

What is the Gospel?

gospel | \ 'gä-spəl \ n. the message concerning Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation (Merriam-Webster)

If we are a community *shaped by the gospel* for the renewing of all things, an important question to ask is, “*What is the gospel?*” In the New Testament, the Greek word for gospel is *evangelion*, which simply means “*good news*.” So, when we say, “We are shaped by the gospel,” we are saying, “We are shaped by the good news.” But exactly what is the good news? Or as N.T. Wright asks, “Why is the gospel news and what makes it good?”¹

To understand the meaning of the good news, below I summarize two main strands of thought: (1) the gospel of the cross and (2) the gospel of the kingdom.² Regarding what makes the gospel good, I posit that there are not two gospels, but one, and this earth-shattering good news has transforming power for today as well as all for human history.

Gospel of the Cross: God-Individual-Christ-Response

The gospel of the cross is designed to save individuals. It is popular in and associated with western evangelicalism. The western world is highly individualistic, and this good-news message caters to that personal appeal. In this view, the church community’s primary task is getting individuals into heaven. This message has a linear God-Individual-Christ-Response, and often explained in the “Roman Road” or Four Spiritual Laws.³ In the Four Laws, each law corresponds to the **God-Individual-Christ Response** pattern, as seen below:

 **GOD** loves you (John 3:16) and offers a wonderful plan (John 10:10) for your life.

¹ N. T. Wright (2015) *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good*

², I recommend Don’s Carson’s *essay* as well as the helpful chapter in *the DeYoung/Gilbert*

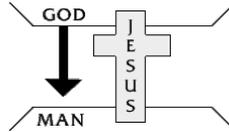
³ You can find the complete *Four Spiritual Laws* at <https://crustore.org/four-laws-english/>.



All **INDIVIDUALS** are is sinful (Rom3: 23) and separated (6:23) from God (3:23).



JESUS CHRIST is God's only provision for our sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life (Rom 5:8; 1 Cor 15:3-6).



We must *individually* **RECEIVE** Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; to know and experience God's love and plan for our lives (Jn 1:12; Eph 2: 8,9).

Implications for Gospel of the Cross

In this gospel message, evangelizing individuals is of supreme importance. After all, we have the Lord's "Great Commission," which exhorts us to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). Without Jesus, people are lost and destined for hell. In essence, the good news of the cross is the ultimate fire insurance plan.

It is easy to conclude that evangelism IS the gospel and more important than anything else we could do. Social action is important, but saving people from hell trumps caring for the poor and vulnerable.

While this view is popular in western evangelicalism, it raises some questions:

- If evangelism is really of utmost importance, why do most of us spend so much time raising a family, earning a living, and just doing life?
- Why do evangelicals emphasize the *Great Commission* (BTW, that exact term *is not* in the Bible), when Christ said the *Greatest Commandment* (BTW, that term *is* in the Bible) is to love God and others?
- And when Jesus interacted with individuals, why so often did he care for their needs rather than share the gospel of the cross? (Hint: The *incorrect* answer to this question is, "He did not have a Four Spiritual Laws tract!")

I hasten to add that while I raise the above questions about the gospel of the cross, this great message ushered me into the fold of the Body of Christ and is the

precise good news that I have proclaimed to hundreds of others. However, as I have lived in the depth of God's Word and grown in His truly amazing grace, I have come to understand what is often called the "Good News of the Kingdom."

Gospel of the Kingdom: Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration

The gospel of the kingdom concerns the big-picture view or Meta-Narrative of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, "the kingdom" is a central theme and was a primary focus of Christ's ministry.

This gospel of the kingdom, however, does not have a tidy, linear-sequential orderliness as does the gospel of the cross. Scholars generally agree that Jesus' main message was about the kingdom of God being "at hand" and coming again. But while the NT uses the term, "kingdom," around 80 times, it never really *defines* it explicitly. Rather, the NT *describes* it metaphorically. Christ would often say, "The kingdom of God is like ...," and Paul would reverse that pattern and tell us what it is not. "The kingdom of God is not meat or drink ..."

So, if the kingdom is a prominent scriptural theme but nebulously defined, how can we accurately understand and proclaim it? One place to get a handle on this dilemma is in Isaiah where "Good News" (Hebrew term m'vasér) is used. In the historical context of the passage, Jerusalem had just been conquered by Babylon, and all but a few Israelites had been exiled into captivity. The few remaining Israelites who remained in Jerusalem were lamenting over God's apparent desertion of His Chosen People.

In Isaiah's depiction, a lone Israelite is watching on the outer walls and sees a messenger running swiftly over the mountain range bearing breaking, earth-shattering, hopeful news:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings **good news**, who publishes peace, who brings **good news** of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isaiah 52: 7) ... He will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52: 10).

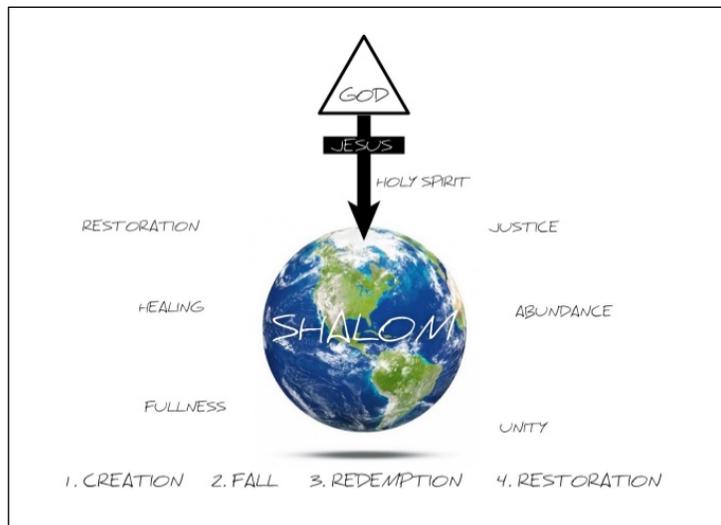
The messenger's encouraging news is that Israel's God has not abandoned them, He still reigns supreme, and all the world will see His salvation! This news has implications for the grieving Israelites as well as for those throughout "all the ends of the earth." The good news includes the heralding of the King and His kingdom of peace, redemption, and restoration that will affect the entire world.

While this good news is hard to fit in a neat little tract, it does have some common features. The biblical framework for understanding God's kingdom is actually the unified biblical narrative, which can be expressed in four major plot movements.

In his book *Counterfeit Gospels*, Trevin Wax, explains these plots as the following:

- **Creation:** Earth was originally full of God's shalom, kind peace in which everything works according to His intention. It was made for human flourishing, joy, worshiping God by loving Him and one another forever.
- **Fall:** Adam and Eve rejected God's rule. This rebellion, or "the fall," affected all of creation, resulting in physical and spiritual death.
- **Redemption:** The next movement shows God implementing a master plan for redeeming His world and rescuing fallen sinners. In the Person of Jesus Christ and through His death and resurrection, God Himself comes to renew the world and restore His people.
- **Restoration:** In Scripture's grand narrative, God will renew the whole world. This restoration is taking place in God's present work ("the kingdom is at hand") and will culminate when Christ returns.

The kingdom gospel has some associated imagery. Several great images can be found on a SlideShare presentation by designer [Calvin Hanson](#), including the following:



Not Two Gospels, but One (and Two Metaphors)

In my view, there is really only one gospel, not two. I follow the same line of reasoning that theologians use to explain that God is One and why Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. They often use the term, hypostasis, to signify oneness in person or unity of being. For example, in the doctrine of the Trinity, which teaches that while the Bible mentions three divine individuals, there is only one God who exists in three eternal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. More specifically, the *hypostatic union* is the joining (mysterious though it be) of the divine and human aspects of the one person of Jesus.

Similarly, in the Bible, we find two overlapping versions of the gospel. However, instead of looking at them as two gospels, I see them as *hypostatically united*. While stories and metaphors fall short of fully explaining the infinite, they are still helpful in our finite understanding (maybe that's why Jesus used them so much!). For example, the two gospels can be explained as *two* wings of *one* dove. Both wings are vital, interrelated aspects of a dove's essential oneness.

Another metaphor is a spring and river. When a spring feeds a river, the water does not change its essence. It is one water system that gives life. The two gospels are one, just as a spring and a river are one. The gospel of the cross is the wellspring of the gospel of the kingdom. The "living water" of the gospel is reconciliation between humankind and God that leads to all other blessings.

In the NT, Paul helps us unite the cross and the kingdom messages when he refers to Isaiah 52, "How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!" (Rom 10: 15). The NT context is the message of the cross, but Paul refers to the OT messenger bringing good news about God's Kingdom and salvation to all:

The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God... See, my servant will act wisely^[b]; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him^[c]—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness—so he will sprinkle many nations,^[d] and kings will shut

their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand (Isaiah 52:10- 15)

The gospel needs messengers because it proclaims a King and His Kingdom radically unlike anything we can imagine. Jesus turned the hierarchical pyramid upside-down -- the greatest in His Kingdom is last, prays for and loves his/her enemies, and feeds the poor. We are to be shaped by and proclaim this Good News of the upside-down kingdom and invite others to give allegiance to its King.

Shaping and Proclaiming

We are a community shaped by the gospel, the glorious good news that there can be reconciliation and restoration between the King of the Universe and humankind. There can be hypostasis between the worldly and heavenly kingdoms. We are to be shaped and continually reshaped by that message. After all, how can we participate with God “in the renewal of all things” if we, ourselves, are not being continuously renewed by His Good News.

The gospel is the declaration of the kingdom of God plus the means of entering it. J.I. Packer defines this Good News in three words, "God saves sinners."

N.T. Wright says, “The good news is that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and therefore the Lord of the world.”

- How can we as a community be shaped by the Good News?
- How can we best express and proclaim the Good News?
- What graphics, symbols, or narrative portraits might we use?