

A Proper Understanding of the Gospel as the Key for Healthy Church Evangelism, Life and Ministry

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Summary

This article seeks to discuss the true biblical meaning of the Gospel message given the fact that in today's Christianity we have various understandings of the Gospel message. Particularly, this issue is present in the debate about Paul and Jesus – whether Paul's message about justification by faith or Jesus' message about the kingdom of God is the Gospel. The thesis of this article is that the Gospel is a primarily christological and not soteriological message. That is, its center is Christ: his person and work, and not humanity and their sins or salvation from sins. There is a huge difference between these two versions of the Gospel message, and they shape church evangelism, life and ministry dramatically. Because of that, this article offers a critique and helpful revision of the understanding of the Gospel message so that rightfully understood it may produce better results and fruits in the life of the church.

Key words: *Gospel, plan of salvation, evangelism, church life and mission, discipleship culture, salvation culture.*

Introduction

It is strange how people can take the meanings of some concepts or words for granted. We often use them and think that people who lived before us meant the same thing as we do now when they used them. But often that is not the case. Therefore, we always need to be alert and keen to test our theological concepts/words as to whether they truly reflect the God-given meaning, or are just a byproduct of church tradition. The concept that I would like to explore in this

article is the concept of the *Gospel*. It is a Christianized word that Christians have used for the last 2000 years, but it seems that they are not always clear about what that word or concept means. In order to prove that, I will explore how proper and improper (or better, insufficient) understandings of the Gospel can potentially affect evangelism, church life and ministry.

My thesis is that a proper understanding of the Gospel is the key element for successful evangelism because it keeps the focus on Jesus' story and not on personal sin; it creates *gospel-discipleship culture* and not just *salvation culture*; and it points our attention to the synoptic gospels, Jesus' ministry, and the message of the kingdom of God.

Such an understanding of the Gospel provides a healthy balance and corrective to a Christianity that understands the Gospel as a message of *justification by faith* with the goal of convincing individuals of their sin (that is, the main goal is for an unsaved person to *confess* that he or she is a *sinner*). Furthermore, this often (not always) leads to the creation of a *salvation culture* (where people think that the most important thing and goal of one's life is to achieve the forgiveness of sins, and everything else is of lesser importance), and church ministry that is focused on mediating the forgiveness of sins and not on the manifestation of the kingdom of God. In other words, understanding the Gospel just as *justification by faith* first of all reduces the Gospel to something that it is not, second, it leads to a Christianity that is focused predominately on how to achieve forgiveness and make converts, and finally, churches that preach and practice such a "Gospel" are not as interested in other aspects of the Gospel such as miracles, exorcisms, and the transformation that the Gospel brings in other areas of human life such as justice, poverty and the like. Needless to say, such an insufficient Gospel is predominately present in Protestantism because Protestantism is focused primarily on Paul, and for a long time it was thought that Paul's main message was justification by faith.¹ Hence, the Gospel became a message about how one becomes justified before God by faith.

In order to prove this thesis, first, I will discuss the meaning of the Gospel – how this word was used before Christianity, and in Christianity, and I will contrast two opposing views of the Gospel. After defining what the Gospel is and is not, I will show how two such different understandings affect evangelism and have the potential to create two opposite Christian cultures – one that is focused on sin, conversion and forgiveness, and another that is focused on the Lordship of King Jesus which in turn creates discipleship. Finally, I will discuss how these

1 For a short discussion on whether "justification by faith" is central to Paul's theology or not, see David G. Horrel, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*. NY & London: T&T Clark, 2006, p. 73-74.

two understandings of the Gospel message produce two different ways of doing church ministry – one that is focused on salvation of the soul, and another that is focused on salvation of the whole person and every area of human existence.

What is the Gospel?

To give an answer to the question, “What is the Gospel?” it is necessary to notice the meaning of this word outside of Judaism and Christianity prior to and during Jesus’ time, its meaning in the Old Testament, and finally, how this word was used and has been developed by Christians. Special attention must be paid to the potential diversity that exists between Jesus and Paul in the meaning of the word “Gospel”.

Talking about the meaning of the word Gospel, N. T. Wright says:

Many Christians today, when reading the New Testament, never question what the word means, but assume that, since they know from their own context what they mean by ‘the gospel’, Paul and the others must have meant exactly the same thing. Everybody who knows anything about the word knows that it means ‘good news’; but what sort of good news? (1997, 40).

If Wright’s observation is correct, that means we must carefully investigate the historical and theological developments of the word Gospel so that we can grasp its meaning. This is crucial because whether our understanding of this word is correct or distorted can have a huge impact on the life, ministry and evangelism of the church.

The Historical and Theological Development of the Word Gospel

Dugandžić explains the Hellenistic origin of the word Gospel and says that in Homer’s and Plutarch’s writings, this word had a meaning of reward that belonged to the person who brought some good news, and plural gospels signified sacrifices that were offered to gods for that good news. In time, the word was used to describe the content of the good news for which someone had a right to a reward. In the cult of the Roman emperor, the word received a religious connotation, and accordingly, the Gospel denotes the emperor’s visit to a particular part of the empire, his birthday, victories in war, or his acts of mercy (cf. 1999, 7).

To determine the meaning of the word Gospel in the Old Testament, two places from Isaiah are particularly important: Isa. 40:9 and 52:7 (also see Isa. 60:6 and 61:1). According to Dugandžić, these verses talk about the Gospel as an eschatological act of salvation that God will accomplish in his appointed time for his people (cf. 1999, 7). Wright observes that we need to understand these verses

from Isaiah in the context of two main topics that dominate this part of the book of Isaiah: “YHWH’s return to Zion and enthronement, and the return of Israel herself from her exile in Babylon” (Wright, 1997, 42). Hence, for Jews, the Gospel was not merely good news or a message of comfort for the downcast in general, but a specific proclamation of the “enthronement of YHWH and the dethronement of pagan gods; about the victory of Israel and the fall of Babylon; about the arrival of the Servant King and the consequent coming of peace and justice” (Wright, 1997, 44). To put it in other words, the Gospel was a proclamation that *God has come* (Isa. 40:9), that *God reigns* (Isa. 52:7) and that the *Anointed one has come* to announce the Gospel, heal the sick and deliver oppressed people.

When we come to the New Testament, we see that the word Gospel is connected first with John the Baptist because his preaching about repentance, baptism, the coming judgment and the coming messiah who will baptize people with Spirit and fire is described as the Gospel (Lk. 3:18). It is then connected with Jesus’ announcement of the coming of the kingdom (Mk. 1:14-15). The early church continued to preach the Gospel in oral form, so Paul in 1 Thessalonians claims that the message he preached there was the word of God (2:13) and the Gospel (2:2). Dugandžić claims that the early church continued to preach the Gospel, but that the word had received a different meaning:

...the apostolic kerygma was not simply a continuation of Jesus’ speech about the kingdom of God, but first and foremost, a speech about Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. Confronted with his violent death, and the unexpected message about his resurrection, the early church had to put his person in the center of attention and not Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God (1999, 8).

In his other book, Dugandžić claims that in the course of his life, Jesus did not preach himself, but the kingdom of God. But after his resurrection, the one who proclaimed the message (Jesus) had become the message itself – the one who proclaims has become proclaimed (2004, 68). Finally, the word Gospel in regards to the New Testament refers to the four books that we have today in the New Testament canon, that is, they are a literary genre which Loveday Alexander describes as: “a loose-knit, episodic narrative relating the words and deeds of a Galilean holy man called Jesus, culminating in his trial and death in Jerusalem, and ending with discrete and varied reports of resurrection appearances” (2006, 16).

Two “Opposing” Understandings of the Gospel Today – Jesus and Paul

By “two opposing understandings of the Gospel today,” I do not say that in the Bible we have two or more versions of the Gospel, but that in evangelical Christian-

ity, there is a confusion regarding the true meaning of the word Gospel, and that confusion originates from the idea that Jesus understood the Gospel as a message about the kingdom of God while Paul preached justification by faith as the Gospel. Hence, Scot McKnight, in his interview with Christianity Today, says,

Many biblical scholars and lay Christians have noted that Jesus preached almost exclusively about the kingdom of heaven, while Paul highlighted justification by faith—and not vice versa. Some conclude that they preached two different gospels. Others argue that really they both preached justification; still others say it's all about the kingdom. What gives? (2010).

McKnight argues that the evangelical movement with its roots in the Reformation, the Great Awakening and revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries “is a Paul-shaped movement through and through” (2010). Furthermore, he thinks that evangelicals struggle with the relationship of Jesus to Paul, and they do this in two ways: “One approach is to master Jesus’ gospel, the kingdom vision, and show how Paul fits. The other approach is to master Paul’s gospel, his theology of justification, and show how Jesus fits” (2010). As a consequence, we have two versions of the Gospel – one Gospel is Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God, while the other is Paul’s “justification by faith” Gospel. So, which Gospel is correct? Did Paul misinterpret Jesus, or did he understand correctly, then upgrade and polish the kingdom message which gentiles would be more prone to accept? The problem is that we cannot easily fit Paul’s soteriological language into Jesus’ kingdom message, nor can we equate the kingdom message with personal conversion.

N. T. Wright is right on track when he says,

The word ‘gospel’ and the phrase ‘the gospel’ have come to denote, especially in certain circles within the church, something that in older theology would be called an *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation. ‘The gospel’ is supposed to be a description of how people get saved; of the theological mechanism whereby, in some people’s language, Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness; in other people’s language, Jesus becomes my personal saviour; in other languages again, I admit my sin, believe that he died for me, and commit my life to him. In many church circles, if you hear something like that, people will say that ‘the gospel’ has been preached. Conversely, if you hear a sermon in which the claims of Jesus Christ are related to the political or ecological questions of the day, some people will say that, well, perhaps the subject was interesting, but ‘the gospel’ wasn’t preached (1997, 40-41).

So, if the Gospel is not the kingdom of God, justification by faith or a description how people get saved, what is the Gospel? McKnight argues for a third approach:

The problem with the two approaches—trying to make Paul fit Jesus’ kingdom vision, or trying to make Jesus fit Paul’s justification vision—comes down to

this: each approach reduces the word gospel. For one group, it is equated with the kingdom. For the other, it is a synonym for justification by faith. To be sure, the word gospel encapsulates both kingdom and justification, but gospel operates on a foundation deeper than either. If we can grasp that, the supposed disjunction between Jesus and Paul disappears (2010).

Accordingly, if we want to find out the true meaning of the word Gospel, we need to discover that foundation. Therefore, in the rest of this section, I will talk about the true meaning of the Gospel that encapsulates both the kingdom of God and justification by faith and much, much more.

Toward the Solution – The Gospel, Jesus and Paul

When we call the Gospel something that is not the Gospel, this creates confusion. When we stop calling the Gospel something that is not the Gospel, confusion disappears. Similarly, if we have too narrow of an understanding of the Gospel, we may think that we preach the Gospel, but instead we may preach only one part of the Gospel. Most of the confusion among evangelical Christians springs from the fact that for them the Gospel means justification by faith or the message about “how I can receive eternal life” (cf. Keathley). In this section, I will present the Gospel and then show that both Jesus and Paul preached the very same thing.

The Gospel

Defining the Gospel is the key task of this article, and following is a definition that fits perfectly with both Paul’s and Jesus’ understanding of the Gospel. According to McKnight,

The gospel is first and foremost about Jesus. Or, to put it theologically, it’s about Christology. Behind or underneath both kingdom and justification is the gospel, and the *gospel is the saving story of Jesus that completes Israel’s story*. ‘To gospel’ is to tell a story about Jesus as the Messiah, as the Lord, as the Son of God, as the Savior (2010).

In his book *The King Jesus Gospel*, McKnight argues similarly. Hence, the Gospel is “the narration of the saving Story of Jesus – his life, his death, his resurrection, his exaltation and his coming again – as the completion of the Story of Israel” (2011, 132). He concludes this by comparing the Gospels that Jesus, Paul and Peter preached. McKnight also raises one additional argument for his claim by pointing to the four books known as the gospels. The question that he asks is, “Why did the early Christians call these books ‘the Gospel’” since they do not focus on the plan of salvation (that is, “how can I be saved”) nor on some method of persuasion. Instead, all four of them relate “the story about Jesus and the power

of God at work in and through him” (2011, 80). According to Wright, the Gospel is this:

The story of God and the world ... focused on and encapsulated within the story of Jesus of Nazareth. This story was ‘gospel’, good news, for all the world ... [an] announcement was that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel’s Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world. Or, to put it yet more compactly: Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord (1997, 46).

In conclusion, if McKnight and Wright are correct, that means that the Gospel is Jesus-centered and God-focused – it is the story of Jesus’ life, the story about who Jesus is and an explanation of the saving significance of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as the fulfillment of Israel’s story. It is also the story of his present position as King, Lord, Savior and coming Judge. All these elements of the Gospel can be found with both Paul and Jesus.

The Gospel of Paul

Since some believe that Paul is the measuring rod for the definition of the Gospel while Jesus preached something else (kingdom and not the Gospel), I will begin with Paul’s message and compare it with Jesus’ message to show that there is not actually any difference between the messages they preached.

To understand Paul’s Gospel, one must explore 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 1:1-5 because there Paul clearly defines what the Gospel is. Wright notices that based on Romans 1:1-5, the Gospel for Paul meant simply this:

God’s gospel concerning his Son. A message about God - the one true God, the God who inspired the prophets - consisting in a message about Jesus. A story — a true story — about a human life, death and resurrection through which the living God becomes king of the world. A message which had grasped Paul and, through his work, would mushroom out to all the nations.

That is Paul’s shorthand summary of what ‘the gospel’ actually is. It is not, then, a system of how people get saved. The announcement of the gospel results in people being saved (1997, 45).

Based on this, Wright (cf. 1997, 46-57) outlines the key elements of the Gospel which are: *Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah*, and *Lord*. The cross is the hearth of Paul’s Gospel because through it God achieved a liberating victory over all powers that had usurped his authority. Therefore, to proclaim the Gospel means to proclaim God’s victory. But the Gospel also contains a proclamation about Jesus’ resurrection: “If Jesus had defeated sin, death could not hold him. If (conversely) he rose again from the dead, it meant he had indeed dealt with sin on the cross — in other words, that God had achieved at last what he had promised to Abraham and the prophets” (1997, 49). Furthermore, that crucified and

resurrected Jesus is no other than the king. Wright explains that “Christ” is not a name, but a title that means “Messiah” or “the anointed one.” Hence, the major referent in first century Judaism was the coming king. So when Paul declared that Jesus is Christ he declared Jesus as king: “Paul’s ‘gospel’ is therefore ‘the gospel of Christ’: not so much a message which is the property of the king, as a message whose subject is the king. It is through this king that the true God has made himself known” (1997, 52). However, Jesus is not just the king of Israel, but of the entire world because Paul views his ministry as bringing both Jews and gentiles to obedience of faith. The final step in Paul’s Gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord. Wright claims that Paul did not use this word for polite address to a social superior, but to denote the social superior above all which in that time was the Roman emperor. “Ultimately, for the Roman point of view, there was only one Lord of the world. According to Paul, he now had a rival” (1997, 56).

1 Corinthians 15:1-5, 20-28 is the other text that demonstrates how Paul understood the Gospel. It is noticeable that the Gospel did not originate with Paul because in v. 3 he says, “For what I received I passed on to you...” McKnight observes that for Paul, the Gospel was the story of the crucial events in the life of Jesus Christ: that Christ died for our sins, that Christ was buried, that Christ was raised and that Christ appeared (cf. 2011, 49). Christ died and rose from the dead according to the Scriptures which point to the whole Old Testament and not just Isaiah 53:10-12. In other words, Jesus is the completion of the Old Testament which describes Israel’s story. However, the Gospel story does not stop there. It is possible that Paul does not end the description of the Gospel in v. 5 but continues his Gospel statement in verses 20 to 28 as well. If that is the case, the Gospel that Paul preached also included the ascension of Jesus, his present glorified position and the second coming of Christ and the final consummation of the kingdom² when God would become all in all (cf. 2011, 53).

The Gospel of Jesus

Although Dugandžić claims that Jesus did not preach himself, McKnight claims otherwise. First, he thinks that Jesus preached the Gospel because the Gospel is the saving story of Jesus completing Israel’s story (2011, 104, 111). Second, Jesus’ kingdom message was centered on his own role in the story of Israel (cf. McKnight, 2011, 79), so one cannot say that Jesus preached only the kingdom, nor that the early church proclaimed Jesus Christ and not so much the kingdom. Accordingly, that means that Jesus’ story in the gospels is the same as Paul’s view of Jesus.

2 Although in Romans 1:1-5 Paul does not discuss the second coming as a part of his Gospel message, in 2:16 Paul declares that the second coming is a part of his Gospel message. That means that viewing 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 as part of his Gospel statement has some basis.

On the first note, McKnight (2011, 83-89) argues that the gospels are the same as the apostolic Gospel because they contain the same elements: 1) the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus; 2) Jesus' story as the fulfillment of the Scriptures; and 3) Jesus' salvific significance. To explain the first element of the apostolic Gospel, McKnight points to the gospel of Mark who calls his document "the gospel" (Mk. 1:1). This gospel (like the other three) significantly talks about Jesus' passion and presents him as the completion of Israel's story (Mk. 1:2-3). Talking about the second element of the Gospel, McKnight argues that Paul's definition of the Gospel "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4) is present also in the New Testament gospels. Matthew's genealogy, and "fulfillment formulas," Luke's birth narratives that are full of Old Testament motives, or John's portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's festivals point strongly toward the Old Testament and show that everything Jesus did was "according to Scripture" (as Paul would say). Finally, the Gospel story speaks that Jesus died "for our sins," and the four gospels clearly identify Jesus as the one who will save people from their sins. Hence, Matthew 1:21 says that Jesus will "save his people from their sins." John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 1:4-5), and in John 1:29 Jesus is introduced as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In his ministry, Jesus manifests authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:2), and during the Lord's Supper, he explains his sacrifice as an offering that will accomplish the forgiveness of sins. But his death was only half of the story because apart from the resurrection, Jesus' cross does not mean anything. Just as Paul told the Corinthians that Jesus was "raised on the third day according to the Scriptures," that same element can be found in the four canonical gospels.

On a second note, that Jesus did not only proclaim the Gospel message about the kingdom, but also himself (Jesus preached Jesus), McKnight (2011, 92-112) argues the following: he begins with Luke 1:46-55, 1:67-79 and 3:1-18 claiming that these examples talk about the messianic and kingdom expectations of Israel's story and point to Jesus (and John the Baptist). His birth was the beginning of a new era because he is the Son of God and king of Israel who will sit on David's throne. With that in mind, McKnight explains that the kingdom must be understood as a community made up of four features that shape the entire story of Israel: *God, king, citizens* and *land*, and these four features were present in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom (2011, 94).

Hence, first, Jesus declared the coming of the kingdom of God to be something that is very near (Mk. 1:15), and this expression connects elements of salvation history such as the promise to Abraham about the land, nation and kings, and the promise given to David about his offspring and eternal kingdom, the prophetic visions of *shalom*, justice and Torah observance and more. With this

proclamation, Jesus announced that the long awaited resolution of Israel's history was about to come. Second, Jesus declared a new society in the land when in Luke 4:18-19 he spoke about good news for the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. Third, Jesus declared a new citizenship. Citizens of the kingdom are those who follow Jesus, but the problem for some Jews was that all the "wrong" people were "in" and all the "right" people were "out". Fourth, Jesus announced the kingdom of God and invited people to submit to God's rule – to the God of Israel, the Creator and the One who made covenants with Israel in the past. Fifth, and the most importantly, Jesus declared that he is at the center of the kingdom of God.

This final point McKnight argues based on several things. First, he points to Luke 7:22-23 where Jesus explains his ministry based on Isaiah when the prophet talks about the restoration of the kingdom (29:18-19; 35:5, and 61:1). Jesus emphasized his role by saying, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of *me*" (Lk. 7:23). Second, McKnight claims that Jesus' speech in Nazareth (Lk. 4:16-30) is also important because Jesus points to himself when he says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21). Furthermore, he points to the three passages that talk about Jesus as the center of Israel's story: a) Matthew 5:17-20 tells us that Jesus understood his teachings and behavior as the consummation, completion and resolution of the OT law and prophets; b) when Jesus chose the twelve (Mk. 6:7-13) and promised them that they will sit on twelve thrones (Matt. 19:28), he evoked Israel's prophetic hope of restoration. However, Jesus is not counted in their number because he is the Lord and King of the twelve; c) in Mark 9:31, Jesus describes his death and resurrection by appealing to Scripture, identifying himself as the Son of Man from Daniel 7. Also, when he shared the Passover meal with his disciples (Mk. 14:12-26), he declared that just as God protected Israel at the Passover, so his sacrifice will protect his followers if they drink his blood-cup and eat his body-bread. Jesus viewed the Passover story of Israel as coming to completion in his sacrifice (cf. 2011, 98-111).

In conclusion, the Gospel that Paul and Jesus preached is simply this – it is the Story about Jesus. This story has several facets: first, Jesus must be presented as the closure of the Old Testament story – in him, the Old Testament promises are fulfilled; second, this story must communicate the significance of his person (who he is) and his life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection and ascension; third, the Gospel story talks about Jesus' present victorious position as the Lord and King over everything; and finally, it communicates and talks about the significance of his second coming.

The Gospel and Evangelism

“Preach the Gospel” is the battle cry of Christianity and the Great Commission given by Jesus to his church. Therefore, Christians are regularly reminded of the need to preach it no matter what. Church ministers are sometimes called “ministers of the Gospel.” There are various “Gospel ministry” organizations that are active in evangelism and missions. There are also Gospel TV stations, Gospel music, Gospel meetings, Gospel, Gospel, Gospel.... But what if we have distorted an incomplete view of the Gospel and preach that which is not the Gospel? We may preach a *part* of the Gospel, or something that *sounds* like the Gospel, but if our message is not the *full Gospel message*, then we are preaching something less or other than the Gospel. In that case, we can expect poor results.

Since I defined the Gospel in the previous section, in this section, I will offer some contemporary negative examples of cases in which people think that they are preaching the Gospel but they are not. Second, I will show how this distorted Gospel ignores its context which is the Old Testament. Third, I will talk about the place that the Gospel story has in evangelism in conjunction with the plan of salvation and methods of persuasion. Finally, I will compare characteristics of the true Gospel and the reduced “Gospel” to show their differences in aims, emphases and results.

It is important to cover these things because then I will argue that such a reduced Gospel has a huge potential to create believers who are converted and saved, but have no desire or need for discipleship. Also, such a Gospel affects church ministries in the sense that preachers aim only to lead people to the place where they will confess their sinfulness and receive forgiveness of sins. As a correction to such a reduced Gospel message, I suggest that we need to separate or rather stop mixing the *Gospel message* with an explanation of *how people can be saved*. In other words, first, we have to proclaim the *full Gospel* and then explain to people *how they can be saved*.³ If we are trying to tell people how they can be saved (and some think that this is the Gospel) without telling them the actual Gospel, more than likely, they will see no need or have no reason to be saved. The truth of the matter is that people can see the need for salvation only if they hear the Gospel message first. Unfortunately, people often hear the message of how they can be saved without hearing the actual Gospel message.

3 In other words, first we have to proclaim Christ so that we can build a path toward soteriology. Accordingly, the Gospel is primarily a matter of christology. (proclaiming Christ – his person and work), and the opportunity for salvation (soteriology) is a result.

Negative Examples

Following are a few examples that show how some Christians today misunderstand or have a distorted view of the Gospel. I will present their views, analyze their mistakes and suggest a better way – a way that separates the Gospel message from the “how one can be saved” message.

In the first example, we are informed that the real Gospel is the message about salvation by grace through faith:

“The real gospel message is that salvation is by grace through faith (Rom. 6:23), not faith and something you do like baptism or faith and speaking in tongues...” (What is the real gospel message?).

The second example says that to preach the Gospel means to tell people about the cross and resurrection (that is OK) and to tell them they are sinners who will end up in hell if they do not choose to accept Christ as their Savior. Allegedly, the Gospel also includes speech about repentance and the cost of discipleship as evidenced by the following quote:

There are many ‘gospel’ messages being circulated today. I want to tell you the TRUE gospel message. In some circles one would believe that if we simply say ‘I accept Jesus into my heart,’ we are saved. This is ‘not the gospel.’ They do not teach the whole gospel.... When presenting the ‘gospel’ message some leave out the cross and resurrection completely. They don’t tell us we are sinners and we need a Savior. They don’t tell us we will either spend eternity in Heaven or hell and our destiny depends on what we believe about Jesus. They don’t tell us that now is the time to make that decision and after we die it will be too late....The emphasis is not on the fact of how we are all dreadful sinners and in desperate need of a Savior. There is no talk of repentance which is clearly taught in the scripture by Jesus Himself. And, they hardly ever tell us there is a cost to following Christ (Poonen).

The third example is the famous “Four Spiritual Laws” approach to the Gospel where people can hear the following:

Law 1: God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life; Law 2: Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life; Law 3: Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin. Through Him you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life; Law 4: We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our lives (*Four Spiritual Laws*).

The four spiritual laws actually do present the Gospel message because when people hear them, they hear the Gospel:

Remember, you are not just sharing principles – you are introducing the per-

son to Christ. The *Four Spiritual Laws* are simply a tool to help you effectively communicate the gospel. Pray for God's love to be expressed through you.... If someone has already heard the *Four Spiritual Laws*, ask him what he thought of the booklet and if he has any questions. If he is interested and the gospel is not clear, go over the *Four Spiritual Laws* again (*Four Spiritual Laws*).

Writing about this topic of a distorted Gospel message, McKnight provides a few examples of how Christians today do not understand the Gospel. His first example comes from an email in which the person wondered, "What is good news about the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the descendant of David?" His second example uses John Piper who defines the Gospel as justification by faith, and his third example comes from one pastor who claimed that the Gospel is a message about justification by faith. Accordingly, Jesus did not preach the Gospel because no one understood the Gospel after the cross, resurrection and Pentecost (cf. McKnight, 2011, 24-26).

If we compare the Gospel as I have defined it with these examples of the alleged Gospel, it is noticeable that it is taken out of its context ("What is good news about the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the descendant of David"), and it is reduced and portrayed as a *plan of salvation* (*Four Spiritual Laws*) or justification by faith. Further, these examples do not only show that the Gospel is reduced and distorted, but many missing elements of the Gospel are replaced with additional speech about other spiritual things so that the Gospel is at the same time reduced and expanded with various additions. Hence, to preach the Gospel turns into speech about human sinfulness, hell, making a decision for Jesus, the cost of discipleship, etc.

The Context of the Gospel

In the early days of the church, Tertullian asked, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church?" (*Against Heretics* chap. 7). Today, the question that many Christians would ask would sound something like, "What does the Old Testament have to do with the Gospel?" McKnight's example in which a person asked about the connection of Jesus as the Messiah and the Gospel speaks volumes because it shows that the Old Testament is not important for the proclamation of that distorted Gospel. Yet, it makes sense that one would not consider the Old Testament to be important for the proclamation of Gospel if the Gospel is considered to be "justification by faith" or a "plan of salvation."

However, the Old Testament is the context from which the Gospel must be preached if we expect the Gospel to make any sense to those who hear it. Otherwise it is like building a house without a foundation. For this reason, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John use a great deal of effort to show that Jesus is

the culmination, closure and fulfillment of the Old Testament promises about salvation.

In the first chapter of his gospel, Matthew thus presents Jesus as the Christ (Messiah, King), the son of David, the son of Abraham, Savior and Emmanuel. Raymond Brown correctly observes that “The goal of Matthew’s infancy narrative is to be inclusive of the whole story of Israel with overt references to the great salvific events of the Exodus (Moses) and the Exile. If the Matthean Jesus was the royal Son of God, he was also the lawgiver and interpreter of the new, eschatological covenant” (1986, 479). Herman C. Waetjen also notices that Matthew’s design is “to present Jesus Christ as the culmination of Israel’s history and simultaneously as the introduction to the history that must still be written, as the way into the open future” (1976, 212). Waetjen also points out something else that is important – although there are some problems regarding Matthew’s genealogy in terms of selection and arrangement, Matthew used this genealogy to communicate something about Jesus to his readers, and that something refers to the fact that “Jesus is like David and Jehoniah, the bridge to a new epoch, the fourth and final period of history, the time of the kingdom of God” (1976, 213).

Mark calls his document “the beginning of the good news [Gospel] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” and the very next thing he does is to mention John the Baptist as the messenger who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus as prophesied by the prophet Isaiah. Since Mark’s gospel is considered to be a Passion story with an extended introduction, it is clear that Mark is writing the Gospel message in its fullness. That also shows that all the evangelists tell the story of Jesus in connection to the Old Testament by presenting Jesus and the closure of everything that God has said and done in the past for the salvation of his people. That means that everything Jesus said and did matches perfectly with the Old Testament story of creation, the fall and the redemption that God has set in motion. Therefore, McKnight’s words are important: “... *the gospel only makes sense in the story* [the story of Israel].... *Without that story there is no gospel.* This leads to a second claim: if we ignore that story, the gospel gets distorted, and that is just what has happened in salvation cultures” (2011, 36).

The Place of the Gospel in Evangelism

If the Gospel must be presented in its context, there is also a great need to understand that preaching the Gospel is not the same thing as presenting a *plan of salvation* and using various *methods of persuasion*. The plan of salvation, according to McKnight, is “the saving message and how we get saved” (2011, 38). In other words, the plan of salvation is an explanation of how a person can be saved, achieve forgiveness and reconciliation, and what he or she must do in order to

be saved (cf. *ibid.*). This means that when we speak the Gospel, we speak about major events in Jesus' life – his death, resurrection, reappearance, ascension, the second coming and the full consummation of the kingdom (cf. McKnight 2011, 52-53), but when we speak about God's love, grace, holiness and righteousness, about our disobedience in Eden, guilt and fall, and then explain the atoning death of Jesus which provides forgiveness for our sins and reconciliation with God, we speak about the plan of salvation. The plan includes a speech about the human need to respond to God's message by admitting one's sinfulness, repenting from sin and trusting in Jesus' atoning death (cf. McKnight, 2011, 38).⁴

From my personal experience, I can say that most Christians I know preach the Gospel something like this: they talk about the great love of God and his mercy, and then they shift to human sinfulness using various methods to somehow force individuals to confess that they are sinful. If the person confesses or denies that he or she has a problem with sin, then the conversation focuses on Jesus' death on the cross as a solution for the sin problem. In the end, the person is told that if he or she rejects Jesus, they will go to hell, but God wants that he or she lives in eternity in fellowship with God. Then the conversation will probably end with a short description of what the person must do to be saved (repent, pray the sinners' prayer, be baptized, etc.). My question is this: where is the Gospel in all of this? The only thing that belongs to the Gospel is the part when the person hears about Jesus' death on the cross. Very rarely do people hear about Jesus' resurrection, his present victorious position as King, Lord and Savior or his second coming.

If we cannot equate the Gospel with the plan of salvation, it is of equal importance to be aware that the Gospel is not the same as the method of persuasion used to explain the plan of salvation. Hence, there are many ways in which people can be convinced to embrace the Gospel and repent. One method can be to start with God's love and grace and then to end with a speech about the final judgment, hell and the wrath of God. Another method is to pull people from trusting in themselves and encourage them to trust in Christ alone for their justification before God. Furthermore, one can use the Ten Commandments to persuade people that they are sinners, or focus on a speech about the blessings that one receives if he or she confesses and accepts Jesus as their Savior. This is

4 On this point, I do not agree with McKnight completely because, in my estimation, he defines the plan of salvation too broadly. Explaining the salvific significance of Jesus' sacrifice is part of the Gospel (contra McKnight), but speech about "how can I be saved" or "what I must do to be saved" (cf. Acts 2:37) falls in the "plan of salvation" category. The best NT example of a distinction between the Gospel and the plan of salvation (how I can be saved) is Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-40 where the speech from 2:14 to 2:36 is the Gospel, and from 2:37-41 is "the plan of salvation". We tend to switch the second for the first and call that the Gospel.

not an exhaustive list.

The classifications that McKnight uses (the story of Israel – Jesus’ story, or the Gospel – the plan of salvation and the method of persuasion) seem complicated at first. Does it mean that we must first elaborate on Old Testament history and then describe Jesus’ life, ministry, passion events, resurrection, current position and his identity before saying anything about the plan of salvation in the way we think is best (that is, our method of persuasion)? McKnight does not elaborate on that question, but at the end of his book, he sketches the Gospel and combines (under the title, *The Gospel Sketched*) Israel’s story, the Gospel and the plan of salvation all in one.⁵ In other words, he does not say “This is the story of Israel, and now this is the Gospel. Now that you know the Gospel, this is the plan of salvation so that you know how to be saved.” However, there is one inconsistency in his argument and one potentially unclear point. The inconsistency is in the fact that he considers certain elements of Israel’s story to also be the plan of salvation, that is, he equates some elements from the story of Israel with speech about the plan of salvation. So, the story of Adam and Eve – their creation, the image they bear and their fall is part of Israel’s (or the Bible) story. Yet, the plan of salvation also includes speech about our creation as image-bearers and our choice to sin. The potentially unclear point is his speech about the plan of salvation. While McKnight recognizes that this term means something else to other people, he defines it as “the (personal) plan of how God saves us” (2011, 34), and as an explanation of “how a person gets saved, gets forgiven, and gets reconciled with God, and what that person must do in order to get saved” (2011, 38). At first, it seems that he is talking about two different things, but for him, the plan of salvation includes explaining how Jesus’ death affects the sinful human condition (how God saves us, or what he has done to save us), and an explanation of what must be done to receive the benefits of God’s act of salvation. I suggest that it is better to say that the plan of salvation consists of an explanation of how people can be saved, but I consider “how Jesus’ death affects the sinful human condition” to be a part of the Gospel.

Comparisons between the Gospel and the Contemporary Reduced Gospel

McKnight has done an excellent job of comparing the way the apostles preached the Gospel with what some Christians do in evangelism today. Therefore, in this section, I will summarize five of McKnight’s six comparisons and present his observations (cf. 2011, 132-145).

The first comparison is called “What gospeling seeks to accomplish.” Accord-

5 When he speaks about Jesus’ death, he also explains the salvific significance of his death, that is, how Jesus’ death did something for our sins (cf. 2011, 51).

ing to McKnight, “gospeling” in the book of Acts “*summons listeners to confess Jesus as Messiah and Lord, while our gospeling today seeks to persuade sinners to admit their sin and find Jesus as the Savior*” (2011, 133). His argument is that the latter can be done within the former, but in their Gospels, the apostles preached or proclaimed Jesus as the exalted King and Lord. However, today’s evangelism is focused on Jesus as a personal Savior. This emphasis ignores Jesus’ kingship and lordship.

Second, he argues that the apostolic Gospel was framed by the Story of Israel and not some salvation or atonement theory. The closest thing that Paul comes to an “atonement theory” when he presents the Gospel is in 1 Corinthians 15:3 when he says, “Christ dies for our sins.” But Paul does not speak about our reconciliation with God and others, about us being declared righteous before God, about God’s wrath being pacified, our slavery to sin, Satan, etc. Similarly, the book of Acts does not have an atonement theory.⁶

In the third comparison, McKnight states that apostolic preaching was not focused on God’s wrath or how to escape from hell. That does not mean that preaching the Gospel does not include speech about judgment. Preaching the Gospel must include speech about the final judgment when people will stand before God.

The fourth comparison talks about the main problem that the Gospel resolves. McKnight recognizes that sin is a big problem that the Gospel addresses and resolves, but even more foundational is the issue that people need to become the true people of God. According to the synoptic gospels, the solution that Jesus presented to address this problem was the *kingdom*, and in the Gospel of John, Jesus emphasized *eternal life*. Starting with Genesis 1:26-30, McKnight argues that God created people to have kingly and priestly roles and that these roles define what it means to be the true people of God. These roles were originally given to Adam and Eve, and then to Abraham, Israel and David. Eventually, these roles were perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. Therefore, it is no wonder that the foundational solution in the Gospel is Jesus as Messiah and Lord – the one who is the Ruler, the King and the Lord. Our personal sin is a problem, but it is connected with our lordly and priestly responsibilities. Therefore, McKnight argues against reducing the Gospel to only personal salvation.

McKnight’s fifth comparison speaks about whether the Gospel message was anti-imperial. However, since this comparison is not so important for this article, I will skip to the sixth comparison that is somewhat similar to the first and sec-

6 The closest thing that the book of Acts speaks of in terms of the modern language of atonement is in 5:31, 10:43 and 13:38-39. However, in neither of these cases do we have a clear explanation of how Jesus’ death achieves and accomplishes justification, forgiveness, or repentance.

ond comparisons. McKnight argues that the apostles evangelized by telling the story of Jesus while our preaching and evangelism today tends to tell the story of how to be personally saved. Furthermore, “gospeling” today tends to be reduced and aim at one target: the sinner’s heart. Instead of aiming for individual admissions of being a sinner and then receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and the solution to the sin problem, McKnight claims that we need to talk more about Jesus and his story.

Gospel-Discipleship Culture vs. Salvation Culture

The apostles preached the *Gospel* and some Christians today preach a *plan of salvation* as the Gospel message. This inevitably creates different results. The apostolic Gospel creates a *discipleship culture* and the plan of salvation creates a *salvation culture*. Since the plan of salvation Gospel reduces the Gospel, it also has the potential to reduce the results that the Gospel produces. Furthermore, *the plan of salvation Gospel* focuses on the sin, conversion and salvation of an individual (as the most important things), as well as on guilt since sin is a problem that only humans have. That means that such preaching, by extension, is human-centered, or maybe even selfish. Such a Gospel tells us that we need to be saved from something (sin), but does not emphasize that we are also saved for something (to be a nation of kings and priests).

On the other hand, the apostolic Gospel that announces Jesus’ rule, dominion and victory over every other power (including sin), is focused on Jesus and his majesty. In his ministry, Jesus revealed the kingdom; he brought the blessings of God’s rule when he fed the hungry, healed the sick, delivered people from demonic possession, and forgave sins. His death and resurrection set a new era in motion – a kingdom era that will reach its fulfillment in his second coming. Until then, he is exalted as the King and Lord over everything. Such a Gospel that is Jesus-centered tells us that we are saved from sin so that we can be what God created us to be – kings and priests who declare God’s glory.

The apostolic Gospel takes sin very seriously and addresses it forcefully, but it does not stop there – salvation from sin is only half of the story because sin hinders people from their God-given roles. The Gospel message proclaims that, since Jesus is the King, those who are saved must submit themselves to him in every way. The emphasis is not on humanity and sin; the emphasis is on Jesus as King and our responsibility to serve him *in* everything and *with* everything. That creates discipleship, and discipleship is possible only if a person’s focus is not on himself or herself, but on God. Of course, that does not mean that sin is taken lightly. On the contrary, the Gospel tells us that there is something other than just the problem of sin, judgment and hell. On that note, Wright says,

The royal proclamation is not simply the conveying of true information about the kingship of Jesus. It is the putting into effect of that kingship, the decisive and authoritative summoning to allegiance. Paul discovered, at the heart of his missionary practice, that when he announced the lordship of Jesus Christ, the sovereignty of King Jesus, this very announcement was the means by which the living God reached out with his love and changed the hearts and lives of men and women, forming them into a community of love across traditional barriers, liberating them from the paganism which had held them captive, enabling them to become, for the first time, the truly human beings they were meant to be. The gospel, Paul would have said, is not just about God's power saving people. It is God's power at work to save people (1997, 61).

Wright here mentions two things that are important. First, since Jesus is the king, that proclamation requires people to respond with allegiance to his rule. Second, the saving power of the Gospel enables people to fulfill their potential. Seeing Jesus as king evokes a lifelong response of allegiance and creates a culture of discipleship.

On the other hand, preaching only a plan of salvation has the potential to create believers who do not have a clear vision of Jesus' kingship as the central focus of their lives. Instead, they see Jesus as a Savior who saves them from their sin. There is nothing wrong with that except that the picture of Jesus is incomplete and reduced. Suppose that we hear the following Gospel message: God loves you – he gave his only Son for you – he has a beautiful plan for your life – you are a sinner, admit that – if you want to be saved from your sins then you must do this or that – now that you are saved, find some local church and have fellowship with other Christians – read your Bible, pray, be obedient to God and tell others about Jesus. My question is: where is King Jesus in all of this? Only the part which admonishes the person to “be obedient to God” conveys the sense that there is more to Christianity than *self*, but other than that, everything else is human-centered: God loves *you*, he has a plan for *you*, Jesus died for *you*, *you* are a sinner . . . Again, this is all true, but strictly speaking, this is not the Gospel.

If people hear such a Gospel and become Christians, there is a great chance that such believers will be focused on their sin and how not to lose, or maintain, their salvation. If the Gospel is a message primarily about *me and my sin*, then the life that I live as a believer will also be focused on *me and my sin*. I presume that believers in churches that adopt Armenian theology are especially prone to do this because according to such theology, there is a chance that a true believer who has been born again but becomes unfruitful can lose their salvation and be cast into hell (cf. Smith, 1968, 3, 7).

I am not arguing that Calvinism is a better theological system than Armenianism, I am just saying that we need to develop a Gospel-discipleship culture

instead of a salvation culture because the Gospel message, while addressing sin, is primarily focused on proclaiming the story of Jesus – what he has done, and who he is (that is, christology). If there are people in our churches who think that salvation means only receiving forgiveness and a ticket to heaven, and in the mean time, doing everything possible to keep that salvation (Armenianist), or continue with their lives as usual and wait for the moment of their death to go to heaven, then in both cases such believers are not living in accordance with the Gospel. Hence, the way we preach the Gospel affects the life of our churches.

The Gospel and Church Ministry

If reduced, the Gospel has the potential to create believers with a wrong focus in their lives; such a Gospel can also create churches that shape their ministry in a somewhat wrong way. For most evangelical churches in Croatia, preaching is the central element in the worship service and the primary goal is that nonbelievers (if there are nonbelievers in the service) receive salvation from their sins, or that believers become more holy, more involved in church life, more this or that; in other words, they should develop a more Christ-like character. Again, there is nothing wrong with all of this except that Jesus' Gospel ministry includes much more. It includes: a) a proclamation of the kingdom and Jesus as king – present and coming; b) a need for repentance and conversion; c) preaching, teaching, healing of sicknesses (Matt. 4:23-24) and exorcisms (Matt. 12:28); d) a proclamation of the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 2:5). Therefore, my critique is focused primarily on three things. First, preaching is just one element of the church service and it does not have to be in the center. Second, when preaching is focused on leading nonbelievers to salvation, most of the time, preachers are satisfied when a person receives forgiveness for their sins. Finally, church services and ministries are focused on building the character of believers.

First, the emphasis on preaching comes from the Reformation and Luther who made preaching an essential part of Protestant worship by changing the form of worship which had been focused on the sacraments (cf. White, 1989, 28). His doctrine of the church placed the existence of the church in connection to the preaching of the word of God. Because of that, many Protestant churches follow the same path. However, Jesus' Gospel ministry involved preaching, teaching and healing. Therefore, I am suggesting that there needs to be a place and space for healing ministry in church services as well. In other words, preachers and pastors should not be satisfied to have time only for singing, offerings, prayer, preaching and the Lord's Supper at the Sunday services, but should also have a time of prayer for the sick and disabled.

Closely related to the first critique is this second one – when speech about salvation is primarily focused on salvation from sin, other aspects of human lives that also need salvation are more than likely neglected. The point is that such a reduced view of salvation springs from an inadequate understanding of the kingdom of God and Jesus’ kingship. Jesus offered salvation that had a social dimension as well as spiritual. The spiritual dimension was salvation from sin and death, but the social dimension involved physical healing (e.g., lepers were excluded from society), feeding the hungry and table fellowship with outcasts (sinners and tax collectors). That is perfectly in line with the prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10), because in heaven, there is no sin, sickness, or hunger. Jesus said to the sinful woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” after he declared the forgiveness of her sins, but he also declared salvation to the woman he healed (Lk. 7:50). Probably the fullest scope of Jesus’ Gospel ministry can be found in Mark 2:1-12 where Jesus not only forgave the sins of a paralyzed person, but he also restored his health as well. Of course, we cannot force God on anything, and we must be aware that the fullness of the kingdom has not yet come (the technical term for this is “inaugurated eschatology”). That means that not everyone will be healed, and poverty will not be eradicated before the second coming of Christ. However, the church has an obligation to proclaim and enact Jesus’ Gospel. In order for that change to happen, Christians must stop limiting God’s salvation to the spiritual dimension, and embrace the kingdom-like salvation that impacts all aspects of human existence.⁷

My final point is that the “plan of salvation Gospel” is predominately focused on building the character of believers, and Bill Johnson has something profound to say about it:

Many believers have made it their primary goal in life to be well-respected citizens of their communities. Good character enables us to be solid contributors to society, but most of what is recognized as a Christian lifestyle can be accomplished by people who don’t even know God. Every believer should be highly respected AND MORE. It’s the *and more* part that we’re often lacking. While character must be at the heart of our ministries, power revolutioni-

7 To support my argument, I quote Cody C. Lorance who says something about the Gospel: “This biblically holistic elucidation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is an important help in solving the tension so prevalent in the global Church that exists between those Christians who dedicate themselves primarily to the ministry of social justice and those whose work is focused rather on spiritual conversion.” Then Lorance concludes that “the gospel, while primarily a message about how God is reconciling the world to himself through the cross of Christ, is also about the complete eradication of evil and the ethical transformation of individuals, families, communities, and societies” (2011, 255-56).

zes the world around us. Until the Church returns to Jesus' model for true revolutionaries, we will continue to be recognized by the world merely as nice people—while it is overcome with disease and torment, on its way to hell. Some Christians actually have considered it to be more noble to choose *character over power*. But we must not separate the two. It is an unjustifiable, illegitimate choice. Together they bring us to the only real issue—obedience. Once, while teaching a group of students about the importance of signs and wonders in the ministry of the gospel, a young man spoke up saying, "I'll pursue signs and wonders when I know I have more of the character of Christ in me." As good as that may sound, it comes from a religious mindset, not a heart abandoned to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In response to this student's comment, I opened to the Gospel of Matthew and read the Lord's charge: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." I then asked him, Who gave you the right to determine when you are ready to obey His command? (Johnson, 2003, 125).

He also says something very important: "What this world needs is for the Church to return to a show and tell message on the kingdom of God" (Johnson, 2003, 43).

Johnson's words present a challenge for today's Christianity that is somewhat focused on sin and how to be free from sin so that we can be better persons. The reason why today's Christianity is focused on character is because we have turned the Gospel message about Jesus the King and his kingdom into a "plan of salvation" message. Such a reduced vision of the Gospel produces a limited and reduced view of salvation that primarily deals with human character and that is it. There is nothing else beyond that. Luckily, Jesus' life and ministry is the Gospel. Jesus defines the Gospel, not Paul or Peter or anyone else. That is why I believe that Graeme Goldsworthy is correct when he says:

The Gospel is the event (or the proclamation of that event) of Jesus Christ that begins with his incarnation and earthly life, and concludes with his death, resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father. This historical event is interpreted by God as his preordained programme for the salvation of the world. . . Thus Christians cannot 'live the Gospel', as they are often exhorted to do. They can only believe it, proclaim it and seek to live consistently with it. Only Jesus lived (and died) the gospel (2006, 58-9).

Goldsworthy's statement is important because he unquestionably defines and identifies the Gospel with Jesus, and Johnson's statement tells us about the way Jesus lived this Gospel. Jesus did not only preach the Gospel (as McKnight argues), but he is the Gospel; he defines the Gospel.

Conclusion

The Gospel started with Jesus, and not with Paul. Hence, we can say: “In the beginning was the Gospel and the Gospel was with God, and the Gospel was God. The Gospel became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory. No one has ever seen God, but the Gospel who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known.” Or maybe it is the other way around: “WHAT SHALL WE SAY TO THESE THINGS? If Paul is for us, who can be against us?” (Wright, 2009, 249).

The problem that I was addressing in this article is the tendency in one part of Christianity to define the Gospel as justification by faith and to then read this, Paul’s expression, into the rest of the New Testament. This problem is called “a canon within a canon” where Paul is used as the measuring stick for the Gospel and everything around it. In other words, he is the canon which interprets the rest of the New Testament canon. But if we misunderstand Paul, such a measuring stick, when applied to the rest of the NT canon, can have many negative consequences. However, the Gospel is primarily about christology, and from christology springs soteriology. If we change the order of these two, we end up with something like the Gospel, but not the Gospel itself.

Accordingly, the way we understand the Gospel affects the way we evangelize, live our life in Christ, and do church services and ministries. I believe that if we were to talk more about Jesus and present more of his Gospel story, more people would come to faith, more believers would be Jesus’ disciples and not just converts, saved one’s or believers, and more believers would embrace a Jesus-like kingdom ministry. After all, it is “[the] gospel... [that is] the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16, NIV), and not something like the Gospel. For that matter, the way we understand what or who the Gospel is has a huge impact.

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Ervin Budiselić

Pravilno razumijevanje evanđelja kao ključ za zdravu evangelizaciju, život i službu crkve

Sažetak

Ovaj članak nastoji ustvrditi što je istinska biblijska poruka Evanđelja uzevši u obzir da u današnjem kršćanstvu postoje razna shvaćanja poruke Evanđelja. Posebice, ova tema je prisutna u raspravi oko Pavla i Isusa – da li Pavlova poruka opravdanja po vjeri ili Isusova poruka o kraljevstvu Božjem predstavlja Evanđelje. Teza je ovog članka da je Evanđelje primarno kristološka, a ne soteriološka poruka. Drugim riječima, u središtu poruke Evanđelja nalazi se Krist: njegova osoba i djelo, a ne čovjek, njegovi grijesi i spasenje od grijeha. Postoji velika razlika između ove dvije inačice poruke Evanđelja jer one drastično oblikuju i utječu na evangelizaciju, život i poslanje crkve. Poradi toga, ovaj članak nastoji ponuditi kritičku i korisnu reviziju poruke Evanđelja ne bi li ispravno shvaćena poruka Evanđelja donijela bolje rezultate i plodove u životu crkava.