all*. As the gospel message began to be proclaimed in synagogues outside the land of Israel, the authorities in Jerusalem were put on immediate notice that gentiles were coming into the church (Acts 8–28). Gentiles had always been welcome to the synagogue and were accepted as proselytes upon circumcision and submission to Torah, especially as practiced in Judaism of the time and location, but what was occurring in the Pauline mission churches alarmed the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, led by James. They were alarmed because these gentiles were not being required to embrace the Torah, and what concerned them were expressions of Torah observance like Sabbath, food laws, and circumcision. The Galatian Jewish believers seemed to have considered such believers as merely Godfearers instead of full converts. Paul dug into his Scriptures to find the blessing of Abraham going to the nations on the basis of faith alone (Gen 12; 15; Gal 3:6–9), to find the terminal fulfillment of Torah in the age of faith in Christ (Gal 3:15–25), and he found satisfaction in converts to Jesus being baptized. This baptism united Jewish and gentile believers, slave and free believers, and men and women believers (3:28). The theme of *for all* shapes the entire mission of Paul, most especially his letters to the Galatians and Romans. Everywhere Paul went he met the same criticism, yet everywhere Paul went he continued to respond and develop his theological response to the inclusion of all in Christ on the basis of faith alone, apart from the "works of the law."[20]

## Response and Benefits

The substance of the gospel determines the response. In other words, the message itself shapes how one responds. If the substance is Jesus is

20. Again, a nest of interpretive hornets is disturbed by this sentence. I appeal to Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*; idem, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Matthew J. Thomas, *Paul's "Works of the Law" in the Perspective of Second Century Reception*, WUNT 2/468 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018); Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

Lord, the proper response is turning to him as Lord. If the substance is Jesus is Messiah, the proper response is to embrace and indwell in that story. If the substance is Jesus is Savior, the proper response is to accept him as Savior. If the substance is Jesus brings peace or justice, the proper response is to live that peace and justice. If he is all those, the response is intensified.

How is one to respond to the gospel? Let me press toward a single but complex word: the required and proper response to the gospel about Jesus is *surrender* to God in Christ through the power of the Spirit. There are at least four dimensions to surrender: repentance, trust, embodiment of the gospel itself in baptism, all issuing into daily allegiance to Jesus. When Peter preached at Pentecost and the people asked what they should do, the answer was "repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). But repentance, deriving as it does mostly from the prophets of Israel and their message to turn, is not a term that must be used or that is reified into a system of salvation. Rather, it expresses what surrender is all about: one surrenders control over one's life and gives in to God in Christ. If we add to this the call to believe/trust (Acts 10:43; 11:17; 13:38–39), the proper response to the gospel is to turn away from sin, to turn one's life over to Jesus as king, to believe in him in the sense of trusting and becoming allegiant to the king,[21] and to be baptized. Each of these is Christoform in orientation: one turns from sin in order to turn to the new in Christ; one trusts and becomes allegiant in order to walk in the way of Christ; and one is baptized in order to enter into his very death and resurrection. The response is all about him, and it concerns all of us.[22]

What does one get? It's not like we need ask, "What's in it for me?" or strut with "sell me on this gospel message." One doesn't "get" so much as one enters into the circle of Christ—to be "in Christ"—and in Christ there is the abundant life of God at work in healing and forgiving and restoring and reconciling and justifying and redeeming and transforming us into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). All these benefits come to



21. Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); idem, *Gospel Allegiance: What Faith in Jesus Misses for Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019).

22. McKnight, *New Vision for Israel*, 164–76.

us so that we will be fit for the presence of God[23] in the New Jerusalem. The benefits of the gospel abound in the New Testament texts, so I turn to some of these. The Christian theology of salvation dominates the subject matter of theology itself, and assuming a widespread knowledge of our favorite terms of redemption, I will not explicate the benefits of salvation as much as we might like. I appeal to the development of this central theme in the secondary literature.[24]

God's gracious gift of forgiveness of sins is almost a non sequitur in Acts 2 if one is not reading closely. Connections must become clear: it is Pentecost, and this Pentecost fulfills the anticipated days of Joel 2, which is about the Spirit coming upon all, about the judgment of God against systemic rejection of God (the cosmic wonders indicate this) by crucifying Jesus, about the sterling character and acts of Jesus that were rejected by the audience who had voiced criticisms of the believers, and about Peter prophetically turning against that audience—but despite their murder of Jesus, God vindicated Jesus as Israel's Messiah by raising him from the dead (as David had prophesied), by welcoming him to the throne room of God, and by Jesus sending the Holy Spirit who just created this event at Pentecost. This Jesus is Israel's Messiah.

Their response is a question: What are we to do in light of what we have done in rejecting the Messiah? Peter's answer is "repent and be baptized, every one of you" (Acts 2:38). They sinned in complicity in the murder of Jesus, but that sin can be forgiven if they turn from it and turn to Jesus to participate in his death and resurrection. Sins to be repented of and forgiven in the New Testament are mostly particular—as we see with John the Baptist in Luke 3:10–14, where the very question asked at Pentecost was asked of the Baptist (What should we do to respond?). Forgiveness is not talked about much in the Gospels: Matthew 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 1:77; 3:3; 4:19; 24:47. It occurs only a few times in Acts: 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18. These references, and others could be added, show that this is not the dominating benefit,[25] but it expresses the heart of the benefits of the gospel. It comes to all who surrender

23. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

24. Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 551–661.

25. It is not common even in Paul: cf. Rom 4:7 (citing an OT text); Eph 1:7; Col 1:14.

because in Christ there is forgiveness. Put differently, forgiveness is but one way of expressing the benefits for those who surrender. Paul prefers justification (e.g., Acts 13:38–39) and reconciliation (e.g., Rom 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18–19),[26] while the benefits in Acts focus more on the outpouring and gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39; 10:44–47; 11:16–18). One of the most prominent terms in the Jesus traditions is "save," and the term does not distinguish healing from some kind of spiritual redemption (e.g., Matt 1:21; 8:25; 9:21–22; 10:22; 14:30; 16:25; 19:25; 24:13, 22; 27:40, 42, 49 and parallels). These come to the one surrendering by virtue of the life, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Such expressiveness does not diminish any of these terms but instead reveals that these terms are expressions of a larger reality that cannot be narrowed to a single term. One term that, because it is not often used, can stun us into thinking more holistically is that the singular benefit of the gospel is *healing*.[27]

One larger theme should surround all discussions about benefits: the intent of God in saving a person is to transform the person into Christlikeness (2 Cor 3:18) so they will be fit for life in the kingdom of God. To the degree that this kingdom has been inaugurated in Christ, or in life in the Spirit in the here and now, to that same degree those who are in Christ should be in the process of transformation.[28] Heaven, as it is so often chatted up, is not simply for individuals in some ecstatic state of personal worship and blessed joy but is a world of love and goodness and justice and peace. The Bible's narrative shape or story is one leading to New Jerusalem, a vision for a utopian society as earthly as it is heavenly (of heaven come down to earth), not one leading simply to a person's eternal destiny in some far-off heaven. The final state of the Christian



26. Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*, New Foundations Theological Library (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification, and the New Perspective*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster/Authentic Media, 2007); N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols., Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 2:1473–1520.

27. Graham H. Twelftree, *The Gospel According to Paul: A Reappraisal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019). Twelftree at times exaggerates benefit at the expense of Christology and message. See, too, the two-part essay by Jon Ruthven, "'This Is My Covenant with Them': Isaiah 59.19–21 as the Programmatic Prophecy of the New Covenant in the Acts of the Apostles," *Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 17 (2008): 32–47, 219–237.

28. David A. deSilva, *Transformation: The Heart of Paul's Gospel* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014).

vision is as social as it is spiritual, and as a social reality it fulfills the divine vision for how humans are to relate to God and to one another, as well as to creation itself.[29]

What is noticeable about the gospeling of the New Testament is that the benefits one gains in Christ do not frame the gospel as if it is a "do this and you will get this" affair. Rather, the gospel is about Jesus, people are summoned to surrender to Jesus, and when they get attached to Jesus, the goodness of God's redemption is theirs. What they "get" is Jesus, and in Christ are all the blessings (Eph 1:3). Sinclair Ferguson, not a normal running mate of mine, warned of the danger of separating the benefits (justification, etc.) from Christ himself, and today we can often experience a gospel in which the benefits are separated by overwhelming Christ—the person, the biography, and union with him.[30]

I put it this way: we announce first a Christology, and only after Christology do we announce soteriology. First, Christology; second, soteriology. It is not either-or but first and second. If we permit benefits to frame the gospel itself, then we turn Jesus into a means. If we put Christology first, then Jesus becomes the subject and substance of the gospel, and the salvation comes in him.

## A Life Worthy of the Gospel

If the substance of the gospel is Jesus is Lord, Jesus is king, Jesus is Messiah, then the life to be lived is a life of submitting to him, of self-denial and of life-long Christoformity/cruciformity. I appeal to three texts as instances of a gospel-shaped life.

First, the Sermon on the Mount is singularly "egocentric." A close reading of the text exalts Jesus as the new Moses[31] in a manner that at least fits with the aftershock expressed by those who heard him (Matt 7:28–29). That Sermon considers kingdom people to be those who are customarily marginalized (5:3–12) and summons them to a kingdom way of life, a new Torah, based on the teachings of Jesus.



29. Often emphasized by N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

30. I am grateful to my friend David G. Moore for pointing me to this from Ferguson. See Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 44.

31. Dale Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

The discipleship passages that follow the Sermon on the Mount reflect the same Christocentricity. The essence of them is to follow Jesus in the path of the cross (e.g., 8:18–22; 16:21–28). Christology determines discipleship. The ethic of the Christian community is not an abstract ethic forged on the basis of abstract reflections on virtue ethics but is instead the concrete way of life embodied in Jesus.

Which is why, second, the apostle Paul appeals to the early Christian hymn in Philippians 2:6–11 as the paradigm of life for the Philippians, and this passage is worked out in detail in the paradigm-forming work of Michael Gorman.[32] Jesus as "example" must simultaneously be understood as life in the Spirit: what gives a human in Christ the power to live the Christoform life is the Spirit (Rom 8:1–4; Gal 5:22–26). All of this, too, happens because of the efficaciousness of grace itself.[33]

Third, in a passage mentioned already, we need to see how Paul not only frames the gospel but how a gospel life is lived:

> Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. . . .
>
> Here is a trustworthy saying:
>
> If we died with him,
> we will also live with him;
> if we endure,
> we will also reign with him.
> If we disown him,
> he will also disown us;
> if we are faithless,
> he remains faithful,
> for he cannot disown himself. (2 Tim 2:8–13)

The Christocentricity comes to the fore again: the gospel is about Jesus, the substance of the gospel is Jesus, and the life lived in consort with the gospel is a Christocentric, Christoform, cruciform life. Those

32. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*.
33. John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

who live that life are those who will experience the eternal benefits of the gospel.

And the impact of humans swept into the kingdom vision of Jesus the king is a life that becomes systemic and socially impacting, as kingdom people embody a kingdom life in a world shaped by too much evil. The goal of the gospel is the kingdom of God.

## Final Reflections

My own teaching, preaching, and writing about the King Jesus gospel has taught me that any rearrangement of the frame for talking about the gospel creates a learning anxiety that many would prefer not to be present. So, to retain their semblance of comfort they think the soterian gospel has got to be right because of the comfort it brings. My contention is that one need not surrender the comfort of a secure relationship with a God who loves us to embrace the center of the gospel in Christology. I contend that we look more carefully at explicit gospel passages where we discover that the reason the church called the first four books of the New Testament the "gospel" was because they told the story of Jesus, and that story of Jesus is itself the gospel.

First Christology, then soteriology. Not one without the other but in that order.

We evangelize or gospel whenever we mention Jesus, whenever we state his identity, and whenever we put his vision into play. The central question of evangelism then is this one:

Who do you think Jesus is?

# RESPONSE TO SCOT MCKNIGHT

MICHAEL HORTON

A test I have for assessing any articulation of the gospel is this: Did Jesus preach what this person says is the gospel?" (p. 29). I love Scot McKnight's criterion. It's not a red-letter edition or canon-within-a-canon approach, at least as far as I can see. If Jesus is the king and is ushering in his kingdom, then the nucleus of everything unpacked by the apostles must be there. As he taught them in the upper room, "But the [other] Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).[1] This is the redemptive-historical foundation of the inspiration of the New Testament. They will not only preach Christ but will remember everything he said and did that's relevant to the case. Like the central character in a novel, he may not appear in every scene, but the whole Bible leads to Jesus and from him.

McKnight is obsessed with the concrete and particular, grounding the gospel in what Jesus actually said and did. Today, Jesus has become a wax nose—a mascot for whatever side of the polarized cultural and political divide one prefers. We need to come to the biblical narrative not first of all to find answers to our questions but to be given better questions. Jesus will tell us who he is and why he has come, regardless of whether we find it helpful, meaningful, informative, empowering, or whatever else.

Especially illuminating, I thought, was McKnight's nuanced wrestling with the often polarizing debate over whether Jesus should be

1. *Paraklētos* is definitely *not* "Helper," a poor rendering initiated by Origen because he wanted to distinguish him from Christ. But Jesus says "another Advocate" (John 14:16), and the same title is used of Jesus in 1 John 2:1.

understood as challenging Caesar's imperial claims. "Unless Paul was profoundly naive to usage," McKnight says, "we must conclude that when Paul said 'gospel' and tied it to Jesus as Lord his audience would have said, 'Caesar is not'" (p. 32). Yes, indeed, and that is how Romans certainly heard him and his disciples. It's also the way the Sanhedrin heard him in its self-preservation politics with the empire: "They cried out, 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar'" (John 19:15 ESV). This sentence must have caused many religious leaders to shudder if they had understood Jesus's statement, "'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they marveled at him" (Mark 12:17 ESV). At the same time, McKnight registers, "I'm dubious that Paul's intentional, overriding agenda was to subvert the Roman Empire and its imperial claims or even the imperial cult" (p. 32).

One could not separate politics from religion in the Roman Empire. Nor, I would add, could one separate politics from religion in Jesus's empire. The question is whether the purpose *right now* was to overthrow the Romans, turn the Roman Empire into Christ's kingdom, or a similar utopia, and Jesus's answer is clear: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). It is a large-scale revolution, but only if one thinks that defeating Satan, death, and hell are more important than driving out the Romans or turning the empire into a nominally Christian society. McKnight turns to the Apocalypse, where the choice is between "taking the mark" (pinching incense to Caesar) and martyrdom. It *is* political in the most extreme terms, but it was not a call to build a just society. Rather, it was the call to attach oneself to the true king who will one day topple all Caesars in their pride. It is "the *gospel* of the empire" that they must repent of, which is a lesson to us today in the United States and the West generally. But we must turn from all such pseudo-gospels of *this regime*, even the ones that we understand to be more just and righteous.

McKnight thinks "Jesus and the gospel are inseparable" (p. 34). All of the passages on the kingdom are "proclaiming Jesus." That's the message of the kingdom. "The message in the gospel is a message *about* Jesus, not us, even if it is also *for* us." "The gospel about Jesus is a message that he has come for *all*" (p. 39). Hence, tension between Jew-gentile missions.

Under his section "Response and Benefits," I have some ambivalence with McKnight's presentation. Yes, there are many responses, including "surrender." But faith is *not* surrender. Maybe repentance is: throwing up one's hands before the law and saying, "I'm convicted and sentenced, guilty as charged." But we are not justified by allegiance but by trust in the only one who can save us despite our lack of allegiance. He cites Matthew W. Bates's work at this point.[2] I have interacted with Bates's paradigm.[3] It seems to me to lead to a massive confusion of law and gospel. Lutheran and Reformed churches have emphasized that faith does many things indeed. "It's a busy thing," as Luther said.[4] Faith works, serves, loves, speaks, and so forth. But in the event of justification, it isn't busy at all but rests in Christ. All of these other "busy" things I have no trouble with—after all, they're all over the pages of Scripture. In the act of being justified, faith merely receives a gift.

This is a very counterintuitive moment in McKnight's presentation, because the whole emphasis of "What is the gospel?" has been *on Christ*. But now it is *my allegiance* that is front and center. The response is not to throw up our hands, accept the law's verdict, but then in faith embrace Christ's imputed righteousness. Rather it is to "surrender to God in Christ through the power of the Spirit" (p. 40). Some of the same concerns I express in relation to the "Wesleyan Gospel" are relevant here. "There are at least four dimensions to surrender: repentance, trust, embodiment of the gospel itself in baptism, all issuing into daily allegiance to Jesus. . . . the proper response to the gospel is to turn away from sin, to turn one's life over to Jesus as king, to believe in him in the sense of trusting and becoming allegiant to the king, and to be baptized" (p. 40). It is true that there are *many* responses to the gospel announcement. However, faith is the instrumental cause of justification. And faith is not anything other than *trusting someone else—Christ—to do the job*!

I don't know why McKnight wants to downplay forgiveness. Even after citing many references to Jesus's own preaching of forgiveness of

2. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*; idem, *Gospel Allegiance*.

3. Michael Horton, *Justification*, vol. 2, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 386–87, 390–92, 412–13.

4. "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans" in *Luther's Works*, ed. Theodore Buchmann, vol. 35, Word & Sacrament I (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 370–71.

sins, he says, "forgiveness is but one way of expressing the benefits for those who surrender." "Paul prefers justification (e.g., Acts 13:38–39) and reconciliation (e.g., Rom 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18–19), while the benefits in Acts focus more on the outpouring and gifts of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39; 10:44–47; 11:16–18)" (p. 42).

It is important, I think, to distinguish genres at this point. The Gospels and Acts should be seen as one continuing narrative of the acts of God in first-century Judea to Rome, while the epistles unpack significance; in all those passages cited, forgiveness, reconciliation, and justification are *the message*. The outpouring of the Spirit, again, is the narrative of a new redemptive-historical event. But what does Peter preach? The other apostles in Acts? They all preached the forgiveness of sins, justification, full acceptance regardless of whether they were Jew or gentile.

McKnight concludes, "I put it this way: we announce first a Christology and only after Christology do we announce soteriology" (p. 43). "The central question of evangelism then is this one: Who do you think Jesus is?" (p. 45). I could not agree more.

I find myself in the greatest sympathy with McKnight's essay. The gospel is not *about* us, but it is *for* us, as McKnight argues. Nothing that happens *to* us is itself the gospel; rather, it is the impact of the gospel. The gospel is the proclamation of a person and what he achieved long ago in a minor Middle Eastern province of the Roman Empire. We are not the good news but are its beneficiaries and heralds. We also live in the light of the gospel (e.g., Rom 12:1–2; Phil 1:27; Col 3:12–14). The gospel creates its own community, a shining city on a hill (Matt 5:14). A notable sign that the kingdom has come is that "the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22 ESV). However, the poor and oppressed, no less than the individual bound by sin's guilt and dominion, are not at any point the subject of God's redeeming work but always the recipient. There is genuine transformation as a result of this regenerating, justifying, adopting, and sanctifying grace of God in Christ, but the gospel itself is that "*in Christ God* was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19 ESV). Our own experience, good works, or individual or collective identity cannot be the gospel but rather is its fruit.

If anyone could relate the inner transformation Jesus effected in their lives, surely it would have been those who spent those momentous three years at his side. We might wish that Peter had related his transformative experience from denying Jesus three times to proclaiming the gospel boldly on the temple steps at a high feast. But for the apostles, "witness" and "testimony" meant relating what Jesus said and did, especially his resurrection. Paul speaks of his experience more than the other apostles, but always pointing away from himself to Christ. Considering his own continuing struggle with sin, he despairs—until he looks to Christ, in whom "there is therefore now no condemnation" (Rom 8:1 ESV).

The same can be said of believers collectively. If Jesus's identity is primarily that of a community organizer, can he be said to have succeeded? His preaching offended not only the religious elites but also the common people—even his own disciples (e.g., John 6). Many who hailed him as the Messiah on Palm Sunday cried, "Crucify him!" on Good Friday. Abandoned by his fearful disciples, Jesus alone hung on the cross, bearing the sin of the world. If it was his purpose to have transformed Judea or the Roman Empire into a just society, Albert Schweitzer's verdict seems justified: he failed to bring in the kingdom of God. Even John the Baptist seems to have felt this when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me'" (Matt 11:3–6 ESV).

Not only is the gospel about Christ, I would add, but Christ gives himself to us in its proclamation. In fact, Christ himself is the speaker through the lips of our fellow sinners as they herald the good news. Lutheran and Reformed traditions designate the preaching of the gospel "the sacramental word." As Paul preaches in Romans 10, Christ himself is present in the preached gospel. More than this, he is the preacher, even through the lips of a sinner. The gospel—good news—is a unique speech-act that, in the power of the Spirit, creates the reality of which it speaks. In preaching this gospel, Christ not only offers an invitation to receive himself with all his benefits but bestows them.

# RESPONSE TO SCOT MCKNIGHT

DAVID A. DESILVA



I will admit it. When I first saw the lineup for the views on the gospel that would be represented in this book, I was surprised to find space being allocated to "the King Jesus Gospel," while none was being given to much older—and far more widely subscribed to—perspectives such as the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox views on the gospel. However, after reading Scot McKnight's essay, I am persuaded of the editors' wisdom in giving this view place here alongside more standard "denominational" articulations of the gospel. This articulation of the gospel has such intrinsic value that it merits not merely to be examined but to be promoted. I want to say that it is "fresh," but not in the sense of being innovative (which would really not be a virtue when it comes to giving expression to that which had its most perfect expression in the first century CE). Rather, it is "fresh" in the sense of giving fresh expression to a gospel that has been overlooked for so long but, once it is given a hearing, seems almost self-evidently correct and worthy of a central place henceforth in conversations about the good news of God both announced and enacted in Jesus Christ.

McKnight and I agree that the "soterian" view of the gospel is inadequate both in terms of the many-layered problem that has beset humanity in its alienation from God and of the many-layered solution that God has provided in Christ through the Holy Spirit. We have been "selling" this gospel too long, as McKnight rightly notes, as the quick and easy way to get into heaven. He is correct that by permitting "benefits to frame the gospel itself, then we turn Jesus into a means" (p. 43). I am reminded of the hymn:

> My God, I love thee not because I hope for heaven thereby,
> nor yet for fear that, loving not, I might forever die.[1]

If our motivation for discipleship is ultimately self-centered, have we really been *converted*—have we *turned* toward God, or are we still the *homo incurvatus in se*, the person curved in on himself or herself, ultimately self-absorbed and self-serving rather than God-absorbed and other-serving?

I am impressed with the manner in which this view of the gospel is able to find its roots in Jesus's own proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God (e.g., Mark 1:15), as well as by the way this view of the gospel makes room not only for Jesus's statements about the redemptive effects of his death as a ransom (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45)—hence, for atonement and reconciliation—but also for Jesus's statements about the absolute necessity of obeying him if we are to enjoy the redemptive benefits of his death and a restored relationship with our Lord, escaping eschatological ruin (Matt 7:21–27; Luke 6:46–49). It does seem more straightforwardly true to the New Testament witness to think of the "gospel" in terms of what God has done in Christ (hence McKnight's emphasis on the content of the sermons in Acts or Paul's summaries of the gospel he received and handed on in 1 Cor 15:1–8) and the ramifications of God's acts in Christ for human beings called to give their allegiance and, therewith, their obedience to this Christ, than to think of the so-called Romans Road as "the" gospel (I say "so-called" because I regard this to be a gross truncation of the gospel Paul himself proclaimed—on which see further below).

Of course, as the representative of the Wesleyan gospel in this volume, I am delighted to find "the transformation of humans and systems" (p. 27) as the result of Jesus's saving action and God's redemptive work make it into McKnight's tweet, suggesting their core importance for his view of the gospel. I note with appreciation the place that this also makes for the liberation gospel's emphasis on the need to deconstruct and rebuild the *systems* that perpetuate harm rather than simply continue to bind up the wounds of the harmed. Indeed, a lived obedience to Jesus

1. "My God, I Love Thee, Not Because," attributed to St. Francis Xavier, trans. Edward Caswall, 1849. Text online at https://hymnary.org/text/my_god_i_love_thee_not_because.

as king—a commitment to put into practice his prescriptions for life-in-community, a commitment to make the "kingdom of God" real in all the spaces that we ourselves inhabit through our collective obedience as a community—has always been the surest way to transform human experience amid the kingdoms of this world.

I can get entirely behind the idea that a gospel ultimately about the reign of God and God's Messiah requires, in response, "surrender to God in Christ through the power of the Spirit" manifested, among other things, in "daily allegiance" (which I would take to include daily *obedience*) "to Jesus" (p. 40). Again, any articulation of a gospel that does not make room for the *requirement* of obedience, of a life brought ever more into alignment with the Creator's wishes for that life, is, in my view, a defective gospel, an inadequate solution to the fundamental human problem of the *mis*alignment of our lives vis-à-vis the purposes of the One who gave us our lives.

I appreciate also McKnight's awareness of the goal of such alignment—of our growing in righteousness and holiness, of Christ's life taking shape in our lives—being to make us "fit for the presence of God in the New Jerusalem" (p. 41). It is good news indeed that God has set in motion all that is necessary to equip us for eternity in the presence of the Holy One through the transformation of our hearts and lives. This is not about "works" or "synergism" or any of the usual bugbears conjured when the notion of living a new life is foregrounded in soteriology: it remains about God's gracious provision, a grace that we dare not receive in vain or set aside.

If I were to quibble (and I can only *quibble* in regard to this invigorating essay), it would be with what appears to be too quick an identification of the "standard soterian model" with "Paul's solution," with its emphasis on "the themes of sin, salvation, and atonement." I find Paul's assessment of both the problem of human existence and the extent of the remedy that God has provided in Christ to be far fuller and richer than this, reaching beyond atonement and reconciliation to the restoration of a proper, consistent response of grateful obedience that ought always to have characterized humanity's stance before its Creator (and now, Redeemer). The emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit especially, and on the conformity of the believer's life to the mind, heart, and actions of Christ that pervades Paul's extant writings (whether this

be expressed in terms of "newness of life," "the new person," "Christ formed in you") shows that Paul believed God to be at work saving us from what we *had* become for what we *could* and *would* become as we submit to the leading of, and receive the empowerment of, the Spirit to this end.[2] In other words, I find McKnight to stand in agreement with Paul when he claims that "the *problem* was human subjects not living under the world's true king" (p. 28, though Paul would speak about this in terms of the honor and obedience due the Creator God in Rom 1:18–32) and that "the *solution* is humans living under Jesus as Lord and king—that is, as Messiah" (p. 28, which Paul speaks about in terms of presenting our embodied lives as instruments for righteous action [Rom 6:12–14, 17–23] and, perhaps even more impressively, living no longer for ourselves but for the one who died and was raised on our behalf [2 Cor 5:15]).

Perhaps by way of refinement rather than disagreement, I think it important to foreground the experience of the Holy Spirit—clearly, in the context of Paul's ministry, an *intersubjective* rather than a purely *subjective* experience—in Paul's thinking as he contended with the rival teachers in Galatia. This experience was the starting point *from which* "Paul dug into his Scriptures to find the blessing of Abraham going to the nations on the basis of faith alone" (p. 39), and indeed Paul understood the Holy Spirit itself to *be* this blessing (according to some interpretations of Gal 3:13–14 at least). The experience was the catalyst that created the opportunity to account for it scripturally.

Quibbles aside, McKnight has foregrounded precisely what I find so clearly emphasized in Paul and underrepresented in too many presentations of the gospel: the "Christocentric, Christoform, cruciform life" is the one that "will experience the eternal benefits of the gospel" (p. 45).



2. This is a constant theme in my commentaries on Paul: *The Letter to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); *Ephesians*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). See also my *Transformation: The Heart of Paul's Gospel* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014).

# RESPONSE TO SCOT MCKNIGHT

JULIE MA

Scot McKnight's King Jesus gospel is something that is both familiar and foreign to me. It is familiar in many aspects of what McKnight says about Jesus as king and Lord, familiar too in concerns it raises, even if I—as an Asian missiologist rather than a Western biblical scholar—am not familiar with much of its scholarly background and reasoning in secondary literature.

McKnight begins with a discussion of the old-time evangelical message of Billy Graham. What McKnight finds deficient, mostly, is what it lacks (identity of Jesus), and more so in what it emphasizes (saving benefits to an individual). Billy Graham himself preached in Asia, specifically in Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo, Seoul, and elsewhere, always to large crowds. But with McKnight, I do wonder if his message was appropriately geared toward the diverse forms of Asian people and Asian Christianity or whether it was something of an American import, like a McDonald's with a crucifix. As an Asian Christian leader, I am sensitive to mission work being more contextual and informed than it perhaps was in the early days of the Billy Graham Association. So I'm naturally inclined to accept McKnight's critique of the American industrial, evangelical gospel. Beyond that I have several other observations.

First, McKnight is correct to connect the gospel to the kingdom of God. Yet I would want to stress that the kingdom of God is not just the climax of a scriptural story; rather, the primary concept of the kingdom of God in the New Testament focuses largely on the rulership of Jesus Christ as launching the kingdom. McKnight is big on Jesus as king, but as a Pentecostal I am aware that Jesus is no king without his subjects experiencing his kingly power, a power that he bestows on us like a king granting favors and disbursing titles.

Second, is it really true that the gospel is the story of Jesus's life? At one level, the incarnation is the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of humankind. The Son of God did not stay in the safe abode of heaven, remote from the sin, pain, and tragedy of the world. Instead, he entered our world. He took on our nature, lived our life, endured our temptations, experienced our sorrows, bore our sins, and died our death. It was the total identification of life without any loss of his own identity. In becoming one of us, he neither ceases to be himself in becoming a man nor ceases to be God. But the life of Jesus is lived *for us*, for our redemption, sanctification, and new creation. The "who" and "for us" should not be separated. Even if McKnight wants to make sure the "who" is not neglected, the "for" is what makes the good news good to Pentecostals.

Third, McKnight is impressive and even inspiring when he talks about responses and benefits of the gospel. He emphasizes one thing in particular: surrender to God. I want to agree, with the qualification that our surrender or submission occurs in Christ through the power of the Spirit. Accordingly, submission takes on a particular shape: surrender is to turn away from sin, to give one's life over to Jesus as king, to believe in him in the sense of trusting and being allegiant to the king, to believe in him in the sense of believing and trusting, and to be baptized (Acts 10:43; 11:17; 13:38–39). Each of these is oriented in a Christocentric way: one repents of sin in order to turn to the new life in Christ; one trusts and pledges allegiance in order to follow Christ; and one gets baptized in order to participate in his suffering and resurrection. The reaction is all about him, and it affects us all. So submission is not just to a confession of Jesus, a recognition of Jesus's status, it is surrendering oneself into God's power, to throw oneself on his mercy, as well as to open oneself up to an infusion of divine enablement.

McKnight's gospel is great, because the kingship of Jesus is great, but there is one thing he needs: power! The gospel is power unto salvation, power for the powerless, power for the hopeless, the power of God's love and the love that works so powerfully in us.

# RESPONSE TO SCOT MCKNIGHT

SHIVELY T. J. SMITH



With stylistic beauty and probing insight, Scot McKnight weaves an interpretive skein rich with biblical references and theological acuity. I found myself collecting fresh gems about the multidimensional meaning of the gospel in each reading of McKnight's view. He facilitates the interweaving of biblical threads that relate issues of biblical content to context by taking up matters such as the imagery of kingdom to the matter of Christology, which gives way to soteriology and even to the fundamental question of Christ's identity. Moreover, his essay supplies a reintroduction that extends the noun form of the word gospel into a verb, "gospeling." The moment McKnight couples gospel with gospeling, my interest was piqued, and questions formed: "What are the features of Jesus's gospel activity captured in the New Testament? And how does this gospel shape the orientation of believers who follow Jesus's model?"

I did not have to wait long for McKnight's response. His gospel tweet named the essential ingredient with two final lines, "In an even shorter tweet, the gospel is the story about Jesus. In one word, Jesus" (p. 27). I appreciate the clear distance McKnight places between Paul's construction of the gospel and Jesus as its embodiment and archetype of gospeling activity. Scott makes the point clear, saying, "Without denying the importance of the themes of sin, salvation, and atonement in Christ, we must recognize that Paul's solution is Paul's and should not be imposed on Jesus. Jesus announced kingdom because kingdom was the expectation, so I begin with Jesus" (p. 28). From a liberation-gospel view, Jesus's embodied proclamation is distinct from Paul's description of Jesus's messianic significance, though they speak back to each other. Indeed, McKnight's one tweet preference resonates: Jesus is the starting place for gospel understanding.

McKnight releases the gospel message from a static announcement and centuries-old story rehearsed repeatedly in our churches, faith communities, or even in the theaters of popular culture and civic forums. Gospel meaning expands in McKnight's essay from proclamation to an active solution interacting at the level of "a context, a story, a narrative" (p. 27). The beginning of the gospel story about Jesus, be it at his birth as rehearsed by Matthew and Luke or in Jesus's adulthood ministry as encountered in the Gospels of Mark and John (after John's prologue, of course), is no small matter in understanding McKnight's construction of the King Jesus Gospel. It is the setting upon which the common gospel phrase "kingdom of God" (or "heaven") is understood.

From whence did this Jesus come, and what circumstances shaded his perspective? The Gospels unanimously place Jesus outside the authorities of Israel's religious, political, and economic hubs—namely, Jerusalem, the temple, and Rome. The distance in terms of beginnings is further amplified compared to his cousin, John the Baptist (as described in Luke 1). His origin story, beginning with his father and mother, Zechariah and Elizabeth, initiates within the sanctuary of the temple where the very presence of God dwelled (Luke 1:8–23). The Gospel casts the iconic site of Jewish authority, peoplehood, and faith as the foreground for John's ministry.

In contrast, Jesus's lineage is tied to David in the Gospel of Matthew as early as its first verse. At the same time, Jesus's origin story in the Gospel of Luke locates him unequivocally as rising from the peasantry ranks of the Greco-Roman caste system operative at birth. Jesus is far from the ranks of imperial Rome, signified by "the reign of Tiberius Caesar" and Jesus's antagonists, Pilate, governor of Judea, and Herod, ruler of Galilee (Luke 3:1–2). Jesus is not born among the priesthood authorities of Annas and Caiaphas. While Jesus's birth and ministry are set outside power in contested space, his status as king is known by those powerful actors (Mark 15:2, 26; Luke 23:2; John 1:49; 18:33), though its form and purpose is misunderstood (Matt 27:29, 37, 42; Luke 23:37; John 6:15).

Reducing the gospel to a single-word tweet appears obvious and accurate enough. Of course, the gospel of Christ is "in one word, Jesus." But embedded within this matter-of-fact simplicity is the challenge—potentially even the danger of such a view. Jesus, as the single-word

answer to the question of what the gospel is, risks objectification. Merely saying Jesus as an answer to a gospel view detaches him from his social and historical underpinnings. These are the ingredients and conditions under which Jesus was "enfleshed" and the gospel first proclaimed by him (Mark 1:14–15) and about him (1 Cor 15:1–10). To unfasten Jesus from the facts of his historical location misses his gospel message's target audience and intention in its first sounding.

For example, which Jesus appears in the gospel reader's imagination like a signpost when she encounters his name? Does one imagine and digest the gospel stories as about a reigning triumphant Jesus? Should Jesus and kingship be a primary starting point for gospel understanding? Or does one imagine the conditions and locations from which Jesus, the Christ, emerges? What is Christhood born from the edges of Judaism when pigeons are the best Jesus's parents can offer to sacrificially honor the birth of their son and Savior of the world (Luke 2:24)? That moment resonates with millions of parents yearly who give birth to their beloved children, bearing the pain that they—through no fault of their own—only have "pigeons" to give in recognition of the gift of life granted to them and the world in the form of child-bearing and child-rearing. What is the content of the gospel message about Jesus when it is understood to be cast in the body and craft of a tradesperson comfortable among other working tradespeople like builders, carpenters, and fishermen (Matt 13:55; Mark 1:16–17; 6:3), as opposed to one belonging to the religious and political arm of locales traversed across Galilee and Judea?

Howard Washington Thurman cautions against an objectification that seems to think merely naming Jesus "in a word" as the gospel captures his meaning and significance. It bears asking whose Jesus is captured by simply dropping his name. There is a foreboding danger in such simplicity. The dominant interpretive trend, often determined by European and US American triumphal histories, risks imposing the meaning of the gospel upon those whose view is understood from their histories of enslavement, apartheid, otherness, and second-class access. Thurman pens a gospel view of Jesus that leads with a context outside kingship ambitions and privileges shaped by the discourses of colonialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It functions as a shading screen for any contextualization of Jesus Christ in the ancient world one might do today. He says, "It is necessary to examine the religion of

Jesus against the background of his age and people and to inquire into the content of his teaching concerning the disinherited and the underprivileged."[1] Even the gospel view of King Jesus requires reckoning with the anatomy of the relationship between Jesus's people, his location as one among the large Jewish peasantry and working class, the political privileges and powers available to Jewish people of means and titles, and the Romans.

McKnight's essay masterfully calibrates our understanding of the kingdom Jesus preached by offering four historically and biblically informed meanings at work in the biblical script (e.g., Mark 1:14). His treatment culminates in a description of the "ethic of Jesus," which orders "the way of life for kingdom people" (p. 31). Such a perspective fuels the move from theocracy and monarchy to "fulfillment in Christocracy" (p. 28). Scott describes Christocracy as "the core of the gospel" in the form of "a declaration about Jesus," which stems from the declaration made *by* Jesus (p. 29). In this way, the core gospel message *now* depends on the message Jesus declared *then*. It is both a message and an activity. It is an active proclamation of salvation that travels, interrogates, disrupts, and resets the lives of Jesus's followers in the ancient past and the emerging present.

Another gem in McKnight's essay that I appreciate is how he clarifies the meaning of Jesus's kingdom-of-God idea as more than an abstract heavenly location. God's kingdom penetrates the earth. By making the point clear, McKnight renders the gospel as spatially oriented. It is not merely spiritual and otherworldly. Gospel is socially tangible. Our relational practices and how they create or destroy kinships texture the quality of the "gospeling" endeavor this view advances. From the conflict between Jesus and his family (Matt 12:46–50) to Judas's kiss of betrayal in Gethsemane (Matt 26:48–54), as well as the mother-son relationship Jesus puts in motion between Mary and the Beloved Disciple at the crucifixion (John 19:25–27)—gospel kingdom language fosters kinships that are both familiar and new. It is a challenge to put forward a notion of kingship to communities who have experienced overlordship that belittles their land ties, terrorizes their communities, displaces their people, and destroys families. What happens when those living in the

1. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1996), 5.

view of the King Jesus gospel are so immersed in that positionality that they inadvertently diminish an imperative of the confession that Jesus is Christ and Lord, who is "God with" and "among us" (Matt 1:23; 28:20; John 1:14–18), restoring families and creating unimagined new social and fraternal ties?

Reading the King Jesus gospel view, one story continued to press upon me. In the exchange between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman, cultural biases are on display that might make such a view unpalatable (Matt 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30). The preexisting tension between Israelite and non-Israelite (Matt 15:22; Mark 7:27; cf. Matt 1:3, 5), Israel and Canaan (Deut 7:1), and even male and female interact in the story. This is a difficult text to situate within the King Jesus gospel view when read from those on the underside of society, who are most readily addressed and engaged as "other" or at least are different from the comfortable norms of society. Jesus's gospel message up to that point, especially in Mark's version, had been singular in focus and location as a proclamation intended for the salvation of Israel. The Syrophoenician woman's encounter disrupts that gospel trajectory. Initially, Jesus's cultural sensibility seems to get in the way when he likens Israel to the Lord's children and the woman to a puppy or a more docile version of scavenger pack animals, saying, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27; cf. Matt 15:26). One wonders if it was Jesus who got in the way at that moment, or if it was the social caste that pitted Jew against non-Jew, male against female, the haves against the have-nots.

Social constructions of insiders and outsiders act as speed bumps in the "gospel" model displayed in the exchange between Jesus and the woman as they face the question of whether her daughter will be healed. It also sensitizes us to the multiple significances of this story as a gospel message that asserts power, sovereignty, and salvation. After rehearsing readings of the Syrophoenician woman story that consider the historical perspectives of Japanese, Botswanan, US Indigenous-American, and Irish-American biblical scholarship, Kwok Pui-Lan asserts such variety makes a demand on every gospel view. "These diverse interpretations of the Syrophoenician woman's story illustrate how reading with other people can radically expand our imagination. . . . Sensitivity to contextual and cross-cultural interpretation helps us to live in a pluralistic

world in which people have different worldviews and assumptions."[2] The King Jesus view makes space for such an exchange to occur, although it does not take up that task directly.

The contemporary task of gospeling, as McKnight puts forward, is as much about the peoplehood and location in antiquity and presently as it is about the content of Jesus's message found in Scripture. The "where" and "who" of the King Jesus view cannot be detached. It is by keeping them together that matters of triumphalism, colonialism, and even human proclivities toward lording over other human beings guided by the unanalyzed prejudices of race, gender, class, xenophobia, nationalism, and even regionalism might be checked. To go with Jesus to the margins and the fringes—those most historically targeted for exploitation, subservience, and erasure—is to hear the sounding of the gospel from the context in which it was forged and intended. We find the gospel message among them, not above them. In that place, the King Jesus view takes on a new sound and meaning recognizable in the African-American spiritual that responds to Christian practices of othering through faithful declaration: "Ride on king Jesus / No man can a-hinder me / Ride on king Jesus, ride on. // No man can a-hinder me / No man can a-hinder me."[3]



2. Kwok Pui-Lan, "Reading the Christian New Testament in the Contemporary World," in *The New Testament: Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sanchez (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 10.

3. "Ride on King Jesus," in *African American Heritage Hymnal*, ed. Delores Carpenter (Chicago: GIA, 2001), 225; Howard Thurman, *Deep River: The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond: Friend United Press, 1990), 20–21.