

# The Multifaceted Sum of the Gospel

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There is a lot of discussion—sometimes even heated debate—concerning the core definition of the gospel of Christ. In most cases, the effort is to articulate the exact essence of the gospel in some brief form like a sentence or two; a nutshell. The key question, then, becomes “What is absolutely essential?” Or more bluntly, “What gets in and what stays out?”

There is some worth in this endeavour, especially as it helps Christians share the gospel in a succinct way. However, I wonder whether this is really a helpful and profitable way to approach the issue. I confess that in the pursuit of simplicity and succinctness, we run the great danger of shrinking the gospel in order to make it “fit” into a short definition. In other words, we may lose the plurality and richness of the great news that—most of us would quickly agree—needs to be at the center of our theology, ministry, and way of life.

I would like to argue the importance of being well-acquainted with the **multifaceted sum** of the gospel. Even the presence of four gospels at the beginning of the New Testament, each highlighting unique aspects of Jesus’s ministry, is an argument that the gospel holds multiple facets to it. Michael Allen puts it like this: “the Bible is not stingy in its description of God’s saving work.”<sup>2</sup> I would like to propose that we can explore and appreciate the richness of God’s gospel by thinking about it through five axes.

## 1. The Gospel as Personal, Communal, and Cosmic

Most of us are familiar with the Four Spiritual Laws, an evangelistic tool used by many in previous decades to give a faithful presentation of the gospel in a condensed way. When reading them, one easily notices that the focus is entirely on the individual. God has a plan for *me*. Sin separates *me* from God so Jesus died for *me*. If *I* believe, *I* will be saved.

All of that is right and true, of course. Is it, however, *all* there is to the gospel? If one was to ask evangelicals why Jesus had to die on the cross and take the curse of sin upon Himself, I’m sure most of us would answer, “In order to save us.” But let us note what Paul says in Galatians 3:13-14:

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

We see here that Jesus died on the cross in order to form a people from the nations, a new humanity in which there is no barrier between Jew and Gentile.

Moreover, in Colossians 1:19-20 we find a more surprising answer. We read, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile

to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”<sup>3</sup> Here we see that the gospel has not only personal and communal, but also cosmic significance. It is important therefore to keep all of these aspects together in order to have a faithful understanding of the gospel and its scope.

## 2. The Ground and Goal of the Gospel

We all agree that the gospel has to do with Christ's work on the cross offering forgiveness of sins and justifying sinners. Again, that is absolutely true, central, and glorious. But is that all? John Webster proposes that “the matter of the Christian gospel is, first, the eternal God who has life in himself, and then temporal creatures who have life in him. The gospel, that is, concerns the history of fellowship—covenant—between God and creatures.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, as Michael Allen says,

“the Gospel is the glorious news that the God who has life in himself freely shares that life with us and, when we refuse that life in sin, graciously gives us life yet again in Christ. While participation in God is the goal of the gospel, justification is the ground of that sanctifying fellowship.”<sup>5</sup>

Allen makes a very important distinction between the ground and the goal of the gospel—between justification by God and participation in God.

By “participation,” I refer to the biblical idea of covenant fellowship in which we enjoy God and are transformed into His image through the life-giving, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The “idiom of justification has an indispensable place”<sup>6</sup> because “justification, especially as understood via imputation, is particularly fit to convey the theological entailments of the sheer gratuity of God’s work.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, grace makes the news *good* news! However, justification by itself does not tell us much about the goal, the *telos*, of the gospel. It reassures us that it is “sure and fixed,”<sup>8</sup> but not what it is. Calvin maintains a good balance here as he emphasizes that the multifaceted sum of the gospel is the double grace of justification and sanctification received in union with Christ.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. The Gospel as Action and Agency

Antonis Vidu<sup>10</sup> adds another interesting dimension to our discussion about the plurality of the gospel. He emphasizes the idea of “divine missions,” the fact that Jesus did not simply *come* into the world but was *sent* by his Father. The same is also true for the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. One aspect of this analysis is the recovery of the important concept of the undivided operations of the Trinity, something we will explore in more detail in the next point.

What we need to note here is that the idea of *sending* is important; it helps us see that Christ’s work is more than the sum of his actions. Of course, we cannot think of Christ’s mission apart from his actions and his work. The problem with focusing exclusively on his work, though, is that it makes the “what” the main thrust of the gospel, not the “who.” Focusing on the operations and their effects and not on the agency we are in danger of missing the central point of the gospel, the proclamation that it is **God with us—Emmanuel**. Vidu explains “the heart of the Gospel is the return of YHWH to dwell with his people, it is the very *presence*, and not just the operations of God among the people.”

## 4. The Gospel, Christocentric and Trinitarian

Time and again, the New Testament emphasizes that the gospel is Christocentric. For example, Acts 5:42 says, "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming [*evangelizomenoi*] the good news that Jesus is the Messiah." Mark 1:1 makes it clear that it is "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, *the Son of God.*"

But as I stated in the previous point, we also need to see the undivided operations of the Trinity. This means that we need to keep in mind that Jesus Christ does not act alone in the story of the gospel. In his book *The God of the Gospel*,<sup>11</sup> Scott Swain helps us locate the gospel in the context of Trinitarian theology. The main quest of the book is to explore the relationship between God's being (namely His being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and God's determination to act towards us in the gospel, his "evangelical self-determination to become our Father, through the Son, in the Spirit." Specifically, the gospel is God's self-determination to become our Father, to become one of us in the incarnation of the Son and to perfect us in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> The gospel is the narrative of the "evangelical events whereby God becomes our God."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is important not to lose this Trinitarian perspective in our understanding of the gospel.

## **5. The Two Narratives of the Gospel: The Central and the Larger Story of God Economy**

Most people are willing to accept that the heart of the gospel is not just an idea, but a story. This notion is not new. As early as 100-200 A.D., Irenaeus of Lyon had already argued the same. In his effort to refute heretical teachings of gnosticism, he argued for the importance of what he called the "rule of faith." The essence of this rule consists of the gospel narrative (Irenaeus refers to that using the term "hypothesis") which brings coherence and order (Irenaeus uses the term "economy") to all of Scripture. The problem with heretics is that they have gotten the narrative wrong.<sup>14</sup>

What, then, is the narrative and "economy" of the gospel? For Irenaeus, it can be summarized in the concept of *recapitulation*. Over and over again, Irenaeus draws "arches" connecting the first with the last, creation with new creation, Adam with Christ, and the like. To get a glimpse of this idea, it's worth quoting a few sentences from his work:

For there is one Son, who accomplished his Father's will, and there is one human race, in which the mysteries of God are wrought, 'which the angels desire to see' [1 Peter 1:12], not being able to search out the wisdom of God, through which his handiwork, conformed and incorporated with the Son, is perfected, [the Father's will] that his Offspring, the first-begotten Word, should descend to the creature, that is, to the handiwork, and be borne by it, and, on the other hand, [that] the creature should bear the Word and ascend to him, passing beyond the angels and becoming in the image and likeness of God.<sup>15</sup>

John Behr explains,

"This sentence brings together the three key points of his demonstration: that there is one God, the Father and Creator, who, in the one economy or arrangement for the effecting of his will through his one Son, Jesus Christ, has brought his own handiwork, the human race, to the point of becoming in his image and likeness, rendering them like himself, at the end thus fulfilling the express intention of God at the beginning of Scripture."<sup>16</sup>

As central and important the narrative of Jesus's life and work is, the larger narrative of the divine economy of salvation is also important.

To complicate matters, we also need to ask which parts of Jesus's life and ministry are important for the gospel. Is it only his death? What about his incarnation? Needless to say, certain Christian traditions like the Eastern Orthodoxy regard the incarnation as important as the cross. And what about the miracles of Jesus, namely his demonstrating the coming of God's kingdom on earth, bringing eschatological restoration and peace? Should they be included in the gospel narrative? We could continue with more aspects of Christ's work, but I think the point is made.

To summarize this analysis, I would like to remind us of the simple fact that God gave us four gospels in the New Testament. I believe that this is enough to make us think that, perhaps instead of trying to compress the gospel, we need to move toward the opposite direction by showcasing its richness and multifaceted beauty. Scripture holds within it thousands of wonderful mysteries and surprises—and the more we reflect on these various, miraculous aspects of the story of Jesus Christ, the more we see ourselves transformed by God's saving work.

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<sup>1</sup> This expression is taken from the title of J. Todd Billings' article "John Calvin's Soteriology: On the Multifaceted 'Sum' of the Gospel" *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 11:4 (Oct. 2009), 428.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Allen, *Justification and the Gospel: Understanding the Contexts and Controversies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Another classic example of these two aspects of the gospel is observing that the favourite way to describe salvation in the Synoptic Gospels is that of an entrance into the Kingdom of God (communal, cosmic), whereas in the gospel of John it is that of having eternal life (personal).

<sup>4</sup> John Webster, "It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him: Soteriology and the Doctrine of God" in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Much of the material present in this session draws from Michael Allen's work *Justification and the Gospel: Understanding the Contexts and Controversies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 7.

<sup>6</sup> John Webster, "Rector et iudex super amnia genera doctrinarum? The Place of the Doctrine of Justification" in *What is Justification About? Reformed Contributions to an Ecumenical Theme*, ed. Michael Weinrich and John P. Burgess (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, 15.

<sup>9</sup> This is the main point of the analysis of J. Todd Billings in the article we owe the title of this essay and we have made reference to at the beginning (see n. 1).

<sup>10</sup> The following depends on the analysis given by Vidu in the Introduction of his forthcoming book *Opera Ad Extra: The Inseparable Works of the Triune God*.

<sup>11</sup> Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP Academics, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Among others, see John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University). A detailed analysis of Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* can be found in John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons, Identifying Christianity*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.36.3.

<sup>16</sup> John Behr, *Irenaeus*, 77.



### **About the Author**

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