



SAM STORMS *and*
JUSTIN TAYLOR, eds.

FOR THE
FAME OF
GOD'S
NAME

+

Essays in Honor of
JOHN PIPER

For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper

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WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?—REVISITED

D. A. Carson

The word “revisited” in the title is my way of reminding myself that I have addressed this question before. Not long ago I wrote an editorial for *Themelios* that briefly focuses on how the gospel is the announcement of what God has done, and must not be confused with our responses.¹ A little over two years ago I prepared a sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:1–19, under the title “What Is the Gospel?”² More than a dozen years ago I wrote an essay titled “The Biblical Gospel.”³ So what will be different or fresh about the approach I adopt here?

This essay is more than an excuse to honor my friend and colleague John Piper, who has been preaching the gospel for decades and thinking about it penetratingly.⁴ It is also the beginning of a fresh probe into the

¹“Editorial,” *Themelios* 34, no. 1 (2009): 1–2, available online at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/themelios>.

²“The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:1–19),” a lightly edited manuscript of a sermon preached at The Gospel Coalition conference in Deerfield, Illinois, on May 23, 2007; text, audio, and video are available online at http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/what_is_the_gospel_1#.

³“The Biblical Gospel,” in *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Steve Brady and Harold Rowdon (London: Scripture Union, 1996), 75–85; available online at http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/1996_biblical_gospel.pdf.

⁴One thinks, for instance, not only of his recent material on justification, but of *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005); *Finally Alive: What Happens When We Are Born Again* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009); and much more.

subject by looking at “gospel” words—at εὐαγγέλιον and cognates. In my mind this is part of two larger projects aimed at showing (a) how the New Testament relates these gospel words to a wide swath of theological and pastoral themes and (b) how we would be wiser to stop talking so much about what “evangelicalism” is without deeper reflection on what the “evangel” is, what “the gospel” is. Those larger projects are merely hinted at in this chapter, of course.

Gospel Words

For reasons of brevity I shall restrict myself to the Septuagint (LXX) and the New Testament. The “gospel words” I shall survey are εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελίζω, and εὐαγγελιστής. The meaning and distribution of these words in the LXX and New Testament can be presented as shown in figure 1:⁵

Fig. 1.

Word	Form	Meaning	LXX	NT
εὐαγγέλιον	noun	“gospel,” “good news,” “evangel”	1x	76x
εὐαγγελίζω	verb	“to preach/proclaim the gospel”	23x	54x
εὐαγγελιστής	noun	“one who preaches/proclaims the gospel,” “evangelist”	—	3x

Gospel Words in the LXX

Εὐαγγέλιον in the LXX

The single occurrence of εὐαγγέλιον in the LXX is found in 2 Samuel 4:10. In the context, Rekab and Baanah have killed Ish-Bosheth and run to David with the news, thinking he would be pleased. David responds by drawing an analogy with the way he had acted when someone had told him the news that Saul was dead, thinking he was bringing good news to the king (ὡς εὐαγγελιζόμενος ἐνώπιόν μου): he put the man to death. “That was the reward I gave him for his news [εὐαγγέλια]!”

Εὐαγγελίζω in the LXX

The verb εὐαγγελίζω does not occur in the LXX of the Pentateuch. In the historical books, it refers to the announcing of good news, or news that is perceived by some, at least, to be good news—news that is usually political or military, for example, related to the deaths of enemies. Not surprisingly, such news is often announced to the king (e.g., 2 Sam. 4:10, the passage cited above; also 2 Sam. 18:19, 20, 26, 31). When pagans

⁵I am grateful to Andy Naselli for compiling the raw data for me.

receive the news of the destruction of their enemies (e.g., King Saul), they rush to tell it to the house of their idols and their people (1 Sam. 31:9; 1 Chron. 10:9). Whether the news is perceived to be good or bad can depend on the perspective of the viewer: in 2 Samuel 1:20, David takes up a lament at the death of Saul:

Tell it not in Gath,
 proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,
 lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad,
 lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice.⁶

The LXX reads “and tell it not as glad tidings [μὴ εὐαγγελίσθητε] in the streets of Ascalon.” Clearly, what might be good news in Ashkelon is not good news to David. A similar tension, we have already seen, is found in 2 Samuel 4:10.

When we turn to occurrences of the verb εὐαγγελίζω in the Psalms, the usage becomes more overtly theological. Translating the Hebrew of Psalm 40:9a, the TNIV reads, “I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly,” and the ESV,

I have told the glad news of deliverance
 in the great congregation.

The corresponding LXX passage, Psalm 39:10 LXX, reads, “I have preached righteousness in the great congregation [εὐηγγελισάμην δικαιοσύνην ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ μεγάλῃ].” Those to whom the Lord gives the word to preach it are designated τοῖς εὐαγγελιζομένοις in Psalm 67:12 LXX (they appear to be women in Hebrew, Ps. 68:11). If the Hebrew of Psalm 96:2 commands us to proclaim the Lord’s salvation day after day, the corresponding Septuagintal text renders “proclaim salvation” by the one word εὐαγγελίζεσθε (Ps. 95:2 LXX). Something similar can be said for the “proclaiming” of the “good news” that God is merciful to Israel in Psalm of Solomon 11:1 LXX.

Turning to the prophets, occasionally the LXX offers a “proclaim good news” clause not found in the Hebrew (e.g., Joel 3:5 LXX; compare Joel 2:32 in most English versions). Many of the occurrences of the Greek verb in the prophets have to do with bringing good news to Judah and/or Jerusalem/Zion to the effect that the years of her punishment are ended or will end in due course (e.g., Nah. 1:15 [LXX 2:1]; Isa. 40:9).

⁶Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the TNIV translation.

Some of these passages, initially attached to the return from exile, are so bound up with eschatological salvation that it is not surprising they are tied by the New Testament to broader themes (e.g., “as the feet of one preaching glad tidings of peace, as one preaching good news: for I will publish your salvation, saying, O Sion, your God shall reign” [ὡς πόδες εὐαγγελιζομένου ἀκοὴν εἰρήνης ὡς εὐαγγελιζόμενος ἀγαθὰ ὅτι ἀκουσθὴν ποιήσω τὴν σωτηρίαν σου λέγων Σιων βασιλεύσει σου ὁ θεός]) (Isa. 52:7 LXX; cf. similarly Isa. 60:6; 61:1). One prophetic passage in which the “good news” is read differently by different people is the hyperbolic lament in Jeremiah 20:15.

Gospel Words in the New Testament

Εὐαγγέλιον outside Paul's Letters

Turning to the New Testament, we discover that the noun εὐαγγέλιον is found only twelve times in the Gospels—four times in Matthew and seven or eight times in Mark, never in Luke or John—and only two times in Acts and once each in 1 Peter and Revelation. The rest of the occurrences are found in Paul—at least once in each of the canonical Pauline Epistles save Titus. In other words, it is a distinctively (though not an exclusively) Pauline word. Before we survey the usage in Paul, however, we should take note of its occurrence in the rest of the New Testament.

In Matthew, three of the four occurrences find the noun embedded in the larger expression “the gospel of the kingdom” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας, 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Once the expression is “this gospel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦτο, 26:13), but transparently the referent must be similar. The first two occurrences are in summary statements of Jesus’ ministry: Jesus went through Galilee, or through all their cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming (κηρύσσων) *the gospel of the kingdom*, and healing every sickness and disease. In 24:14, “this gospel of the kingdom” will be preached (κηρυχθήσεται) in the whole world (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ); in 26:13, Jesus describes what will take place wherever “this gospel” is preached (κηρυχθῆ) in the whole world (ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ).

Interestingly enough, none of the eight occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον in Mark link the word so directly with the kingdom (though one is close: see Mark 1:15, below). The opening line of Mark introduces readers to the word: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus the Messiah” (1:1). By 1:14 we are told that Jesus came into Galilee “proclaiming the gospel of God [κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ].” In the next verse, 1:15, the content of Jesus’ preaching is given: “The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the gospel [πιστεύετε ἐν

τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ].” In 8:35 and 10:29, the gospel is something so valuable that someone might suffer deprivation or lose life itself for the gospel’s sake. In 13:10 and 14:9, the gospel will be preached in the whole world (with minor verbal variations from Matthew). The only other occurrence in Mark is in the so-called long ending: Mark 16:15 finds Jesus commanding his disciples to “preach the gospel [κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον] to all creation.”

In the first of the two occurrences in Acts, Peter declares, at the Jerusalem Council, that God ordained that by his mouth “the Gentiles might hear the word of the gospel [τὸν λόγον τοῦ εὐαγγελίου] and believe” (Acts 15:7). In the other, Paul declares to the Ephesian elders how he wished to complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him, “to testify to the gospel of the grace of God [διαμαρτύρασθαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ]” (Acts 20:24). In 1 Peter 4:17, judgment is threatened to those who do not obey “the gospel of God [τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ εὐαγγελίῳ].”

The final New Testament occurrence, in Revelation 14:6, has generated some controversy. We are introduced to an angel “with the eternal gospel [εὐαγγέλιον αἰώνιον] to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” The next verse (14:7) tells us what the angel said in a loud voice: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” Some have argued that verse 7 gives us the content of “the eternal gospel” mentioned in verse 6. The substance of this “eternal gospel,” then, is simply the command to fear God and give him glory. In the light of the rest of New Testament usage, this interpretation is singularly unlikely. It is much more plausible to hold that the substance of “the eternal gospel” is roughly in line with the news of God’s redeeming act in Christ and all that flows from it, and verse 7 gives us not the content of that gospel but the motive for responding: the hour of final judgment is near.

Εὐαγγελίζω outside Paul’s Letters

Before turning to Paul, it is worth briefly scanning the uses of the verb εὐαγγελίζω that are found outside the Pauline corpus. Εὐαγγελίζω occurs once in Matthew, 11:5, which picks up the language of Isaiah 61:1: the good news is preached to the poor (πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται).

The verb is found in neither Mark nor John, but occurs twenty-five times in Luke–Acts. Good news is announced to Zechariah regarding the birth of his son John (Luke 1:19) and to the angels regarding the birth of Jesus (2:10). John the Baptist preached the good news of the impending

arrival of one whose sandals he was unworthy to untie, one who would baptize in the Holy Spirit and burn up the chaff on his threshing floor (3:18). Luke 4:18 finds Jesus applying Isaiah 61:1 (regarding the good news preached to the poor) to himself; the same Old Testament passage is picked up again in 7:22 (parallel to Matt. 11:5, cited above). In Luke 4:43 Jesus announces that he must preach the good news of the kingdom to other towns; the construction is rather different from that found in Matthew: *Καὶ ταῖς ἐτέραις πόλεσιν εὐαγγελίσασθαι με δεῖ τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ*, “for I was sent for this purpose” (ESV; similarly Luke 8:1; 16:16). “Preaching the gospel” (bound up in the verb) is often used absolutely (e.g., 20:1), and sometimes in a list of Jesus’ activities (e.g., preaching and healing, 9:6).

Acts 5:42 says that the believers never stopped “teaching and preaching that the Messiah is Jesus” (as the Greek really must be rendered: *οὐκ ἐπαύοντο διδάσκοντες καὶ εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν Χριστόν, Ἰησοῦν*). Christians are found preaching the word (*εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν λόγον*, 8:4), Philip is preaching the good news about the kingdom of God (*εὐαγγελιζομένῳ περὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ*, 8:12), and, once again, the verb is found without modifiers, meaning simply “to preach the gospel” or the like (8:25, 40; 14:7, 21; 16:10). The range of the content of the preaching connected with this verb is of some interest: preach Jesus (8:35), preach good news of peace through Jesus Christ (10:36), preach the Lord Jesus (11:20), preach that what God promised to the fathers he has now fulfilled to this generation (13:32), teaching and preaching the word of the Lord (15:35), preaching Jesus and the resurrection (17:18).

The verb appears twice in Hebrews (4:2 and 4:6), where it is used to draw a comparison between the “good news” that was preached to the Israelites in the desert and the good news preached about Jesus to the author’s readers. It shows up three times in 1 Peter (1:12, 25; 4:6), always absolutely, identified as the word of the Lord. Finally, it shows up twice in Revelation, once in connection with the “eternal gospel” already discussed (*εὐαγγέλιον αἰώνιον εὐαγγελίσει*, 14:6) and once as the announcement of “the mystery of God” to God’s servants, the prophets (10:7).

Εὐαγγέλιον and Εὐαγγελίζω in Paul’s Letters

That brings us to Paul, where the noun *εὐαγγέλιον* occurs twenty-three times and the verb *εὐαγγελίζω* occurs fifty-four times. Limitation of space prohibits an equally exhaustive catalog of the usages in this corpus.

Εὐαγγέλιον in Paul's Letters. In the first verse of the first Pauline letter to appear in the canon, Paul declares that he is a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and “set apart for the gospel of God [ἀφορισμένος εἰς εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ]” (Rom. 1:1). Paul serves God with his spirit “in the gospel of his Son” (1:9 ESV), the gospel of which he is not ashamed (1:16). According to Paul, his gospel declares that God judges everyone’s secrets (2:16); indeed, in line with Isaiah 53:1, Paul recognizes that not all have obeyed the gospel (Rom. 10:16), and some Jews in Paul’s day remain enemies of the gospel (11:28). The apostle’s evangelistic efforts can be understood to be his priestly service of the gospel of God (ἱερουργοῦντα τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ, 15:16). By preaching as he has, Paul has fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ (15:19). In the final doxology of his letter to the Romans, Paul addresses himself to God who is able to establish his readers “in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ,” which is itself simultaneously in line with the revelation of the mystery long hidden and entirely in line with the Scriptures already given (16:25–27).

The Corinthian letters have an abundance of references to the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15; 9:12, 14, 18, 23; 15:1; 2 Cor. 2:12; 4:3, 4; 8:18; 9:13; 10:14; 11:4, 7). First Corinthians 15 is especially powerful in laying out the matters “of first importance” in connection with this gospel: it is Christ-centered, bound up with Jesus’ death and resurrection, apostolic, biblical, transforming, and so forth. First Corinthians 9 depicts Paul’s own example, precisely because he is a gospel-shaped apostle, not to use his rights but to put them aside, mirroring how Jesus set aside his own rights—a reality at the heart of the cross and thus at the heart of the gospel.

Small wonder the letter to the Galatians finds Paul saying that any other “gospel” is really no gospel at all (1:6–7). This gospel that Paul preaches (κηρύσσω) among the Gentiles (2:2) must preserve the exclusive sufficiency of Christ (2:5) and is preached to Jews and Gentiles alike (2:7). Christian life must be lived according to the truth of the gospel (πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου), or one is acting hypocritically (2:14; cf. Col. 1:5).

The “word of truth” is “the gospel of your salvation” in Ephesians 1:13; unity between Jews and Gentiles is accomplished because both are “partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6), this “gospel of peace” (6:15). Paul’s purpose is to make known the mystery of the gospel (γνωρίσαι τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, 6:19).

When believers share their assets and gifts to promote the gospel, as the Philippians supported Paul, they enter into a partnership in the gospel (Phil. 1:5; 4:15). Paul is determined to remain in defense and confirma-

tion of this gospel (1:7, 16); even his imprisonment seems light if it serves to advance the gospel (1:12). The apostle knows full well that believers ought to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27) as they learn to strive side by side “for the faith of the gospel” (1:27; cf. 2:22; 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:2).

Believers must not move away from the hope held out in the gospel (Col. 1:23). Ideally, when that gospel is proclaimed, it is also experienced in power (1 Thess. 1:5) and proclaimed with courage (2:2), for we have been entrusted with it (2:4). Those who understand it best want to share not only the gospel but themselves as well (2:8–9). God calls us to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth, calling us to this through the apostolic gospel to the end that we might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 2:14).

Small wonder Paul wants believers to live in line with sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God (1 Tim. 1:11). This gospel is well worth suffering for (2 Tim. 1:8; Philem. 13); Christ Jesus has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10). The gospel can be summarized in a number of ways, but is always deeply Christocentric: for example, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David, according to my gospel” (2 Tim. 2:8, my translation).

Εὐαγγελίζω in Paul’s Letters. The verbal form εὐαγγελίζω is less frequent in the Pauline letters than in Luke–Acts. Paul wants to preach the gospel to those in Rome (Rom. 1:15; cf. 10:15); indeed, it is his ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not known (15:20; cf. 2 Cor. 10:16). In his preaching, the apostle is determined to do so without manipulative eloquence lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (1 Cor. 1:17—which again shows a tremendously tight tie between the gospel and the cross of Christ; cf. also 1 Cor. 9:16, 18; 15:1–2). The other Pauline occurrences of the verb are in line with the noun uses.

Εὐαγγελιστής in the New Testament

Finally, for the sake of completeness, I should list the three instances of the noun εὐαγγελιστής, referring to the preacher of the good news. Our English versions traditionally render the Greek word as “evangelist.” Philip is labeled “the evangelist” (Acts 21:8); God has given to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (Eph. 4:11); Timothy is to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5).

Preliminary Observations on These Gospel Words

This bare-bones list of word usages could easily be considered shallow, even slightly boring. Yet I fear that some of the nonsense about what the gospel is today turns on *not* having worked through the way the word-group is actually used. What we must now do is offer some preliminary observations on these raw data, and then probe the evidence a little more deeply.

Word Study Fallacies

This side of James Barr, we are all aware of the common mistakes in word studies. We must not, for instance, merely assume that each instance of the gospel word-group means exactly the same thing as every other instance: even a cursory glance over the list discloses substantial diversity. Nor do we have the right merely to add up the various contextually determined meanings in order to establish a synthetic whole. Nowadays, however, converse dangers are perhaps more common. Some scholars display a penchant for assuming nothing in common between one usage and another unless it is specifically spelled out. For example, in 1 Corinthians 2 Paul declares that he is determined to know nothing except Jesus and him crucified. By contrast, in 2 Timothy 2:8 Paul declares that what is in line with his gospel, what is according to his gospel, is “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David”—with no mention of the cross. This confirms some scholars in their belief that the apostle could not have written the Pastoral Epistles: the “gospel” found in each of the two passages is different from the other “gospel.” A more sober assessment recognizes that Jesus can hardly be resurrected unless he dies first; that Paul—whether in the Pastorals or in his undisputed writings—is interested in Jesus’ incarnation not only as a model in humility but as the supreme act of divine self-disclosure that makes the redemptive act of the cross possible (and hence “descended from David” is entirely in line with Pauline thought). If the gospel word-group in the New Testament is taken to mean the (good) news of what God has done, supremely in Jesus, including his coming, death, and resurrection and all that he does that flows from this sacrifice, we have a category broad enough to embrace almost all the uses while allowing subtle refinements in individual passages.

Nevertheless there is frustration in the survey I have just provided, for I have not had the space to tease out the significance of fascinating expressions that are regularly tied to the gospel—what it means, for instance,

to say that the gospel is the mystery of God,⁷ or for Paul to say that his function is that of a διάκονος (“servant”) of the new covenant and thus of the gospel, or what it means to speak of the οἰκονομία (“stewardship”) of the gospel, and much more. We could usefully explore how the “gospel” relates to the “promise,” how “preaching the gospel” relates to preaching/proclaiming (κηρύσσω). We have noted a substantial number of passages where the gospel focuses on the cross, and that in turn ought to draw us into discussion of what the cross achieves, how it is tied to, say, justification. And of course one could usefully undertake a full-scale exegesis of each passage where the gospel words occur. Thus our understanding of what “the gospel” is must, in a full-scale treatment, run down each of these lanes, for otherwise our treatment is in danger of being little more than cliché. But one must start somewhere.

Literary Genre

One small matter should be raised if only to set it aside. Today one common use of “gospel” is to refer to the ostensible literary genre of the first four books of the New Testament: we speak of the four canonical Gospels. It is now widely recognized that there is no evidence that anyone in the first century used the word “gospel” that way. Each of what we call the four Gospels was called “The Gospel according to Matthew,” “The Gospel according to Mark,” and so on: there was *one* gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There is little harm in preserving usage that sprang up in the second century and continues to this day, but we should not succumb to the anachronism that thinks such usage has any bearing whatsoever on how the word was understood in the first century.

The Gospel and the Imperial Cult

Some have pointed out that the word εὐαγγέλιον, “gospel,” is never used with theological significance in the LXX, and they therefore conclude that New Testament usage likely springs from its occurrence in the imperial cult.⁸ The argument has little validity. For a start, the noun εὐαγγέλιον occurs only once in the LXX, so to speak of it “never” being used with theological significance, while formally correct, is more than a little misleading. Moreover, our survey of the use of the entire word-group in

⁷See D. A. Carson, “Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul’s Understanding of the Old and the New,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 181, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck/Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 393–436.

⁸So U. Becker, “Gospel, Evangelize, Evangelist,” in *The New Testament Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 2:109.

the LXX shows that the psalmists and prophets happily use the cognate verb with theological significance, while the historical books tend not to. Many of the relevant LXX uses reflect Hebrew בָּשָׂרָה (“bring good news”), often deployed to refer to Yahweh’s eschatological activity, the announcement of the dawning of eschatological joy (e.g., Joel 2:32; Nah. 1:15; Isa. 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1).⁹ Conceivably, Paul and his readers could have picked up allusive overtones to the imperial cult and delighted by contrast in proclaiming the *real* good news, but there is no valid reason to look beyond the Old Testament/LXX for the dominant influence on Paul’s usage of the word-group.

Gospel Content and Gospel Proclamation

Douglas Moo rightly points out,

The noun [εὐαγγέλιον, “gospel”] in the NT denotes the “good news” of the saving intervention of God in Christ, referring usually to the message about Christ (1 Cor. 15:1; Gal. 1:11; 2:2) and, by extension, to the act of preaching that message (1 Cor. 9:14 [second occurrence]; 2 Cor. 2:12; 8:18; Phil. 1:5[?]; 4:3[?]).¹⁰

In some Pauline contexts it is notoriously difficult to decide which emphasis takes preeminence: the good news itself or the proclamation of that good news. In Romans 1:1, for instance, when the apostle tells us that he was “set apart for [εἰς] the gospel,” does he mean that he was set apart (by God) to preach the gospel, or that he was set apart (by God) for the gospel itself—that is, for the advantage of the gospel, for the advance of the gospel? Perhaps it is not necessary to choose. The word “gospel” can become so comprehensive that it becomes more or less equivalent to “Christ” or to “God’s redeeming and transforming work in Christ” (see Rom 1:9; Phil. 1:27). The “gospel,” which is *the good news about* God’s redeeming work in Christ, becomes shorthand for God’s redeeming work in Christ itself. When that happens, to say that Paul was set apart (by God) *for* this gospel inevitably carries overtones of both the content of what God has done and the promotion and declaration of it.

⁹See Peter Stuhlmacher, *Das paulinische Evangelium. I: Vorgeschichte*, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 95 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 152–53, 177–79, 204–6; R. P. Martin, “Gospel,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2:530.

¹⁰Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 43n16.

More Probing Observations on These Gospel Words

The Gospel Is Heraldic Proclamation

Because the gospel is news, good news (even if some will hear it as bad news), it is to be announced: that's what one does with news. The essentially heraldic element in preaching is bound up with the fact that the core message is not a code of ethics to be debated, still less a list of aphorisms to be admired and pondered, and certainly not a systematic theology to be outlined and schematized. Though it properly grounds ethics, aphorisms, and systematics, it is none of these three: it is *news*, good news, and therefore must be publicly announced. That is why εὐαγγέλιον κηρύσσειν, “to preach the gospel,” is the functional equivalent of εὐαγγελίζω. Paul reminds us that it is by the foolishness of what is *preached* that people are saved (1 Cor. 1:21). True, the focus of the participial construction (in Greek) is not on the foolishness of *preaching*, that is, the activity, but on the foolishness of “what was preached,” that is, the gospel. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that Paul speaks of the foolishness of what was preached rather than the foolishness of what was taught, or discussed, or reasoned over. I hasten to add that the Bible includes a handful of verbs that pick up such activity. When all is said and done, however, the gospel is primarily displayed in heraldic proclamation: the gospel is announced, proclaimed, preached, precisely because it is God's spectacular news.

So when one hears the frequently repeated slogan, “Preach the gospel—use words if necessary,”¹¹ one has to say, as gently but as firmly as one can, that this is smug nonsense.¹² The element of truth in it, of course, is that words alone, divorced from the credibility that is gained by believers acting Christianly (i.e., in line with the gospel), may engender a great deal of cynicism. Even this element of truth is belied by advising readers to use words “if necessary”: the very nature of announcing or proclaiming (good) news—whether εὐαγγελίζω or κηρύσσω—is that words are the primary medium. What we might call the logocentrism of Scripture is massively reinforced by the nature of the gospel itself: it is news, good news, to be proclaimed.¹³

¹¹The expression is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Mark Galli, the author of a biographical guide to Francis, has nicely debunked this notion (available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/mayweb-only/120-42.0.html>). Galli suggests that the saying has been attached to Francis because many of us entertain a highly sentimentalized mental picture of the man.

¹²First Peter 3:1 is not an exception. That passage says that husbands who do not believe the word may be won over by the Christian conduct of their wives. That presupposes that the words have been uttered (probably again and again!). Peter is not saying that the first priority is the conduct, with words added only if necessary.

¹³One recalls the recent blog post by Justin Taylor: “‘Gospel’ means ‘good news.’ If so, the saying ‘Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary’ makes about as much sense as telling a reporter he should broadcast the news but that words are optional” (available online at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/>).

The Gospel in Its Wide and Narrow Senses

For some time there has been interesting and sometimes complex discussion about how “big” or “robust” or “focused” the gospel really is. Some of this discussion, it must be said, pays too little attention to the gospel words and their contexts. Not long ago I had occasion to ask a Christian leader what he thought the gospel was. He replied that it is first of all about Christ dying on the cross for our sins, about people being justified before God because of that death, of people being born again. “But,” he added, “there is also the gospel of social justice.” That the Bible says quite a lot of important things about justice is not in dispute. The question, rather, is whether it ever labels the demand for justice “gospel.” Frankly, it does not.

One or two well-known leaders in the emerging church movement have been known to draw attention to Jesus’ teaching regarding the greatest two commandments—to love God with heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:28–34). These commandments, they say, are the gospel. Far be it from any of us to depreciate what the Lord Jesus himself identifies as the greatest two commandments. Nevertheless they are not the gospel. The gospel is the news of what God has done; it is not the stipulation that God requires.

During the last couple of years *Christianity Today* has run a series of interesting essays under the rubric “The Christian Vision Project.” Although the series has cast up numerous helpful insights, on the whole it has been remarkably devoid of robust biblical or theological reflection. Fleming Rutledge, for instance, projects the common polarization: “Some Christians emphasize the gospel as purely a matter of individual salvation; others see it essentially in terms of community and social justice.”¹⁴ She then goes on to point out how the leaders of the civil rights struggles believed, for the most part, that “God was on the move,” and that conservative Christians need to give more attention to this dimension of the gospel. Sadly, she devotes no space to demonstrating that the Bible itself emphasizes the gospel “as purely a matter of individual salvation” or sees it “essentially in terms of community and social justice.” That the Bible addresses both of these topics is beyond dispute. What is more doubtful is that the Bible treats *either* as the gospel. The better question asks the extent to which the Bible insists that there are both individual and communal *outcomes* to the preaching of the gospel, *neither of which is the gospel itself*. Another contribution, by David Fitch,¹⁵ turns the table

¹⁴“When God Disturbs the Peace,” *Christianity Today* 52, no. 6 (June 2008): 30–33, esp. 33.

¹⁵“Missional Misstep,” *Christianity Today* 52, no. 8 (September 2008): 36–39.

on the series question, “Is our gospel too small?” by suggesting that the mainline emphasis on the breadth of the gospel has made it almost impossible to press individuals into receiving it at all. Doubtless there is some pastoral insight here, but once again there is no reflection on what the Bible explicitly says about the gospel.

Many writers begin with the expression “the gospel of the kingdom”—which, as we have seen, occurs only three times (and is hinted at in a fourth), all in Matthew’s Gospel, though there are rough parallels in three other passages—and then expound the gospel entirely in terms of what they judge to be central to the kingdom. Commonly this is carried out by focusing on the social and communal values of the kingdom, and the word “kingdom” becomes an adjective: kingdom ethics, kingdom justice, kingdom community, kingdom gospel. It is certainly right to ask what is bound up with the kingdom. Immediately one learns from the canonical Gospels, however, that one of the dominant notes in passages about the kingdom is that, contrary to belief then popular, the kingdom of God was not yet coming as a climactic apocalyptic event, but was dawning more slowly, subtly, like wheat amid the weeds, like a treasure to be pursued, like yeast in a lump of dough—all brought about by King Jesus who goes to the cross, and reigns from the cross in a massive reversal of what “reign” commonly means among us human rebels, with Jesus not being served but serving and giving his life as a ransom for many. In other words, all that the canonical Gospels say must be read in the light of the plotline of these books: they move inevitably toward Jesus’ cross and resurrection, which provides forgiveness and the remission of sins. That is why it is so hermeneutically backward to try to understand the teaching of Jesus in a manner cut off from what he accomplished; it is hermeneutically backward to divorce the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels from the plotline of the Gospels.¹⁶

A more helpful analysis of the problem of defining how broad or how focused the gospel is comes from a series of posts by Greg Gilbert on the 9Marks blog.¹⁷ He argues that some passages where “gospel” is used focus on the message a person must believe to be saved, while others focus on the message that is “the whole good news of Christianity.” (I would

¹⁶One thinks, for instance, of Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville: W. Group, 2006). Similarly, Edmund K. Neufeld, “The Gospel in the Gospels: Answering the Question ‘What Must I Do to Be Saved?’ from the Synoptics,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (2008): 267–96, concludes, “The Synoptics normally teach that one receives eternal life, or eschatological salvation, or that one enters the kingdom of God, by some kind of active obedience” (291).

¹⁷Greg Gilbert, “Appendix: The Gospel in Its Broader and Narrower Senses,” in Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and C. J. Mahaney, *Proclaiming a Cross-Centered Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 121–30; available online at <http://blog.9marks.org/2009/03/what-is-the-gospel.html>. See now Gilbert’s popular-level book-length treatment, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

prefer to say something like “the whole good news of what God has done in Christ Jesus and in consequence will do.”) The first list includes, for example, texts like Acts 10:36–43; Romans 1:16–17; 1 Corinthians 1:17–18; 15:1–5—all passages having to do with the forgiveness of sins, how to be saved, how a person is justified, and so forth. In Gilbert’s analysis, one group of believers, whom he designates Group A, rightly argues that “the gospel is the good news that God is reconciling sinners to himself through the substitutionary death of Jesus.” A second group of believers, whom Gilbert designates Group B, rightly argues that “the gospel is the good news that God is going to renew and remake the whole world through Christ.” The two groups tend to talk past each other. When a Group A believer asks the question What is the gospel? and hears the answer provided by a Group B person, inevitably he or she feels the cross has been lost; when a Group B believer asks the question What is the gospel? and hears the answer provided by a Group A person, inevitably he or she feels the response is too individualistic, too constrained, not driven by the sweep of eschatological expectation and ultimate hope.

The problem is subtler yet. Sometimes Group B Christians, rightly discerning the communal and eschatological sweep of the promises of a new creation, then work backward in time to the ordering of life *now*. There are surely right and wrong ways of doing this. The gospel of grace that Paul expounds in Ephesians, for instance, a gospel that reconciles to God those who are by nature children of wrath, also reconciles Jews and Gentiles into one new humanity, a new humanity being built up into a holy temple in which God dwells by his Spirit. The entailments of Christ’s cross work must be developed in transformed, reconciled churches. But it is no help to blur the distinction between the church and the world, then blur the distinction between the gospel and its entailments, and conclude that the gospel *is* the message of racial reconciliation. The fact is that neither Paul nor anyone else in the New Testament says, “This is my gospel: that human beings are racially reconciled.” I hesitate to write so boldly (though what I have said is, quite simply, the truth), because some might take what I have just written out of its context to justify indifference about racial reconciliation.

Gilbert’s point is that although one can discern two foci in “gospel” texts—both having to do with the message of what *God* has done or is doing, but one more focused on Christ and his cross and how people are saved, the other taking in the broadest sweep of restoration in the new heaven and the new earth—these are not two separate and competing gospels, two distinguishable and complementary gospels. There is but

one gospel of Jesus Christ. The narrower focus draws you to Jesus—his incarnation, his death and resurrection, his session and reign—as that from which all the elements of what God is doing are drawn. The broader focus sketches in the mighty dimensions of what Christ has secured. But this means that if one preaches the gospel in the broader sense without also emphasizing the gospel in the more focused sense of what God has done to bring about such sweeping transformation, one actually sacrifices the gospel. To preach the gospel as if this were equivalent to preaching, say, the demands of the kingdom or the characteristics and promises of the kingdom, both now in its inauguration and finally in its consummation, without making clear what secures the whole, is not to preach the gospel but only a tired and tiring moralism. Perhaps that is why Paul, talking of what the gospel is, feels free to identify the matters of first importance: Christ crucified and risen again.

The heart of the gospel is what God has done in Jesus, supremely in his death and resurrection. Period. It is not personal testimony about our repentance; it is not a few words about our faith response; it is not obedience; it is not the cultural mandate or any other mandate. Repentance, faith, and obedience are of course essential, and must be rightly related in the light of Scripture, but they are not the good news. The gospel is the good news about what *God* has done. Because of what God has done in Christ Jesus, the gospel necessarily includes the good that has been secured by Christ and his cross work. Thus it has a present and an eschatological dimension. We announce the gospel.

Yet we must be careful not to make the lines too crisp. Does preaching the gospel include, say, *the demand* for repentance, faith, and obedience? Some will respond negatively: the gospel focuses exclusively on what God has done. But what God has done in Christ Jesus has an intrinsic demand built into it. If in God's mercy Christ has come to bear the sins of his people and risen in vindicated glory to call together a new covenant people and usher in the consummated kingdom, intrinsic to God's work in Christ is an appeal for the ends of earth to turn to him and be saved. Their actual turning is not the gospel; their transformed living is not the gospel, however much it is the fruit of the gospel. But the "good news" is not just like the news, say, that there has been an accident on the Dan Ryan Expressway. That sort of news does not intrinsically demand anything of us (unless we happen to know the victims). By contrast, the gospel, the good news, has an *intrinsic* demand to it, such that our rearticulation of the demand for repentance, faith, and obedience cannot be divorced from the gospel itself. Of course, the demand for repentance, faith, and

obedience *divorced from Christ and his cross work* is no more the gospel than hope for a consummation divorced from Christ and his cross work is the gospel. But I do not see how one can be said to be truly preaching the gospel without spelling out the demands that the gospel makes.

The Gospel Is Not Simply Important News, but Good News

There is another dimension to the discussion about the breadth of the gospel. Some have objected to rendering εὐαγγέλιον by “good news.” It should be rendered, they say, simply by “news,” for in some contexts the news is not good at all, but threatens judgment.¹⁸ Mark 1:1 announces the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and promptly reports the preaching of John the Baptist, who preached Jesus. In preaching Jesus, the Baptist not only insisted that people believe in him, but warned that Jesus himself would separate out the chaff and burn it with unquenchable fire. This was huge news, big news—but it was *good* news only to those who believed. John the Baptist announced the dawning of the kingdom. But the dawning of the kingdom meant, for both John and Jesus, that everyone was called to repent: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The announcement that Jesus is King cannot be isolated from the announcement that Jesus is the final Judge. On the last day, Jesus himself is the one who will tell some people to depart because he never knew them (Matt. 7:21–23). When Felix invites Paul to address the court “about faith in Christ Jesus” (Acts 24:24), the apostle discourses “about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come,” and in consequence Felix becomes afraid (24:25). If Paul were doing nothing but preaching good news, there would be no reason for Felix to fear. We have already seen that Paul speaks of “the day when God will judge the secrets of men and women by Jesus Christ”—according to Paul’s *gospel* (Rom. 2:16). Much more evidence could be adduced.

What shall we make of this suggestion that εὐαγγέλιον is better thought of as “news” or “important news” than as “good news”? Five observations will help.

First, there is a valid dimension to the argument. Our ready talk of “good news” sometimes entices us to overlook the plentiful biblical threats, the promise of final judgment, and the raw alternative to receiving the salvation that Jesus alone brings. If John 3:16 tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his Son, John 3:36 reminds us that the wrath of God remains on all who reject the Son. The question, however, is whether

¹⁸Above all see D. Broughton Knox, “The Gospel of the New Testament,” in *D. B. Knox: Selected Works* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2006), 3:9–60. In condensed form the material occurs as “What Is the Gospel?” *The Briefing* 343 (April 2007): 10–14.

being faithful to the biblical emphasis on the imminence of judgment warrants the conclusion that we should not think of the εὐαγγέλιον itself as good news, but take it, more neutrally, as highly important news.

Second, several passages speak clearly of how Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath (e.g., 1 Thess. 1:10; cf. 2 Thess. 1:8). Surely that is spectacularly good news.

Third, if one objects that it is not good news to those who perish, we must remember how even in the Old Testament there were instances where the news was perceived to be good by some and bad by others. That did not stop it from being good news; it merely stopped it from being good news to everyone.

Fourth, although etymology is rarely determinative for the meaning of a word, if our authors had simply wanted to say “news,” one wonders why they did not use the simpler form ἀγγελία or the like, or, perhaps, for “great news,” coin μεγαγγέλιον or something of that order.

Above all, fifth, one wonders if this neutral rendering of εὐαγγέλιον as “important news” focuses too much attention either on the *coming* of Jesus (whether in blessing or judgment) or on the *results* of the coming of Jesus (some are saved and some are lost), and too little attention on the *cross and resurrection* of Jesus. Paul says that God “uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that bring life. And who is equal to such a task?” (2 Cor. 2:14–16). But Paul is certainly not suggesting that the aroma is neutral, a strong smell that might be either good or bad. It *is* good. If it is a stench to those who are perishing, that says something about them, not about the nature of the smell itself.

The Gospel Is Not Just for Unbelievers, but Also for Believers

The gospel is not a minor theme that deals with the point of entry into the Christian way, to be followed by a lot of material that actually brings about the life transformation. Very large swaths of evangelicalism simply presuppose that this is the case. Preaching the gospel, it is argued, is announcing how to be saved from God’s condemnation; believing the gospel guarantees you won’t go to hell. But for actual transformation to take place, you need to take a lot of discipleship courses, spiritual enrichment courses, “Go deep” spiritual disciplines courses, and the like. You need to learn journaling, or asceticism, or the simple lifestyle, or Scripture memorization; you need to join a small group, an accountability group,

or a women's Bible study. Not for a moment would I speak against the potential for good of all of these steps; rather, I am speaking against the tendency to treat these as postgospel disciplines, disciplines divorced from what God has done in Christ Jesus in the gospel of the crucified and resurrected Lord. We have already caught a glimpse of the way our living ought to be tied to the gospel in the several texts that speak of living a life in line with the gospel, worthy of the gospel (e.g., Gal. 2:14; Phil. 1:27). Moreover, the gospel is regularly presented not only as truth to be received and believed, but the very power of God to transform (see 1 Corinthians 2; 1 Thess. 2:4).¹⁹

Failure to see this point has huge and deleterious consequences. I shall mention only two. First, if the gospel becomes that by which we slip into the kingdom, but all the business of transformation turns on postgospel disciplines and strategies, then we shall constantly be directing the attention of people *away* from the gospel, *away* from the cross and resurrection. Soon the gospel will be something that we quietly assume is necessary for salvation, but not what we are excited about, not what we are preaching, not the power of God. What is really important are the spiritual disciplines. Of course, when we point this out to someone for whom techniques and disciplines are of paramount importance, there is likely to be instant indignation. *Of course* I believe in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, they say. And doubtless they do. Yet the question remains: What are they excited about? Where do they rest their confidence? On what does their hope of transformation depend? When I read, say, Julian of Norwich, I find an example of just how far an alleged spirituality may be pursued, in medieval form, directly attempting to connect with God *apart* from self-conscious dependence on the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus—the very matters the apostle labels “of first importance.” Wherever contemporary pursuit of spirituality becomes similarly distanced from the gospel, it is taking a dangerous turn.

One of the most urgently needed things today is a careful treatment of how the gospel, biblically and richly understood, ought to shape everything we do in the local church, all of our ethics, all of our priorities.

Second, a rich grasp of what it means to “preach the gospel” (εὐαγγελίζω) ought to be definitive for establishing our strategy.²⁰ We are con-

¹⁹See, e.g., Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life: Turn to the Liberating Power of the Cross . . . Every Day* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003); C. J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross-Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2006); Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians: Learning to See the Glories of God's Love* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 2008).

²⁰It is well worth reading Phillip D. Jensen, “The Strategy of God,” *The Briefing* 358 (July–August 2008): 13–18.

stantly urged to develop mission strategies, vision documents, strategic plans, and the like. At a certain level, I am all for such encouragement, *so long as the primary strategy of God, disclosed in Scripture, is preserved*, such that what we are really doing is nothing more than carefully working out tactics in submission to the grand strategy that God himself has laid down. That gospel strategy, laid out again and again, is the heraldic announcement of the gospel. It is *gospeling*; it is *εὐαγγελίζω* in the most comprehensive sense.

“Evangelists” in the New Testament Are Simply Proclaimers of the Gospel

We should at this juncture cast another glance at *εὐαγγελιστής*, regularly rendered “evangelist.” The advantage of this rendering is that it is almost an easy transliteration of the Greek. The problem is that in contemporary English “evangelist” calls to mind someone who preaches the “gospel” to unbelievers with the aim of seeing them converted. On this view, if Paul tells Timothy to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5), he is telling him that, among his other pastoral responsibilities, he is not to neglect trying to win outsiders to place their faith in Jesus. He must be not only a “pastor” but an “evangelist.” Similarly, Philip “the evangelist” (Acts 21:8) may not be a systematic teacher of the Bible or a good pastor, but his calling is to win outsiders to faith in Jesus.

I have come to suspect, however, that we are in danger of reading back into the Greek word *εὐαγγελιστής* what the English transliteration “evangelist” means. If instead we understand *εὐαγγελιστής* in terms of its cognates *εὐαγγέλιον* and *εὐαγγελίζω*, then a *εὐαγγελιστής* is simply someone who proclaims the *εὐαγγέλιον*, the gospel. If we are not thinking of “the gospel” in some simplistic or reduced sense, then an “evangelist” (in the Greek sense), precisely because he or she focuses on proclaiming the gospel, will inevitably provide at least some such proclamation to outsiders, and thus be doing evangelistic work, the work of an “evangelist” in the contemporary sense. Nevertheless, such an “evangelist” will still be proclaiming the gospel even when such proclamation is not directed toward outsiders with the aim of their conversion. In short, an “evangelist” in the New Testament sense is simply a gospel-preacher, an announcer of the gospel. That is what Philip does: he begins with the text presented him by the Ethiopian eunuch (*viz.*, Isaiah 53) and preaches Jesus: he has thought through how the Scriptures (for him, what we call the Old Testament) point forward to Jesus, his person and work, and the good news Jesus is and brings, and he announces this good news.

The Gospel Is Not Only Revelation, but Also History

In the contemporary climate it would be irresponsible of me not to mention an intrinsic, nonnegotiable element in this heraldic proclamation of the gospel. While we proclaim what God has done in Christ, there are elements of what God has done in Christ *that have taken place in history*; what we proclaim, in other words, are not only truths that can be known exclusively by revelation (e.g., God accepted Christ's death as a sacrifice on behalf of his people), but truths that we come to know, in large part, because they took place in history and were witnessed (e.g., Jesus died on a cross; he rose again the third day). Gospel proclamation cannot ignore either pole because both elements are intrinsic to the good news of what God has done in Christ.

This has been a challenge for a long time. For example, for more than a century many scholars have used the expression "salvation history" to mean something like "salvation as purported to be history in the Bible even though it is not real history that takes place in the space-time continuum."²¹ There are many offshoots of this heritage. Most recently Luke Timothy Johnson, whose voluminous writings are invariably lucid and insightful, and frequently helpful, published an essay that, regrettably, falls along this axis. Johnson's title is "How Is the Bible True? Let Me Count the Ways."²² He sketches out a rather stereotypical contrast between American fundamentalists, who are interested in defending the truth about details and establishing the veracity of predictive prophecy, and American modernists/liberals, who never get beyond the truth of "broad principles they derive from Scripture."²³ Johnson proposes "another approach to the truth of the Bible, one which works in and through literary imagination. Such an approach would focus neither on the world that created the Bible nor on the world that the Bible might predict, but rather on the world that the Bible *itself* creates."²⁴ This Johnson ties to postmodern epistemology, for "all great history and all great science depend on fantasy and imagination . . . just as every human life is driven by fantasy and imagination more than by sets of facts."²⁵ In this sort of world, what might we mean by suggesting that the Bible is true? We might ask if the Bible imagines a true world. This could not mean that the Bible imagines a true three-decker universe: we would have to let the language fire our

²¹See especially the important analysis of the problem by Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology*, History of Interpretation 2 (Leidendorp: Deo, 2004).

²²*Commonweal* 136, no. 10 (May 22, 2009): 12–16.

²³*Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

imagination to enable us to grasp the mythic dimensions of reality, the inner and outer dimensions of the universe. Again, do we read the Bible truly? This will demand that we undertake a reading that is responsible to the text, a reading that demands we recognize the Bible's otherness, a reading that is responsible to the community of other readers past and present. Yet again: Do we act truly as readers of the Bible? Are we morally competent to read? Among other things, this means we must "be in the process of being transformed by the world that Scripture imagines."²⁶

Oh, dear. Among the questions that Johnson's piece calls to mind:

1. Does the Bible (assuming it has been given by God) *intend* primarily to incite the human imagination? Even at the human level, without appealing to God as the Bible's ultimate author: Do the biblical writers *intend* primarily to spark human beings to exercise their imagination? Or do they have a variety of goals, including provoking imagination, but also including, say, moral exhortation, disclosing the nature of God, making historical claims, and so forth? What precisely sanctions such a high valuation of imagination? One might argue that heavily symbol-laden literature, such as apocalyptic, is more vested in sparking the imagination than, say, genealogical lists. But even apocalyptic demonstrably has other intentions built into the genre. In other words, Johnson is short-circuiting serious discussion of literary genre. Granted that, say, Proverbs is not interested *primarily* in making historical claims, what forms of Scripture *are* interested in making historical claims? How does one decide? Johnson's essay begins to appear like a horrible piece of reductionism.

2. Can one afford to stand quite this loose to at least some biblical historical claims? Consider, for a prime example, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Paul goes so far as to say that if one believes this to have happened (i.e., in history), when in fact it has not happened (i.e., in history), then we remain in our sins, the apostles are liars, our faith is futile, and we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:14–19). In other words, in this context one of the validating factors in faith is the historical truthfulness of faith's object. In this domain, if you believe something that isn't true, then even if it fires your imagination, you remain an object of the apostle's pity. Must we not say something similar about the *historical* nature of the incarnation? Further, there are many theological, imagination-engendering arguments in the Bible that depend absolutely on the validity of a certain historical sequence (e.g., Galatians 3; Heb. 4:1–13; 7:1–25). For instance, if the Pentateuch is not telling the truth about entering into the "rest" of

²⁶Ibid., 16.

the Promised Land, and if the report of it was not written until *after* Psalm 95, then the argument of Hebrews 4 makes no sense.

3. Johnson's argument is a profoundly intellectualist argument. We are not saved by stirring ideas about the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God, but by the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God. In other words, the heart of what saves us, the heart of the gospel, is not a set of ideas that fire the imagination, but the extratextual realities to which the text points. The Bible expounds the ideas, not because ideas themselves reconcile us to God, but because the ideas are about Christ, and he reconciles us to God. Once we get such matters clear in our minds, then of course we can say all sorts of useful things about the power of imagination, the use of words to stir and shape us, and so forth; that is, in part, what good preaching does. But if one says such things *at the expense* of the extratextual referentiality, it's a bit like trying to build a skyscraper after destroying the foundation. Only intellectuals can believe such nonsense *about Christianity*. If you are a Buddhist, of course, and someone proved that Gautama the Buddha never lived, it would not devastate your Buddhism: Buddhism depends for its believability not a whit on historical claims. But that cannot be said of Christianity. Either prove that Christ never lived, never died, and never rose from the dead, or declare that such details are unimportant, and you have destroyed Christianity utterly.

4. Should we not also reflect on how old-fashioned Johnson's treatment of epistemology appears to be? He seems to accept the absolute polarizations between modernism and postmodernism that were far more common in the 1970s and early 1980s, without acknowledging that modernism has become chastened modernism and is better analyzed in terms of critical realism, while postmodernism remains absurdist (If one can never speak of the truth, how does one speak of the truth of postmodernism?) unless it becomes "soft" postmodernism. While American undergraduates are still fed a régime of Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault, university students in France have long since given them up. Johnson is capable of first-class biblical scholarship, but this piece is no more than kitsch.

What the Gospel Rescues Us From, and What It Saves Us For

Finally, if the gospel is the good news about what God is doing in Christ to rescue and redeem his rebellious image bearers, we must constantly bear in mind what it is we are being rescued from. The reason is that we will gain a clearer grasp of the gospel if we hold a clear grasp of the desperate situation the gospel addresses. If we see that we are guilty, we will understand that for the gospel to be effective it must clear us of our

guilt; if we are alienated from God, we must be reconciled to him; if we stand under his judicial wrath, that wrath must be propitiated; if we are estranged from one another, we must be reconciled to one another; if the entire created order lies under the curse, the curse must be lifted and the created order transformed; if we are, morally speaking, weak and helpless (as well as guilty), we must be empowered and strengthened; if we are dead, we must be made alive; if the heart of our idolatry is abysmal self-focus and the de-godding of God, God must be restored in our vision and life to his rightful glory. In other words, we gain clarity regarding the gospel when we discern what the gospel addresses, what it fixes. If we focus on just one element of the desperate need—say, our broken horizontal relationships—then by ignoring all the other dimensions of our sin, including the most fundamental dimension, namely, our rebellion against God and the consequent wrath we have rightly incurred, we may marginalize or even abandon crucial elements of the gospel that address our sin. After all, the Bible speaks of the wrath of God more than six hundred times. If we cannot grasp how the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses all these dimensions of our desperate need, we will invariably promulgate an anemic and truncated gospel.

By the same token, many of the themes with which the gospel words are associated in the Scriptures bear out the same connection—the connection between plight and solution—from the other end. Thus the gospel not only forgives us, but holds out the hope of resurrection existence (Col. 1:22–23; 2 Thess. 2:14; cf. Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 15); the gospel of the cross not only justifies us, it is the power of God that transforms us (1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 1:18ff.). It not only draws faith from us, but commands our obedience (Rom. 10:16; 1 Pet. 4:17) in line with its truth (Gal. 2:14; Phil. 1:27; 1 Tim. 1:11). It calls us not only to preach the unique suffering of Christ, but also to participate in his suffering (1 Cor. 9:23; Phil. 3:9–10; 1 Thess. 2:8–9; 2 Tim. 1:8; Philemon 13). In it God himself is vindicated and his own righteousness revealed (Rom. 1:17; 3:21–26).

Small wonder the apostle boldly declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel “because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

“This book is a tribute to one of the extraordinary pastors of our generation, who in many ways broke the mold. He has big thoughts about God in a time when God and his glory have been much diminished in the church. His has been a God-centered ministry. In this he has sometimes been unconventional, but the explanation is always that he has insisted on seeking to be true to the truth of God’s Word. Though highly imaginative and endowed with a poetic sensibility, he has never let his ideas run away with him but has worked hard to make every thought, and himself, captive to Christ. The result has been a full, rich, and extraordinary ministry that has been owned of God. Pastors like this do not come along very often, and when they do, we need to take note.”

*David F. Wells, Distinguished Research Professor,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*

“It would be strange if a book that honors a dynamic, intelligent, pious, God-centered, learned, kind, devoted, influential, far-traveled, widely published, and hyper-conscientious pastor like John Piper did not occasionally slip into hagiography. And this book does, but only occasionally. Far more, its authors offer the best sort of tribute by seriously engaging the Scriptures to which Piper is committed, earnestly expounding the classic Calvinistic doctrines into which Piper has breathed such life, and zealously promoting the glory of God to which Piper has devoted his ministry. Here is a volume full of thoughtful reflections on central scriptural themes, Jonathan Edwards, the life of prayer, Christ-honoring preaching, pastoral disciplines, pastoral privileges, Christian hedonism, and more. In the end, it is a tribute that, by stressing the themes John Piper has stressed, draws attention away from him to God.”

*Mark A. Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History,
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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

