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# Dissertation Approval Sheet

This dissertation entitled

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH:  
HOPE FOR UNITY AND FRUITFUL MISSION

Written by

KENT R. WALLEY

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned reader:

  
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THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH:  
HOPE FOR UNITY AND FRUITFUL MISSION

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
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BY

KENT R WALLEY  
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## ABSTRACT

### **The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Episcopal Church: Hope for Unity and Fruitful Mission**

Kent R. Walley  
Doctor of Ministry  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
2012

The purpose of this dissertation is to address the confusion and lack of agreement that pervades the understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ among persons within the Episcopal Church by elucidating significant worldview presuppositions that are often present but not often acknowledged. Promising developments in the Episcopal Church and postmodern theology will be highlighted that suggest ways forward for greater unity leading to more fruitful gospel mission in a postmodern world.

This dissertation is about rediscovering the gospel of Jesus Christ amidst a sea of confusion about what that word means, especially within the Episcopal Church. The gospel is the central message of Jesus Christ that summarizes His teachings, and yet in the Church today the gospel is quite often not a topic of discussion; instead, debates focus on other more prominent issues. A wide variety of gospel understandings are often derived in large part from worldview assumptions rather than from careful consideration of the commonly accepted Episcopal sources of Scripture, reason, and tradition. A rediscovery of the gospel message in the Episcopal Church, where division abounds, offers potential for a greater unity that transcends the current theological divisions that plague the church.

This dissertation has three parts. Part One focuses on the gospel in Holy Scripture. Chapter 1 considers the gospel in the four canonical Gospels and Chapter 2 explores the gospel in the remainder of the New Testament. It will be argued that persons within the Episcopal Church often perceive the gospel in ways inconsistent with the New Testament.

Part Two addresses the concept of gospel in tradition through a brief review of the gospel in church history in Chapter 3 and then by examining how the gospel is portrayed in the *Book of Common Prayer* in Chapter 4. The broad gospel of Scripture will be revealed as the gospel of the early church and the prayer book.

Part Three will explore the gospel in reason in the context of the Episcopal Church of the postmodern era. This section will discuss elements of both modern and postmodern worldviews entwined within various understandings of the gospel message. Chapter 5 focuses on the postmodern context. Chapter 6 examines postmodern theologies that are emerging in that context, while Chapter 7 connects these with the present state of leadership in the Episcopal Church by means of a survey of diocesan bishops' view of the gospel conducted for this dissertation.

It will be demonstrated that the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture, upheld in theological tradition, and affirmed by reason of contemporary theology is more broadly defined than is often acknowledged, and that substantially more unity is possible.

Theological Mentor: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD.

Word count: 437

To my wife, Joy, and sons, Philip and Stephen  
with thanksgiving to God for you and your loving support

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE: THE GOSPEL IN THE SCRIPTURES	
Chapter 1. THE GOSPEL IN THE GOSPELS	9
Chapter 2. THE GOSPEL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT	38
PART TWO: THE GOSPEL IN TRADITION	
Chapter 3. THE GOSPEL IN TRADITION AND CHURCH HISTORY	57
Chapter 4. THE GOSPEL IN THE TRADITION OF THE 1979 BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER	74
PART THREE: THE GOSPEL AND REASON IN POSTMODERN THEOLOGY AND THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH	
Chapter 5. THE GOSPEL AND REASON IN AN INCREASINGLY POSTMODERN WORLD	95
Chapter 6. GOSPEL PROCLAMATION AND THEOLOGY IN A POSTMODERN WORLD	126
Chapter 7. PRESENT STATE OF GOSPEL INTERPRETATION IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH	152
CONCLUSION	170
APPENDIX	177
BIBLIOGRAPHY	182

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the need to rediscover a gospel-based unity within the Episcopal Church. It argues that with a renewed gospel clarity there is great potential for unity within the Episcopal Church and its ministry to those in a postmodern world, for there is in the gospel something that transcends the theological differences that fuel the debates of the present age. The Church has always debated points of doctrine, but the gospel center has remained constant from before the time when the first books of the New Testament were written. This project proposes to demonstrate that the gospel is larger than it is often conceived, that many in the present day define it too narrowly. The gospel is the central message of Jesus Christ that announces good news. This is the core of Christianity. The gospel is broad and multi-faceted.

The word “gospel” is used freely to mean a variety of different things by leaders within the Episcopal Church. A dozen clergy might easily give a dozen different answers when asked to define the gospel. In their book about the nature of the gospel, the writers of *Stormfront: The Good News of God* make the following observation:

Gather a dozen Christians into a room and ask them the question, “What is the gospel?” The likelihood is that you will receive a dozen different answers. Some Christians will speak about forgiveness of sins, entering into a personal relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ, and the gift of eternal life. They may add to this the incorporation of the believer into the body of Christ — the new humanity begun in Christ. Other Christians will speak of liberation from oppression and injustice, of reconciliation, or of the restoration of creation. Still others will speak of the power of the Holy Spirit, healing, miracles, freedom from demonic powers, and of a joy so intense that words simply cannot express it. Still other Christians will speak of strength in the midst of weakness, courage in the face

of suffering, comfort, peace, and the capacity to face death unafraid. All these answers are attempts to explain what is good about the good news.<sup>1</sup>

The Episcopal Church is in many ways representative of the wider divergence on the question of the gospel in twenty-first century Christendom. A number of answers have been given by Episcopal diocesan bishops in the year 2012 to this question as this dissertation will show. Nevertheless there are clues pointing to a greater gospel unity than is often perceived. Debates rage in the Episcopal Church, but the premise of this project is that there is potential for greater unity around the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is also the contention here that there is great opportunity for the Church to interpret the gospel with relevance to this increasingly postmodern world. Yet, there is very little direct discussion about the gospel in the forums where Episcopalians and their leaders express ideas. The controversial issues draw much of the attention. When the word or concept of the gospel is mentioned, it is often in passing with an assumption that everyone understands what the speaker means by “the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The variety of understandings of the gospel as mentioned above suggests a lack of clarity.<sup>3</sup> Douglas John Hall, writing in his book, *Waiting for Gospel*, notes that the word gospel is a term that has been all but relegated to the evangelical segment of the church: “The second most salient reason why the once-

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<sup>1</sup> James V. Brownson, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey and Charles C. West, *Stormfront: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 35.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the Windsor Commission report where the word is used frequently to refer to the church’s gospel mission, the need to proclaim and obey it; however it is never defined. The same is true of the New Anglican Covenant. Though not explicitly a definition there is this parenthetical comment in Section A, #3 of the Windsor Report where it states in a section referring to the fruit of the gospel: “The gospel itself, the good news of God’s action in Jesus Christ to deal once and for all with evil and to inaugurate the new creation.” Robin Eames, *The Lambeth Commission on Communion: The Windsor Report 2000* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> For another example of a present day writer concerned about this see: Darrel Bock, *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 9.

established churches [mainline churches] fail as heralds of gospel is. . . that nearly all the language of gospel, including the word gospel itself, has been taken over lock, stock, and barrel by ‘evangelicalism.’”<sup>4</sup> Yet speaking to all mainline Protestants, not just evangelicals, Hall writes that only the gospel can keep one a Christian in more than “name only.”<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation is about rediscovery. It is a call to rediscover the good news of Jesus Christ for the whole church for this generation. From the time of the Apostles and down through the ages, the gospel has found relevance in each generation. The gospel is the grand heritage of the people of God. Time and again, from one culture to the next, the gospel bore fruit bringing light and life. To use the words of the Apostle Paul, the gospel message bears fruit wherever it is proclaimed: “You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God” (Col 1:5b-6).<sup>6</sup> One might wonder if the concept of the gospel has become so unclear as to lose its force and fruitfulness. It is vital that Christians of every denomination, including Episcopalians, realize that the gospel brings light to the darkness of this world, healing to the afflicted, hope to the hopeless, and peace to those lost in confusion and turmoil. Just as the gospel spoke with relevance to people in cultures of ages past, so it offers to the people of the present day a transformative word of

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant “Establishment”* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), xvi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>6</sup> All citations of Scripture unless otherwise noted are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

hope. Over the years, the message has not changed, but the particular aspect of the breadth of the gospel message which speaks to a people in any particular culture certainly does change. This is what happens when the gospel's timeless message encounters the constantly changing cultures and perspectives of people throughout the ages.

The present day is a contentious time for the world, and it is a contentious time for the Episcopal Church. Debates have raged within the Church between two ideologies which seem diametrically opposed. One ideology, which can be characterized as liberal, expresses a gospel of love, social justice, and tolerance.<sup>7</sup> The other, which can be characterized as conservative, focuses on apparent ethical commands in Scripture and the importance of the acknowledgement of sin and forgiveness. Though the debate, as reported in the media and bantered about on blogs, often focuses on issues such as the blessing of same-gender unions, the divide is deep and theological. While the world has waited in need of a fresh translation of the gospel, the Episcopal Church has been plagued by division and strife. Yet, part of the division in the Church and the world is attributable to tectonic shifts in worldview that are taking place. Here, the term worldview will be used to describe the way in which a person's thinking affects how that person perceives the world.

Worldview includes concepts that form presuppositions and inform one's interpretation of the world. The Western world has been captivated for about four hundred years by a modern worldview. This view focused on reason, and on a distinction between objective, public facts and subjective, individual beliefs. This modern worldview seeks to insulate itself from critique by building on an unassailable foundation to which all are

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<sup>7</sup> See Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, xx, on gospel becoming an exhortation to activism.

expected to agree. The rules of the game are dictated by this worldview and the concept of the neutral secular excludes religious thought from many discussions in the public marketplace of ideas. Historically, Christians responded to this modern worldview with one of two approaches. The first, often characterized as liberal, was to ground theology in spiritual experience thought to be common to all people and all religions. The second, often characterized as conservative, was to ground theology in the revelation of Scripture. Both approaches sought an unassailable foundation, just as the modern worldview suggested. Thus the central divergent theological conflict is grounded in the modern worldview, and in the present time changes are taking place.

The modern worldview is alive and well, but under attack. That which follows after the modern is postmodern. There is considerable discussion and debate as to what is emerging next, what postmodern means, but at its core it is a critique of the modern, a dissatisfaction with the modern worldview. The postmodern critique has laid a substantial blow to the foundation of the modern worldview. To the extent Christian theologies are entwined in the modern worldview, they will crumble as the modern worldview crumbles. Just as the old foundations are in disrepair, so too is the foundation of the conservative-liberal division. Regardless of whatever the postmodern worldview becomes, a new potential for unity is emerging as the modern worldview foundation which upholds the conservative-liberal divide comes down.

The postmodern world will need a fresh translation of the gospel and the Episcopal Church is appropriately poised to offer it, if a gospel unity can be renewed. Many Christians, when considering the postmodern world, suggest that it is vibrant, liturgical

churches with broad theological understanding that will have the greatest opportunity to speak the gospel into a postmodern world. Surely, if the Episcopal Church could recover unity in a broad gospel, that in and of itself would bear salient witness in this polarized and conflict-riddled world.

There is a challenge in researching the gospel with respect to the Episcopal Church, since the Church has no formal, doctrinal statement concerning the gospel. The strategy adopted here will be to follow the much cited work of Richard Hooker. Hooker writing within the Church of England in the eighteenth century, focused on three areas of authority.<sup>8</sup> These have been likened to a three-legged stool. The concept of the three-legged stool is often cited by Episcopalians in considering how the Church works out its theology. Each leg is important to the stability of the stool; if any single one is removed the stool collapses. Hooker's three areas of authority are important when considering Anglican theology. They are: Scripture, tradition, and reason. The strategy of this dissertation will be to elucidate the gospel in the Episcopal Church by utilizing Hooker's three areas of authority. Thus, there are three major sections, each section corresponding to one of the three legs of Hooker's stool. Section One of this Dissertation considers the first leg, the gospel in Scripture, in two chapters. Chapter 1 explores the concept of the gospel in the four Gospels. Chapter 2 extends the findings with a consideration of the gospel in the rest of the New Testament. Section Two considers leg two, the gospel in tradition, in two chapters. Chapter 3 will explore the gospel in the ancient traditions and early church history with a brief consideration of the gospel in theology down through the ages. Chapter

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Secor, *Richard Hooker on Anglican Faith and Worship: Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Book V – A Modern Edition* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 32.

4 explores the Episcopal tradition as found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. This chapter seeks to discern the gospel according to the Episcopal Church through the lens of its prayer book. The third section of this dissertation takes up the third leg of the stool, the gospel in reason, in three chapters. Chapter 5 considers the reason of this age as it examines the rise of the postmodern critique in contrast to the modern worldview. Chapter 6 extends this discussion into the theology of the present day especially as it relates to the Episcopal Church. Finally, Chapter 7 explores the present understanding of Episcopal diocesan bishops with respect to the gospel. The results of a recent survey conducted as part of the research for this dissertation will be presented.

The quest for certitude in the modern worldview can be like gas on flames to the differences. This is not to say the differences are not real, that they do not run deep or that they do not involve important issues. The assertion here is simply that the recovery of a clear understanding of the gospel might allow both sides to find that they have more in common than is usually conceded. In addition, an understanding of the ways in which the modern worldview contributes to the divisions has the potential of bringing both conservatives and liberals together as that modern worldview declines. With renewed unity and a broad gospel the Church would be freed to speak with fresh relevance into an increasingly postmodern world.

PART ONE

THE GOSPEL IN THE SCRIPTURES

## CHAPTER 1

### THE GOSPEL IN THE GOSPELS

The first leg of the three-legged stool attributed to Hooker's three authorities is Scripture. This is an important entry point for a discussion of the meaning of the gospel despite the fact that not everyone interprets the Bible in the same way. The danger of interpretive schemes built on the foundation of human theological systems, be they theologically conservative or liberal systems, is to find in the Scriptures what one expects to find there. A literal view of Scripture that leads to bibliolatry is to be avoided, while at the same time a dismissive view that suggests Scripture has nothing to speak of the gospel message of Jesus Christ for our present day context is equally perilous. Warning against the dangers of either extreme and examining the approach of Karl Barth while frequently referencing Paul Tillich, Douglas John Hall warns liberals that they risk losing their own *raison d'être*: "Clearly a book that has been and is so significant for the whole Christian sojourn as the Bible has been and is cannot be dispensed with or rendered optional without very serious consequences for the community that does this."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he warns conservatives not to forget that the Scriptures are meant to lead us to the One who is a transcendent mystery that cannot be fully explained by human words, even if the words are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Though differences of interpretation exist, he commends the strategy of Karl Barth, who approached the Bible as an instrument in the hand of God

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<sup>1</sup> Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 47.

that speaks as the authentic witness to the Word of God.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of what one's views of the Scriptures are, Barth's approach calls on people from both sides of the theological divide to acknowledge that God speaks through the Scriptures to humanity not only in ages past, but in the present also. The Scriptures are not the end in themselves, so completely explaining God that they become a god to be worshipped, but rather, they are meant to lead humanity closer to God and to the good news He extends to the world through the gospel.

Scripture is the earliest witness available to the life, message and ministry of Jesus Christ. Most scholars would date Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians as being written in the 50s C.E.<sup>3</sup> There are several manuscript fragments of the New Testament dating to the early second century and perhaps even before 100 C.E.<sup>4</sup> Harry Poe, writing about the gospel in church history, notes this point:

What the world knows of Jesus comes from those followers who, in the moment of crisis, fled from him because the Jesus they believed in was lost. Jesus left no written records. Instead, he charged his disciples with the responsibility of bearing testimony to what they knew, like witnesses in a court trial. Those who heard the testimony played the part of judge. They believed the testimony of the witnesses, or they did not. What the early followers of Jesus told people when they gave testimony, then, comprises a helpful key to understanding why people then, or at any other time and place, would choose to believe and follow Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Conzelmann, tr. James W. Leitch, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia Series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 2.

<sup>4</sup> There are fifteen listed in this category in Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, ed., *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts: New and Complete Transcriptions with Photographs* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2001), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Harry L. Poe, *The Gospel and Its Meaning: a Theology for Evangelism and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 18

In his book-length examination of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Scot McKnight suggests that there is a renewed interest and concern among many today who see confusion in the church and who seek answers in Scripture to the question, “What is the gospel?”

In fact, there is both a widespread dissatisfaction with where we are and a widespread yearning for a more biblical approach to the question [what is the gospel?], and the disease and yearning show up in a vigorous and invigorating discussion of this question today. One of my friends says the church is “in a fog” about this question, and another writer says there’s a “fog of confusion” about it.<sup>6</sup>

As many see a fog and seek answers at least in part in the New Testament, it should be noted that not only is the New Testament the earliest and most widely attested witness to the message of Jesus Christ, it is also the resource that is most consistent with the understanding of the early church. It is consistent with the earliest councils and the earliest “rule of faith” which at first, was called the “symbol of faith” in Rome around the year 150.<sup>7</sup> This early rule of faith will be recognized by many today under the name of the Apostle’s Creed.

Another compelling reason to weigh carefully the witness of Scripture when considering the gospel of Jesus Christ in the present day is to note the similarities of the ancient world to the pluralistic culture of the twenty-first century West.<sup>8</sup> Noting that both ancient Rome and our modern day world embrace religious pluralism, and representative

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<sup>6</sup> Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: the Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1984), 63.

<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 16.

of the feeling of many present day authors, C. Norman Kraus in his book, *An Intrusive Gospel?* suggests this:

Perhaps no world government has attempted a more pluralistic stance than ancient Rome with its pantheon of gods for the empire. And it was in this cultural climate that Christianity was born. This suggests that we might get some strategic insight from the New Testament itself. How did the men and women of first-generation Christianity bear witness to Jesus as the Christ? What were their attitudes toward those of other religions?<sup>9</sup>

The result of these early witnesses was obviously a vibrant and growing church, even in the midst of a pluralistic and often hostile surrounding culture. Re-focusing on the gospel as these first Christians announced it, in word and deed, might offer hope for fruitful mission in the pluralistic and sometimes hostile world of the twenty-first century as well.

The approach of this dissertation is to understand “gospel” as a word that means the core of the message of Jesus Christ and thus the central meaning of Christianity. This dissertation seeks to clarify the nature of the good news that the church has to announce to the people of the twenty-first century. It seeks to rediscover the meaning of the gospel.

In this chapter, the answer to that question will be explored in the four gospels and particularly as articulated by Jesus Christ, Himself, and His forerunner, John the Baptist. The next chapter will compare this understanding of the gospel in the Gospels with the writings of Paul and the other books in the New Testament, especially Acts. However, before going to the witness of the New Testament writers and the early church in Acts, consideration is given to the gospel statements made by Jesus Himself. For, any understanding of the Christian gospel must find its genesis in Jesus Christ, lest it cease to

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<sup>9</sup> C. Norman Kraus, *An Intrusive Gospel? Christian Mission in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 112-113.

be Christian. In *Ancient and Postmodern Christianity*, a collection of essays about Christianity of the first centuries and Christianity of our day, Carl E. Braaten argues that both conservatives and liberals need Christ in the Christian gospel:

The gospel issue here is that without the narrative history of Jesus, there would be no gospel in the Gospels. For the very notion of gospel, of good news, denotes message, but it is always a message about something, or better, someone, namely. “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands” (1 Jn 1:1). There must be a fundamental continuity between the kerygmatic Christ—the Christ of faith—and the historical Jesus. To separate them, that is, to dehistoricize the kerygma, would be to repeat the docetic error of ancient Gnosticism.<sup>10</sup>

This does not deny the possible need to adapt and understand Christ in the modern context and modern cultures, but it does suggest the central point of the gospel is Jesus Christ and without Christ a gospel ceases to be Christian.

### **The Usage of the Word “Gospel” in Ancient Greek**

Before examining how Jesus used this word, it will be helpful to explore its meaning in classical and *koine* Greek usage, providing the context of first century listeners for which this word had rich meaning. The word translated as “gospel” in Greek is *euangelion*. The word appears in both noun and verb form. It is a compound of two Greek roots: *angelion* and *eu*. *Angelion* means “messenger,” or in verb form, “to announce.”<sup>11</sup>

The English word “angel” is derived from it. It is combined with the prefix *eu* indicating

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<sup>10</sup> Carl E. Braaten, “The Gospel Proviso: Lessons from Twentieth Century Theology for a New Millennium,” in *Ancient and Modern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Kenneth Tanner and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 207.

<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Becker, “Gospel,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1986), 2:107.

‘good’; this leads to the standard definition: “good news.”<sup>12</sup>

However, there is a deeper context of the usage of this word from the classical period of the ancient Greek language. In classical Greek, *euangelion* originally meant “the reward offered to a messenger who brought news of victory in battle or escape from danger.”<sup>13</sup> Then the word *euangelos* came to refer to a “messenger who brings a message of victory or other political or personal news that causes joy.”<sup>14</sup> Over time, this word came to mean the content of the message the messenger brought. The immediate reaction to such content describing the victory, the good news, was an offering of a sacrifice to the gods as a token of gratitude.<sup>15</sup> Thus the news which was good, the “good news,” historically was intrinsically related to the messenger and to the resultant joy the messenger announced.<sup>16</sup>

Further, to place this definition in the context of a Greek-speaking Jewish audience of the first century it is instructive to consider the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, commonly referred to as the Septuagint (LXX). Though the Septuagint does not have the form *euangelion*, it does contain the concept of a messenger of good news who “announces a new age in which Yahweh is king and His rule is inaugurated.” The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* offers several passages from Isaiah as examples (40:9, 52:7-10, 60:6 and 61:1.)

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<sup>12</sup> Becker, “Gospel,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:107.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph P. Martin, “Gospel,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. by Geoffrey Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:529.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> A good summary statement of these points can also be found in Brian D. McLaren’s *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), 10.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Is 52:7-10).<sup>17</sup>

As portrayed in that passage, the message contained in the “good news” was understood to embody the salvation and joyful victory to which it referred. An inscription from 9 B.C. proclaims the joyful news (*euangelia*) to the world of the birthday of Emperor Augustus.<sup>18</sup> Some have seen in this a demonstration of the message itself containing the salvation it announces.<sup>19</sup> “The proclamation of this *euangelion* does not merely herald a new era: it actually brings it about. The proclamation is itself the *euangelion*, since the salvation it proclaims is already present in it.”<sup>20</sup>

As noted in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, the context and connotations of meaning of *euangelion* suggest the powerfully appropriate use of the word with respect to Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment, the very substance of His message, as well as its herald – namely He is the good news:

The message of joy is no longer to be separated from the messenger who brings it, and this messenger is Jesus himself (cf. Luke 11:20; Matthew 5:1f.) Moreover, He appears not only as the messenger and author of the message, but at the same time as its subject, the one of whom the message tells. It is therefore quite consistent for

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<sup>17</sup> Martin, “Gospel,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2:529.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Becker, “Gospel,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:108.

the early Christian church to take up the term *euangelion* to describe the message of salvation connected with the coming of Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

Scottish theologian I. Howard Marshall finds Christ embodying and fulfilling the message in Luke's Gospel: "Luke's purpose is not merely to narrate the deeds and words of Jesus but to show how these did in fact lead to the experience of salvation and to the formation of the community of the saved."<sup>22</sup>

Unpacking this central purpose of the Gospel writers in describing Jesus Christ embodying the message of the gospel involves two parts. First, it will involve understanding why the gospels are called Gospels. And second, it will involve understanding how the gospel writers use the term *euangelion* in their Gospels. More specifically, it will involve observing how they describe Jesus using it.

### **Why the Gospels Are Called Gospels**

One aspect to understanding why the Gospels use the term gospel can be seen in looking at how the Gospel of Mark, which many assume was the first written of the four Gospels, begins (Mk 1:1): "The beginning of the good news [*euangelou*] of Jesus Christ." According to New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight, Mark is basically entitling his work, Gospel. "In this opening line Mark titles his book "the gospel" because he is 'gospeling' in this book. What does that mean? That Mark is narrating the saving, forgiving Story of Jesus as the completion of Israel's Story."<sup>23</sup> In his book that seeks

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<sup>21</sup> Becker, "Gospel," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:110.

<sup>22</sup> I.H. Marshall, "Luke and His 'Gospel,'" in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. P. Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 283.

<sup>23</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 84-85.

clarity on the gospel message as handed down to us in Scripture, McKnight suggests that the Gospels were not initially called gospels to indicate that they were some literary form or genre:

Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of a basic fact. The early Christians weren't describing the first four books as a kind of literature, as if "gospel" was a genre of literature and already had a number in the Dewey Decimal System of ancient libraries. No, we need to say this loud and clear: they didn't call the first four books of the New Testament the "Gospels." Instead, they called each one of them the "Gospel." They were saying there was one Gospel, but it was written down in four versions, the (one) Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In fact, to call them "Gospels" as we now do casually is to suggest that there was more than one gospel.<sup>24</sup>

McKnight goes on to summarize the point as to why the Gospels are called gospels:

Let's make this point clear: the gospel is the Story of Jesus as the completing Story of Israel. The first four books of the New Testament, the Gospels, are called "The Gospel according to. . ." because they are telling that same story. And they each have the same emphasis on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (see Matt. 19-28, Luke 18-24)...The Gospels are called "The Gospel according to. . ." because they declare the Story of Jesus according to the apostolic script: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus—and this all according to the Scriptures.<sup>25</sup>

The Gospels are called gospels then because each tells the Story of Jesus Christ, the complete explanation of what the good news is: Jesus Christ. And Jesus is depicted as the messenger announcing the present fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and in announcing that message; Jesus is also causing the fulfillment to take place. The fulfillment and announcement can be seen clearly at the beginning of Jesus ministry as He reads from the scroll of Isaiah:

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<sup>24</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk 4:16-21)

### **The Synoptics' Good News That God's Kingdom Has Come Near**

An analysis of the word *euangelion* in the Synoptic Gospels indicates that on many occasions it describes the summary of the message of Jesus and his forerunner, John the Baptist. Here are a few samples: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news [*euangelion*] of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mk 1:14-15). "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news [*euangelion*] of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Mt 4:23). "But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news [*euangelion*] of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.' So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea" (Lk 4:43-44). In this second citation from Matthew the context indicates more about the good news that Jesus proclaimed. A few verses earlier, in Matthew 4:17 it says, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" When one reads this and then a few verses later in 4:23 Jesus is proclaiming the "good news of the kingdom" it becomes clear that Matthew 4:23 is referring to the summary statement of what Jesus was

proclaiming in Matthew 4:17 as He traveled the ancient world: the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Luke's summary statement should be coupled with the reading of the scroll of Isaiah cited above (4:16-21), where Jesus announces that He is fulfilling that scripture which speaks of the Messianic Kingdom in their presence. This is consistent with Mark and Matthew. Jesus is "gospeling", that is proclaiming the good news, that the kingdom of God has come near in the very One who announces it, Jesus Christ.

Across all three Synoptic Gospels there is a consistent message about how the gospel could be summarized: "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near, repent and believe in the good news [gospel]." That the Kingdom of Heaven is near has sometimes been interpreted in temporal, eschatological fashion. This interpretation understands the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven in the sense that at some crucial point in the near future the Lord is coming to His people or that the end of time will arrive soon. Yet implicit in this understanding in the Synoptic Gospels is the realization that it is in Jesus that the kingdom is coming. In a new way that fulfills the Messianic prophecies; Jesus is inaugurating the Kingdom of God.

Others have understood this reference to the nearness of the kingdom to not refer to time, but to geographic proximity. Thus the kingdom of heaven is near, because the King is near, in fact so near, He is right in front of the person as He announces it. This is the approach taken by Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*:

The damage done to our practical faith in Christ and in his government-at-hand by confusing heaven with a place in distant or outer space, or even beyond space, is incalculable. Of course God is there too. But instead of heaven and God also being always present with us, as Jesus shows them to be, we invariably take them to be

located far away and, most likely at a much later time—not here and not now. And we should then be surprised to feel ourselves alone?<sup>26</sup>

Willard later notes that the word “heavens” is plural and suggests that this be understood as the atmosphere.<sup>27</sup> The ancient peoples understood the heavens as the air all around us.

Willard notes that in Jesus, the Son of God come into the world, the reign of God has begun and the kingdom is present and accessible to all.

His fame grew to the point where crowds were in the thousands. People trampled one another (Lk 12:1) and ripped roofs off houses (Mk 2:4) to gain access to him. But they were only responding to the striking availability of God to meet present human need through the actions of Jesus. He simply was the good news about the kingdom. He still is....we must reemphasize that in speaking of the kingdom of the heavens being “at hand,” Jesus was not speaking of something that was about to happen but had not yet happened and might not.” ...The reality of God’s rule, and all of the instrumentalities it involves, is present in action and available with and through the person of Jesus. That is Jesus’ gospel. The obvious present reality of the kingdom is what provoked the responses we have just discussed. New Testament passages make plain that this kingdom is not some thing to be “accepted” now and enjoyed later, but something to be entered now (Mt. 5:20; 18:3; Jn 3:3, 5).<sup>28</sup>

In looking closely at the word gospel in the Gospels and the summary statements about Jesus’ message, it becomes clear that the good news Jesus proclaimed was that the Kingdom of God had now come near, that is, it was present in the person of Jesus Christ. Just as the messenger announced victory as good news and as the good news inaugurated the blessings (as in the example of Caesar noted above), so Jesus announced the good news and Jesus was the good news. Jesus is still the good news. McKnight also notes this point, that the good news is about the Kingdom of God come near:

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<sup>26</sup> Willard, Dallas, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 27-8.

[This] text evokes something even closer, so close one has to say, “It is here!” In Matthew 12:28 Jesus says “but if it is by the spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you!” Here we find a different Greek word, *ephthasen*, which means “has come upon”; in this instance Jesus clearly believes the experience of exorcism is the actual manifestation of the long-awaited kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup>

Jesus’ ministry of healing and exorcism then demonstrates the reality that the Kingdom of God is near. In visible ways, with deeds of power the Kingdom of God has been brought near in the person and presence of the Son of God. This theme of the Kingdom of God and its present availability to meet human need was the constant subject of Jesus’ teaching and proclamation. It was the hallmark of His life and ministry: “Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God” (Lk 8:1). “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Mt 3:1-2). “When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured” (Lk 9:11).

The centrality of the Kingdom of God is also seen as the disciples are sent out to proclaim the good news of the kingdom: “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news [gospel], ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Mt 10:5-7). The disciples also demonstrate the Kingdom’s present reality through their deeds of power and healing and exorcism: “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over

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<sup>29</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 96.

all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Lk 9:1-2). Here, seeing the two placed in parallel by Luke, the kingdom of God is virtually equated with healing. The two are intrinsically bound together so that when the kingdom of God appears, healing takes place. Thus in a very real sense, healing announces the presence of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is frequently noted by the Gospel writers to be focused on explaining to His followers what the Kingdom of God is like, how it works, where it is and how to be a part of it in this life. This is, of course, the essence of Jesus’ teaching. This was such an important point, that Jesus seeks to convey it with numerous examples. This is clearly seen in several of the parables in Matthew which speak of what the kingdom of heaven is like: “He put before them another parable: The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field”(Mt 13:24). “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed” (13:31). “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast” (13:33). “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field” (13:44). “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls” (13:45). “The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea” (13:47).

Mark also places great emphasis on the kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching: “He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground’” (Mk 4:26). “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed” (4:30-31). “But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom

of God as a little child will never enter it'" (10:14-15). "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" (10:23). "When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God'" (12:34). Indeed Mark notes that proclaiming the message (which is the message of the Kingdom of God cf. Mk 1:15) was the very purpose for which He came: "He answered, "'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do'" (Mk 1:38).

Though Luke offers many examples that overlap with those of Matthew and Mark, he also offers a clear statement about the nearness of the kingdom being proximity rather than temporal when he records Jesus giving instructions to the seventy as He sends them out: "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Lk 10:9).

Thus, the Gospel writers make clear that Jesus' gospel message was focused on the Kingdom of God and its implications. The question of how this understanding of the gospel challenges ways in which the term is used and understood will be addressed later. However, the manner in which the writers of *Storm Front* summarize the point of the gospel in present kingdom terminology associated with Jesus Christ is noteworthy:

If you survey the data in the New Testament, a very clear pattern emerges. The focus falls not so much on what we experience, but on what God has done and is doing in the world. When Jesus speaks about the gospel, he uses the term primarily to refer to the kingdom of God or the reign of God...whereas we tend to speak about the gospel in terms of its impact upon our lives, the Bible tends to speak of the gospel as a revelation of who God is and what God is doing and has done in the world.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Brownson, et al., *Stormfront*, 36.

Kingdom then focuses on God as King, on Christ as King, the Son of God come into the world born “King of the Jews”. The Gospels portray Jesus as the anointed King, the Lord.<sup>31</sup> McKnight also focuses on this stating: “Christians believe that this new reality of God’s reign has entered history not by human efforts, nor even by the general providence of God. Rather, the reign of God has entered history in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Messiah, the one anointed to reign in God’s kingdom.”<sup>32</sup> Then in his careful study of the gospel, he concludes the following about the gospel in the Gospels:

Did Jesus preach the gospel? Yes, he preached the gospel because the gospel is the saving Story of Jesus completing Israel’s Story, and Jesus clearly set himself at the center of God’s saving plan for Israel. I agree with my friend and colleague Klyne Snodgrass, who said Jesus “was not just part of his own good news but the key factor in what was happening.” The Gospels, by their very nature, tell a Story of Jesus on center stage on every page. The Gospels are the gospel and Jesus preached the gospel. . . Preaching Jesus is preaching the gospel. In fact, Jesus almost says he and the gospel are one and the same. Listen to this word of Jesus from Mark 8:35: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life *for me* and *for the gospel* will save it.” In this text “for me [my sake]” and “for the [sake of the] gospel” are brought into the closest relationship possible. To respond to Jesus was to respond to the gospel; to respond to the gospel was to respond to Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

As one comes to the Gospels asking the question, “What gospel is presented?” it becomes clear that the Kingdom of God is front and center and that Jesus Christ is the focal point of that Kingdom. In a sense, Jesus Christ is the gospel. James Brownson’s essay about hearing the gospel again for the first time summarizes this point:

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<sup>31</sup> Brownson, et al., *Stormfront*, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 111-112.

The gospel does not express merely the abstract idea that God is a God of surprises who calls us to radical love and trust. The gospel presents to us the life, death, and resurrection of one particular person, Jesus Christ. The gospel invites, even demands, radical allegiance to this person, to this way in which God has been made known. In that particular life, we find enormous wisdom about how to live a counter-cultural life in our own world. How much we need to meet this Jesus again, for the first time!<sup>34</sup>

The gospel in the Gospels then, is about the Kingdom of God present in the person of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is available now. This is not merely conceptual, but personal. The Kingdom of Heaven is near and fulfilled in the person of Christ. This does not mean that a future aspect of the Kingdom is never intended. Indeed at the Last Supper, in the prophecies concerning the destruction of the Temple, even in the following section there may be a future, eternal, heavenly element: “And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come” (Mt 24:14). This reminds us that the Kingdom of God has already come, but not fully. The process has begun, but complete fulfillment awaits the eschatological moment in history when all is set right. The Kingdom has indeed come already and it can be entered now, but it is also not yet fully here. The Kingdom of God is already-but-not-yet fully come. The end times have begun but they await their complete fulfillment on that day when God, Himself, will “wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rv 7:17 and Is 25:8) and all will be set right.

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<sup>34</sup> James V. Brownson, “Hearing the Gospel Again for the First Time,” in *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 137.

## Jesus the Messiah: Fulfillment of the Scriptures

The theme of the embodiment of the message in the messenger has surfaced through this study up to this point, but needs further explanation. It is clear from the numerous instances in the Gospels that Jesus is quoting the Hebrew Scriptures and that He understood Himself in the context of the promise of God to the Israelite people as recorded in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). This becomes an important point in understanding the message and ministry of Jesus. The good news of the gospel involves a fulfillment and consummation of the promised Kingdom. McKnight notes,

What becomes patently obvious to the reader of any of the Gospels is that they do not tell us the Plan of Salvation, and neither do they offer to us a Method of Persuasion. Instead, they fit perfectly into what that great apostle Paul indicated because *they narrate the Story of Jesus in a way that shows that Jesus completes Israel's Story in a way that the story is a saving story*. Furthermore, they are lopsidedly oriented—in a peculiar manner for the ancient world—on the narrative of Jesus' last week.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus came first to the Jewish people, born in the lineage of David, fulfilling the ancient prophecies about God's Anointed that would come to rescue His people. Jesus came also in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53 where the servant suffers to heal many. Crucial to understanding the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels is an understanding of the context and cultural backdrop of the ministry of Christ.<sup>36</sup> The gospel is to be understood as a part of the story of the Hebrew Scriptures. McKnight comments on this importance of understanding Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels in the context of the fulfillment of Scripture:

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<sup>35</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 82.

<sup>36</sup> Gary Wills, *What the Gospels Meant* (London: the Penguin Group, 2008), 4.

The gospel fits into this story [the story of the Bible, especially as beginning in Genesis in the Old Testament], but it is not the story. Further, *the gospel only makes sense in that story*. Now a very important claim: *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*.<sup>37</sup>

This accounts for why the gospel writers take such pains to put Jesus in the Hebrew context. For example, as McKnight notes, Matthew and Luke both include extensive genealogies.

Inherent to the Story of Jesus are labels that define him and identify him and his role in completing Israel's Story: Messiah, Lord, Son of God, Savior, and Son of Man. The Story of Jesus as Messiah and Lord resolves what is yearning for completion in the Story of Israel. This Jesus is the one who saves Israel from its sins and the one who rescues humans from their imprisonments... The Story of Jesus, though, is first and foremost a resolution of Israel's Story and because the Jesus Story completes Israel's Story, it saves.<sup>38</sup>

Jesus on the road to Emmaus notes explicitly His role in fulfilling the Hebrew Scriptures:

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (Lk 24:25-27).

### **The Synoptics' Good News Calls for a Response**

In the summary statements of the gospel in the Gospels noted above, there is a clear call to repentance.<sup>39</sup> The word in the Greek is *metanoia*. It means to have a change of mind.<sup>40</sup> It is used to translate the Hebrew word *sub*, meaning "to turn."<sup>41</sup> John the Baptist

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<sup>37</sup> Wills, *What the Gospels Meant*, 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, xxi.

<sup>40</sup> Jurgen Goetzmann, "Metanoia," in *The New International Theological Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:357.

called for a repentance in preparation. Jesus called for people to, as Willard paraphrases, “re-evaluate their outlook on life”:

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ deeds and words, the formulation repeatedly used is the well-known “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand” (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). This is a call for us to reconsider how we have been approaching our life, in light of the fact that we now, in the presence of Jesus, have the option of living within the surrounding movements of God’s eternal purposes, of taking our life into his life.<sup>42</sup>

The Kingdom of God, now present in the world in the person of Jesus Christ, demanded a response. It should be noted that this response was not merely to feel a certain way as the word repent can imply in modern English. The term instead called for metamorphosis into a new outlook on life that affected not only one’s feelings, but also one’s thinking about the world and relationships. Willard notes:

The issue, so far as the gospel in the Gospels is concerned, is whether we are alive to God or dead to Him. . . . It is we who are in danger: in danger of missing the fullness of life offered to us. Can we seriously believe that God would establish a plan for us that essentially bypasses the awesome need of present human life and leaves human character untouched? . . . Can we believe that the essence of Christian faith and salvation covers nothing but death and after?<sup>43</sup>

In *Stormfront* the writers note the differences between the ancient culture and our own. Accepting the rule of a King was a very person-centered activity. The King was not some concept to be adhered to as much as a person to be loyal to and whose royal reign was to be accepted. Accepting the king’s generosity implied loyalty and inclusion into the citizenship of his kingdom. This is not how

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<sup>41</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 16-7

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

present day believers are likely to think to respond when hearing of God's generosity:

To put it in simplest terms, in the ancient world the king is the richest person around. He commands most of the resources in the country. The king's power, however, comes essentially from generosity. That is, the king gives to others (especially to other nobles) and expects allegiance (both personal and financial) in return.... It is very clear that Israel saw its relationship with God in this framework .... God showed generosity by rescuing the people from Egypt and then gave them the law, which codified exactly the form of allegiance that was expected from the people, in response to God's kindness and generosity....[T]his interaction between generosity and allegiance not only binds the people to their king; it also binds them to one another.... Our modern blind spots appear with greater clarity when viewed against this biblical background. In our capitalist society, most transactions are impersonal, rather than personal. Goods and services are exchanged for money, not for allegiance. Consequently, when we hear the good news of God's gracious generosity, we readily respond by accepting the gift, but rarely do we understand ourselves to be obligated by the gift to ties of allegiance to God and to God's people. Salvation thus becomes a matter of having one's needs met, rather than being drawn into what God is doing in the world.<sup>44</sup>

This is, of course, precisely that to which the New Covenant points. Further correlation with the New Testament will come in the next chapter, but it is important to note here that this citizenship in God's kingdom is a thoroughly New Testament concept that emerges as a direct response to Jesus, to the Jesus of the Gospels. The writers of *Stormfront* state:

The kingdom of God, as it is announced in the New Testament focused centrally upon this notion of being drawn together into God's new society, initiated through God's presence and activity in the world. People were called to a new citizenship in this kingdom (Phil 1:27; 3:20) and were urged to see themselves as part of a new household of God (Eph 2:19; I Tim 3:15; I Peter 4:17). Jew and Gentile alike were being drawn into a newly constituted people of God, the new "Israel of God." (Gal 6:16) The early Christians believed that this new religious/social reality was the direct result of God's new action in Jesus.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Brownson, et al., *Stormfront*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-9.

This is a call to repent, that is, to adopt a radically new outlook on life. The outlook is one that is formed by personal relation to the King and His Son, who has come to announce His reign. It is formed in relation to the other members of that kingdom, one's fellow citizens.

This new outlook also looks forward, in the Gospels, to the ultimate act of Jesus in His passion. The Gospel writers each devote a considerably high percentage of their Gospel to the last week of Jesus life; indeed the Gospel of Mark has been called a passion story with an extended introduction.<sup>46</sup> The concept of repentance in the Gospels is connected with sin as can be seen in the ministry of John the Baptist: "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4). "He (John) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk 3:3). That the gospel calls human beings to a response of repentance of their sins is clear in the extended section from Luke 3 where the coming of the Son of God and the fiery call of John the Baptist is summarized by Luke to be the good news, which is the gospel:

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in

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<sup>46</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 83.

their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people (Lk 3:7-18).

The Gospel writers clearly see the death of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins as a core element of the Story of Jesus. The link to the gospel summary is in the word repentance as this implies the need to deal with sins. McKnight follows the story of the coming of the King and the revelation of His nearness to the world as climaxed on Calvary:

[A] theme in the Gospels about "for our sins" can be found in the Last Supper narrative. Matthew's gospel deserves to be called a gospel for this text alone. As Jesus passes the cup, he says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28). Matthew said Jesus would be called "Jesus" because he would save Israel from its sins;<sup>47</sup>

This aspect of the gospel is what many believe the term to mean and indeed there is an element of this, but as we have seen the gospel is so much more.<sup>48</sup> McKnight goes to great lengths to clarify the distinction. He calls such a view of the gospel that equates it with the cross and atonement and the resulting salvation as the Plan of Salvation which is not the same as the gospel story:

I believe the word gospel has been hijacked by what we believe about "personal salvation," and the gospel itself has been reshaped to facilitate making "decisions." The result of this hijacking is that the word gospel no longer means in our world what it originally meant to either Jesus or the apostles... In this book I will be contending firmly that we evangelicals (as a whole) are not really "evangelical" in the sense of the apostolic gospel, but instead we are *soterians*. Here's why I say we are more *soterian* than evangelical: we evangelicals (mistakenly) equate the word

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<sup>47</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> For another author making this point, see: Bock, *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel*, 10.

gospel with the word salvation. Hence, we are really “Salvationists.” When we evangelicals see the word gospel, our instinct is to think (personal) “salvation.” We are wired this way. But these two words don’t mean the same thing...No matter how central the cross is to the Story and to the Plan of Salvation, we need to keep in mind that the story is more than the story of the cross. Jesus didn’t just die. The Story of Jesus includes, by implication, the life of Jesus (birth, teachings, actions)...<sup>49</sup>

However, the cross does call for a response and participation. Jesus explicitly states this:

“He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it’” (Mk 8:34-35). Jesus is calling His followers to respond to the cross with an action that will be as dramatically life-changingly new so as to be like dying to the old way of life. Thus the cross becomes an aspect of what is implied in the call to repentance in the summary statements of the gospel in the Gospels, as Poe notes:

The substitution goes both ways. Christ takes our death only if we share his death. In turn, Christ gives us life only if we take his life. In this regard, the substitution operates like a double transposition. Faith in the saving death of Christ involves our entry into his death in order to die with him, while he enters into us to live through us. The idea is decidedly mystical rather than transactional in a legal sense.<sup>50</sup>

Once again it must be noted that this is not the usual way those of more conservative theological persuasion often present the gospel and the call to repent. The writers of *Stormfront* address this in a section of the book focusing on John the Baptist’s call to repentance:

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<sup>49</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 26, 29, and 53.

<sup>50</sup> Poe, *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, 144.

The repentance, baptism, and forgiveness that John calls for here are portrayed entirely as part of the preparatory process for the Lord's coming. It is because the Lord is coming – and because the Lord's coming will define a radically new social reality – that repentance, forgiveness, and cleansing are both necessary and possible. There is a new kingdom and a new king, and people must bring their lives into alignment with this reality. In our contemporary North American context, we characteristically misread this passage. We tend to understand ourselves as individuals, not as embedded in larger social and religious contexts. We therefore construe John the baptizer's call as a summons to a form of personal holiness expressed as repentance. This personal holiness is the necessary precondition of a proper personal encounter with Jesus. We lose, therefore, the profoundly social context of this passage – its evocations of Israel of old, as well as the character of John's ministry as a movement itself.<sup>51</sup>

The gospel then in calling for repentance is inviting human beings to not only become members of the Kingdom of God in accepting His loving gracious forgiveness through the cross, but also to participate in what God is doing in the world. They are to become part of the mission of God, the *missio dei*.<sup>52</sup> In his book, *The Hole in our Gospel*, Richard Stearns reflects on this participatory aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ:

The amazing news of the gospel is that men and women, through Christ's atoning death, can now be reconciled to God. But the good news Jesus proclaimed had a fullness beyond salvation and the forgiveness of sins; it also signified the coming of God's kingdom on earth. This new kingdom, characteristics of which were captured in the Beatitudes, would turn the existing world order upside down... Proclaiming the whole gospel, then, means much more than evangelism in the hopes that people will hear and respond to the good news of salvation by faith in Christ. It also encompasses tangible compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical justice, efforts to right the wrongs that are so prevalent in our world. God is concerned about the spiritual, physical, and social dimensions of our being. This whole gospel is truly good news for the poor, and it is the foundation for a social revolution that has the power to change the world. And if this was Jesus' mission, it is also the mission of all who claim to follow Him. It is my mission, it is your mission, and it is the mission of the Church.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Brownson, et al., *Stormfront*, 43.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 15 and

To summarize what has been considered to this point: the gospel in the Synoptic Gospels is the story of Jesus set in the context of God's Word to Israel. Jesus fulfilled the promise in the Scriptures of the coming Messiah, but not in the way that the Jews expected. He came focused not on an earthly kingdom, so much as in bringing the nearness of God's heavenly kingdom and all the healing, life-changing potentiality that comes with it. He called people to find in Him the King, present to His people, and called them to participate in the mission of God in the world by ascribing loyalty to that kingdom and joining it's citizenry in proclaiming by word and deed the good news that God is near and a restored relationship with Him is possible.

### **The Gospel of the Kingdom in John**

John's Gospel omits the term *euangelion* entirely preferring to use terms like *martyreo* 'to witness' and *martyria* 'witness'.<sup>54</sup> One must use other means to locate the central message of Jesus as John recounts it. However, the themes of the Synoptic gospel summary can be found clearly in John.

The emphasis on Jesus bringing the Presence of God to the world could not be stronger than it is in John's Gospel. Beginning in John's Prologue, Jesus is raised up as God Himself come into the world, thus certainly bringing the Presence of God who is King to humanity:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.... And the Word became flesh and

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<sup>54</sup> Becker, "Gospel," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:110.

lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:1-2,14)

Jesus speaks of Himself as the One in whom people can find the key to life with God. Carl Braaten notes this in his essay entitled, "Gospel Proviso": "The first verse of John's Gospel declares that the Logos was with God from the beginning, and that the Logos was truly God. And this Logos became one with the man Jesus. Here and only here in this divine-human person, in this concrete God-man, do we have the heart of the gospel."<sup>55</sup>

Taking the Greek words for "I am" that the LXX uses for God's name with Moses at the burning bush, John emphasizes that Jesus is the Eternal "I am." This becomes most clear in John 8:58: "Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.'" And the "I am" statements abound, focusing the reader on the uniqueness of Christ who is the locus of all history. In John 8:12 Jesus states: "I am the light of the world". Light is a symbol for the Presence of God.<sup>56</sup> Other examples include: "I am the vine and my Father is the vinegrower" (Jn 15:1); "I am the good shepherd" (15:11); "I am the gate for the sheep" (15:7); "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). In John 17:3 Jesus equates eternal life with knowing God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent. It is noteworthy that eternal life is found in knowing both, placed grammatically in parallel: God and Jesus. John in his Gospel presents a Jesus who proclaims Himself to be the intersection between God and humanity. God the King has come near to humanity in the person of Christ. This is also clear in Jesus' statement about Himself, alluding to Jacob's

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<sup>55</sup> Braaten, "Gospel Proviso" in *Ancient Postmodern Christianity*, 205.

<sup>56</sup> Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, in *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, series ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 211.

ladder and how on Jesus angels will be ascending into heaven and descending. Jesus is the ladder connecting heaven to earth: “And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’” (Jn 1:51). The concept of the Kingdom of God is explicitly stated in Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus. Jesus states that it is crucial for humanity to understand the Kingdom of God:

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (Jn 3:3-5)

That the Kingdom of God is the focus of Jesus is evident once again, when before Pilate, Jesus states that His Kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:35).

Thus it can be seen that John emphasizes the gospel summary themes of the Synoptic Gospels in the person of Jesus Christ, ushering in the Presence of God and the Kingdom of God. There is also the clear theme of the importance of the cross and the call to repentance for the forgiveness of sin as one notes how John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and also the “King of Israel” (Jn 1:49). Thus while John in his Gospel chooses not to use the word “gospel” to convey the central message of Jesus, his gospeling theme is consistent with the gospel of the Synoptic writers.

This chapter has summarized the message of the good news, the gospel, as recorded by those four individuals whose work has been entitled, Gospel. The Synoptic Gospels describe the good news, *euangelion*, as the announcement of the Presence of God

found in the person of Jesus. This gospel is more than facts to be recited, it is a depth to be understood and explored. The term gospel implies the inauguration of a new day, the arrival of a Kingly presence, joy and victory. This joy-bringing good news is associated with forgiveness of sin, healing and restoration of humanity with the Ever-Present and Available God who is the multi-faceted great “I Am” who spoke to Moses. Jesus’ teaching explains the meaning of the gospel focusing on describing what the Kingdom of God is like. The gospel is a message inseparable from the messenger who brings it, the one who truly inaugurates a new era of peace and the gracious goodwill of God toward all humanity. It is, therefore, central to the thrust of Jesus’ ministry and teachings. Gospel stands at the heart of the Christian faith. Such is the gospel in the Gospels and as Jesus proclaimed it by word and deed. It is now necessary to consider the question: “Is this understanding of the gospel consistent with the remainder of the New Testament, especially as found in the Apostolic witness found in Acts and the writings of Paul?” This will be the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE GOSPEL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The purpose of this chapter is to correlate the results found in the previous chapter concerning the meaning of the gospel. This chapter considers the question, “Is the gospel in the Gospels, the gospel of Jesus Christ, consistent with the meaning of the gospel found elsewhere in the New Testament?” This chapter will explore the answer to that question in three parts: first, the *kerygmatic* gospel attributed to the Apostles in Acts will be considered; second, the gospel as it is described in the books of the New Testament attributed to the Apostle Paul is examined; and third, the remaining works of the New Testament are explored.

#### **The Apostolic Gospel in Acts**

The Acts of the Apostles, attributed to the Gospel writer, Luke, is of supreme importance in consideration of the meaning of the gospel. Acts purports to recount the earliest witness of the church. The chronology presents it as having taken place after the events of Jesus’ life as recorded in the Gospels and starting before any of the rest of the New Testament was written, though some of the epistles were written during the span of Act’s timeframe. In Acts we are given several accounts of the first Christians, particularly the Apostles themselves, in action. They bring the message of the gospel to various

contexts: the ministry of Peter to the Jews in Jerusalem and surrounding areas, the ministry of the first deacons, and then the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles. In Athens, Paul speaks to a very different culture than does Peter in Jerusalem. Examining how the gospel was presented in these differing contexts can yield clues to which aspects of the gospel are trans-cultural and which were merely time-bound application. This is true whether or not one accepts the speeches in Acts as a genuine record of the Apostles, or a later creation.

Many have suggested that the material in Acts is more the creation of Luke, reflecting the church at his time in the later first century, than an accurate record of the proclamation and ministry of the Apostles themselves.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand scholars have noted the Aramaic hallmarks of the speeches cited in Acts possibly indicating early and authentic sources.<sup>2</sup> Even among those who believe that the speeches in Acts are a purely Lukan creation, such as Martin Debelius, there is still an admission that Acts preserved the gospel as it was proclaimed in the early church.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars find an “old fashioned” character to the speeches in Acts and see them lacking in the hallmarks of later church development.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, Acts, gives us a record of the understanding of the gospel that dates to near the end of the first century at least, or possibly earlier, recording even some

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<sup>1</sup> A.B. Higgins, “The Preface to Luke and the Kerygma in Acts,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays*, ed. W.Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1970), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Poe, *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: the Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 72.

ancient *kerygma* proclaimed by the Apostles themselves. There is some reason to connect Acts with the Gospels. According to Poe,

Luke makes clear at the end of his Gospel that the message the apostles declared in Acts had its origin in the teaching of Jesus between the resurrection and the ascension. The teaching that occurred during the resurrection appearances also reiterated what he had taught during his ministry, but what the disciples had not comprehended. . . In other words, Luke clearly describes a gospel tradition that originated with Jesus during his resurrection appearances.<sup>5</sup>

Acts portrays the gospel in the context of at least two distinctive cultures, that of Jewish Jerusalem and that of the Hellenistic culture of Asia Minor. In the next chapter of this paper, the gospel in the tradition and history of the church will be considered. Emphasis will be given to the work of Poe who has documented how differing aspects of a broad gospel have been emphasized at various points in church history. Such differing emphasis becomes apparent in Acts. Peter's presentation on the Day of Pentecost differs significantly from Paul's at the Areopagus. Though some may suggest that this is an indication of two different gospel traditions, a comparison with the gospel in the Gospels reveals the consistency of the gospel message as found in Acts with the gospel in the Gospels.

One seminal study of the gospel in Acts was undertaken by C.H. Dodd. In his work, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, Dodd seeks to uncover the historic *kerygma*, a word he uses for the core message of the Apostolic proclamation to the non-Christian world.<sup>6</sup> Central to his study was the book of Acts.<sup>7</sup> Dodd sought to use modern

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<sup>5</sup> Poe, *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinting 1980, first published in 1936), 7.

literary criticism to uncover the historic elements which were later enhanced by the writer of Acts, but nevertheless are present behind the text and representative of the church's understanding during a post-Apostolic period. Dodd writes, "In short, there is good reason to suppose that the speeches attributed to Peter in the Acts are based upon material which proceeded from the Aramaic-speaking Church at Jerusalem, and was substantially earlier than the period at which the book was written."<sup>8</sup> Dodd's analysis of the first four speeches of Peter in Acts finds the following to be central elements of the *kerygma*:

1. The age of fulfillment has dawned. "The apostles, then, declare that the Messianic age has dawned."
2. The fulfillment came through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.
3. Jesus by virtue of His resurrection has been exalted to God's right hand.
4. The Holy Spirit in the Church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory.
5. The Messianic Age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Christ.
6. An appeal to repent accepting the offer of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Dodd also found the speeches of Paul in Acts to be consistent with Peter's preaching, though with differing emphasis: "According to Acts, Paul did preach in terms closely similar to those of the Petrine *kerygma* of Acts x. The speech said to have been delivered by Paul at Pisidian Antioch... is obviously of the same stuff as the *kerygma* in the early chapters [Peter's speeches] of Acts."<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note that Dodd considers the usage of "Kingdom of God" to be virtually synonymous with Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that Dodd's analysis of the Apostolic

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<sup>7</sup> Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8.

*kerygma* is consistent with the gospel in the Gospels as described in chapter one of this paper. Jesus Christ is central to the message and thereby the Kingdom of God is present. Repentance is called for to receive the blessings of forgiveness of sins. The Kingdom remains present, that is, near, through the Holy Spirit. And the already-and-not-yet nature of this kingdom fulfillment is acknowledged in the proclamation of the coming return of Christ. Thus Dodd's analysis, in slightly different form, presents the gospel of the Gospels in the Apostolic *kerygma*.

Another summary of the gospel in Acts has been suggested by John R. W. Stott:

Here, then, is a fourfold message – two events (Christ's death and resurrection), as attested by two witnesses (prophets and apostles), on the basis of which God makes two promises (forgiveness and the Spirit), on two conditions (repentance and faith, with baptism). We have no liberty to amputate this apostolic gospel, by proclaiming the cross without the resurrection, or referring to the New Testament but not the Old, or offering forgiveness without the Spirit, or demanding faith without repentance. There is a wholeness about the biblical gospel.<sup>12</sup>

Again the form is different, but the content is quite consistent with the gospel in the Gospels. There is an emphasis on Christ in what Stott calls the "two events". The reality of the presence of the Kingdom is manifest in the witnesses of prophets and apostles and in the promise of the Holy Spirit. The call to repentance and the forgiveness of sins are explicitly present.

Several approaches to the summary of the message are reviewed by Poe. Among them are T.F. Glasson who proposed: 1. Fulfillment of Scripture; 2. the Death of Christ; 3. The Resurrection of Christ; 4. Forgiveness of Sins; and 5. Apostolic witness.<sup>13</sup> Poe also

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<sup>12</sup> Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Poe, *Gospel and Its Meaning*, 33.

notes Bertil Gartner who summarized the message in seven elements: 1. The Ministry of Jesus, His Suffering, Death and Resurrection, 2. Prophecies Being Fulfilled, 3. Jesus as the Lord and Messiah, Exalted to the Right Hand of God and Bestowing the Holy Spirit, 4. The Apostolic Message Directed Also to the Gentile, 5. The Expectation of the Advent and the Judgment of the Lord (the eschatology motif), 6. The Exhortation to Conversion and 7. The Bearing of Witness.<sup>14</sup> It is clear from these approaches that a consistent message emerges focused on the story of Christ fulfilling the Scripture, the Presence of God through the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness and repentance that results from receiving the message and the already-and-not-yet as seen in the eschatological motif.

McKnight notes the sermons in Acts and suggests that they are examples of how the first generation of apostles evangelized.<sup>15</sup> He supports this by relating several places where the text of Acts speaks of the early disciples and the Apostles sharing the gospel, or good news. Here are the examples that literally mention “gospel” in the format he offers in his book:

- \*[Acts] 5:42: Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and *proclaiming the good news* that Jesus is the Messiah.
- \*10:36: You know the *message* God sent to the people of Israel, Announcing the *good news* of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.
- \*13:32: We tell you the *good news*: What God promised our ancestors...
- \*14:7:... where they continued to *preach the gospel*
- \*14:21 They *preached the gospel* in that city and won a large number of disciples.
- \*16:10: After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to *preach the gospel* to them.
- \*17:18: A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He

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<sup>14</sup> Poe, *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 114.

seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was *preaching the good news* about Jesus and the resurrection.<sup>16</sup>

McKnight also notes 28:31 which is particularly relevant to the discussion of the Kingdom of God as announced in the gospel in the Gospels: “He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!”<sup>17</sup>

McKnight sees all of Acts to be about the proclamation of the gospel: “The book of Acts, even when the passage does not begin with a road sign that says ‘Apostolic Evangelism Ahead,’ frames the entire twenty-eight chapters in a story of apostolic gospeling from Jerusalem to Rome.”<sup>18</sup> The categories that McKnight finds as part of the consistent gospel message in Acts are: First, the story of Israel (according to the Scriptures) shaped the gospel. The story of Jesus fulfilled Israel’s story. He was the promised Messiah.<sup>19</sup> Second, the whole story of Jesus is gospel. The gospel is about Jesus entire life and ministry, not just his death on the cross.<sup>20</sup> Third, the gospel centered on Jesus. It involves seeing Him as He is: the anointed Messiah and Lord of all.<sup>21</sup> Fourth, Paul adapted the gospel for a Gentile audience. Paul speaks of God in more general terms when appealing to the Gentiles, particularly in Athens.<sup>22</sup> He speaks of the invisible God, Creator

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<sup>16</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 115-116.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-122.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

of the universe.<sup>23</sup> Paul also does not dwell on Jesus crucifixion but rather on his resurrection.<sup>24</sup> Fifth, the Apostles summoned people to respond. That is they called people to believe, repent, and be baptized.<sup>25</sup> Sixth, the Apostles promise redemption in a variety of terms, including forgiveness of sins, filling with the Holy Spirit, times of refreshing and peace.<sup>26</sup> Once again a broad gospel which centered on the Presence of Christ, His life, death and resurrection, and His Holy Spirit is presented. There is the call to respond and the promise of forgiveness of sins and the resulting new life.

The book of Acts clearly presents a gospel consistent with the Gospels. That the Kingdom of God is near in Acts is practically seen on every page. The healings continue. The dead are raised. The Holy Spirit comes upon many. The focus is on the person of Jesus Christ which is synonymous with the Kingdom of God (see Acts 28:31 quoted above.) This presence of Christ offers forgiveness of sins and new life lived with God present in Spirit, thereby following Him as Lord, that is, as King. What emerges is that the new life is lived in the Kingdom of God, with Christ as the King. The call is to repent and live into this new life.

Thus the message of Acts is consistent with the gospel in the Gospels. The next portion of the New Testament corpus to be considered is the works of Paul. The section that follows will seek to correlate both the gospel in Acts and the gospel in the Gospels with the Pauline Epistles.

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<sup>23</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 125.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-130.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-131.

## The Gospel According to Paul

It should be noted that several of Paul's New Testament Epistles are among the earliest written record we have of the gospel. That I Corinthians was written by Paul, himself, in the 50s has universal agreement.<sup>27</sup> Representative of the widespread acceptance is Hans Conzelmann writing that "No series challenge for Paul's authorship of the letter has ever been raised."<sup>28</sup> The Anchor Bible Dictionary dates the letter to 52-54.<sup>29</sup> The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia dates it 53-54,<sup>30</sup> while the New Bible Dictionary dates the letter to the mid-50s.<sup>31</sup> Many find in chapter 15 of this epistle a record of an oral Apostolic tradition that dates from even earlier and has been passed down to Paul<sup>32</sup>. McKnight states the importance of this forcefully:

[The opening verses of First Corinthians 15 are] among the oldest set of lines in the entire New Testament. Many scholars think this was the oral tradition about the gospel that *every* New Testament apostle received and then passed on. First Corinthians 15 is nothing less than a lifting up of the curtains in the earliest days of the church; it tells us what everyone believed and what everyone preached. This passage is the apostolic gospel tradition. Thus—before there was a New Testament...Before the apostles were beginning to write letters...Before the Gospels were written...There was the gospel. . .*In the beginning was the gospel.* That gospel is now found in 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Conzelmann, tr. Leitch, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Betz, Hans Deiter and Margaret M. Mitchell, "The first letter to the Corinthians," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1: 1140.

<sup>30</sup> Leon Morris, "First Epistle to the Corinthians," in *the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1: 777.

<sup>31</sup> J.B. Taylor, "The Letters to the Corinthians," in *the New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982), 234.

<sup>32</sup> Ted A. Campbell, *The Gospel in Christian Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25, 28.

<sup>33</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 46.

The claim in I Corinthians 15 is that Paul has received the authentic gospel and he has now passed it on to the Corinthians.<sup>34</sup> He now restates it writing to the church at Corinth:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you— unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received (I Cor 15:1-3).

This gospel Paul now moves on to define: “That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (I Cor 15:3-4). This gospel according to Paul is Jesus Christ. This gospel handed down to him and passed on is: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, including how the story of Christ is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures resulting in the forgiveness of sins. Clearly the repentance and forgiveness aspect of the gospel in the Gospels is explicitly present in this summary gospel statement of Paul as he passes on the Apostolic gospel that he has received.<sup>35</sup> The Kingdom theme that has been elucidated in this review of the Gospels is present in the person of Jesus Christ and recorded by Paul. That Jesus was raised implies His continuing nearness and presence to His followers. This is what Paul goes on to include, several of the resurrection appearances: “He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (I Cor 15:5-8). Paul will go on after an

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<sup>34</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Wills, *What the Gospels Meant*, 2.

extended defense of the resurrection of the dead to explicitly state that this gospel is about the Kingdom of God, Christ as King, and that there is yet to come a future eschatological fulfillment. Thus Paul's explanation of the summary statement shows that he intends for this gospel summary to be understood to be about the Kingdom of God come in the person of Jesus Christ, and that one day that Kingdom will be fully restored.

Then comes the end, when he [Jesus] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all (I Cor 15:24-28).

Therefore, in one of the earliest books of the New Testament, penned by Paul, one finds a high correlation with the gospel in the Gospels. Paul is focused on Jesus Christ, the reality of His life, death, and resurrection. Christ is depicted as the anointed Messiah, fulfilling the Scriptures, and King of all. The King, Jesus, has come near fulfilling the promise of old and bringing the opportunity for all to be forgiven and thereby enter into a relationship with Him, the risen Lord. This is the same gospel Paul proclaimed, though he emphasizes differing aspects of this gospel depending on the circumstances of the church to which he writes. McKnight summarizes the point about the gospel Paul proclaimed:

This story begins at creation and finally only completes itself in the consummation when God is all in all. This is Paul's gospel. And while it includes and encompasses the Plan of Salvation and leaves open how one might construct a Method of Persuasion, the gospel of Paul cannot be limited to or equated with the Plan of Salvation. The four lines of Paul's gospel are about the Story of Jesus. Every time Paul mentions "gospel" in his letters (and he does so some seventy-five times), he is referring to this four-line gospel. And many times Paul uses "shorthand" by simply saying "gospel" or "my gospel" or the "gospel of salvation" or even "Christ crucified." But he always means this gospel—the gospel of the full,

saving Story of Jesus resolving the story of Israel, the one we found in shorthand in 1 Corinthians 15 and which then is fully expounded in the Gospels themselves.<sup>36</sup>

Paul's gospel, the Apostolic gospel that he received and has passed on to the Corinthians is about four central elements of the life of Christ and the implications of this. King writes,

The authentic apostolic gospel, the gospel Paul received and passed on and the one the Corinthians received, concerns these events in the life of Jesus: that Christ died, that Christ was buried, that Christ was raised, and that Christ appeared.

The gospel is the story of the crucial events in the life of Jesus Christ. Instead of "four spiritual laws," which for many holds up our salvation culture, the earliest gospel concerned four "events" or "chapters" in the life of Jesus Christ.... To gospel for Paul was to tell, announce, declare, and shout aloud the Story of Jesus Christ as the saving news of God.... Paul's gospel—better yet, the early Christian gospel—is rooted in the Scriptures.<sup>37</sup>

McKnight also cites N.T. Wright, New Testament theologian and bishop of the Church of England. Wright notes that the plan of salvation often associated with the word gospel is not something with which Wright disagrees. It is however, not what he would associate with the word gospel.<sup>38</sup> McKnight summarizes Wright's understanding of the Pauline gospel this way:

Tom [Wright] enters into descriptions of two backgrounds to Paul's usage of the term gospel, including both that powerful set of images from Isaiah as well as the characteristic empire gospel of Rome. For Paul, the word gospel is connected to the Story of Israel/Bible in his Roman context. Most importantly, the word gospel in the first century context was an announcement: "to announce that YHWH was king was to announce that Caesar is not." But Tom goes farther ... [stating that] "gospel" is not the Plan of Salvation: the gospel "is not, then, a system of how people get saved. The announcement of the gospel results in people getting saved. . . . But 'the gospel' itself, strictly speaking, is the narrative proclamation of King Jesus." "Or, to put it yet more compactly: Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord." A few pages later Wright unpacks this meaning in a more general and universally

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<sup>36</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

applicable sense: “The gospel’ is for Paul, at its very heart, *an announcement about the true God as opposed to the false gods.*”<sup>39</sup>

In I Corinthians 15 Paul does say that Christ died for our sins, so that clearly that aspect of the gospel in the Gospels is upheld as well as the focus of the gospel on Jesus Christ. Some would suppose the gospel that Paul proclaimed to be focused only on the cross and the concept of justification by faith and grace. While these implications of the gospel message are central to Paul and the entire New Testament (expounding the implications of the concept of the forgiveness of sins), these are not the entirety of Paul’s gospel. There is no better example of this than that which is found in the Epistle to the Romans. Romans has much to say about justification and faith, but that the gospel Paul proclaims there is more. He states this clearly at the outset:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name. (Rom 1:1-5)

Paul states explicitly here that the gospel was “promised beforehand...in the holy scriptures”, concerns God’s Son, descended from David, risen from the dead and this results in grace and the calling on Paul’s life to apostleship. This gospel that Paul proclaims is about Jesus the Lord, that is—Jesus the King. It features His life and resurrection. It fulfills the Scriptures and results in the grace of a new life. This is the gospel in the Gospels which Paul will later expound in Romans offering the fuller

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<sup>39</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 58.

implications of receiving this good news, which is grace. Wright finds this gospel summary of Paul in the opening verses of Romans telling:

In a passage that we have every reason to suppose Paul intended to be seminal both for his greatest letter – the passage stands right at its opening – and for his understanding of God, the gospel, Jesus, and his own vocation we read: ...[Romans 1:1-5]... 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.<sup>40</sup>

Wright calls the gospel as proclaimed by Paul: “narrative proclamation of King Jesus”.<sup>41</sup>

As one surveys the usage of the word gospel by Paul, one finds much discussion of receiving it and proclaiming it (such as in the opening chapters of Galatians and the pastoral epistles), much about the resulting effects of salvation in the believers’ lives (such as in chapters 1 and 2 of First Thessalonians), and that the gospel is a mystery now revealed which is that the Gentiles also are blessed and included (such as in Galatians 3-4 and Ephesians).

That the gospel is Jesus Christ and *results* in salvation by grace can be seen clearly in Titus. There is a summary statement by Paul of the gospel he proclaims in Titus 2:8:

“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel...” Yet earlier in chapter one the effects of this gospel are described:

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus

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<sup>40</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher (Ti 1:8-11).

The gospel, in this passage from Titus, is that Jesus as Savior abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. This gospel “saved us” and “called us”. It certainly results in eternal life, salvation, and calls the believer to a new life. The grace of the gospel “was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” The gospel is Jesus Christ, His death, His resurrection and then the results flow from that.

One final example illustrates that Paul was focused on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Philippians 1:27 Paul is speaking about the gospel: “Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,...” Paul goes on just a few verses later to speak in hymn-like fashion. Many scholars believe that Philippians chapter two contains a quote from a hymn about Christ that predates this epistle.<sup>42</sup> Note what this early hymn says and its proximity in Philippians to Paul’s urging the Philippian Christians to live lives worthy of the gospel:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11).

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<sup>42</sup> Wills, *What the Gospels Meant*, 5.

The ancient *kerygmatic* hymn speaks of the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. It uses imagery to present Him as Lord, as the King to whom every knee should bend. Once again the ancient proclamation of the Church is seen to focus on the person of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection and His Kingship. The Kingdom of God has indeed come near, calling all to surrender loyalty to the King and discover the resulting blessings. Paul's gospel is the gospel in the Gospels. Paul proclaims it and then speaks of its implications to certain church situations of the ancient world. The gospel of Paul is not merely the concept of salvation or the concept of forgiveness; these are its results. But the gospel is simple and broad – King Jesus has come near.

### **Gospel in the Rest of the New Testament**

It has already been noted that the Johannine writings tend not to use the term gospel. Nevertheless in I John it is clear what the thrust of the central message is:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all (1 Jn 1:1-5).

The emphasis in John's first epistle begins with reality: the true, living, Jesus, raised from the dead, seen, heard, and touched. The results are fellowship with God the Father (that is a relationship), and eternal life. The relationship and the eternal life are a result of the revealing of the nature of the Son of God. This resonates with the gospel in the Gospels. Writing into the context in which he does, John adds the concept of God as pure light.

Nevertheless John's explanation of the message, which is the gospel, is consistent with the findings stated in this dissertation.

Though not using the word gospel the writer of Hebrews begins with clear focus on Jesus Christ as the Son of God:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." (Heb 1:1-6)

That passage states that Jesus is Lord even over the angels. He sits at the right hand of the Majesty on High and it is through Him that all things have been created. He made purification for our sins. Jesus again is front and center as King, whose nearness extends the forgiveness of sins. Peter's first epistle, while not using the term gospel, begins by focusing on the person of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, but also emphasizes the hope of eternal life and salvation. Revelation begins with a glorified image of Christ.

Campbell suggests that studies of early Christianity in recent years have focused on the diversity of the early Christian communities and neglect to speak of the common threads between them.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless he writes this about the gospel as found in the New Testament: "...the wide diversity represented in the New Testament literature, New Testament texts presuppose at specific points that there was a common understanding in

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<sup>43</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 15.

early Christian communities of the church's basic proclamation (*kerygma*) of God's saving work in Christ (the "good news" or gospel, *euangelion*)."<sup>44</sup>

It will be seen more fully in the next chapter that the gospel of Jesus Christ is broad and that various aspects of it are emphasized to various people groups in their culture and context. One sees this in the writings of the New Testament. The elements are consistently present, though not every aspect of the gospel is elucidated in every passage. Various aspects and resulting implications are proclaimed, depending on the audience. Nevertheless, clearly the gospel in the Gospels, the gospel Paul proclaimed and the message of the New Testament resonate with the resounding claim that Jesus is Lord, that He brought the very Kingdom of Heaven near to us. Through His life, death and resurrection we are offered the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and new life beginning now in His name. Thus the first leg of the three-legged stool, the Scriptures, affirm a gospel that is broad and centered on the Kingship of Christ.

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<sup>44</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 14.

PART TWO  
THE GOSPEL IN TRADITION

## CHAPTER 3

### THE GOSPEL IN TRADITION AND CHURCH HISTORY

Another leg of the three-legged stool is tradition. This second section of this dissertation will explore the gospel in tradition in two chapters. This chapter will explore a central aspect of how the gospel interacts with tradition: that a certain aspect of the gospel will resonate with a particular culture, yet in another culture a different aspect will resonate. As the gospel encounters cultures throughout history, differing aspects of it resonate and are emphasized. This can be observed in the theological emphasis given by various theologians throughout history. In the next chapter the gospel in the Anglican/Episcopal tradition will be explored by analyzing the concept of gospel in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

#### **The Gospel in Tradition**

Poe, in his book, *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, has documented how the various aspects of the gospel have impacted differing cultures throughout history. Poe's premise about the gospel is: "The different elements of the gospel speak to different levels of spiritual concern in different cultures at different times. Sometimes the death of Christ speaks most meaningfully to a people, while at other times the resurrection of Christ

speaks more powerfully.”<sup>1</sup> The gospel message itself does not change, but rather is broad so that various aspects of it are emphasized as they resonate with various cultures.

Atomizing texts of Scripture and dissecting the writings of the ancient church can suggest a diversity of gospels. Studies in recent years have tended to emphasize this in considering the diversity of early Christian communities.<sup>2</sup> Yet Poe finds among the texts a great consistency:

The atomizing of texts and traditions and theological perspectives tends to obliterate the larger mosaic created by the nuances. I have looked for how each book of the New Testament uses the elements of the gospel, some with an evangelistic (*kerygma*) purpose, while others have a discipleship (*didache*) purpose. Regardless of the purpose, the same elements have been used. What startled me is the surprising similarity of gospel themes common to the variety of books and writers. In microcosm, however, the books use the themes in particular ways to address the spiritual issues of particular cultural contexts.<sup>3</sup>

This provided a theological contextualization of the church throughout history as various aspects of the gospel became theologically dominant at various points in history. Ted Campbell notes this in his book, *The Gospel in Christian Traditions*: “Despite the wide diversity represented in the New Testament literature, New Testament texts presuppose at specific points that there was a common understanding in early Christian communities of the church’s basic proclamation (*kerygma*) of God’s saving work in Christ (the “good news” or gospel, *euangelion*).”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poe, *Gospel and Its Meaning*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

However this gospel contextualization can create a problem for the church, according to Poe. Poe finds that the church gets stuck and tends to use gospel proclamations in ways that worked in the contexts and cultures of the past:

At different times and in different cultures, different elements of the gospel have provided the point of orientation for the church or for systems of theology. While this approach speaks powerfully to its context, the church has also tended to cling to the answers of past generations, which, over time, can distort or veil the gospel that lies hidden under all of the contextualization.<sup>5</sup>

Another problem that Poe underscores is the possibility of emphasizing the aspects of the gospel that speak to the one proclaiming it rather than the one who is receiving it:

Christians have a tendency to proclaim the gospel from the perspective of their own spiritual issues rather than to the perspective of their audience. Furthermore, Christians tend to speak of the gospel in terms of the aspect of the gospel that means the most to them, rather than in terms of the aspect of the gospel that might offer the most good news to another person. This habit creates the oft observed situation in which the church answers questions people are not asking.<sup>6</sup>

The adaptation of the gospel in various cultures has been noticed by others.<sup>7</sup>

McKnight, for example, notices the adaptation of the presentation by Peter to the Jews and how that contrasts with the adaptation of Paul to the Gentiles. McKnight has documented this difference in his sample of the history of evangelistic preaching.<sup>8</sup> He acknowledges this to be a good and necessary application of the gospel that shows that the one proclaiming is paying attention to the audience. Norman Kraus also notices the adaptation of the gospel calling it “translation”:

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<sup>5</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 42.

This leads to a fourth observation concerning the important and in fact inescapable necessity of contextualizing words and actions used to express the gospel to a cultural context. It is a kind of translation. The purpose is to allow the original meaning of the message to be expressed in understandable terms. Contextualization will include not only verbal adaptations and ideas but also style of intervention and the priority given to action and words. Throughout the centuries the church has contextualized the cultural expression of biblical meaning and values. In earlier centuries the process was unstudied and natural. For the literate populace, the gospel message was put into the constructs of Greek philosophy. For the preliterate, religious art visualized the Bible stories in the contemporary context.<sup>9</sup>

### **Gospel Adaptations throughout the History of the Church**

For Poe the adaptation begins in the New Testament itself. He finds differing emphasis of Peter and Paul in Acts on the content of their gospel presentations. Poe's understanding of a broad-variously-emphasized gospel instead of a developing gospel can be noted in the following:

In Jerusalem, Peter never stated specifically that Christ died for our sins. Paul stressed this meaning of the death throughout his writings. Instead of a theological development in the understanding of atonement, the difference between Peter and Paul reflects the cultural difference of their audiences. In Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, Peter could assume a common understanding of sin and its remedy... In the Gentile world, however, Paul had a formidable problem. The Gentiles offered sacrifices to their gods, but sacrifices served as bribes to enlist the aid of a god or to pacify an offended deity. Paul had to explain the moral demands of a holy God and the significance of the death of Jesus with respect to the problem of human sin. Without the preparation of the Law and the Prophets, the Gentile world required explanation that the Jewish community did not need. Paul indicated in the strongest of terms that the apostles felt no freedom to alter the terms of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

Poe notes other examples of the different translations of the gospel as they are found even in the same book in the Scripture, for example, in Acts. Peter, preaching to a Jewish audience, did not need to begin by speaking of God as Creator. His audience would need

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<sup>9</sup> Kraus, *Intrusive Gospel*, 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> Poe, *Gospel and Its Meaning*, 42-3.

no explanation of this.<sup>11</sup> Paul, on the other hand, in traveling to Lystra and then on to Athens where the concept of many gods existed found a need to build a bridge between such belief systems and the One True Creator God.<sup>12</sup> In these cities, he emphasized God as Creator.

Another example Poe offers considers the gospel concept of fulfillment of Scripture. In Matthew's Gospel, writing to a Jewish audience, the ways in which Christ fulfilled the Scriptures becomes an underlying theme.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Matthew frequently references the fulfillment of texts of Hebrew Scripture, even fulfillment as seen in the genealogy he includes. John, on the other hand, does not make fulfillment so much an underlying theme; nevertheless, he emphasizes fulfillment in a more specialized sense concerning how the passion of Jesus fulfilled Scripture.<sup>14</sup> Poe also finds this variation in how the deity of Christ is explained:

Though the Synoptics proceed from the assumption of the deity of Christ and give evidence to support their view, their accounts of Jesus focus on his human experiences and emotions as support for the idea of a true incarnation. John's Gospel, on the other hand, proceeds with a different purpose, writing to prove that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:31). In contrast to the lunatic emperors who claimed divinity, Jesus appears in John's Gospel as one free of the character flaws that typified the human-form gods of Asia Minor. Unlike the Synoptic writers, who nuanced their Gospels to show that Jesus Christ had really come in the flesh, John nuanced his Gospel to show qualitatively why the claims of the Deity of Christ should be taken more seriously than the claims to deity by Caesar.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Poe, *Gospel and Its Meaning*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 86

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

Poe finds several aspects of the gospel which he defines broadly in nine parts. This is the most complete gospel summary yet to be considered in this dissertation. In his book, Poe documents the early gospel proclamation. He suggests the gospel, as found in the New Testament, the ancient creeds, and the first theologians of the church, has nine dimensions. Through careful examination of these he has offered the following as the parts of a gospel summary:

1. The Creator God. Salvation came as a work of the Creator who has the right to all creation and who exercises authority over all creation.
2. The fulfillment. Jesus came to fulfill Scripture rather than to abolish the faith of Israel, and stands in continuity with all God had spoken by the prophets as the culmination point of Israel's relations with the God of Creation.
3. Son of God/ Son of David. Jesus stood uniquely related to God and humanity, which suited him alone to be the Savior, as demonstrated by his teaching and demonstrations of power.
4. Death for sins. The death of Christ came as the plan of God for salvation from sin, rather than as an unfortunate mishap.
5. Resurrection. God raised Christ from the dead as a demonstration of his Lordship and victory over sin and death, revealing his power to save.
6. Exaltation. Christ reigns at the right hand of God, providing immediate access to God for all who abide in him.
7. Gift of the Holy Spirit. Christ sends the Holy Spirit to live within all who have faith in him.
8. Return for judgment. Christ will return to bring this age to an end, judge the nations, and complete redemption.
9. Response. The good news always expected the decisive response of repentance and faith.<sup>16</sup>

This summation of the gospel message is consistent with those presented in the previous chapters of this project. It is more complete, but it certainly not contradictory. The centrality of Christ is clear as Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture, the Son of God come into the world, and His death and resurrection are central. In Christ's exaltation we certainly see the concept of Christ as King, reigning over the world. His death is for our

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<sup>16</sup> Poe, *Gospel and Its Meaning*, 45-6.

sins. God is near through the Holy Spirit. The concept of already-and-not-yet is present in the emphasis on the return of Christ for judgment. The call for a response is explicitly stated.

While it can be categorized differently, the gospel that the Apostle's proclaimed, the gospel of the various books of the New Testament, the gospel in the Gospels, especially the gospel summary attributed to Jesus, Himself, is clear and broadly defined. As Poe has shown and this dissertation will now summarize: this gospel was the torch which was passed to the church in the first several centuries.

### **The Gospel in the Creeds and Early Creedal Tradition**

The question now to consider is this: is this gospel of the New Testament texts, the earliest Christians and the Apostles – is this the gospel that the church received? Campbell finds continuity. The gospel received and passed on by the first Christians was held in the tradition of early Christian communities. Campbell calls them “proto-orthodox” communities.<sup>17</sup> Before the Scriptures were written the gospel was guiding these communities and eventually guiding the development of the New Testament Canon.<sup>18</sup> These communities preserved the gospel first with oral tradition and careful safeguards for the oral tradition, and soon after with a few writings which can now be found in the New Testament.<sup>19</sup> Parts of the gospel then found their way into early Christian writings, such as a letter from Ignatius of Antioch dated around 110 C.E. “But the gospel possess something

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<sup>17</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26f.

distinctive, namely, the coming of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, his suffering, and the resurrection. For the beloved prophets preached in anticipation of him, but the gospel is the imperishable finished work.”<sup>20</sup> Here again the focus is on Jesus Christ, His life, death and resurrection and the fulfillment of Scripture. This reference to the finished work would include the forgiveness of sin extended through His death.

Irenaeus, writing in the 180’s in *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* offers this: “We have received baptism for the remission of sins in the name of God the Father and in the name of Jesus Christ the Son of God who was incarnate and died and was raised again and in the Holy Spirit of God.”<sup>21</sup> Similar statements can be found in the writings of Origen and Tertullian in the 200’s C.E.<sup>22</sup> Also of note is the *Apostolic Tradition* which comes to us in Latin from Hippolytus and dates to the third or fourth century. It includes a baptismal formula that focuses on Jesus Christ and on the Trinity.<sup>23</sup> Campbell summarizes, referencing Jaroslav Pelikan:

A study of the creedal phrases in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus [i.e., the Latin recension of the *Apostolic Tradition*] shows there was great variation not only between one Christian writer and another, but between one quotation and another by the same writer, suggesting that the texts of the creeds themselves were far from uniform and that an author adapted and elaborated the texts to suit his purposes. Two elements remain constant through the citations, and one or both of them may safely be said to have formed the outline of most creeds: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These were, according to Origen, “the particular points clearly delivered in the teaching of the apostles”;

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<sup>20</sup> Cited by Campbell, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 33.

apostolic continuity he argued, did not preclude discussion of other issues, but this central content was not negotiable.<sup>24</sup>

Campbell summarizes this way:

The fact of this “central content” handed on from one generation in the church to another lies at the heart of this study of the gospel in Christian traditions. The gospel cannot be a vague expression in this regard. It refers to the central teaching about Christ’s life, death and resurrection that was at the heart of the earliest Christian message, transmitted from generation to generation, and proclaimed in the churches.<sup>25</sup>

In Rome, sometime around 150 C.E., in response to variant theologies that the proto-orthodox communities regarded as heresy, a “Symbol of Faith” was developed. It was meant to be a standard by which one could recognize an authentic Christian.<sup>26</sup> The main use of the symbol was in baptism as the candidate was asked three questions:

Do you believe in God the Father Almighty? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living from among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?<sup>27</sup>

Over time, this symbol of faith evolved into what is commonly known today as the Apostle’s Creed. The similarities with the gospel in the Gospels, the gospel in the New Testament and the gospel in the early proto-orthodox communities are striking. The formula has come to be built on a Trinitarian framework, but the focus is very much on the Kingly rule of God. The term usually translated “Almighty” is *pantokrator*, which literally

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<sup>24</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1989), 1:117, quoted in Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

means “all ruling”.<sup>28</sup> The Son of the Ruling King of all is Jesus Christ come into the world by means of the Virgin Mary. His life, death, resurrection and ascension are a central focus. There is an “already and not yet” element in the coming eschatological judgment. The presence of God is noted in the Holy Spirit present in the church.

As the early church continued to clarify and identify Christian belief against heretical challenges, another creed was developed. This creed, the Nicene Creed, is the most widely accepted creed in use by the Christian churches of the present day.<sup>29</sup> This creed is the creed of the Council of Nicaea which met in 325 C.E. but was later revised at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 C.E., although the records of the assembly do not include the text of the creed.<sup>30</sup> It is significant that this creed was utilized widely in the church after 381 C.E. as a means of teaching the Christian faith in both the East and West.<sup>31</sup> “Ancient Christian communities had used a “rule of faith” epitomizing the Christian gospel as a way of teaching the faith and as a means of affirming the faith at baptism. From the fourth century the Nicene Creed came to be used in this way.”<sup>32</sup> The Nicene Creed continues to emphasize the gospel of the earlier centuries and New Testament period as documented above. With greater explanation the elements remain in place. God is Father Almighty, that is Ruler or All or King. He is the Creator of all, whether things seen or unseen. The co-eternal Son of the Creator God, a Lord and King in

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<sup>28</sup> Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*,

<sup>29</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 43.

His own right entered the world and a good portion of the text of the creed makes explicit the details of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. This Jesus will come again to judge, thus bringing the eschatological aspect of the gospel. The final section acknowledges the presence and deity of the Holy Spirit who has “spoken through the prophets”. Thus the Nicene Creed affirms the fulfillment of Scripture as does the wording in the section on the Son, “On the third day He rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures...” The final section also affirms the forgiveness of sins.

At the heart of the Nicene Creed is its affirmation of the ancient Christian message about Jesus Christ: He suffered (death) and was buried. On the third day he rose (again) from the dead in accordance with the scriptures. Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection are affirmed, and the phrase “in accordance with the scriptures” comes directly from the earliest expression of the gospel tradition, as in I Cor 15:3-4.<sup>33</sup>

In each successive age the gospel of Jesus Christ summarized in the Gospels is expounded with greater explanation and detail, but always maintaining the elements of the gospel as proclaimed by Christ, received by the Apostles and handed on and preserved in the tradition of the early church. As one looks at the early church tradition, what emerges is the gospel orally transmitted by the first Apostles and incorporated into ancient hymns. Both the early gospel formula and the early Christian hymns that celebrate it, predate the writing of the New Testament, even the writing of I Corinthians in the mid-50’s C.E., but are documented in the writings of the New Testament in the second half of the first century. Concurrent with this, early proto-orthodox Christian communities sprung up and preserved the gospel, passing it on to future generations. Various portions of the New Testament became available. A consistent gospel emerges in the writings of the early church, dating from the beginning of the second century, and in early pre-creedal

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<sup>33</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Christian Traditions*, 42.

statements. Then it emerges in the creeds themselves. This gospel is adapted to various contexts, both cultural and in response to heresies, but a broadly defined gospel emerges, focused upon the person of Jesus Christ. At various points in history differing aspects of the gospel have resonated, and theologians took up these aspects of the gospel and expounded them in ways that spoke to their contemporaries. A detailed analysis of this is beyond the scope of this paper, but Poe has carefully documented this. His findings can be summarized as follows:

Throughout the centuries theologians have tended to organize their theological systems either around one of these elements or around a related group of these elements. Thomas Aquinas, for example, oriented his theology around the Creator God and the doctrine of natural revelation. Martin Luther oriented his theology around the death of Christ for our sins and the doctrine of justification, John Wesley his theology around the Holy Spirit and the doctrines of sanctification and regeneration. Carl Barth and Carl F. H. Henry oriented their theologies around Christ as the fulfillment of Scripture and the doctrine of specific revelation. Reinhold Niebuhr oriented his theology around the Creator God and the doctrine of humanity. Walter Rauschenbusch oriented his theology around Christ as Son of God and Son of David and the doctrine of the incarnation. Rudolf Bultmann oriented his theology around the response to the gospel and the doctrine of conversion. Dietrich Bonhoeffer oriented his theology around the exaltation and the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ. C. I. Scofield oriented his theology around the return of Christ and the doctrine of eschatology. John Calvin oriented his system around the Creator God and the doctrine of grace. Though most of these figures would acknowledge the truth and reality of most of the elements of the gospel here identified, their theological agenda gives entirely different nuances to the meaning of the gospel. Each approach has tended to explain the entire gospel in terms of one particular doctrine.<sup>34</sup>

### **Gospel Misconceptions**

One might wonder if each one of the theological systems represents a new and different gospel, or if each of them is taking an aspect of the same gospel as Poe suggests. Without the witness of Scripture and the proto-orthodox communities, one might conclude

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<sup>34</sup> Poe, *Gospel and Its Meaning*, 48-49.

that Poe is merely creating a gospel that fits the historic data of the theologies of the church down through the ages. On balance, however, the evidence for a broad gospel from the earliest days of the Church is strong. After tracing the development of the gospel from the beginning of the record as this dissertation has done, it seems clear that a consistent albeit, broad, gospel emerges. As the centuries have rolled onward from the time of the Apostles, an increasing number of contextualizations have been attempted. In a pluralistic, global information age such as ours, more and more theological innovations are being offered. In the present day, it seems that the gospel is constrained by various theological positions. It seems, at times, as if the gospels being proclaimed are not the same gospel. To be sure, at times, they truly are different. On the basis of this study, it would seem reasonable that any gospel that cannot connect to the gospel as presented in the Gospels, the New Testament and the traditions of the church would be suspect. Certainly, any gospel that contradicts that witness would be a different gospel.

With this insight, comes a tool to measure and evaluate the disagreements that rage in the church. In this, there is perhaps the potential to find unity in places where there seems to be only disagreement. Perhaps the disagreements are merely between different aspects of the same broad gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been the church's guiding principle from the beginning, even guiding the formation of the New Testament canon. It must be paramount in any consideration of the church's message and purpose today. Perhaps the contextualization of each age leads to an overemphasis of an aspect of the gospel that causes other aspects to be so minimized that they are neglected. The Church throughout history has shown difficulty in handling such differences in emphasis. This is

apparent if one considers the wars of religion in the past or the divisions in churches such as the Episcopal Church and the churches of the World Anglican Communion today.

The next section of this dissertation on reason, the third leg of the stool, will suggest that the modern worldview and to some extent the medieval pre-modern worldview contributed to a strategy of conquest which in our day has become intellectual conquest. But the drive to conquer the opposing viewpoint is not a gospel imperative. In fact, since the beginning the gospel has contained a length, breadth, and depth of meaning that has allowed for a variety of contextualization to address cultures, heresies and needs. The gospel is the guide to what is and what is not heresy, just as the gospel has been the guide for what is and is not considered inspired, authentic, Holy Scripture as the canon of the New Testament was being formed. However, such a gospel imperative is not a call to monolithic doctrine; rather it is a call to comprehensive and expansive doctrine that is large enough to include a wide variety of applications in context. This line of reasoning will be continued in the next section on reason. At this point it will be useful to consider gospel misconceptions that have arisen in our present day, misconceptions that limit the gospel at the risk of reshaping the gospel into something that it is not and has never been.

Many in our era have written with a sense of discontent about the gospel as it is often proclaimed in the church today. Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy* takes the gospel of the right and the gospel of the left to task as gospels of “sin management”:

When we examine the broad spectrum Christian proclamation and practice, we see that the only thing made essential on the right wing of theology is forgiveness of the individual’s sins. On the left it is removal of social or structural evils. The

current gospel then becomes a “gospel of sin management.” Transformation of life and character is no part of the redemptive message.<sup>35</sup>

Many evangelical writers have lamented a gospel proclamation that in many conservative churches has focused exclusively on the individual and forgiveness of sins to the neglect of broader aspects of the gospel. Willard’s approach is to emphasize the heart, the inner transformation that the gospel brings. He takes time to discuss the gospel in the Gospels and finds the call to transformation in the gospel a call to repentance. The repentance is merely a “turning” (as the Hebrew word literally indicated) and entering the ever present Kingdom of God. Commenting from Mark 1:35 Willard says this: “‘Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand’ (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). This is a call for us to reconsider how we have been approaching our life, in light of the fact that we now, in the presence of Jesus, have the option of living within the surrounding movements of God’s eternal purposes, of taking our life into his life.”<sup>36</sup>

It is not only Willard that sees the church getting off track from proclaiming and understanding the gospel. McKnight believes that the evangelical church today is confusing the “Plan of Salvation” with the whole gospel. McKnight believes the Plan of Salvation is a valid and true implication from the gospel but that it stops far short of what happens when one proclaims the whole gospel:

We reduced the robust view of salvation to these four or five points; we are also asking the Plan of Salvation to do something it was never intended to do. The Plan of Salvation, to put this crudely, isn’t discipleship or justice or obedience. The Plan of Salvation leads to one thing and to one thing only: salvation. Justification leads to a declaration by God that we are in the right, that we are in the people of God; it

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<sup>35</sup> Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 15-16.

doesn't lead inexorably to a life of justice or goodness or loving-kindness. If it did, all Christians would be more just and more filled with goodness and drenched in love. But the gospel properly understood does lead to those things, and had we distinguished the "gospel" from the "Plan of Salvation," we wouldn't have gotten ourselves into all these motivational ploys. If we preach the Plan of Salvation as the gospel, we will find ourselves doing everything we can to get people motivated or, to use words from earlier, bucking up our efforts to get more people into ... The Disciples. But, if we learn to distinguish gospel from Plan of Salvation, we will discover an altogether different world. I am convinced that because we think the gospel is the Plan of Salvation, and because we preach the Plan of Salvation as the gospel, we are not actually preaching the gospel.<sup>37</sup>

Kraus takes some conservatives to task for focusing on the gospel and the response of faith to be a cognitive exercise only. Kraus sees the gospel as far more comprehensive. Properly understanding the gospel leads to a more holistic view of the Christian life: "This emerging vision sees truth as a way of life in Christ and not as a rational idea, witness as sharing an evangelical life rather than preaching evangelical doctrine, and the end of holistic salvation (shalom) as a shared life in community, not the rescue of individual souls from a sinful social order."<sup>38</sup>

McKnight agrees. In an extended discussion of N.T. Wright's work on this subject he notes:

The Plan of Salvation can be preached apart from the story. And it has been done for five hundred years and two thousand years. When the plan gets separated from the story, the plan almost always becomes abstract, propositional, logical, rational, and philosophical and, most importantly, de-storified and unbiblical. When we separate the Plan of Salvation from the story, we cut ourselves off. We separate ourselves from Jesus and turn the Christian faith into a System of Salvation.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Kraus, *An Intrusive Gospel*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 62.

He also finds many focusing on individual salvation to the exclusion of the whole gospel which creates a “Salvation Culture”:

I believe the word gospel has been hijacked by what we believe about “personal salvation,” and the gospel itself has been reshaped to facilitate making “decisions.” The result of this hijacking is that the word gospel no longer means in our world what it originally meant to either Jesus or the apostles...Our salvation culture tends toward asking one double-barreled question: “Who is in and who is out?” Or more personally, “Are you in or out?” The evangelical culture focuses on the experience of personal salvation as the decisive factor for creating that culture.<sup>40</sup>

The point these conservative writers are making is that the gospel is about more than merely the way to be saved and the atoning work of Christ on the cross. The gospel is broader and has every implication about personal transformation and new life lived in the Presence of the King who has come near. The other challenge is that the liberal concept of equating the gospel to merely social justice also misses the breadth of gospel. The gospel speaks to so much more on the pages of Scripture in transforming lives and throughout the pages of church history as the gospel impacted the lives of many in the first few centuries of the Church.

The tradition of the gospel is a massive topic. This chapter has merely skimmed the surface, but the point clearly emerges. The gospel is broad, broader than is often reflected at particular points in history. It is certainly broader than both sides of the conservative-liberal theological divide tend to appreciate. This broad gospel is Christ-centered, with transformative, and profound implications for every aspect of life.

It is now time to consider which aspects of the gospel have resonated within the Episcopal tradition and how that tradition might proclaim the gospel in its present day context.

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<sup>40</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 26 and 30.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE GOSPEL IN THE TRADITION OF THE 1979 BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

The preface of the 1789 Book of Common Prayer, which was an important revision to the prayer book of the Church of England as America had so recently won her independence, begins with a strong gospel focus.

It is a most invaluable part of that blessed “liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,” that in his worship different forms and usages may without offence be allowed, provided the substance of the Faith be kept entire;... And now, this important work being brought to a conclusion, it is hoped the whole will be received and examined by every true member of our Church, and every sincere Christian, with a meek, candid, and charitable frame of mind; without prejudice or prepossessions; seriously considering what Christianity is, and what the truths of the Gospel are;<sup>1</sup>

Clearly the intent of the *Book of Common Prayer* has been, from at least as early as Colonial days, to proclaim in worship the “truths of the Gospel” and “substance of the Faith...entire”. In order to examine the gospel in the Episcopal Church and clarify the gospel tradition it holds, it is necessary to examine the *Book of Common Prayer* currently in use in the Episcopal Church. The *Book of Common Prayer* is the fundamental distinguishing feature of the church. While much diversity of opinion exists on a wide range of theological issues, it is the prayer book that is the unifying principal in its weekly

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David: According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1979), 9, 11.

use in worship in nearly all of the individual parishes within the Episcopal Church. There are historical documents on theological belief (contained in the *Book of Common Prayer*) but these are historical, not the doctrinal statement of the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church does not have formal statements of belief or confessions like many denominations. “Praying shapes belief” has become the de facto position.<sup>2</sup> That which is prayed is believed, thus the Latin version of that statement, *lex orandi lex credendi*, is often cited.<sup>3</sup> This is reasonable, for if that which is prayed by nearly all Episcopalians in worship nearly every Sunday is not what Episcopalians themselves believe, then the liturgy becomes less the “work of the people” in prayer and worship and more a meaningless, empty exercise. In the previous chapter the gospel message was examined in the early history and traditions of the church. The focus there was at first on the ancient origins and then on the subsequent theologians who took up various aspects of that gospel to address the needs of their time, thereby constructing something of a theological bridge to the present. The *Book of Common Prayer* is full of ancient liturgies and creeds.<sup>4</sup> It is a living tradition. This chapter will examine the evidence for the gospel message in the tradition received by present day Episcopalians in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, which is the prayer book that is to be used for worship in each of the individual Episcopal parishes for Sunday worship.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher L. Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church: An Introduction to Its History, Faith and Worship* (Harrisburg, PA, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 2f.

## The Gospel in the Eucharistic Services

It is the prescribed practice of the Episcopal Church that the principal worship service each Sunday be Holy Eucharist. In the previous chapter, the Nicene Creed was analyzed and found to be a statement of the gospel message. This creed is included in the typical Eucharist whether it be Rite I or Rite II. It is not necessary to reiterate here how the creed expounds the gospel, but the important point to note is that every Episcopalian in worship every Sunday in a church that is following the rubrics and participating in Eucharistic worship will *say* that he or she believes the gospel. “We believe...” or “I believe...”

A second place where the central part of the gospel is proclaimed in a succinct response of the people is in several of the forms of the Eucharistic Prayer: Forms A, B, and C to be exact. In varying but similar wording there is the acclamation that: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”<sup>5</sup> All forms of the Eucharistic prayer do speak of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The Rite I Eucharistic Prayers, Forms I and II both include this: “Having in remembrance his blessed passion and precious death, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension...”<sup>6</sup> The following is stated in Eucharistic Prayer A of the Rite II liturgy: “Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.”<sup>7</sup> Eucharistic Prayer B does not offer any further explicit statements about the resurrection beyond the acclamation noted above. It is

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<sup>5</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 363.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 335 and 342.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

focused more on the Incarnation; nevertheless it speaks of a living Christ and an everlasting heritage, clearly implying the resurrection and ascension.<sup>8</sup> Eucharistic Prayer C offers much about the death of Christ for our sins but beyond the acclamation it does not offer explicit reference to the resurrection and ascension either. Eucharistic Prayer D has the most frequent mention of these gospel aspects of Jesus' life: "To fulfill your purpose he gave himself up to death; and, rising from the grave, destroyed death, and made the whole creation new...Recalling Christ's death and his descent among the dead, proclaiming his resurrection and ascension to your right hand, awaiting his coming in glory."<sup>9</sup> Clearly in varying degrees the Eucharistic Prayers have explicit mention of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Recalling the gospel in the Gospels as the good news announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, it is important to see if any allusions to this aspect of the gospel are present. The concept of the kingdom is found in the Nicene Creed: "His Kingdom will have no end."<sup>10</sup> It is also found in the Lord's Prayer which is said every Sunday "Thy Kingdom come... the Kingdom, the power and the glory."<sup>11</sup> The service in ordinary seasons will open with the acclamation: "Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And blessed be His Kingdom now and forever." This concept also appears in the second option for the post-communion prayer as it is acknowledged that the people of God are

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<sup>8</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 368-369.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 336 and 364.

“heirs of Your eternal Kingdom...”<sup>12</sup> It also appears in the Rite I post-communion prayer: “that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs, through hope, of thy everlasting kingdom.”<sup>13</sup> Eucharistic prayer A explicitly mentions the kingdom as well: “and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.”<sup>14</sup> However, none of the other Eucharistic prayers mention a kingdom. The preface inserted into the prayer on days of Baptisms does mention citizenship in God’s Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> There is, therefore, this aspect of God’s Kingdom but it is not as consistently present in the liturgy as are many of the other gospel elements.

The concept of the nearness of God, as Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near, is also evident in the prayer book. The opening Collect for Purity ushers the worshippers into the presence of God as it asserts that to Almighty God “all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid”.<sup>16</sup> It also prays for a cleansing through the presence of the Holy Spirit: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> Central to this concept is also the oft repeated responsorial “the Lord be with you and also with you.” This is used before collects and as

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<sup>12</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 366.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

the opening of the Eucharist in all forms beginning the ancient *Sursum Corda*.<sup>18</sup> The inclusion of the Sanctus coming from the scene of Isaiah's calling as he has a vision of the throne of God subtly suggests both the concept of the kingship of God as He is seated on His throne in Isaiah 6 (though this is not explicitly mentioned in the text of the Sanctus) and the concept of God's nearness. Recalling the image of the throne of God at that point in the service is meant to remind the worshipper that as worship is offered here and now it is also offered at this moment eternally before the throne of God. Thus the worshippers on earth join those in heaven in acclaiming that God is "holy, holy, holy." This image is born out in the Eucharistic prayer itself: "Joining our voices with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven."<sup>19</sup>

The call to repentance that includes the gospel concept of Christ's death for the forgiveness of sins is strongly present in the Eucharistic services. Each service includes a confession of sin and then a pronouncement of absolution. The Eucharistic prayers A, B, C, and D, centered as they are on Christ's death, each pick up the theme:

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all. He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.<sup>20</sup> (Form A)

For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. In him, you have delivered us from evil, and

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<sup>18</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 333, 340, 361, 367, 369-370 and 372.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 334, 341, 362, 367, 370, and 373 though with variation on the last two.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.<sup>21</sup> (Form B)

But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another. *Have mercy, Lord, for we are sinners in your sight.* Again and again, you called us to return. Through prophets and sages you revealed your righteous Law. And in the fullness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman, to fulfill your Law, to open for us the way of freedom and peace. *By his blood, he reconciled us. By his wounds, we are healed.*<sup>22</sup> (Form C)

When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you. Again and again you called us into covenant with you, and through the prophets you taught us to hope for salvation. Father, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation; to prisoners, freedom; to the sorrowful, joy. To fulfill your purpose he gave himself up to death; and, rising from the grave, destroyed death, and made the whole creation new.<sup>23</sup> (Form D)

Even stronger is the language from Rite I (the portion in brackets is only found in Form 1):

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world;... [most humbly beseeching thee to grant that, by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we, and all thy whole Church, may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion.]<sup>24</sup>

Drawing as these liturgies do from the early church and its continuation of many Jewish elements in worship, there is also the reference to the Passover at the fraction in all forms of the Eucharist: “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast.” Campbell notes this reference as he tracks the gospel in ancient liturgies:

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<sup>21</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 368.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 334-335.

Early Christians did not miss the sacrificial context and meaning of Jesus' words and actions, and New Testament texts frequently allude to sacrificial and Passover meanings associated with Christ's work. In I Corinthians 5:7, for example, Paul wrote 'Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal [Passover] lamb, Christ has been sacrificed.'...Early Christians understood Christ's life (including his death) as his offering to God: Paul took Christ to be "our paschal lamb" (I Corinthians 5:7), and the paschal lamb in the Jewish context was offered to God before it died. They understood Christ's resurrection as a sign of divine acceptance of Christ's offering...The early Christians understood the Eucharistic meal itself to be a sign of renewed fellowship with God and with each other, and they understood it to be a way of proclaiming God's self-offering in Jesus Christ. The eucharist was understood as a deep mystery in which Christ's whole work, Christ's self-offering, was celebrated. It is in this sense that the eucharist proclaims Christ "until his coming again."<sup>25</sup>

Indeed the words of institution themselves speaking as they do of Christ's offering His body and blood for the redemption of all people and commanding this act to be imitated in future remembrances suggest an early *kerygmatic* tradition. Campbell follows this from I Corinthians 11:23-25.

The same technical terminology of handing on and receiving an oral tradition that was used in I Corinthians 15:1 and 3 is used in I Corinthians 11:23: the tradition was "received" and "handed on," and again the term "you" (denoting those to whom the tradition was delivered) is in plural...this passage also transmits one of the most primitive strands of Christian tradition. And just as the kerygma of I Corinthians 15:3-4 proclaims Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, Paul follows the brief narrative given earlier with this comment (I Corinthians 11:26): 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'<sup>26</sup>

Thus at the heart of the weekly Eucharistic liturgy is an ancient oral *kerygmatic* tradition that recalls not only the Last Supper, but Christ's death with redemptive overtones.

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<sup>25</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 47-49

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

In addition to these examples which are present in all rites and forms, the Rite I service retains the “Comfortable Words” spoken just before the exchange of the peace. These four verses of Scripture feature the work of Christ in securing the forgiveness of sin:

Hear the Word of God to all who truly turn to him.

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.  
*Matthew 11:28*

God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. *John 3:16*

This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. *1 Timothy 1:15*

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world. *1 John 2:1-2<sup>27</sup>*

The eschatological aspect, the already-and-not-yet aspect of fulfillment of the gospel is also present in the Eucharistic services though not as thoroughly. The acclamation says that “Christ will come again.” In Eucharistic Prayer A there is: “and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.”<sup>28</sup> In Eucharistic Prayer B it is prayed: “and bring us to that heavenly country where, with [ \_\_\_\_\_ and] all your saints, we may enter the everlasting heritage of your sons and daughters.”<sup>29</sup> In Prayer D one finds the following: “And grant that we may find our inheritance with [the Blessed Virgin Mary, with patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, (with \_\_\_\_\_ ) and] all the saints who have found favor with you in ages

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<sup>27</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 332.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

past.”<sup>30</sup> And in Rite I there is this: “and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice, until his coming again.”<sup>31</sup>

Other elements of the broad gospel as Poe defined them are also present. The category of God as the Almighty Creator is abundantly present as each Eucharistic Prayer begins with this concept immediately after the opening *Sursum Corda*. In both Eucharistic Prayers A and B it says: “It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.”<sup>32</sup> From Eucharistic Prayer C there is: “God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise. *Glory to you for ever and ever*. At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home. *By your will they were created and have their being*.”<sup>33</sup> Prayer D states: “Fountain of life and source of all goodness, you made all things and fill them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance.”<sup>34</sup> This element of the gospel is also present in Rite I, though only by mentioning God as the Almighty. That He is Creator is not specifically mentioned: “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 375.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 334 and 342.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

That Jesus is the Son of God is another of Poe's Apostolic Gospel categories. This is found abundantly in the Eucharistic prayers. Prayer A includes: "sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us."<sup>36</sup> Prayer B is particularly strong on the Incarnation and Son of God theme: "and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son. For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world."<sup>37</sup> Prayer C states, "And in the fullness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman."<sup>38</sup> Prayer D puts it this way: "Father, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin."<sup>39</sup> The Rite I forms also allude to this theme in the sense that Christ has been given by the Father to live in order that He might die: "All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption;"<sup>40</sup>

The concept of fulfilling the Scriptures is present in the Eucharistic prayers, although the explicit reference to Jesus as the Son of David or Messiah is not a theme. Prayer C is close, acknowledging explicitly the Hebrew ancestral connections: "Lord God of our Fathers; God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; God and Father of our Lord Jesus

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<sup>36</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 362.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

Christ: Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us.”<sup>41</sup> In Eucharistic Prayer C there is also this reminder of the Covenants and the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, that is the Christian Old Testament: “Again and again, you called us to return. Through prophets and sages you revealed your righteous Law. And in the fullness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman, to fulfill your Law, to open for us the way of freedom and peace.”<sup>42</sup> Prayer D has a similar theme: “When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you. Again and again you called us into covenant with you, and through the prophets you taught us to hope for salvation.”<sup>43</sup> Eucharistic Prayer B puts it this way: “We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation; in the calling of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son.”<sup>44</sup> This theme is largely absent from Eucharistic Prayer A and from the Rite I forms.

The final central gospel category to be considered involves the response to the gospel. This is summarized with the word repent in the gospel in the Gospels. Poe and others speak of the giving of one’s self to the Lord. Willard speaks of the transformation of life. This element is also present in the Eucharistic services of the *Book of Common*

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<sup>41</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 372.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

*Prayer.* The term Eucharist is derived from the Greek word meaning “to say thank you.”<sup>45</sup> And the response of thanksgiving to God for His work of creating us and for sending His Son to die for the forgiveness of our sins is overwhelmingly and explicitly present. The opening responses of each Eucharistic prayer demonstrate this: “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give Him thanks and praise.”<sup>46</sup> Phrases mentioning thankfulness are numerous throughout the Eucharistic prayers. A confession of sin with pledge to lead a renewed life is also part of both the Rite I and Rite II Eucharistic services.<sup>47</sup> Also present is a call to repentance to give oneself to God. This is particularly clear in the Rite I:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him. And although we are unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service, not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses, through Jesus Christ our Lord;<sup>48</sup>

In the Rite II Eucharistic forms this concept of offering oneself to God is also present. In prayer C it states, “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world

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<sup>45</sup> Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Book of Common Prayer.*, 333, 340, 361, 367, 370 and 372.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 330-1 and 360.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

in his name.”<sup>49</sup> In prayer A the following wording is used: “Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace.”<sup>50</sup> Forms B and D do not specifically mention the repentance theme, however the post communion prayer for all services does mention it. The Rite II versions put it this way: “Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart.”<sup>51</sup> The other post communion prayer option reads, “And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.”<sup>52</sup> The Rite I post communion prayer has this element as well: “And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in.”<sup>53</sup> The final dismissal in the Rite I and Rite II services has options that include this as well: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.”<sup>54</sup>

The preceding has shown that the Eucharistic prayers of all rites and forms in the Book of Common Prayer display a strong gospel proclamation. Though the elements of Kingship and nearness are clearly present they are not nearly as explicit as the other elements of the gospel and must be carefully observed and examined to be understood.

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<sup>49</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 372.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 340 and 366.

However, other elements such as the forgiveness of sins and the focus on the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ are strongly and explicitly present as is the call to a new way of living in offering oneself to God in service.

### **The Gospel in the Non-Eucharistic Sections of the Book of Common Prayer**

Various aspects of the gospel can be found in the *Book of Common Prayer* in sections other than the Eucharist. There are various mentions of gospel in relationship to one of the four Gospels and in prayers speaking of preaching the gospel or hearing and receiving the gospel, though in these prayers the word is not clearly defined. The Catechism offers some insight on the role the gospel is to have in the life of a believer and in the role of clergy. It has this in question and answer format:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.<sup>55</sup>

These questions give little definition to what the gospel is but they do indicate that it is to be integral to the church's mission and integral to bringing about unity with God and unity among the people of God. A few questions later, the clergy are specifically charged with proclaiming the gospel, but all Christians are included in this charge to spread the "kingdom of God":

Q. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?

A. The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel ...

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<sup>55</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 855.

Q. What is the duty of all Christians?

A. The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.<sup>56</sup>

The same call to proclaim the Gospel is present for all three orders of clergy. More will be said later on the importance of this in the ministry of a bishop according to the *Book of Common Prayer*. A priest being instituted into a new ministry is called with a letter from the prayer book that charges the priest by words and by manner of life to “proclaim the Gospel of Love.”<sup>57</sup> While these citations do little to clarify the Episcopalian understanding of what the gospel is, they do show its proclamation as a central element of the life and ministry of the church. There are, however, three areas in the prayer book where the gospel is brought to light with some clarification: in the Baptismal service, in the Ash Wednesday liturgy and in the ordination of a bishop.

The Baptismal service calls the baptized either through their own pledge in answer to questions or through their parents and godparents in the case of young children to a new life. This connects with the repentance/response aspect of the gospel:

*Question* Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

*Answer* I renounce them.

*Question* Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

*Answer* I renounce them.

*Question* Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

*Answer* I renounce them.

*Question* Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

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<sup>56</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 856.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 557.

*Answer* I do.

*Question* Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

*Answer* I do.

*Question* Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

*Answer* I do.<sup>58</sup>

These questions not only call the baptismal candidate to a transformation of life that leaves behind the old self-centered, sinful way of living, but they also call the candidate to embrace Christ through some of the basic categories of the gospel. The term “Savior” implies rescue and points to the work of Christ to bring about the forgiveness of sins. The term “Lord” indicates divine Kingship thereby recalling the “Kingdom of Heaven” and its nearness as summarized by the gospel in the Gospels.

The service continues with what many today know as the Apostle’s Creed in question and answer format. This focuses the service on the gospel themes of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ as well as His divine Sonship, and that God is the Almighty Creator:

*Celebrant* Do you believe in God the Father?

*People* I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

*Celebrant* Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

*People* I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

*Celebrant* Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

*People* I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 302-303.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

The Holy Spirit is also mentioned recalling the Presence and nearness of God in His church.

The Ash Wednesday service makes specific mention of the gospel: “Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.”<sup>60</sup> This passage suggests that the gospel has much to do with forgiveness of sin and the response of repentance leading to a new life of faith. Thus it affirms two of the categories of the gospel as summarized by Poe and others.

It is a central aspect of the stated ministry of a bishop to proclaim, protect and preserve the Apostolic Gospel. This is brought out in the service of ordination of a bishop as contained in the prayer book:

Bishop: My *brother*, the people have chosen you and have affirmed their trust in you by acclaiming your election. A bishop in God’s holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ’s sovereignty as Lord of lords and Kings of kings. You are called to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church; to celebrate and to provide for the administration of the sacraments of the New Covenant; to ordain priests and deacons and to join in ordaining bishops; and to be in all things a faithful pastor and wholesome example for the entire flock of Christ. With your fellow bishops you will share in the leadership of the Church throughout the world. Your heritage is the faith of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and those of every generation who have looked to God in hope. Your joy will be to follow him who came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.<sup>61</sup>

This statement by the bishop leading the consecration service has several gospel elements.

Besides being charged to interpret the gospel to the world, the candidate for bishop is

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<sup>60</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 265.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 517 and 531.

called to proclaim Christ's resurrection. This has the gospel focus on Christ. In addition, the candidate is called upon to testify to Christ's sovereignty and that He is "Lord of lords and King of kings." This brings the Kingdom of God concept of the gospel in the Gospels to the forefront. Jesus is also noted as the one who "gave His life a ransom for many." The sense of receiving and passing on in the Apostolic tradition is preserved as well as the candidate is charged to remember the "heritage" of "patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs." The candidate to be consecrated bishop is later asked to pledge specifically regarding this gospel: "*Bishop*: Will you boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people? *Answer*: I will, in the power of the Spirit."<sup>62</sup> It is later prayed that the candidate will be a bishop who proclaims the gospel: "May *he* exalt you, O Lord, in the midst of your people; offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to you; boldly proclaim the gospel of salvation."<sup>63</sup> Later in the Litany for Ordinations it is prayed that the church would "preach the gospel to the ends of the earth."<sup>64</sup>

To summarize, the *Book of Common Prayer* has many gospel elements within its pages. At times these are merely passing words or phrases that convey rich Scriptural meaning, rooted in history and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is likely that many, if not most, Episcopalians lack an appreciation for both the history and the meaning of these terms. Nevertheless what is prayed is wholly consistent with the gospel in Scripture and the tradition of the early church. The prayer book also makes clear that the ministry of

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<sup>62</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 518.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 549.

all clergy as well as the call upon the laity is to live out and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the bishop is consecrated with the call to preserve and proclaim the Apostolic gospel. The gospel in the prayer book tradition of the Episcopal Church then is clearly present as a living tradition.

PART THREE

THE GOSPEL AND REASON IN POSTMODERN THEOLOGY AND  
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

## CHAPTER 5

### THE GOSPEL AND REASON IN AN INCREASINGLY POSTMODERN WORLD

The final leg of the three-legged stool to be considered is reason. Reason locates itself in the present context. It is the cognitive perception of Christians of the present day seeking to understand and perceive the gospel and tradition as it has been received from Christians in ages past. “Neither Scripture nor tradition,” writes Christopher Webber in his book on the Episcopal Church, “provides clear and certain answers to all questions; at some point, there is no way to decide among possible interpretations except through the use of the human mind. . . Reason involves study and investigation and consultation, as well as careful, critical thinking and reflection, not a sudden feeling or individual impulse.”<sup>1</sup> The gospel does not arrive in a vacuum, but just as it has throughout history, it impacts and connects with a particular culture, a present day context, and a people who have certain ways of perceiving the world. This chapter will consider the third leg of the stool, reason, by exploring changes in worldview observed by scholars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Worldview can be defined simply as the way a group of individuals view the world. It involves their culture, the way they think, the way they speak and their philosophical presuppositions. As the term is used in this dissertation, worldview is the

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<sup>1</sup> Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church*, 70.

core presuppositions a group of people use to interpret the world around them. Worldview began as a concept espoused by Immanuel Kant and subsequent German Philosophers to describe one's "perception" of the world.<sup>2</sup> The concept entered the English language at first as a loanword from German, *Weltanschauung*, which means literally a "perception of the world."<sup>3</sup> The English version of this, worldview, became a term widely used by philosophers in the mid to late twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Theologian and researcher of postmodern thought, Stanley Grenz has joined others in suggesting that postmodern is the antithesis of worldview because it rejects universal explanations:

In a sense, postmoderns have no worldview. A denial of the reality of a unified world as the object of our perception is at the heart of postmodernism. Postmoderns reject the possibility of constructing a single correct worldview and are content simply to speak of many views and, by extension, many worlds. By replacing the modern worldview with a multiplicity of views and worlds, the postmodern era has in effect replaced Knowledge with interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

Though postmodern thought may not form a complete, coherent worldview, the term postmodern worldview will be used in this dissertation to refer to a general mood that has developed in reaction to the modern worldview. This postmodern mood is critical of modern thought and is searching for that which will come after it, thus justifying the use of "post" as a prefix. Some assert that postmodernism has already run its course and is dead.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David K. Naugle Jr., *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 40

<sup>6</sup> See for example: *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, edited by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (New York: Ropodi, 2007).

Others prefer the term post-secular.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, while postmodernism may be out of vogue among some, the critique of modern thought remains, generating discussion and conflict regardless of what individuals choose to call it. When he wrote of the use of reason, Hooker was writing in a time period dominated by the modern worldview with an emphasis on reason which was seen as a widely accepted, objective way to find agreement. The postmodern critique has challenged the notion that modern reason naturally leads to such agreement.

Episcopalians of the twenty-first century live in a Western ideological context and at a point in history when a major shift in the way people view the world is taking place. It is a central premise of this dissertation that worldview differences have much to do with the debates in the Episcopal Church on the controversial issues. That tenet will be explored in the next chapter. This chapter, focusing on the context for the gospel of the present day through the lens of reason, considers in detail the undergirding philosophies of the modern worldview, and the rising postmodern critique.

### **The Advent of the Modern Worldview**

Scholars do not agree as to exactly when it happened, but the pendulum swung away from the pre-modern era of Medieval thought toward what we now characterize as a modern worldview. The way people thought and viewed the world changed as the pendulum swung away from the old and toward the new “modern” way. The modern era closely connected with the Enlightenment dominated thinking in the West until the late

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion of how postmodern philosophy creates space for a philosophy not governed by secular assumptions see: *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between philosophy and theology*, edited by Phillip Blond (New York: Routledge, 1998).

twentieth century. What is still emerging in the early years of the twenty-first century is that which comes after the modern worldview and is therefore described as postmodern.

The modern worldview pendulum swung away from the concept of the Divine Right of Kings and sought another means upon which to ground the state. It swung away from the idea of authority centered in the church and revelation and sought a basis upon which everyone could agree. It swung away from, so it hoped, the violence of war that resulted from competing claims for truth that the world witnessed as the Thirty Years' War. It swung away from focusing on the questions of why things happen to how things happen. It swung away from superstition and fanciful deduction and sought certitude in the repeatability of experimentation in the Scientific method. It swung away from grounding authority in an elite group of leaders, toward an understanding of the exalted self, which included the concept of the rightness of the individual to know, discern, and choose what to believe for one's self.

In the pre-modern era knowledge was received from trusted authorities. Heath White, in his book, *Postmodernism 101* describes the pre-modern context from which the modern worldview emerged:

The pre-modern world was organized much differently than our own. The differences can largely be traced to the roles that various traditions and authorities played in pre-modern society. To begin with, the political structure placed power with kings and nobles, their authority bolstered by longstanding tradition. Before the modern period in Europe, feudalism was the near-universal form of government. . .The Roman Catholic Church enjoyed state support and the Reformation hadn't yet divided western Europe.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Heath White, *Postmodernism 101* (Grand Rapids: Brazon Press, 2006), 24.

Traditional authorities also dominated education. University curricula centered on thorough familiarity and deep understanding of a few canonical texts. In particular, these included the Bible, the works of the church fathers and a few ancient pagans, especially Aristotle.<sup>9</sup>

Into this context a new way of viewing the world emerged, took hold, and caught on like a firestorm sweeping the intellectual landscape of the period known today as the Enlightenment. Perhaps the new worldview began with the printing press. The access to knowledge in books was taken out of the hands of the elite, clerics, academics and the wealthy and was made readily available for all. Perhaps the new era began with Francis Bacon. As noted by historian, W. Andrew Hoeffecker, in many ways “Francis Bacon (1561-1626) epitomized the Renaissance from the past and foreshadowed the modern age ahead.”<sup>10</sup> Bacon wrote as the Renaissance era was elevating humankind to the center of the universe. Bacon envisioned human beings taking control over nature by discovering its secrets.<sup>11</sup> In *Novum Organum* (1620), Bacon proposed a method more certain than traditional deduction which he considered a method that “flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, Bacon proposed a new “interpretation of Nature and the Kingdom of Man” by observing the particulars and then arriving at general axioms. Bacon’s steady deliberate method issued a clarion call for future

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<sup>9</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> W. Andrew Hoeffecker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings: The Beginning of Modern Culture Wars,” in *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2007), 242.

<sup>11</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Hoeffecker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings,” in *Revolutions in Worldview*, 242-243.

Enlightenment thinkers when he spoke of seeking to discover the very foundations of nature. Bacon called for the overthrow of idols that influenced the way people viewed the world. Rather than view the world through our human nature, through individuality, through the community under the influence of others or through the theatre of human creation, Bacon proposed this scientific system in search of certainty.<sup>13</sup> Hoffercker summarizes this approach:

Bacon's insistence that the elimination of idols will produce a new, impartial science heralds the modern preoccupation—even obsession—with finding the one true method by which thinkers can settle all disputes about matters of fact or truth. Just as religious idolatry requires a change of mind for genuine faith to succeed, so modern people must repent of false worldviews.<sup>14</sup>

Later the search for certainty would find grounding in mathematics when Isaac Newton utilized mathematics to explain the movements of planets and provide a way of objectifying nature. Newton's approach pictured the universe as a machine with regularity and laws that could be discovered by the human mind.<sup>15</sup>

John Locke contributed to this approach in developing a method known as empiricism, which emphasized the role of what the senses could discern in formulating one's view of the world. He offered the following view of how the human mind comes to know anything. "Prior to experience of the world through the senses, the human mind is a mere *tabula rasa* ("blank slate")," writes Hoffercker about Locke's epistemology, "Therefore, ideas are not *a priori* but *a posteriori*; they enter the mind only through

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<sup>13</sup> Hoffercker, "Enlightenments and Awakenings," in *Revolutions in Worldview*, 242-243.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 3.

experience, which consists of sensation and reflection. A person has no direct knowledge of the world; such knowledge is mediated through the senses.”<sup>16</sup> Locke also contributed another valuable piece to the modern foundation in denying the divine right of kings. By appealing to natural law and the Bible, Locke proposed a state formed on a contractual basis of the consent of the governed.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, many, including Grenz, would associate the beginning of the modern worldview with the philosophy of Rene Descartes:

Building on the Renaissance, the Enlightenment elevated the individual self to the center of the world. Rene Descartes laid the philosophical foundation for the modern edifice with his focus on doubt, which led him to conclude that the existence of the thinking self is the first truth that doubt cannot deny — a principle formulated in his re-appropriation of Augustine’s dictum *Cogito ergo sum*. Descartes thus defined human nature as a thinking substance and the human person as an autonomous rational subject.<sup>18</sup>

That rational “thinking” self, referred to as human reason, was to become the foundation upon which Descartes sought to build a philosophy to which all would agree. Faith in the power of reason is the central pillar of the modern worldview.<sup>19</sup> Grenz describes this focus on reason as “faith”. “The Enlightenment method places the many aspects of reality under the scrutiny of reason and assesses it on the basis of that criterion. That is to say that this method exercises an absolute faith in human rational capabilities.”<sup>20</sup> John D. Caputo, a devotee of Jacques Derrida who is one of the leading philosophers of the postmodern

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<sup>16</sup> Hoffecker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings,” in *Revolutions in Worldview*, 244.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 4.

movement, describes this as a “methodological imperative, in which modernity made up its mind to abide by human reason alone.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus Enlightenment thinkers following Descartes sought certainty by appealing to an unassailable foundation upon which the worldview could be built. Today this approach is considered central to the modern worldview and called foundationalism. Grenz and John Franke have considered this in their book on post-foundationalist theology:

At the heart of the foundationalist agenda is the desire to overcome the uncertainty generated by our human liability to error and the inevitable disagreements that follow. Foundationalists are convinced that the only way to solve this problem is to find some means of grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge on invincible certainty. This quest for complete epistemological certitude is often termed strong or classical foundationalism.”<sup>22</sup>

Having considered the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the modern worldview, thinkers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century summarized the resulting modern worldview. Robert E. Webber describes three characteristics of the modern worldview: 1) individualism, “which asserts the ultimate autonomy of each person”; 2) rationalism, “which is characterized by strong confidence in the power of the mind”; and 3) factualism, “which insists that the individual, through the use of reason, can arrive at objective truth.”<sup>23</sup> Webber sees these concepts leading to the emergence of three convictions of the Enlightenment paradigm: 1) foundationalism, “conviction that there are

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<sup>21</sup> John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, “Apology for the Impossible: Religion and Postmodernism,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 18.

beliefs or experiences that are in themselves beyond doubt and upon which systems of belief and understanding can therefore be constructed with certainty”; 2) structuralism, “the belief that societies construct texts to make meaning out of life and that the meaning which is in the text can be commonly agreed upon by its interpreters through the use of reason”; and 3) the metanarrative, which are “stories that make sense out of life by providing an interpretation of the world from its beginning to its end.”<sup>24</sup> Grenz identifies these modern worldview tenets as elevating “the individual self to the center of the world.”<sup>25</sup> It was the existence of the self that could define truth, as Rene Descartes postulated, *Cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am.<sup>26</sup>

Recognized as a leader in the postmodern, emergent church movement, Brian McLaren wrote a book entitled *A New Kind of Christian* which provides an emerging postmodern perspective. Though written in the form of a fictional story, the book seeks to convey a new perspective on the Christian Faith. In the book the modern worldview is described with the following categories:<sup>27</sup> First, the modern era is described as an era of conquest and control. It emerged as an era of imperial conquest and then control of the conquered territories. Second, modern era is the age of the machine. “The universe itself came to be seen as a vast machine, controlled by an engineer-God.”<sup>28</sup> Third, it is an *age of*

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<sup>24</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) 16.

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

*analysis*, thinking of things in smaller pieces so as to understand them. Thinking and analyzing tended to marginalize “other forms of thought – imagination, intuition, pattern recognition, systems thinking and so on.”<sup>29</sup> Fourth, McLaren describes *secular science* as a characteristic of the modern era. Religion was pushed to the private sector and science without reference to God controlled the public sector. Fifth, the modern worldview is presented as one that holds to *absolute objectivity*. Human reason replaces “mysteries with comprehension, superstition with fact, ignorance with information, and subjective religious faith with objective truth.”<sup>30</sup> Sixth, it is a *critical age* where people count it important to “debunk” those who hold a different view than you. Seventh, it is the *age of the modern nation-state and organization*, “from the assembly line to the picket line to the party line.”<sup>31</sup> Eighth, it is described as an *age of individualism*. Never before have individuals been so free from social constraint, but also so alienated and isolated. Ninth, it is the age of *Protestantism and institutional religion*, where not only Catholicism is protested but so are the entire medieval and pre-modern worldviews. Tenth, the modern age is described as the *age of consumerism*, where “the market economy led to freedom from the feudal system, but it has become a powerful lord in its own right.”<sup>32</sup>

As pointed out by Merold Westphal the modern worldview assumes a certain objectivity to the reasoning mind:

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<sup>29</sup> McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 18.

The Enlightenment perspective assumes that knowledge is not only certain (and hence rational) but also objective. The assumption of objectivity leads the modernist to claim access to dispassionate knowledge. Modern knowers profess to be more than merely conditioned participants in the world they observe: they claim to be able to view the world as unconditioned observers — that is, to survey the world from vantage point outside the flux of history...At the intellectual foundation of the Enlightenment project are certain epistemological assumptions. Specifically, the modern mind assumes that knowledge is certain, objective, and good. Moreover, moderns assume that, in principle, knowledge is accessible to the human mind.<sup>33</sup>

A final characteristic of the modern worldview that can be seen from the perspective of the twentieth century is the belief in progress and optimism about how far reason and science can take the human race toward solving the world's problems. Craig Van Gelder writes,

It became the goal of the human intellectual quest to unlock the secrets of the universe in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world. This quest led to the modernity characteristic of the Twentieth century, which has sought to bring rational management to life in order to improve human existence through technology.<sup>34</sup>

In an article entitled, "Philosophy Among the Ruins," Michael Payne provides a good summary:

From the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, the modern paradigm emerged and developed—a paradigm organized around the logic of determinism and rooted in the objectifying, mechanistic, abstract, and atemporal mode of thought that developed from the natural sciences. Science became the new God and scientism the new religion. Science and the scientific method formed the royal road to truth and certainty. In the world of modern science, the perceiving subject is a neutral

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<sup>33</sup> Merold Westphal, "The Ostrich and the Boogeyman: Placing Postmodernism," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 20 (December 1990): 115. Quoted in Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Craig Van Gelder, "Postmodernism as an Emerging Worldview," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 26 (1991): 413. Quoted in Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 4.

observer, and the object is a pure datum of perception, unpolluted by the observer's participation.<sup>35</sup>

Many in the church of today are quite comfortable with the modern worldview assumptions, but it was certainly not that way in the early stages of the developing modern worldview. The Western pre-modern world was largely founded on assumptions that the activity of the Divine or the gods were the foundation of all of life. Kings were crowned by the church. Truth came through revelation and the church was the sole interpreter and expositor of that revelation. With the advent of the modern worldview, reason and repeatable scientific experimentation were the new revealers of truth. The scientist and the philosopher, appealing to common sense, were now the interpreters. Basic assumptions of the Christian faith propagated by the church were now challenged. Scripture itself was put under the microscope of critical examination. Historical details of the life of Christ were challenged. New explanations were developed for how the world works and even how it came into existence. In short, the church found itself under attack.

Two approaches emerged from this challenge. Their effect on present day theology and gospel proclamation will be explored in the next chapter. Here it will suffice to summarize the points and list a couple of examples. Today, the two Christian responses to the modern worldview challenge would be associated with two different theologies, one liberal and one conservative. The conservative approach was to wield science to prove the veracity of the Biblical revelation and historicity of Jesus Christ. Philosophical arguments were developed for the existence of God. What is known today as "apologetics" developed as Christians used reason and science to defend the faith. For many conservatives the

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<sup>35</sup> Michael W. Payne, "Philosophy Among the Ruins: the Twentieth Century and Beyond," in Hoffecker, *Revolutions in Worldview*, 344.

foundation upon which theology is built is that of Scripture. Murphy finds an example of this in Augustus Strong a Baptist writing in 1876:

For Strong, theology is the science of God and of relation between God and the universe (1) and not, he insists, the science of the Christian religion. Its aim is to ascertain the facts respecting God and to exhibit these facts in an organic system of truth. The possibility of theology is grounded in the existence of God and in God's self-revelation. Revelation presents "objective facts," which serve as "the ground of theology" (13). Systematic theology "takes the material furnished by Biblical and Historical Theology and with this material seeks to build..." Note the foundationalist metaphors: facts from Scripture as ground, theology as building.<sup>36</sup>

A more contemporary example she cites is that of Alister McGrath whom she cites as stating: "The narrative of Jesus Christ, mediated through scripture and Eucharistic celebration, is presented, proclaimed and accepted as foundational and controlling narrative of the community of faith."<sup>37</sup>

The philosophical groundwork for the other approach to the challenges presented by the modern worldview finds its roots in Immanuel Kant. He suggested a distinction between outwardly observable, scientific facts and inwardly subjective values. This distinction was followed by theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and successors. Schleiermacher wrote of a kind of intuition of the presence of the divine, a God-consciousness or in later works an awareness of dependency upon the divine.<sup>38</sup> Religion, faith and values, while important to the individuals that held them, were nonetheless not provable and therefore relegated to the realm of subjective personal experience.

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<sup>36</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2007), 14.

<sup>37</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *the Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 55. Quoted in Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 22.

Experience provided an unassailable foundation. Though not trying to use science to prove the points of Christianity, this approach still adhered to the modern world view assumptions, even agreeing to consign the realm of faith to the private individual and accepting completely the factual claims of modern scientific reason.

And yet, as the world moves beyond the certitude of modernity, the Church must find ways to work out its theology and present the gospel that are not based upon modern worldview assumptions. As the fires of modernity dim, the world is on the brink of something new. The new is not at all clear. It is commonly referred to as “postmodern” meaning it “came after” the modern era. Many see this not as a total rejection of all modernist thinking, but rather holding on to some tenets even while new ways of understanding the world are taking hold.

### **The Postmodern Critique**

It is a subject of considerable discussion when the postmodern era began. James K.A. Smith, in his book entitled *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism* writes:

Postmodernism has been variously described as a kind of post- (after-) modern condition and is sometimes even linked to particular historical events such as student riots in 1968, the abandonment of the gold standard, the fall of the Berlin Wall, or, to be specific, 3:32 p.m. on July 15, 1972! Each candidate for the advent of postmodernism relies on an account of the supposed collapse of modernity. Trying to pinpoint the advent of the postmodern condition...seems counterproductive, given the widespread disagreement about such historical claims.<sup>39</sup>

The mention of July 15, 1972 is an often referenced historical event among postmodern writers. “This is when the Pruitt-Ingoe housing development (a prize-winning version of

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<sup>39</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, the Church and Postmodern Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 18-19.

Le Corbusier's "machine for modern living") in St. Louis was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed."<sup>40</sup> White, in *Postmodernism 101*, takes a differing view. He notes some historical turning points that others describe as constituting a "collapse of modernity" and finds something other than a total collapse. Rather, these contributed to an overall disenchantment with the optimistic modern worldview. White says,

The First World War (1914-1918) taught Europeans that even the countries most influenced by the Enlightenment could engage in tremendous amounts of pointless slaughter. During the Second World War, the Holocaust, with its enormous numbers of victims, demonstrated the bureaucratic efficiency that an evil regime could apply to genocide. And the same postwar decades that saw the invention of the polio vaccine and eradication of smallpox also saw the development of increasingly powerful weapons of mass destruction... In America, ... in spite of some successes, no government program has eliminated poverty, or reconciled the races, or eradicated crime, or restored the environment. ... Our statesmen are not wiser and wiser; things are not getting better and better.<sup>41</sup>

One might well add prominent failures of modern technology such as the sinking of the unsinkable ship, the Titanic, or more recently the explosions of two space shuttles. With such a historical backdrop, the gnawing concern is that science and the modern worldview have not brought inevitable improvement and progress. Noting this point as a rise in postmodern pessimism Grenz concludes:

In eschewing the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism. Gone is the belief that every day, in every way, we are getting better and better. Members of the emerging generation are no longer confident that humanity will be able to solve the world's great problems or even that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. They view life on earth as fragile and believe that the continued

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution in Architecture* (New York: Monacelli, 2000), quoted in Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 45

existence of humankind is dependent on a new attitude of cooperation rather than conquest... They see our problems mounting. And they are no longer convinced that human ingenuity will solve these enormous problems or that their living standard will be higher than that of their parents.<sup>42</sup>

Besides a disenchantment with the modern worldview's optimism, more needs to be said about what it is that defines postmodern thought. Among scholars this is notoriously difficult to define.<sup>43</sup> "Despite the fact that there is no consensus concerning the meaning of the term, it has become almost a commonplace to refer to the contemporary cultural situation as postmodern."<sup>44</sup> Grenz observes that some self appointed postmodern experts have one idea while others veer in differing directions:

The lack of clarity about the term has been magnified by the vast array of interpreters who have attempted to comprehend and appropriate postmodern thought. Paul Lakeland observes that there are probably a thousand different self-appointed commentators on the postmodern phenomenon and bewildering discrepancies between the ways many of these authors understand the term postmodern and its cognates.<sup>45</sup>

At the very least, the term postmodern refers to a major philosophical and cultural shift beginning in the later decades of the twentieth century. This is a shift away from certain tenets of the modern worldview. One scholar, Dan Stiver, has noted the rise of the postmodern worldview as a paradigm shift that rejects the central tenets of the modern worldview:

"When one surveys the panorama of contemporary thought it is evident in field after field, in discipline after discipline, that a significant critique of modernity has arisen along with a discussion of a paradigm change. The upshot is that the kind of

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<sup>42</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 7 and 13.

<sup>43</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 18-19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

change under discussion is not incremental or piecemeal, but structural and thoroughgoing.” Almost without exception, those who are engaged in the pursuit of this paradigm shift use the term postmodern.... From this description it is clear that the unity of the movement lies not in any tentative sketch of the details of a new paradigm but rather in the rejection of the program of modernity. This insight enables us to suggest a basic, minimalist understanding of postmodernism. The term is best understood as referring primarily to the rejection of the central features of modernity.<sup>46</sup>

And yet many, such as Smith, do not view this paradigm shift as a rejection of the entire modern worldview edifice:

Talking about “postmodernism” can give the impression that we are describing a discrete, specific phenomenon, like a table or a cup. Further, one is tempted to suggest that with the advent of postmodernity, everything has changed. But neither of these is true: Postmodernism is an admittedly pluriform and variegated phenomenon. And postmodernism does not make a clean break from modernism. There are both continuities and discontinuities between modernity and postmodernity.<sup>47</sup>

At the core of the postmodern critique of the modern worldview is a rejection of the assumption that reason provides a universal, unbiased foundation upon which to build premises to which all will agree. “Postmodernism,” Grenz writes, “likewise entails a rejection of the emphasis on rational discovery through the scientific method, which provided the intellectual foundation for the modern attempt to construct a better world. At its foundation, then, the postmodern outlook is anti-modern.”<sup>48</sup> White puts it this way in his work on postmodernism: “Premoderns placed their trust in authority. Moderns lost their confidence in authority and placed it in human reason instead. Postmoderns kept the

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<sup>46</sup> Dan R. Stiver, “The Uneasy Alliance between Evangelicalism and Postmodernism: A Reply to Anthony Thiselton,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David Dockery (Wheaton, IL: Bridge Point, 1995), 242. Quoted in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 26.

<sup>48</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 2

modern distrust of authority but lost their trust in reason and have found nothing to replace it. This is the crux of all postmodern thought.”<sup>49</sup> This minimalist approach merely describes postmodern as what comes after the modern era. Adding to the definition and clarifying the terms postmodernity and postmodernism is this from Grenz:

Postmodernism refers to an intellectual mood and an array of cultural expressions that call into question the ideals, principles, and values that lay at the heart of the modern mind-set. Postmodernity, in turn, refers to an emerging epoch, the era in which we are living, the time when the postmodern outlook increasingly shapes our society. Postmodernity is the era in which postmodern ideas, attitudes, and values reign — when postmodernism molds culture. It is the era of the postmodern society.<sup>50</sup>

Just as Bacon laid the groundwork for the modern worldview in advance of the era in which it took hold, so challenges to the Enlightenment and modern worldview assumptions began even within the Enlightenment period.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) considered language and explored the connection of language with the “objective” reality it seeks to describe. He challenged the notion that there is a correspondence between language and objects. Rather he sought to show that language is a construct from the mind of the person speaking. “It is not a result of correspondence between language and objects,” writes Payne, “But of how we use language; it is a result of ‘language games.’ Meaning and sense result from practices and life forms.”<sup>51</sup> These language games created their own “rule” and thus the language, rather

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<sup>49</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Payne, “Philosophy Among the Ruins,” in Hoffecker, *Revolutions in Worldview*, 338.

than referring to an objective reality, was self-authenticating and self-justifying. Payne writes,

Naming presupposes a number of categories and procedures that make identification possible. As Wittgenstein put it, “Only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name.” (PI 31)<sup>52</sup> *Wittgenstein realized that basic facts cannot be discovered independently of methods of projection that guarantee their status as facts.* Wittgenstein realized there are many ways of dealing with the facts in the world, many ways for language to project a relationship to the world... Gone now was any pristine notion of a pure, ideal relation between mind and nature.<sup>53</sup>

In their book, *Beyond Foundationalism*, Grenz and John R. Franke describe the resulting understanding. “Human languages function as social conventions that describe the world in a variety of ways depending on the context of the speaker. No simple, one-to-one relationship exists between language and the world, and thus no single linguistic description can serve to provide an objective conception of the ‘real’ world.”<sup>54</sup>

Wittgenstein, writing toward the end of the modern era, provided an approach to see language itself as its own foundation, centered in the self, rather than in the objective world around. He suggested that the methods used to discern if something is a fact, actually in of themselves, guarantee which things will be facts. Grenz and Franke join others who describe the result as a postmodern “chastening of rationality”: “Chastened rationality is marked by the transition from a realist to a constructionist view of truth and the world. Postmodern thinkers maintain that humans do not view the world from an

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<sup>52</sup> PI is used in this text by the Payne to refer to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M Anscombe, (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

<sup>53</sup> Payne, “Philosophy Among the Ruins,” in Hoffecker, *Revolutions in Worldview*, 338. (Italics mine.)

<sup>54</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 23.

objective vantage point but structure their world through the concepts they bring to it, such as language.”<sup>55</sup> Hence a fact is no longer an unassailable foundation upon which to build a

Lockean or Newtonian understanding of the world, as Payne observes:

The notion of a disengaged reason, once the *sine qua non* of science, now is seen as an illusion. Each disciplinary matrix—whether physics, history, ethics, or religion—constitutes its own “language game,” or paradigm, thus raising the stakes in any quest for certainty or truth. Once the fully embodied, knowing subject overtakes the disembodied *cogito*, the full force of subjectivity and engaged reason results in the curse of subjectivity” and loss of “absolute truth.”<sup>56</sup>

Caputo commenting on the transcript of a presentation by Jacques Derrida suggests that the postmodern critique of reason asks: what is the reason for reason?

If the old Enlightenment makes everything turn on ‘Reason,’ the New Enlightenment wants to know the reason for reason, wants to take responsibility for what at a specific point in history calls itself reason and the age of reason, and to consider carefully what is being declared “irrational” in the name of reason, instead of simply marching to its tune.<sup>57</sup>

By the twentieth century the supposedly universal foundation of objective reason upon which the modern worldview was constructed began to crumble under the critique as

Payne concludes:

Several underlying presuppositions that made the modern scientific paradigm intelligible came in for criticism. These included the paradigm’s purported objectivity, neutrality, linearity, incremental development, overall consistency with what is “rational,” and the rule of invariability. Once any one of these is challenged, the edifice that purportedly provides “clear, distinct, and certain” conclusions goes into a tailspin. A new kind of anxiety sets in, and the building begins to collapse.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Payne, “Philosophy Among the Ruins,” in Hoffecker, *Revolutions in Worldview*, 345.

<sup>57</sup> John D. Caputo, ed. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: a Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 55.

<sup>58</sup> Payne, “Philosophy Among the Ruins,” in Hoffecker, *Revolutions in Worldview*, 344-345.

Descartes envisioned a modern worldview built on an unassailable foundation of thinking and reason. Yet the postmodern critique rejects that such a foundation was found or even that one could be found. Grenz and Franke provide this summary:

The goal of the foundationalist agenda is the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs. According to foundationalists, the acquisition of knowledge ought to proceed in a manner somewhat similar to the construction of a building. Knowledge must be built on a sure foundation. The Enlightenment epistemological foundation consists of a set of incontestable beliefs or unassailable first principles on the basis of which the pursuit of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles must be universal, objective, and discernible to any rational person. . . . In the postmodern context, however, foundationalism is in dramatic retreat, as its assertions about the objectivity, certainty, and universality have come under withering critique. The demise of foundationalism carries fundamental and far-reaching implications for theological method. . . . The postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational, and personal.<sup>59</sup>

Postmoderns prefer to take a more holistic and intuitive approach rather than trying to build on one the unassailable foundation of cold logic and reason. Grenz summarizes:

Postmodern holism entails a rejection of the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous, rational individual. Postmoderns do not seek to be wholly self-directed individuals but rather “whole” persons. Postmodern holism entails an integration of all the dimensions of personal life — affective and intuitive as well as cognitive. Wholeness also entails a consciousness of the indelible and delicate connection to what lies beyond ourselves, in which our personal existence is embedded and from which it is nurtured. This wider realm includes “nature” (the ecosystem), of course. But in addition it involves the community of humans in which we participate.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 23-24 and 7.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

## Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault

Though the critique of pure, objective reason lies at the heart of much of the postmodern worldview, other thinkers recognized as postmodern contribute their individual threads to the tapestry that is emerging as the postmodern worldview. While not wanting to restrict postmodern thought to just these three, in *Beyond Foundationalism*, Grenz and Franke do acknowledge the central role of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard.<sup>61</sup> These are the three philosophers presented for explanation in the book by James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* Smith asserts that these philosophers are misunderstood and misinterpreted, especially among Christians today:

In particular, postmodernism owes its impetus to French philosophical influences. While most commentators from various disciplines (architecture, art, literature, theology) concede this point, few have facility with philosophy or French philosophy in particular. In other words, we tend to give French philosophy a nod as crucial for understanding postmodernism but then do not engage the philosophical underpinnings.<sup>62</sup>

Jacques Derrida coined the term “deconstruction” in 1967 not so much as a destructive approach, but rather one which he saw was positive and constructive.<sup>63</sup> Once again providing even a definition proves problematic according to John Caputo:

Deconstruction “itself”—I do not actually think there is any such thing—is not a determinate position, a definite “what” or worldview with a manifesto, or a platform or a set of positions, theistic or atheistic, but a “how,” a way of holding a position, of being under way or being on a path. It is an affirmation without being a self-certain and positive position.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>64</sup> John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture Series, James K.A. Smith, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 55-6.

Philosopher, Christopher Butler describes the skepticism of using language to describe deconstruction:

Indeed, to attempt to define deconstruction is to defy another of its main principles – which is to deny that final or true definitions are possible, because even the most plausible candidates will always invite a further defining move, or ‘play’, with language. For the deconstructor, the relationship of language to reality is not given, or even reliable, since all language systems are inherently unreliable cultural constructs.<sup>65</sup>

Derrida unpacks this deconstructive approach by looking to the other side – playing in a sense the Devil’s advocate. This other, forgotten counterpoint is often described by

Derrida and his followers as the coming of the “other”.<sup>66</sup> Caputo summarizes:

For Derrida, the experience of deconstruction is a dream and a desire of something *tout autre*, of something that utterly shatters the present horizons of possibility, that confounds our expectations, that leaves us gasping for air, trying to catch our breath, the first words out of our mouth being, “How did that happen? How was that possible?” That is what Derrida calls *l’invention de l’autre*, the incoming of the other, the coming of something we did not see coming, that takes us by surprise and tears up our horizon of expectation. Faced with the (unforeseeable) prospect of this “incoming,” deconstruction does not timidly shout “heads up” and then head for cover; rather, it boldly and brazenly calls “come” (*viens*), “yes, yes (*oui, oui*), and offers it its hospitality.<sup>67</sup>

This “other” represents the points ruled out and makes what seemed impossible or contradictory now possible. As Caputo explains:

To put it all in a very condensed formulation, in deconstruction, the very conditions under which something is impossible, is declared impossible by what calls itself “the light of reason” or “philosophy,” are likewise and especially the conditions of

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<sup>65</sup> Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: a Very Brief Introduction* (London: Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), 16-7.

<sup>66</sup> Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 53.

<sup>67</sup> Caputo and Scanlon, “Apology for the Impossible,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 3.

its possibility. Being impossible is what ignites our passion, gets us off dead center, and drives our desire to make it happen.<sup>68</sup>

Caputo goes on to cite an important example which Derrida uses in applying this strategy of deconstruction to even something as simple as the giving of a gift. This shows the complexity, even the impossibility of the concept of the gift:

As soon as we think about it, Derrida thinks, we realize that the gift is impossible. As soon as a donor gives someone a gift, that puts the recipient in debt and makes the donor look good, thereby taking from the recipient and adding to the donor, which is the opposite of what the gift was supposed to do. As soon as we appreciate that we are cornered by that *aporia*, as soon as we submit to that insuperable difficulty, then, at that moment, we can begin. In order to give a gift, we must give in to that *aporia* but without giving up.<sup>69</sup>

Another much referenced quote of Derrida's deconstruction is his statement that there is "nothing outside the text." Derrida is indicating by this statement that it is difficult to distinguish between the world that the reader brings to the text and the world the author creates in the text. Derrida writes: "If it seems to us in principle impossible to separate, through interpretation or commentary, the signified from the signifier, and thus to destroy writing by the writing that is yet reading."<sup>70</sup> Some have taken this to mean that the whole of reality is constructed in the words members of society use. The actual intention is more nuanced. Smith suggests that the idea is to remind us of the role interpretation plays in our understanding of reality: "Derrida's claim that there is nothing outside the text. . . means roughly that everything is interpretation; interpretation is governed by context and the role of the interpretive community. This entails abandoning the modern notion embracing a

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<sup>68</sup> Caputo and Scanlon, "Apology for the Impossible," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 3-4.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, tr., *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 159.

central theme of postmodernism: interpretation goes ‘all the way down.’”<sup>71</sup> This approach does not deny objective reality, as Caputo observes, but is a reminder that one’s understanding of reality is *contingent* upon a number of specific factors relative to that person’s point of view:

For deconstructive thinking is acutely sensitive to the contingency of our constructions, to the deeply historical, social, and linguistic “constructedness” of our beliefs and practices. But that is not because it has appointed itself the supreme arbiter of what is true and false. On the contrary, it is because it confesses that it does not “know” the “secret” that sits in the middle and smiles at our ignorance. In other words, deconstructive thinking is a way of affirming the irreducible alterity of the world we are trying to construe—as opposed to the stupefying nonsense that deconstruction reduces the world to words without reference.<sup>72</sup>

Grenz offers this helpful summary: “And because the meaning of a text is dependent on the perspective of the one who enters into dialogue with it, it has as many meanings as it has readers (or readings).”<sup>73</sup>

The second postmodern author as noted by Smith and widely recognized for his postmodern contribution is Jean-Francois Lyotard. Scholar, Christopher Butler states:

A great deal of postmodernist theory depends on the maintenance of a skeptical attitude: and here the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard’s contribution is essential. He argued in his *La condition postmoderne* (published in French in 1979, in English in 1984) that we now live in an era in which legitimizing ‘master narratives’ are in crisis and in decline. These narratives are contained in or implied by major philosophies, such as Kantianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, which argue that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity. The two main narratives Lyotard is attacking are those of the progressive emancipation of humanity – from Christian redemption to Marxist Utopia – and that of the triumph of science. Lyotard considers that such doctrines have lost their credibility’ since the Second World War.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 54.

<sup>72</sup> Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 52.

<sup>73</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Butler, *Postmodernism*, 13.

Lyotard is often quoted from his work, *The Postmodern Condition*: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>75</sup> The metanarrative, or grand story that explains everything in the pre-modern era focused on religious stories. In the Enlightenment, thinkers considered such myths as superstitious and improvable. They sought to remove the grand story from explaining things and turned to the observation of nature, to reason, and to rationality. However, postmodern thinkers counter that rather than removing metanarratives, the Enlightenment merely chose a new one in reason and science. That Lyotard is focused on the scientific metanarratives is clear from the context of this much cited quotation:

Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicitly appeal to some grand narrative.<sup>76</sup>

This skepticism for metanarratives leads postmoderns to assert the pluralistic idea of “local ideologies” or truths specific to the local community, rather than overarching universal truths to which all can agree. This is summarized by Grenz:

Chastened rationality is also manifest in the loss of the metanarrative and the advent of “local” stories. Postmodern thinkers assert that the all-encompassing narratives of scientific progress that shaped and legitimated modern society have lost their credibility and power. Further, they maintain that the very idea of the metanarrative is no longer credible. This is not to suggest that narratives no longer

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<sup>75</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, tr. Geoff Bennington, *The Postmodern Condition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

function in the postmodern context. However, the narratives that give shape to the postmodern ethos are “local” rather than universal.<sup>77</sup>

Thus one’s understanding of truth is rooted not in universal reason but in the community in which one operates.<sup>78</sup> Grenz continues by noting that these views direct postmoderns away from individualism to a more communally grounded self:

Postmoderns are keenly conscious of the importance of community, of the social dimension of existence. And the postmodern conception of wholeness also extends to the religious or spiritual aspect of life... The conviction that each person is embedded in a particular human community leads to a corporate understanding of truth.<sup>79</sup>

Such communally understood self and localized concepts of truth lead postmoderns to posit the loss of a unified whole, and rather the acceptance of competing localized worldviews. Thus postmodern thinkers view modernism and its quest of an unassailable foundation in human reason to have failed. White captures this point:

In the eyes of postmoderns, then, modernism has failed, both as a prediction of progress and as a moral framework for culture. As a result, postmoderns take distinctly anti-modern views on the deeper questions of human life: social, political, moral, and spiritual questions. The failure of modernism means that there is no universal agreement and no prospect of universal agreement on these questions. Postmoderns draw a range of conclusions.<sup>80</sup>

The third author that Smith describes is Michael Foucault. He takes Wittgenstein’s concept of the “language games” a step further. Not only is language more a construct of the person’s mind rather than direct correspondence to objective reality, language is used to hold power over other persons. What constitutes knowledge is not neutrally determined,

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<sup>77</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 23.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 45-46.

but determined by “networks of power” that use the knowledge to exert control over or oppress others.<sup>81</sup> Once again the influence of Francis Bacon is detectable as noted by

Smith:

At root, Foucault claims, knowledge and justice reduce to power. While we moderns...were shaped by the maxim of Francis Bacon proclaiming that knowledge is power, Foucault’s postmodern axiom is that “power is knowledge.” . . . He means to emphasize the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power. Knowledge, or what counts as knowledge, is not neutrally determined. Instead, what counts as knowledge is constituted in networks of power—social, political, and economic.<sup>82</sup>

Among postmodern authors, the concept of using language as power over others contributes to a kind of humility that accepts differing opinions without trying to win debates and convince others to hold one’s position. Grenz describes this as a reduced concern to prove themselves right: “Nor are postmoderns necessarily concerned to prove themselves ‘right’ and others ‘wrong.’ They believe that beliefs are ultimately a matter of social context.”<sup>83</sup> Some postmodern authors, such as Derrida, see their work as a new Enlightenment.<sup>84</sup> Caputo, describing this take of Derrida, says this about the New Enlightenment: “On this telling, the new Enlightenment would constitute a second childhood which is given over to dreaming of the impossible, arising from a deep desire

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<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 85.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 15.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Weber, ed., Peggy Kamuf and others trans., *Points...:Interviews 1974-94* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 428. Quoted in Caputo and Scanlon, “Apology for the Impossible,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 2.

for what, given the constraints and conditions posed by modernity, is precisely not possible, which for that reason is precisely what we most deeply desire.”<sup>85</sup>

Webber provides a clear summation of the postmodern paradigm shift. First, he suggests a shift away from dualism: against the emphasis on reason and empirical method, the mechanistic worldview comes with a challenge to view science as not just the facts, but interpreted facts. The shift is from dualism to holism and mystery.<sup>86</sup>

The second change Webber notes is in the philosophical realm. Here truth is seen as subject to the individual’s experience. The lens through which that person views the world colors the truth. Language becomes not communication so much as power. It is not so much descriptive as defining of reality.<sup>87</sup>

An example to help understand what is being suggested here comes from an essay entitled “Epistemology at the Core of Postmodernism: Rorty, Foucault, and the Gospel” by Jon Hinkson and Greg Ganssle.<sup>88</sup> They describe the ornithologist who discovers a bird that appears in every way to be a crow except that it is white. Now the ornithologist, having never seen such a bird before, has two options. One is to classify the bird as a white crow. This places the bird in the species of crow and is truthful and legitimate, for the bird is, in all respects a crow, only a white one. The other option is to classify the bird as an entirely new species. Now this is also legitimate, for although the bird does resemble a crow in

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<sup>85</sup> Caputo and Scanlon, “Apology for the Impossible,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 21.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Jon Hinkson and Greg Ganssle, “Epistemology at the Core of Postmodernism: Rorty, Foucault and the Gospel,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 68.

every way except one, nevertheless there is no record of there ever having been a white crow before. The bird is the same bird, only there are two different but truthful ways of describing it. Hinkson and Ganssle write, “As long as the theory accommodates the evidence, the theory is adequate. So we can have two theories that conflict but are each evidentially adequate.”<sup>89</sup> The power of language in postmodern thought is to define the categories – to create one’s own truth by means of the words used.

Webber’s third category of post-enlightenment paradigm is seen in the Communications Revolution. Here he has in mind that communication has shifted from a more linear, logical approach to more experiential, participatory, emotive approach.<sup>90</sup> Indeed the revolution in communication has contributed to the pluralism that pushes us toward tolerance, bringing before our eyes, nuance, complexity and the story behind the story. Mystery, humility and skepticism reign supreme in such an environment.

These are the philosophical underpinnings of the context of the Western worldviews of the twenty-first century. In short, the context in which the present day Episcopal Church finds itself is one of conflict, not only conflict that ensues over issues and theology, but also conflict of worldviews. The modern worldview which has reigned supreme for hundreds of years has come under a postmodern critique as many doubt that it provides such a comprehensive view which explains everything, as it proposes. This worldview conflict could be summarized as follows: (1) foundationalism verses a broader holism; (2) belief in objective rationalism verses a deconstruction which sees the complexities of a situation and the influences of context, community, environment and

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<sup>89</sup> Hinkson and Ganssle, “*Epistemology at the Core of Postmodernism*,” 71.

<sup>90</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 24.

perspective on the interpretation of the facts; (3) optimistic belief in the objective and universally self-evident nature of the scientific method verses the loss of the metanarrative which suggests that truth is held not universally, but locally by cultures and peoples. In this approach a pluralism is upheld that acknowledges the validity of competing truth claims; and (4) a view of language as truly representing the real, objective world verses a view of language which constructs a world relative to the person speaking, which can be used to wield power and control others.

The next chapter of this dissertation will further explore how some of the differences among Christians over theology are actually entangled in questions of worldview. In the Episcopal Church, such conflicts are more the result of worldview clashes than the result of differences in understanding the core message of Christianity, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## CHAPTER 6

### GOSPEL PROCLAMATION AND THEOLOGY IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

At this point it will be helpful to summarize the first five chapters. The gospel as found in Scripture is a broad, multi-faceted gospel centered on the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. It speaks of the nearness of the Kingdom of God in the person of Christ and calls for a response that is transformative in the believer's life. This gospel predates the New Testament in oral apostolic tradition. In the early church it was embraced in proto-orthodox communities and eventually affirmed and clarified through early credal statements of faith and in the canonization of Scripture. This broad gospel can be found to have different aspects of its impact differing cultures at different points in history. As the gospel encounters a culture certain aspects of it resonate, thus are emphasized by the preachers, theologians and evangelists of that time. The present context for that gospel is an increasingly postmodern world. This chapter and the next explore the application of the gospel in a postmodern, Episcopal context.

#### **The Liberal and Conservative Dichotomy in the Postmodern Context**

As noted in the previous chapter, many in the postmodern world eschew single universal explanations and instead emphasize the role of interpretation and the recognition that there are many points of view. This suggests that world history has arrived at a point in which a broader exposition of the gospel is necessary to speak to the increasingly multi-

faceted, postmodern world. Aided by the technology of the information age, it is as if the world today holds many cultural time periods simultaneously for it holds many points of view in many localities, but at the same time. Thus, the application of the gospel to merely one worldview is no longer appropriate. It is a time in which the church needs to reclaim the breadth of the gospel as it has been expressed in Scripture and throughout the history of the church. In this context the Episcopal Church is uniquely positioned. It has a rich Anglican heritage of broad theological understanding. In speaking of John Donne's "middle way" or *via media*, Christopher Webber sees this broad theological understanding:

The Anglican way, as he saw it, was to steer a course between the extremes of no reform and radical reform, between Rome on the one hand and the new Protestant churches on the other. Sometimes that has been misunderstood to mean compromise or fence-sitting, but neither of those alternatives is intended. Rather the intention has been to achieve a comprehensiveness or breadth of approach that could draw wisdom from every side and include the insights of others.<sup>1</sup>

Christian writers outside the Episcopal Church have suggested that a Christian church that best connects with the postmodern trend is a liturgical church. Smith is a theologian from the Reformed Church tradition who has been extensively researching postmodern thought of the present era in relation to Christianity. He concludes: "I want to suggest that, quite, unlike the anti-institutional mentality of postmodern 'spirituality' it is actually a robust, vibrant, liturgical church that speaks meaning in and to a postmodern world."<sup>2</sup>

There is a great temptation among Christians on both the right and the left to attack the emerging postmodern ideas. The tendency to dissect, atomize, analyze, and criticize a

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<sup>1</sup> Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church*, 71.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 11.

concept so as to win the argument is not a gospel imperative, but rather, as McLaren notes, flows from a modern worldview. The modernist pursuit of unchallengeable foundations, the lock-tight linear thinking, and the focus on empirically observable data led to self assurance that can degenerate into a pursuit of conquest. In this case it becomes an intellectual conquest. Indeed, the tenets of the postmodern viewpoints may have many things that are not correct, but the gospel throughout history has entered cultures and captivated minds from within cultural contexts. The gospel does not lead to political, cultural or intellectual conquest. The victory of the cross and resurrection speak of the coming of the Kingdom in ways that transcend these institutional structures, though surely in ways that speak to them. The gospel does not come to dominate and control, but rather to invite. In approaching the postmodern world, the better strategy is to seek the touch points of the gospel with postmodern thought. As noted above, this allows certain aspects of the gospel to speak to the current context. This is what the gospel has done in the history of the church in ages past. Thus the desire to win the argument may have much more to do with the modern worldview than it has to do with the gospel. This can be seen not only in the propensity of some to attack postmodern ideas, but also in the internal struggles within Christendom, namely the conflicts that have emerged between liberals and conservatives. In the present day, there is great potential for the breadth of the gospel, held in the broad theological understanding of the Episcopal Church in a postmodern theological context, to transcend differences commonly described as liberal and conservative. There is great potential for the Episcopal church to offer the increasingly postmodern world a fresh look at the gospel in ways that show its relevance and lead to

fruitful mission in both word and deed.

Others have noted the potential in this postmodern climate to find unity in the church. Grenz writes,

One theme running through these pages is the thesis, which has in recent years been gaining a wide hearing, that the labels “liberal” and “conservative”—or “left” and “right” as they have commonly come to be defined—were the product of a philosophical problematic that emerged with the Enlightenment and, in turn, defined theology, both positively and negatively, throughout the modern era but especially since the mid-nineteenth century. With the waning of the modern theological agenda, however, the commonly cited two-party dichotomy of “liberal versus conservative” is growing increasingly passé. Today, any approach that maps the theological landscape by placing thinkers and movements along a one-dimensional spectrum running from left to right is suspect if for no other reason than because it is simply a particular application of the two-party model.<sup>3</sup>

Campbell notes that the definition of the gospel is at the heart of the division in the mainline and Anglican denominations, such as the Episcopal Church:

Another contemporary reason for a renewed discernment of the basic Christian message, the gospel, at the beginning of the third Christian millennium has to do with the particular crises faced now by old-line Protestant and Anglican churches in the United States and elsewhere. A series of divisive issues—such as the issues of whether churches should ordain gay and lesbian persons, and whether clergy should be authorized by the church to perform unions of gay and lesbian persons—have divided these churches in recent decades...the issue is not, strictly speaking, what constitutes sin, but is rather how tight or specific a definition of sin and of the gospel is necessary to define Christian unity or to serve as grounds for the division of Christian communities.<sup>4</sup>

Fueling the division are assumptions about those on the “other side” of the issue. It might be possible that assumptions are being made about what those who hold differing views on such issues believe about the gospel. When the word gospel is used but not clearly defined this can lead to assumptions and misunderstanding. The next chapter will explore how

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<sup>3</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 336.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, *The Gospel in Christian Traditions*, 19-20.

diocesan bishops in the present day Episcopal Church view the gospel, but here it is important to note that discovering greater unity about the gospel has the potential to lead to greater unity in the church, even where serious disagreements reign.

As noted with examples in the previous chapter, Murphy writes of the conservative and liberal divide at length in her book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*. Murphy takes a view of postmodernity focused on North America and the United Kingdom, rather than the Continental philosophers such as those cited in the previous chapter. She sees a paradigm shift in thought in the major academic fields, calling what she observes “Anglo-American Postmodernity”. She finds a shift away from foundationalism to be evidence of a shift among Anglo-Americans away from modernism. She notes: two aspects of foundationalism. The first is that of an indubitable foundation and the other is one-way reasoning.<sup>5</sup> Next Murphy notes how conservative and liberal theologies both utilize these modern worldview concepts. For conservatives she notes that Scripture has become the unchallengeable foundation:

One of the central tenets of fundamentalism is the verbal inspiration of Scripture and its complete inerrancy. It is claimed by some critics of the inerrantists that strict doctrines of inerrancy did not appear in Christian history until the modern period.” Conservatives who hold the doctrine, however, claim that it has been the traditional understanding of the nature of Scripture. Notice that foundationalist epistemology explains why conservatives would want to be able to make such radical claims about the truth of Scripture: if Scripture is to provide an indubitable foundation for theological construction, then all of its teachings must be free from error, lest the theologian make erroneous judgments in distinguishing true teachings from false ones or essential teachings from incidental cultural assumptions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

Murphy also believes that conservatives have another hallmark of foundationalism in that they utilize one-way reasoning, moving from the specifics of Scripture to doctrinal positions:

Early conservative theologians vary in their accounts of the means of construction from Scripture to theology. They tend to speak rather indiscriminately of induction, of deduction, and of theology as mere organization of the facts of Scripture. But in all cases the assumed direction of reasoning is what the foundationalist theory would lead us to expect: from the scriptural foundation to the higher levels of doctrine and theology, never from doctrine to the truth or meaning of the texts.<sup>7</sup>

Thus Murphy suggests that conservative, Scripture based theologies flow from modern worldview thinking.

But Murphy finds the same modern worldview reasoning in liberal theologies as well. For them, beginning with Schleiermacher, the unassailable foundation is experience:

[Schleiermacher] put forward the view that the essence of religion (of all religion, not just Christianity) is a certain sort of feeling or awareness. He described this feeling differently over the years of his theological career: as “intuition of the infinite,” as “immediate perception of the universe and of the existence all finite things in and through the infinite,” as “immediate consciousness the deity,” and finally in his mature work as “awareness of absolute dependence,” or what he took to be the same, as “God consciousness.”... Schleiermacher’s achievement in the systematic theology of his later years was to show that all legitimate doctrines were derivable from this foundational experience.<sup>8</sup>

Murphy also finds the earmark of foundationalist thinking in Schleiermacher’s focus on all religious experience, not just Christianity:

Now, in what sense is this a foundationalist use of experience for theology? Recall the criteria I set out earlier: First, the experience has to be unchallengeable. For Schleiermacher’s purposes this means it must be universal and unmediated. It is universal in the sense that while it is colored differently in different cultures—and for Christians, especially by the influence of Jesus—it is the common source of all

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<sup>7</sup> Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

religions. It is a kind of experience that is available in principle to all human beings, not just Christians.<sup>9</sup>

Murphy finds evidence of one-way reasoning in liberal theology just as it was evident in conservative theology. Here liberals are described as reasoning from experience to doctrine and never the other way around:

The second criterion for foundationalist epistemology is one-way reasoning. This requirement is satisfied in Schleiermacher's system in that doctrine is to be evaluated in light of experience, never the reverse. So God-consciousness is the foundation of all religion; first-order religious language (prayer, preaching, and so forth), as well as doctrine and theology, are all built up from this experience. Liberal theologians since Schleiermacher have followed him in taking human religious experience or awareness as a universal feature of human life and in supposing that this religious self-consciousness was to be the starting point for theology.<sup>10</sup>

Thus both liberals and conservatives are using a modern worldview way of reasoning by seeking to build their theological constructs on unassailable foundations and by means of utilizing one-way reasoning. Grenz and Franke have also found both conservatives and liberals to be building their theological constructs on modernist thinking:

This foundationalist conception of knowledge came to dominate the discipline of theology as theologians reshaped the theological structure in accordance with this rationalist approach. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the foundationalist impulse produced a theological division in the Anglo-American context between the "left" and the "right." Liberals constructed theology on the foundation of an unassailable religious experience, whereas conservatives looked to an error-free Bible as the incontrovertible foundation of their theology.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, p. 23-24.

Another aspect of modern theology that can be traced to both liberal and conservative approaches is an acceptance of a worldview grounded in science. The liberals tend to accept this uncritically, acknowledging science as fact and following Kant and his successors by relegating religion to personal experience in the subjective sphere. Yet conservatives also accept the scientific worldview in that they use the scientific method to defend the faith in traditional apologetics. Smith writes, “Our Christian faith—and correlatively, our account of apologetics—is tainted by modernism when we fail to appreciate the effects of sin on reason.”<sup>12</sup> In traditional evangelical apologetics evidence is presented to build a case for faith by means of the one-way reasoning of the modern worldview. Robert Webber notes the modernist thinking of both sides: “For liberals, reason led to the denial of a supernatural Christianity and to the teaching of Christianity as myth. For conservatives, the emphasis on reason led to a proof-oriented Christianity, to ‘evidence that demands a verdict.’”<sup>13</sup>

With the rise of the postmodern critic outlined in the previous chapter the modern worldview is increasingly being challenged. As noted in that last chapter, some have said we live in an era of a “chastened reason” or a “chastened view of science.”<sup>14</sup>

The Enlightenment epistemological foundation consists of a set of incontestable beliefs or unassailable first principles on the basis of which the pursuit of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles must be universal, objective, and discernible to any rational person.... In the postmodern context, however, foundationalism is in dramatic retreat, as its assertions about the objectivity, certainty, and universality have come under withering critique. The

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 27, 247.

demise of foundationalism carries fundamental and far-reaching implications for theological method.<sup>15</sup>

As that worldview crumbles so too does the gospel proclamation, to the extent that the gospel is hitched to a modern worldview. The challenge for the church in the present era is not to find modernist ways to attack postmodern thought, but rather to find connections with postmodern thought and the gospel. Just as aspects of the gospel have connected with cultures and worldviews at various touch points in ages past, certain aspects of the gospel can connect with the postmodern worldview. The critical question is “How does the gospel speak to an increasingly postmodern world?”

### **The Postmodern Critique and the Potential for the Gospel**

Exploring some of the critiques of modern thought and their gospel implications suggests that there is an opportunity for the gospel to spread and have profound impact in an increasingly postmodern world. There are also several ways in which the Episcopal Church is uniquely positioned to proclaim the gospel with fresh relevance in this context. This can be seen by examining three aspects of the postmodern critique: deconstructionism, the challenge to metanarratives and the demise of foundationalism leading to a new way of discerning truth.

Deconstruction offers a “devil’s advocate” approach that takes the other side of a commonly accepted viewpoint. It challenges persons to look at the complexity of the issue and not merely follow the crowd in belief. Deconstruction suggests humility and that people in our world today may not have everything figured out. It reminds one of the danger of oversimplifying complex issues. Deconstruction suggests a truth that is contrary

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<sup>15</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 23-24.

to the accepted norm, a truth that has been hidden away as other aspects have been emphasized. Caputo notes this: “Contrary to what you may have read in some Christian presses, the “other” is not the devil himself but a figure of the truth, a truth that has been safely closeted away or repressed. . . Things get deconstructed by the event of truth.”<sup>16</sup> This truth event can lead to a transformation which Caputo calls a *metanoia* referring to the Greek word translated repentance:

So the “event” need not be delivered by a thunderbolt. It gradually, quietly overtakes us, grows on us, until at a certain point we realize that everything has been transformed. In a deconstruction, our lives, our beliefs, and our practices are not destroyed but forced to reform and reconfigure—which is risky business. In the New Testament this is called *metanoia*, or undergoing a fundamental change of heart.<sup>17</sup>

Deconstruction then has a way of reminding people of truths which they have forgotten. It can be a counter to blindly moving forward, stuck in the ways and thinking of the past. The church needs this kind of deconstruction as it has the tendency to get locked in to certain ways of proclaiming the gospel, and it is often slow to change the emphasis of gospel proclamation as the surrounding cultures and worldviews change. This kind of deconstruction can help keep the gospel fresh and relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Smith writes of deconstruction noting the oft cited phrase of Derrida, “there is nothing outside the text.” Smith takes this to mean that everything is interpretation. Each person brings a certain set of presuppositions, education and background that leads each person to a certain interpretation of the facts seen in the world around. Focusing on the

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<sup>16</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

text, Derrida is claiming that language becomes such a lens through which each person views the world:

When Derrida claims that there is nothing outside the text, he means there is no reality that is not always already interpreted through the mediating lens of language. Textuality, for Derrida, is linked to interpretation. To claim that there is nothing outside the text is to say that everything is a text, which means not that everything is a book, or that we live within a giant, all-encompassing book, but rather that everything must be interpreted in order to be experienced.<sup>18</sup>

This is often considered problematic by conservative Christians, for if everything is interpretation then the gospel is also interpreted. Its primacy, truth and application to all are seen by some to be called into question. Smith makes an interesting point related to this. He suggests that this concern stems not from the gospel or the New Testament but rather from a modern worldview way of looking at the gospel:

Christians who become skittish about the claim that everything is interpretation are usually hanging on to a very modern notion of knowledge, one that claims something is true only insofar as it can be universally known by all people at all times, in all places. On this account the truth of the gospel—that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—is taken to be objectively true and thus capable of rational demonstration. (Classical apologetics buys this epistemology, or theory of knowledge.) If we say that the gospel is an interpretation, then it is not objectively true in the traditional or modern sense of being self-evident or universally demonstrable. The problem with this very construal of the gospel is that it doesn't match up with the witness of the New Testament.<sup>19</sup>

Smith goes on to note that not everyone in the Gospels interprets the same events in the same way. Thus the centurion at the foot of the cross sees the same thing that the chief priests see and yet each draws differing conclusions. Smith sees this as an example of Derrida's interpretative point: "the very experience of the things themselves is a matter of

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

interpretation.”<sup>20</sup> In noting this, Christians might find a touch point with the postmodern world and the proclamation of the gospel. As postmoderns observe that all is interpretation, Christians can find a point of agreement in seeing the role of interpretation in the Gospel stories. The gospel can also offer an interpretative framework. And as presently de-emphasized aspects of the gospel are brought to light by a deconstructing method there is the potential for life-transformation in the form of *metanoia* repentance. Such an approach could lead to a rediscovery of aspects of the gospel long neglected. Smith also suggests that a “deconstructive” church seeking the text to interpret the world would employ ancient texts and the use of the tradition of the lectionary to avoid individualistic interpretations.<sup>21</sup> That this is a strength of the Episcopal Church suggests once again the potential the Episcopal Church has for postmodern gospel proclamation.

Another aspect of the postmodern critique involves the incredulity toward meta-narratives. This does present problems if one conceives of faith or the gospel as a metanarrative. While it is may be appropriate for Christians to believe it is, this is not necessary in gospel proclamation. In fact, Smith suggests that what is really meant by the incredulity toward metanarratives is not a rejection of grand stories that explain everything, but rather of a particular type of grand story, one that is legitimized in a specific way. The postmodern challenge leveled at metanarratives in the modern world lays down the gauntlet before science and the scientific method, not before religion which is no longer seen in the modern world as the reigning metanarrative. Smith suggests that

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 49.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Lyotard's incredulity toward metanarratives is a concern for grand stories that explain everything and seek to "legitimate or prove the story's claim by an appeal to universal reason."<sup>22</sup> Smith suggests that the postmodern critique challenges science as a metanarrative.

Modernity, then, appeals to science to legitimate its claim—and by "science" we simply mean the notion of a universal, autonomous reason. Science, then, is opposed to narrative, which attempts not to prove its claims but rather to proclaim them within a story. But postmodernism, according to Lyotard, has suggested that the emperor of modernity has no clothes! At the heart of the postmodern critique of modernity is an unveiling of the way that science—which is so critical of the "fables" of narrative—is itself grounded in a narrative.<sup>23</sup>

This leads not to the conclusion to reject all metanarratives, but rather to acknowledge that all metanarratives are grounded in story and narrative. Science is no exception.

Postmodernism is not incredulity toward narrative or myth; on the contrary, it unveils that all knowledge is grounded in such. . . . What characterizes the postmodern condition, then, is not a rejection of grand stories in terms of scope or in the sense of epic claims, but rather an unveiling of the fact that all knowledge is rooted in some narrative or myth.<sup>24</sup>

This aspect of the postmodern critique has the effect of leveling the playing field. Science still has a seat at the table of public opinion, but is no longer qualified to control the debate. Religion, and more specifically Christianity, now may also have a seat at the table as representative of a way of thinking. This new "local" narrative approach offers possibilities for unapologetic gospel proclamation from that sphere to the marketplace of

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

ideas, offering an invitation to others to join the new, twenty-first century gospel community. Grenz writes,

The relativistic pluralism of late modernity was highly individualistic; it elevated personal taste and personal choice as the be-all and end-all. Its maxims were “To each his/her own” and “Everyone has a right to his/her own opinion.’ The postmodern consciousness, in contrast, focuses on the group. Postmoderns live in self-contained social groups, each of which has its own language, beliefs, and values. As a result, postmodern relativistic pluralism seeks to give place to the “local” nature of truth. Beliefs are held to be true within the context of the communities that espouse them.<sup>25</sup>

Thus one can proclaim the gospel as true in the sense that it is demonstrating the beliefs held to be true in the twenty-first century gospel-centered community of faith.

Foundationalism is a third aspect of the modern worldview in decline. Murphy has noted how conservatives and liberals have followed two different tracks in response to the rise of the modern worldview. The tracks were so different as to be diametrically opposed at times. Yet both tracks ran on the foundation of the modern worldview. With that foundation, and the concept of intellectual foundations crumbling, there is now the possibility of merging the tracks back together. What is needed for the Episcopal Church as well as conservative and liberal Christians of all denominations is a way forward with the gospel in the twenty-first century that is not locked into the modern way of thinking. This would suggest not starting from an indubitable foundation and following linear thinking to a grand metanarrative. Another approach has been suggested for discerning truth which is not far from a three-legged stool that does seek a solid foundation, albeit a triple one. Similarly scholars today have proposed the concept of a net or web:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure

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<sup>25</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 14-15.

mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions re-adjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Reevaluation of some statements entails re-evaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections—the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system. . . . But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

This image of the net or field suggests multiple points held in tension and creating boundaries. The experiences observed suggest re-adjustments to the boundaries. Perhaps the touch points of the gospel as proposed in Scripture, Tradition and Reason provide points on such a web. The sources that have been considered here are not a single solitary foundation. The following have been touch points for the net of gospel truth: the remnants of oral tradition as found in the *kerygma* embedded in hymns recorded by Paul in the New Testament and in speeches given by the Apostles as recorded by Luke in Acts; the New Testament gospels themselves are witnesses recording their witness and also, many surmise, the earlier witness of a document called Q; the New Testament as a whole bears witness; the first proto-orthodox communities bear witness, each preserving the witness of a particular Apostolic school or Gospel or Epistle that would form part of the New Testament; the church fathers writing letters and citing the Apostolic Gospel bear witness; the formation of the New Testament canon taking careful consideration of those works that were Apostolic, thereby gospel-centered, were affirmed and bear witness; the early rules of faith, the creeds, and the ancient liturgies bear witness; there is the witness of the

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<sup>26</sup>W. V. O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 42-43. Cited in Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 88-89.

theologians of the church throughout the ages, each touching a point of the gospel. Each of these points correlates to the others. Each bears witness in relation to the others. Together they create a field with boundaries, broad boundaries, but boundaries nonetheless.

Together they suggest the good news of Jesus Christ. As more is discovered about one, re-adjustments can be made to others. Another way of thinking about the “net of truth” as suggested above is to consider the gospel content itself as a net. Here the net includes the following points: God as the Almighty Creator, King of kings; the life of Jesus Christ bringing the presence of the King to those on earth; the death/resurrection/ascension of Jesus; the nearness of the Kingdom of God through the Holy Spirit and in Jesus; the forgiveness of sin extended through the cross; the fulfillment of Scripture; the transformational response; and the future hope of Christ’s return.

Perhaps these nets transcend the controversies of the church. Perhaps they suggest boundaries for the church that are large enough to be generous and inclusive, but not lacking boundaries altogether and thereby losing the church’s gospel identity. Perhaps these suggest a way forward where other controversial and conflicting views could be held in tension as long as these points are affirmed.

In considering the modernist attachment to one-way thinking, there comes the suggestion that in an increasingly postmodern world, at the very least, a two way reasoning be considered. Thus for conservatives who base doctrine on either inductive or deductive reasoning from Scripture to doctrine, the gospel offers another paradigm. A gospel paradigm suggests the interpretative framework. How one reads and interprets Scripture is guided by the gospel. This follows logically, since as noted above, the gospel

itself, predates the writing of Scripture and the formation of the New Testament canon. And the gospel in the form of authentically Apostolic Christ-centeredness guided the process of canonization.<sup>27</sup> The books chosen for inclusion in the New Testament Canon came to be those that consistently proclaimed the gospel. Therefore, to interpret these writings, the gospel should be paramount.

For liberals the gospel can interpret experience. Rather than seeking a universal experience as an indubitable foundation, there is a freedom to explore where the gospel will lead the Christian in experience. In an increasing postmodern world with “local” ideologies the gospel simply makes the Christian claim for truth. The experience of the Presence of God leading to a transformative life and a transformative social action community is a possible fruitful direction for understanding the church in the twenty-first century.

### **Radical Orthodoxy**

Some have suggested a new way of understanding the Christian gospel in the postmodern world. This new theology seeks to transcend conservative-liberal differences and it deliberately takes the postmodern critique into account. This interesting new development has been called Radical Orthodoxy. Leaders of this movement prefer not to refer to it as a school or even a movement at all, but rather a loose tendency or an

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<sup>27</sup> Lee Martin McDonald, “Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: the Criteria Question,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 428.

approach—a theological sensibility or a task.<sup>28</sup> This is not a list of doctrines or criteria erected as a new set of fundamentals.<sup>29</sup> Radical Orthodoxy seeks to recover ancient pre-modern traditions but not just for the sake of being nostalgic but rather to radically rethink the tradition.<sup>30</sup> It has received a remarkably wide acceptance in the contemporary theological scene.<sup>31</sup> This emerging theological task is rooted in Anglican sensibilities, and is both postmodern and gospel-centered.

That it has Anglican roots is evident. The movement emerged in Great Britain from Cambridge and is described as “largely Anglican.”<sup>32</sup> Several Anglican scholars are involved with the movement. In a seminal work of the movement, a collection of essays espousing the theology entitled, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, the co editors, John Milbank (largely credited with founding Radical Orthodoxy), Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward note of the twelve authors: “Seven of the contributors to this volume are Anglican, all of a High Church persuasion; five contributors are Roman Catholic.”<sup>33</sup> Retiring Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams is cited as someone who influenced the volume and would be sympathetic to much but not all of it.<sup>34</sup> Thus Radical Orthodoxy

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<sup>28</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Milbank, John, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

finds itself at home within an Anglican, thereby Episcopal ethos. This is confirmed by its inclusion of the Eucharist as a central focus<sup>35</sup> as well as a strong emphasis on the sacramental.<sup>36</sup>

Besides its Anglican roots, Radical Orthodoxy is a movement that takes into account the critique of modernist thought that postmodern philosophy raises about reason in the present day. The provocative claim that “once there was no ‘secular’” is a central tenet of the movement as it was penned by John Milbank in his groundbreaking work, *Theology and Social Theory*.<sup>37</sup> According to Smith, that work that has been said to “land with considerable impact on contemporary theology”<sup>38</sup> and be a “tome that became something of a manifesto for an agenda that would later be described as Radical Orthodoxy,” has led to Radical Orthodoxy becoming “arguably the most discussed and provocative tendency in Anglophone theology,” according to Simon Oliver.<sup>39</sup> In that book and in subsequent works under the Radical Orthodoxy umbrella, the claim is made that the modern worldview concept of universal reason is flawed and intellectually bankrupt. “In the United States, the march of the secular finds its expression in the persistent project to neutralize the public sphere, hoping to keep this pristine space unpolluted by the

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 43.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 9.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Oliver, “Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: from Participation to Late Modernity,” in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, eds. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.

prejudices of concrete religious faith.”<sup>40</sup> Thus taking seriously the postmodern critique of Continental philosophers and postmodern thought as detailed in the previous chapter, Radical Orthodoxy challenges the modernist assumptions by rejecting the notion of modern thought that there can be a neutral secular space uninfluenced by theological presuppositions: “In short, *there is no secular*, if by ‘secular’ we mean ‘neutral’ or ‘uncommitted’, instead, the supposedly neutral public spaces that we inhabit—in the academy or politics—are temples of other gods.”<sup>41</sup> This leads to “a refusal to concede the criteria for responsible public discourse to the supposed neutrality of the secular.”<sup>42</sup> That there is a secular neutrality is a myth<sup>43</sup> and asserting its neutrality is a philosophical/theological move intended to, as Smith puts it, “secure a universal reason that could ground a public politics.”<sup>44</sup> The creation of secular neutrality is an attempt to build an unchallengeable foundation of cognitive certainty that is rejected by Radical Orthodoxy in favor of an epistemology that “recognizes other modes of knowing.”<sup>45</sup>

Milbank argues that the secular is not simply that which is left behind once we have rid ourselves of religion and theology. The secular is not a neutral, dispassionate or objective view of ourselves and the world; it had to be created as a positive ideology. The secular view holds its own assumptions and prejudices concerning human society and nature which are no more objective or justifiable than those of the ancient and mediaeval philosophers and theologians...Milbank’s crucial point is that the secular is not simply the rolling back of a theological

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

consensus to reveal a neutral territory where we all become equal players, but the replacement of a certain view of God and creation with a different view which still makes theological claims, that is, claims about origins, purpose and transcendence.<sup>46</sup>

Evidence of this point is found in disagreement. That there is disagreement about the nature of things among those who hold the same modernist assumptions about reason and a neutral secular suggests it is not as neutral and universally acceptable as it claims. Oliver states, “Put simply, if what we mean by ‘reason’ and ‘truth’ does not depend on one’s particular perspective, circumstances, background or history, but is a matter of objective and dispassionate indifference, disagreement simply should not arise.”<sup>47</sup> The view of a “sacred versus secular” contrast is considered a false dualism by Radical Orthodoxy.<sup>48</sup> To recover thought that has not been tainted by the concept of the secular, Radical Orthodoxy places great emphasis on the works of pre-modern, early church fathers and in particular St. Augustine.<sup>49</sup> “In short, for Augustine there is no secular, nonreligious sphere as construed by modernity; there is only paganism or true worship.”<sup>50</sup> All of this is evidenced by the tendency of Radical Orthodoxy to persistently seek to undercut the vestiges of modernity, especially modernity’s uncritical appeal to reason and the foundation laid by the Enlightenment.<sup>51</sup> This leads to Radical Orthodoxy asserting a distinctly theological

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<sup>46</sup> Simon Oliver, “What is Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, ed. Milbank, 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

claim in the public arena. “RO claims that there is not a single aspect of human existence or creation that can be properly understood or described apart from the insights of revelation.”<sup>52</sup> Thus its proponents have written concerning a variety of issues in a wide range of fields, including culture, aesthetics, science, music, sex, nihilism, politics, the city, the body and others.<sup>53</sup> Radical Orthodoxy’s stance toward modernity then is aptly summarized by Smith this way,

RO [Radical Orthodoxy] is a trenchant critique of modernity as a flawed, imploding project. The key figures in RO see in modernity the institution of dualisms that are grounds for excluding the divine and the transcendent, hence modernity’s implosion or what others have called the ‘end’ of metaphysics. . . . Modern dualism, such as the opposition between faith and reason, became the rules of the game in which modern theology had to play. RO, instead of operating within those confines, questions the very rules of the game by calling into question the assumptions of modernity itself.<sup>54</sup>

Radical Orthodoxy then is calling into question the rules of the game that have excluded theology from public discourse and thereby has suggested that such a secular approach has created a worldview that is dangerously bankrupt and nihilistic.

The other tendency that is characteristic of the Radical Orthodoxy is that it rejects the liberal and conservative dualism in favor of a broader catholic understanding of the faith focused on the relevance of Jesus Christ that is based upon the gospel. Though it has Anglican roots, it is ecumenical in claiming a new kind of orthodox, a way that transcends confessional boundaries.<sup>55</sup> Milbank describes Radical Orthodoxy as an ecumenical

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<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 76.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

theology that rejects the Twentieth century theological dualisms of nature and grace as well as matter and spirit.<sup>56</sup>

A stress on the primacy of nature, the universal, and a neutral philosophy characterized the world of ‘correlationist’ theologies, which to most young scholars today appears now like a bizarre academic twilight zone inhabited by the intellectually craven and impotent. Yet conversely, over-fidesitic theologies, tending to see theology as having its own special, positive domain of concern with belief and salvation, appear now to leave the Christian with too little guidance in other domains and to hand these over to secular authority. This seems especially unsatisfactory in a world in which science, politics, the arts, and social behavior are taking increasingly novel and sometimes bizarre directions. In this situation, the thinking Christian requires a response that is not simply pure (supposed) biblicist condemnation on the one hand nor flaccid accommodation on the other.<sup>57</sup>

Radical Orthodoxy then sees the current theologies of both the conservatives and liberals to be wedded to a modernist epistemology and way of thinking, which is dangerous for the survival of such theologies. Smith summarizes, “Insofar as twentieth-century Christian theology (sometimes unwittingly) allied itself with the Enlightenment project, resigning itself to an ‘apologetic’ project of correlation with secular thought, the demise of modernity must also spell the demise of such theology.”<sup>58</sup> Smith in describing the Radical Orthodoxy stance finds liberals such as Paul Tillich and John Caputo, as well as conservatives such as Carl F. H. Henry to be captivated by the modern worldview.

This deeply modern correlationist project is replayed in much that goes under the rubric of ‘postmodern theology,’ particularly as embodied in the religious work of Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo. Determinate religious confession becomes instead, a bland ‘concern for the ultimate’ (Tillich) or a ‘passion of the impossible’ (Caputo)—which one could take to be one more version of the *theologia gloriae* devoid of the particularity of the *crucis*. In seeking to correlate the religious with

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<sup>56</sup> Milbank in the foreword to *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* by James K.A. Smith, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 10-11.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 32.

the parameters of secular reason, the Tübingen project must remove that which scandalizes the secular: the scandal of the cross...one could argue that, ironically, even fundamentalist or early evangelical theologies (such as that of Carl F. H. Henry) paid allegiance to such a project insofar as they presumed upon a neutral, 'objective' reason to warrant their theological project."<sup>59</sup>

While seeking to transcend the conservative liberal duality, Radical Orthodoxy is also a movement that fits with the broad gospel outlined in this dissertation. Smith describes it as "orthodox insofar as it seeks to be unapologetically confessional and Christian."<sup>60</sup> In the words of Milbank, Pickstock and Ward in the introduction to their book entitled *Radical Orthodoxy*, spiritualism and materialism are false alternatives.

In many ways be seen as undercutting some of the contrasts between theological liberals and conservatives. The former tend to validate what they see as the modern embrace of our finitude—as language, and as erotic and aesthetically delighting bodies, and so forth. Conservatives, however, seem still to embrace a sort of nominal ethereal distancing from these realities and a disdain for them. Radical orthodoxy, by contrast, sees the historic root of the celebration of these things in participatory philosophy and incarnational theology, even if it can acknowledge that premodern tradition never took this celebration far enough."<sup>61</sup>

Radical Orthodoxy then is seeking to recover a broad incarnational understanding that transcends the theological differences that have emerged in response to the Enlightenment.

In the book, *Radical Orthodoxy*, there is an explanation of Radical Orthodoxy that works also as a good summation of this section of the dissertation. The work begins by noting what makes it orthodox:

In what sense *orthodox* and in what sense *radical*? Orthodox in the most straightforward sense of commitment to creedal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix. But orthodox also in the more specific sense of re-affirming a

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 35.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>61</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 19.

richer and more coherent Christianity which was gradually lost sight of after the late Middle Ages. In this way the designation ‘orthodox’ here transcends confessional boundaries, since both Protestant Biblicism and post-tridentine Catholic positivist authoritarianism are seen as aberrant results of theological distortions already dominant even before the early modern period...recovering and extending a fully Christianised ontology and practical philosophy consonant with authentic Christian doctrine.<sup>62</sup>

This statement resonates with the gospel as presented in the earlier chapters. This broad creedal gospel is at the heart of the Radical Orthodoxy movement. It is radical in ways that address the increasingly postmodern world in which the church finds itself in the twenty-first century. The book, *Radical Orthodoxy*, puts it this way,

Radical first of all, in the sense of a return to patristic and medieval roots, and especially to the Augustinian vision of all knowledge as divine illumination—a notion which transcends the modern bastard dualisms of faith and reason, grace and nature. Radical, second in the sense of seeking to deploy this recovered vision systematically to criticise modern society, culture, politics, art, science and philosophy with unprecedented boldness. But radical in a third sense of realizing that via such engagements we do have also to rethink the tradition. . . . Fourth, . . . Such radicalism indeed refuses the secular, but at the same time it does ‘re-envision’ a Christianity which never sufficiently valued the mediating participatory sphere which alone can lead us to God.<sup>63</sup>

The radical aspect, as so described, roots Radical Orthodoxy in tradition, while at the same time engaging critically with the reason of the present age, specifically the postmodern critique. One finds in Radical Orthodoxy, then, an intriguingly gospel-centered project that resonates in the contemporary world, transcending the issues of conservative-liberal controversy and seeking a robust engagement with the world. This theology is relatively new and there lies ahead much work in applying this radically orthodox tendency to various aspects of thought and culture in the twenty-first century. Yet, it holds great

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<sup>62</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

promise for the Episcopal Church and the proclamation of the gospel in an increasingly postmodern world.

This chapter has suggested that there are opportunities and dangers that the church faces in the twenty-first century. This is especially true for the Episcopal Church, where the conservative-liberal dualistic debates have continued. Individuals, parishes and even entire diocese have disassociated themselves with the Episcopal Church and aligned with various international Anglican entities. As court battles ensue over property, and debates continue over the proposed Anglican covenant, perhaps the focus on all sides of the Episcopal Church has drifted too far from the gospel. Perhaps the Episcopal Church finds itself still in the shackles of modernist thinking, while the postmodern world awaits a present day proclamation of the gospel that connects with relevance to the questions it is asking, even though it may not expect relevance from churches of the twenty-first century. The Episcopal Church has an opportunity to speak into the present day context, having as the Church does a tradition that is rooted in the pre-modern, and broad in its theology. This is precisely what many of the postmodern scholars suggest is that for which the postmodern world longs. A renewed fruitful mission awaits, if the Episcopal Church can reclaim gospel unity and focus attention on gospel proclamation. There is potential for renewed unity in some of the emerging postmodern theologies such as Radical Orthodoxy. This is an era where complexities are being recognized along with the dangers of oversimplification. This is an era that calls for nothing less than humility on all sides.

## CHAPTER 7

### PRESENT STATE OF GOSPEL INTERPRETATION IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

As has been presented in the previous chapters, the gospel must be translated into each culture. As the “reason” of the twenty-first century has been considered, it has become clear that interpretation has tremendous bearing on the proclamation and reception of the gospel. The postmodern critique has gone so far as to suggest that everything is interpretation, that is, that “there is nothing outside of the text.” It is therefore appropriate to explore the Episcopal Church’s interpretation of the gospel in the present day. To explore this question, this dissertation will consider the interpretation of the diocesan bishops of the Episcopal Church.

Episcopal Church governance places a diocesan bishop as overseer of the basic unit of the church, the diocese. In chapter four, the *Book of Common Prayer’s* charge to the bishop was considered. There it was noted that the consecration service for a bishop as directed in the *Book of Common Prayer* specifically charges the bishop with the duty of interpreting the gospel: “A bishop in God’s holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ’s sovereignty as Lord of lords and Kings of kings. You are called to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 517 and 531.

Thus it is the specific role of a bishop, as the prayer book dictates, to guard the truths of the gospel—that Christ is the sovereign “Lord of lords and King of kings.” The bishop is called to be “one with the apostles” in proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and in guarding the “faith, unity and discipline of the Church.” Thus, the bishops perform a crucial gospel function; they are entrusted with the treasure of the gospel for the church and for its proclamation as they interpret it into the culture. It is therefore important to explore the current view of the bishops regarding interpreting the gospel in the present day context.

### **The Survey and the Bishops in the Survey Sample**

Given the controversies of the Episcopal Church over the past several years and listening to the rhetoric, one might wonder if there is any gospel center in the Church that remains. The Episcopal Church at times can feel very diverse and even fragmented. At the time of writing of this dissertation in the year 2012, a survey of diocesan bishops was done in order to take the pulse of the church. This chapter will analyze the results of that survey and extrapolate them with respect to the gospel of Scripture, tradition and reason as detailed in the previous chapters.

The survey asked each bishop to produce a paragraph of what they understood the gospel to be and then to state why they think that gospel, as they have defined it, is good news. They were also asked to rank various categories as to how pertinent certain concepts were to the gospel. Finally, they were asked about the gospel in their ministry and the life of the church.

The survey sample was fourteen percent of all the diocesan bishops. The bishops completing the survey represent all but one of the nine provinces of the Episcopal Church. The only province not represented is province six (Northwest Province) which includes the following states: Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming. All other regions of the United States were represented as well as the province outside of the United States which is located in Central/South America. The bishops in the survey had been in their office from less than a year to fifteen years. The average of all bishops' tenure was 5.75 years. In addition, 73.3 percent of the bishops surveyed had earned at least one advanced degree from an Episcopal Seminary. The highest concentration was in Virginia Theological Seminary, General Theological Seminary and Seabury-Western Seminary. Other seminaries from which these bishops had earned degrees included Nashotah House, Seminary of the Southwest, Sewanee, Oxford, Harvard, Boston University and a few others. The complete answers regarding gospel content are included in the Appendix. The following will summarize the findings.

### **Ranking Areas of Gospel Emphasis by the Bishops**

To gauge the particular inclinations of bishops to emphasize certain aspects of the gospel over others, that is, to see which aspects of a broad gospel the diocesan bishops of the Episcopal Church focus upon, a ranking system was used. Bishops were asked to rank from one to ten how central to the gospel certain concepts were, with one being "the gospel is not about this" and ten being "the gospel is all about this." The thirteen categories in the order they appeared on the survey were: forgiveness of sin, personal salvation, social justice, acceptance/tolerance, Kingdom of God, getting into heaven,

spiritual formation, transformation of the individual, transformation of society, justification/the cross, resurrection/new life, the gift of the Holy Spirit and Jesus as the promised Messiah. Some felt this exercise was unhelpful and 27 percent ranked at least eleven of the thirteen categories with a ten, and fourteen percent ranked all categories with a ten.

However a clear emphasis still emerges when all responses are averaged for each category. The following shows the breakdown grouped into categories ranked nine and higher, from 8.5 to 8.9, from 8.0 to 8.4 and below eight.

**Average Score, Weight Given to Categories by Diocesan Bishops**

Category	Average Score Assigned
Kingdom of God	9.9
Resurrection New Life	9.5
Jesus as Promised Messiah	9.1
Forgiveness	8.9
Holy Spirit	8.7
Transformation of Individuals	8.7
Social Justice	8.4
Transformation of Society	8.2
Personal Salvation	8.1
Justification/Cross	8.0
Spiritual Formation	7.7
Acceptance/Tolerance	7.3
Getting Into Heaven	5.1

As noted earlier in this dissertation, the concept of “Kingdom of God” was specifically part of the gospel in the Gospels and central to Jesus’ proclamation. That this ranks highest

would indicate that this is kept in mind by the bishops as they seek to interpret the gospel to the present day world. As noted in the previous chapter, the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ was essential to the Apostolic gospel proclamation. This was ranked the second highest category of emphasis, while the third category is Jesus as the promised Messiah. These top three categories suggest a strong grounding in the Apostolic gospel, the gospel in the Gospels and the tradition of the early church, ranking above nine out of ten.

The second grouping, which scored on average from 8.5 to 8.9, also elucidates central gospel elements as put forth in this dissertation. Ranking 4<sup>th</sup> is “forgiveness”. This recalls the concept of “for our sins” that was prominent in the earliest oral traditions regarding the meaning of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. However, the category entitled “justification/cross” appears in the next grouping, gathering a score of only eight out of ten. This would tend to suggest the emphasis that many of the bishops had in mind with the “forgiveness” category was more along the lines of being enabled to forgive others just as one has been forgiven by God. This follows as the other two categories in this second highest grouping are directly about that kind of a result in the believer’s life: the Holy Spirit and Individual transformation. The individual transformation along with the sanctifying role of the Spirit suggest the transformation of life contained in the concept of repentance and the call for response in the broad gospel as defined in this dissertation. The bishops of the church clearly see this as a continuing vital aspect of the proclamation and effect of the gospel.

Considering these first two groupings of the highest ranked categories suggests an emphasis on the gospel as Christ-centered in the resurrection, Messianic in aspects of Jesus' life, and related to the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. These also suggest an emphasis on the transformative nature of the gospel in freeing one to forgive as one has been forgiven, leading to transformation of life and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also brings the concept of the nearness of Christ the King and God's Kingdom. Thus based upon this ranking exercise, the diocesan bishops of the Episcopal Church are focused upon a gospel that exalts Christ the King, who calls for and ushers in transformation of life.

The next grouping includes those categories receiving an average score from 8.0 to 8.4. This category still receives a high rank of at least eight out of ten but, clearly not as high as the concepts just detailed, in the minds of all bishops surveyed. What is interesting in this set is that aspects of the gospel message often associated with two different poles of the theological spectrum both find a lower emphasis. The concepts of social justice and transformation of society are hallmarks of a more liberal theology that emphasizes action and sharing the love of Christ in the world through ministering to those in need and seeking relief for those who are oppressed. These categories received a rank of 8.4 and 8.2 respectively. This would tend to suggest an action oriented response to the gospel is present but not as highly emphasized as the life changing ministry of Jesus. In contrast, the concepts of personal salvation and justification/cross are hallmarks of a more conservative theology that might emphasize the personal implications of the "plan of salvation". These concepts ranked lower in priority at 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> out of thirteen. These categories are

reminiscent of the “for our sins” aspect of the gospel and while still important to the bishops, find a lower emphasis in the present day Episcopal Church.

The final grouping of the ranking of gospel categories is the lowest with those which received an average score below eight. These comprise the bottom three in priority and they are: spiritual formation (ranked 7.7), acceptance tolerance (ranked 7.3) and getting into heaven (ranked 5.1). Though the first two ranked higher than seven out of ten, they still appear as the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> out of 13 in priority suggesting a much lower emphasis. It is interesting that the category of spiritual formation ranks above acceptance/tolerance. Both categories fall under the concept of repentance/response/call to new life. The work of God in forming the individual relates to sanctification of the individual. Yet this is also true of acceptance and tolerance. Presumably as one grows in Christ, one would develop the character of Christ, and reflect the love of Christ outwardly to welcome all. This is clearly part of the gospel *metanoia*, having a change of heart to love others as Christ loved us. Both of these issues are topics of discussion in the Christian climate of the twenty-first century and yet both are seen as lower in emphasis overall by the bishops taking this survey.

Ranking dead last is the concept of getting into heaven. This category received scores ranging from one to ten. There is less agreement among the bishops about this category. Some see this as an aspect of the gospel while others do not. The typical “plan of salvation” approach to the gospel is clearly out of favor among some of the bishops, but not all bishops within the Episcopal Church.

Taken as a whole, the rankings suggest a gospel priority that is consonant with the gospel in the Gospels and the Apostolic gospel of tradition. The emphasis in this survey falls in line with that gospel, though suggests some areas of priority in how the bishops understand the gospel. The priority is given to Christ, the Kingdom of God and the transformation that comes through the Presence of the Holy Spirit. This certainly resonates with the gospel in the Gospels.

### **In Their Own Words: Bishops Describing the Gospel**

The first question on the survey asked the bishops to write their understanding of the gospel in a paragraph. The complete answers are included in the Appendix. An analysis of those answers with respect to the gospel confirms the results of the ranking exercise, but adds some further clarification with some other areas of emphasis.

The answers ranged from a single sentence such as: “God has come to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus, has promised to love, forgive and remain with us always – into eternity,” to a full sermon given in explanation of Christ’s death for our sins which results in sanctification, referenced in Hebrews 10:10, which reads, “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” There were a number of gospel themes that consistently are mentioned and some range of difference in areas of emphasis. All responders mention Jesus Christ by name. It clearly stands out in reading these descriptions of the gospel that the earthly ministry of Jesus is kept in mind for these bishops, and for many of them the concept of Jesus’ death “for our sins” is central. There is also frequent mention of this offering of Christ as showing God’s love.

The centrality of the concept of “for our sins” appears in nearly all of the bishops’ answers. Sometimes this is present by means of mentioning the concept of reconciliation. One respondent referenced II Corinthians 5 which he said “speaks of the new creation given by God being in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” Another typical example is: “The Gospels tell of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Holy Scripture (Old and New Testaments) is the story of God’s mission of reconciliation and restoration of all people to unity with God.” Another respondent states: “The Word of God became a human being to reconcile humans to God and to one another.” God dealing with our sins is described explicitly by several: “God created us to live in harmony with himself, with one another, and with nature. Human sin has shattered this intended harmony. . . . Jesus’ death rescues us from sin.” Sometimes the concept is referenced as Jesus making an offering for our sins, as with this respondent: “[Jesus is there to] offer up his body as a sacrifice for our sin.” Another bishop wrote, “Jesus made the offering which we could not make and in him we are freed from the power of sin and reconciled to God.” Another cited the Eucharistic prayer: “When we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death (God) in his infinite mercy sent his only and eternal son, Jesus Christ, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us to reconcile us to . . . the God and Father of all.”

Another prominent theme was the love of God. This is often stated as the motive of the offering of Christ or that Christ’s death shows that love. One writes the entire answer to this question as: “The gospel is the revelation of God’s pure love and grace gifted to us through Jesus Christ.” Another wrote on this point, “The nature of God which is revealed in Jesus is that God is love.” One bishop wrote, “But offering his (Jesus’) body showed the

depth of God's love for us." Another bishop commented, "The Gospel is God's encounter with humanity and the proclamation that all are chosen and included in the love of God."

The Kingdom of God which ranked number one in the ranking exercise does not feature so prominently in the answers to this open-ended question. It is present in a few of the responses however: "Jesus is the bringer and bearer of that love and inclusion; that all of us are welcomed into the Kingdom of God's Grace." Another respondent remarked, "In his (Jesus') preaching, teaching and actions he invited people to live into the reign of God..." Another affirmed this point of the gospel: "The redemption wrought in Christ is not simply personal salvation (it is indeed that, of course), but more: God inaugurates the Kingdom..." One bishop mentions that in Christ persons become "heirs of God's Kingdom." Thus while present in a few of the responses this concept is not prominent. Often the words are mentioned more in the context of making another point.

The Apostolic focus on the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus is also present but not nearly as central as the themes of "for our sins" and love, though a focus on the incarnation is very frequent. Here is one example: "The Gospels tell of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Another wrote, "God's ultimate response came in the incarnation of the Word: God took human flesh, lived, died and rose." One bishop commented, "The divine son became human, so that in him human beings might be adopted as children of God and be made heirs of God's kingdom."

Another theme that emerges less frequently is that of relationship to God. Sometimes it is present in the mention of rescue or salvation, sometimes it is personal, and sometimes conceived in corporate terms. One bishop said, "God loves us without strings

attached, and offers us a relationship with himself in Jesus Christ.” Another offered, “The gospel is inspired by the Holy Spirit to bring each generation into relationship with Jesus Christ, the church and the whole people of God.” Consistent with these is the following comment: “Human beings are created in the image of God and find their highest fulfillment in communion with God. But that image and that communion are distorted by sin... We are radically alienated from God and from one another. But God, on his own initiative and operating out of sheer infinite love, has acted to save us from our hopeless state.”

Other themes, such as that of social action and justice that were lower priorities in the rankings, emerge more strongly in the verbiage of the bishops. This is often linked to sanctification. One bishop noted, “The Good News is that we are loved, and are thereby freed to love others without regard to any notion of merit or privilege.” Another wrote, “Jesus came that we might have life, abundant life. He lived as a Jewish rabbi, in his preaching, teaching and actions he invited people to live into the reign of God and suggested that living well in the reign of God was about sharing what you have, healing each other...” Affirming this point another commented, “God inaugurates the Kingdom, restores the whole created order to harmony with himself, enables us to work for justice and peace, and enlists us as ambassadors of the Kingdom.” Other concepts that are touched upon by a few include: that God is Creator; the Apostolic message being handed down from the early church, the fulfillment of Scripture, grace and abundant life being found in Christ.

In summary, the bishops have reflected much of the gospel as broadly described in this project. The concepts that emerge strongest and clearest are forgiveness of sins and the incarnation. Featured but less prominent is the life, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is seen to be consonant with God's love. There is a strong sense of transformation but that most often is described as showing forth God's love in a variety of ways, especially in deeds done for those in need. The Kingdom of God is present though not as often in these answers and usually made in reference to something else. Only a few times is the Holy Spirit, relationship to God or nearness of God mentioned.

### **How the Gospel Is Good News**

The second question of the survey was short answer. It asked the bishop to explain how the answer given describing the gospel in the first question was good news. This is an important question that is a fundamental aspect of interpreting the gospel to a world that is increasingly less concerned with the cold logic necessary for coherence and far more concerned with what an ideology means practically.

At several points the bishops seemed to stumble on this. Some simply restated or referenced their answer given to the first question about what the gospel means. Here is one examples of this: "The Good News is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and its lasting and holy effect on all humanity." Another wrote, "This is executed through Christ's proclamation to people ... that ... they receive the offered salvation plan for heaven's sake by means of the prophets and apostles, and today proclaimed by the Church strengthened by the sacraments." And there were some vague generalities such as this answer: "It effects our salvation/redemption/full humanity." These answers raise a

question about how often bishops of the Episcopal Church tend to think about the gospel—not just what it means, but why it is good news for the present-day world.

Furthermore, the answers were widely scattered and only a few repeated themes emerge. Those that do emerge are not attributable to the entire sample but merely to a few of the respondents. One such theme is that of living a meaningful and abundant life. Thus one respondent wrote: “It invites us to live this life well.” Another bishop noted: the gospel enables one “to live in confidence in newness and fullness of life.”

The theme of eternal life reminiscent of the already-and-not-yet nature of the gospel was mentioned by several: “Alienation and death no longer have the last word...God has the last word – and that word is reconciliation and life.” Another writes that the gospel “opens to me a new and eternal reality.” One bishop wrote that the gospel “allows us to know the reign of God now which we will know fully later.” Another commented, “It changes our fate from death to glory.”

Another sporadic theme that emerges in these responses is that of love and relationship with God. One bishop described the result of the gospel as bringing humanity freedom and “renewed access to the adventurous and open interaction with God and neighbor we were made for.” Another wrote that the gospel “answers our deepest desire to be known, loved and have meaning in our lives.” These have connection with the gospel concept of God’s nearness which is clearly stated in this response: “It is good news because it invites us to live this life well and in God, it invites us to be with god in this life as we are with the poor and disenfranchised, and it allows us to know the reign of God now which we will fully know later.”

Other concepts that were mentioned by a few included the concept of loving others, grace and Christian unity. These responses are scattered across categories and sometimes vaguely restate the gospel, suggesting that there is not a consistent clarity in the Episcopal Church about the implications of the gospel in the present day. This is the challenge of a broad gospel that focuses on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One bishop wrote in the comment section a thought related to this point: “We all struggle with the message and messenger (Jesus) and that for me is a good thing. I want to work out what Jesus is saying at that time and what that means for me and the church. I do not have a corner on interpretation and the apologetic for this age, but I do have the joy, grace and love of God to listen to others and value them for who they are and for their understanding of Gospel.”

### **The Bishops’ View of the Gospel and Unity in the Episcopal Church**

There were three other issues that were asked on the survey that relate to the impact of the gospel. These included the level of agreement the bishops saw concerning what the gospel is in the Episcopal Church, the potential for greater gospel agreement bringing greater unity in the church and how often the subject of the gospel comes up in the typical day to day ministry of the bishop. This section will also include some of the comments offered by bishops in the general comments section of the survey as well.

The survey asked the following question about unity. “How much agreement do you think there is in TEC on what the gospel is? \_\_\_\_\_% (from 0%=none to 100%=complete)” The answers ranged from 1% to 100% with most bishops acknowledging a significant level of disagreement. The average of all respondent answers

to this question was 63.7%. Thus the bishops surveyed saw roughly a two thirds agreement on the meaning of the gospel. Perhaps this is not surprising given the complexity and breadth of the gospel and the controversies that have raged in the church in recent years. Yet this may also indicate a lack of gospel clarity. Some of the responses in the comments section of the survey provide further insight. Some respondents noted the complexity and breadth of the gospel: “I believe there is 100% agreement within the Episcopal Church that ‘the gospel’ is a complex and diverse theological concept and that this ‘good news’ is good news for many different reasons.” Another writes: “I believe our acceptance of theological diversity and complexity has historically been the strength of the Episcopal Church.” Such complexity and diversity could lead to greater confusion, or if embraced and clarified from within the postmodern point of view, could be an opportunity.

Another question related to unity asked: “Do you think that if there were more agreement in TEC on what the gospel is that there would be room for disagreement on the other more prominent issues of contention within the church? \_\_ yes \_\_ no.” This question polls the potential for greater unity around the gospel allowing for more disagreement around other controversial issues. Once again breaking in thirds, two thirds of the bishops (66.7%) answered yes, greater gospel agreement could lead to greater church unity, while one third (33.3%) believed it would not. This suggests that two thirds of the bishops see potential for greater unity in recovering and renewing a clear gospel understanding. It is possible that rediscovering the breadth of the gospel might allow for more unity even as disagreement continues over issues. It is also possible that understanding how the modern worldview contributes to the theological disagreements could bring greater gospel unity

and thereby bring greater church unity. Such unity would be noteworthy in the present-day world, polarized and politically divided as it is. One commented on unity and gospel disagreement. This quote was partially cited above, but here is the context of how the comment was introduced with the point once again: “I am pleased that we all do not need to agree on the gospel’s intersection within our lives and within our societies. We all struggle with the message and the messenger (Jesus) and that for me is a good thing.”

The final aspect of the survey dealt with how much a topic of focus the gospel is among those charged to guard it and interpret it for the church. Here the question was asked of the bishops: “Over the past year, approximately how many times has this topic (what the gospel is or its importance to our church) come up in your conversations with Episcopalians either individually or in groups? \_\_\_ times.” Once again there were a range of answers. Some quantified as high as 100 times and others chose not to quantify and simply wrote: “many” or “countless” or “all the time.” Others put much lower scores, including one who put zero, commenting: “there is far more concern with what our mission is.” Though on average, it seems to be something of a regular topic of conversation. The average of all quantifiable answers is 36.6, suggesting three times a month on average. Realizing that several non-quantifiable answers suggested “too many to count” which would obviously raise the average, one could assume the subject comes up at least weekly. Indeed this is a topic of conversation, though it tends not to make the headlines that the controversial issues make.

In summary, the survey has revealed some interesting insights into the current understanding about the gospel among the leadership of the Episcopal Church. Though the

sample size was small, it represented a variety of geographical diversity and a range of seminary training among the bishops who responded. Though a few objected to trying to quantify the gospel, the results, nevertheless suggest the current state of priority in the Church. Some bishops commented on this project and the gospel: “Thanks for doing this work.” “You have raised THE question....Our (the Episcopal Church’s) conflicts and decline is rooted precisely in divergent understandings of the gospel.” While certainly not all, two thirds of the bishops agree that greater clarity and unity around the gospel could lead to greater unity in the church, despite the presence of divergent views. Many of the bishops understand this to be central to their role and calling in the church. The answers on this survey do not suggest conflicting views of the gospel, but rather differing areas of emphasis. Usually considered a more conservative theological issue, it is noteworthy that the Episcopal Church, known to many as more liberal in its general outlook, should still hold this cross-centered aspect of the gospel as the results suggest. All this reveals that there is an inherent unity in the Episcopal Church despite the conflict. There are gospel touch points to which most would agree. The Episcopal Church diocesan bishops have absorbed the creedal theological tradition of the prayer book by and large and do, to a great extent, hold the gospel of the Gospels and the Apostles in mind. What this survey suggests is most lacking is application of that truth to the present culture, proclaiming how this is good news to people in the twenty-first century. As this project has suggested, the Episcopal Church is uniquely positioned to proclaim that gospel in an increasingly postmodern world. It is time for the church to renew its gospel vision and make more publically visible its unified gospel focus. It is time for the breadth of the gospel unity of

the church to be revealed, offering the light of hope to a world divided by the darkness of polarization.

## CONCLUSION

The history of the church and its tradition suggests that the breadth of the gospel has found points of connection with various cultures and worldviews throughout history. Living in the present world in which paradigms and worldviews are in flux, there is a need for the gospel to be translated into a postmodern context. What is needed is not simply a re-assertion of the forms of the past, nor a denial of their truth, but rather a fresh translation of the gospel that reveals its relevance in the postmodern world. While living in such times of transition—as the present moment surely is—can be unsettling, the people of God must resist the urge to attack the new and simply entrench in the old. It is time to proclaim the gospel from within the newly emerging worldview.

It is not difficult, even for one who has been thoroughly steeped in the modern worldview, to see that the postmodern critique has some valid points. Certainly there is a bias or perspective that influences how each person perceives truth and which aspects of truth they are open to receive. The lens of language, education, culture, family, environment, and so on shapes the understanding and the perception of each individual. Recovering the breadth of the gospel allows one to embrace this point in seeing that an aspect of the gospel will naturally stand out to someone coming from whatever perspective they might have learned. The danger is to assume that what speaks to one individual should be made the entire, mandatory emphasis of gospel proclamation for all.

Surely things are more complex than is usually perceived. There is always a great danger of over-simplification that fails to adequately account for all the variables and aspects of something. This deconstructive search for the truth event can also be embraced

by recovering the breadth of the gospel. The gospel is not to be over-simplified in the church's quest for relevance.

Surely we need not ground the gospel in an unassailable foundation. Its truth does not rest on this, and its present day application no longer finds this necessary as many in the world today move past a foundational view of truth to a network of belief. As suggested in this project, the gospel and the means by which we discern it can be illustrated as such a net of belief.

As the skepticism of metanarratives challenge the realm of a neutral scientific secular, a new age of possibility opens up for the gospel. From the stance of a "local" ideology it can find a seat at the table in the public marketplace alongside other "local" ideologies including a scientific, naturalistic worldview. That science is subject to its own interpretation by scientists, their cultural backgrounds, concerns, and influences is also a matter of common sense. In recent years, a number of news reports have emerged concerning scientists who for various ideological reasons skewed their data. In this new postmodern, pluralistic world a bold claim such as Radical Orthodoxy shows great promise to invite many to consider anew the claims of the gospel, just as relevant as ever, even more relevant having just come through centuries wherein the modern worldview sought to define the rules of the game to keep the gospel in a subjective and irrelevant realm.

The challenge for the church today as it has always been is not to remain mired in the concepts of gospel proclamation that worked in the past, in the modern world, but to move forward and embrace a fresh translation of the gospel for the present day. The

challenge is also to allow the postmodern critique to lead the church to greater humility. Let each one hold one's view firmly and with conviction, but also graciously, with charity and humility. After all, whatever one's view, it is always possible that the other side might be right. In the end it is not so much about being right, but submitting to the King of kings with the whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Perfect theology and a perfect perception of truth belong not to human beings but to God alone.

The danger of such a broad and general gospel as asserted in the Scriptures and found in the tradition of the church is that various factions take up polemics that are mere narrowly-focused aspects of the gospel. It might be the case that much of the present controversies of the church have to do with various camps over-emphasizing things that are true. How infrequently in our polarized, conflict-riddled world one hears recognition of the valid points being made by the other side. This is not to surrender totally one's own position, or to opt for some nebulous area that lacks any conviction; it is simply to focus on something other than just trying to win the argument. The age of conquest from which such intellectual conquest emerges is coming to an end. It is time for the church to stop infighting and humbly offer the love of God in Christ to one another and to the world.

Campbell, in his concern for ecumenism writes eloquently (albeit with foundationalist tendencies), on the state of the mainline churches and the opportunity that is being missed by not focusing on the gospel in the present climate:

The gospel has served as the fundamental ground of unity for Protestant and related churches, indeed. . . the gospel serves as the fundamental ground for the unity of Christians more broadly. But in the current discussions over these issues, the gospel itself has not consistently appeared as a significant factor in discussion, and its absence can leave battle-weary combatants on all sides with the impression that

their opponents are merely concerned with political or social agenda rather than being concerned with the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Suppose on that great day, when one stands before God, one learns that one was wrong. At that point, it is time to surrender the issue and embrace the infinite love and wisdom of God. This calls for both sides to show humility and admit they might be wrong. This calls for both sides to remember that what the church worships is not a particular issue, but the God who created all things. Such a humble approach resonates with the inhabitants of a pluralistic postmodern world.

It is also easy to lose sight of the impact of the resurrection. Emerging from a modern era when faith was reserved to subjective personal experience has allowed for a panoply of spiritualizing symbolisms. As many today eschew “literal” interpretations of the Scripture, symbolic meanings of the resurrection are sought. This results in downplaying the gospel assertion that is scandalous in its particularity: that God should come and enter our world as a human being at a particular place and time live our life, die our death, and then shattering all realm of possibility (the fans of Derrida can cheer at the advent of the impossible), He rises from the dead and lives again. Asserting that the resurrection really happened can insert a realism of the presence of God back into a world that in many places lacks any coherent sense of the Divine. This leads one to Jesus’ profound good news that the Kingdom of God has now come near in the person and presence of Christ. It is through the resurrection that such nearness remains a present reality. This then adds import to the gift of the Holy Spirit that not only mediates the presence of God who is Almighty, transcendent and spirit, but also mediates the presence

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, *Gospel in Traditions*, 76.

of Jesus Christ, the fierce, loving, profound and sinless teacher who understands what it is to be human.

Some might question if this ancient gospel has any contemporary relevance. It can be easy to underestimate the importance of the simple truth that in Christ, the Kingdom of God has come near, that is, the King is near. Those who are experienced in providing pastoral care realize that there are many times in ministry when there is simply nothing to say. What matters to one who is struggling in crisis more than some trite saying or profound truth is often simply the fact that a person cares enough to be present with them as they endure the struggle. This is sometimes referred to as a ministry of presence. Perhaps the earthly ministry of presence derives from the heavenly Ministry of Presence: God is near. The love of God, the caring of God, and the companionship of God are of profound comfort and importance. The Presence of God in Christ, as the Kingdom has come near—that concept alone, just in and of itself, can provide Divine Pastoral Care to a world that is lost in chaotic haste and ever emerging awareness of complexity. That God is here, in and through the presence of the Holy Spirit to inspire and bring comfort, can bring light and relevance to a world that so desperately needs it as the twenty-first century marches onward.

The differences within the Episcopal Church and within all of Christendom in the twenty-first century are deep and the suggestion here is not to ignore the differences or to say that they are unimportant. The suggestion here is that the differing theological tracks that form the foundation of the theologies that have led to the differences are wedded to the modern worldview. As the world increasingly moves past the modern to whatever lies

ahead, the next thing, the postmodern, the church must let go of those differences that are wed to the modern worldview. This is not only essential as that worldview declines, but has the potential for revealing a unity in the church that has been present all along, though hidden from view.

It is sometimes considered that changing form, such as moving from traditional to contemporary music, more social activism, or the use of the latest new-member techniques is what is needed to grow the church and allow the Episcopal Church to actively engage with the people in the world around. This dissertation has suggested that what is needed most in a postmodern world, the Episcopal Church already has, which is a liturgical tradition rooted in the gospel. Perhaps what is needed more than superficial changes is a renewed emphasis on the gospel, especially that it is still good news for the world. The elements of the gospel are present among the bishops, in the prayer book and in the Scriptures. A present day re-engagement that reveals a unity in the Church that is currently obscured by controversies would be a powerful statement to a world that is so deeply polarized and longing for peace, harmony and unity. Such a compelling gospel unity would have all the trappings of the messiness of the postmodern condition. Those with strong but conflicting positions on issues would be side by side for the sake of the gospel, and with full appreciation of the Presence of Christ and all the resources that He brings. Laying aside the differences and focusing once again on a decidedly bold and Apostolic gospel would certainly make the world stand up and take notice. It would lead to a fresh re-engagement, a fresh, albeit postmodern, translation of the gospel with all the potential of the next great awakening.

“Remember, Lord, your one holy catholic and apostolic Church, redeemed by the blood of your Christ. Reveal its unity, guard its faith, and preserve it in peace.” (*Book of Common Prayer*, 374, attributed to St. Basil, 4<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, 377.

APPENDIX

SURVEY OF DIOCESAN BISHOPS AND RESULTS

**The Gospel in the Episcopal Church Survey**

Your Diocese: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you served as bishop of this diocese?

Seminary or Seminaries you attended for degrees?

1. In a paragraph, please write your understanding of the gospel: (You may attach separate page if desired)

2. What makes this “good news”?

3. How Central are Each of the following to the gospel? Indicate with a number from 1 to 10 with 1 being the gospel is not about this -- to 5 the gospel is somewhat about this -- to 10 being the gospel is all about this.

Forgiveness of Sin \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Personal Salvation \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Social Justice \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Acceptance/Tolerance \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Kingdom of God \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Getting into Heaven \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Spiritual Formation \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Transformation of Individuals \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Transformation of Social Systems \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Justification/the Cross \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Resurrection/New Life \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

The Gift of the Holy Spirit \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

Jesus as the Promised Messiah \_\_\_\_\_ Assign number from 1 to 10

4. How much agreement do you think there is in TEC on what the gospel is? \_\_\_\_\_% (from 0%=none to 100%=complete)

5. Do you think that if there were more agreement in TEC on what the gospel is that there would be room for disagreement on the other more prominent issues of contention within the church? \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no

6. Over the past year, approximately how many times has this topic (what the gospel is or its importance to our church) come up in your conversations with Episcopalians either individually or in groups? \_\_\_\_\_ times

Comments?

## Survey Data

Percent of Diocesan Bishops Responding: 13.6%.

Percent of Provinces Represented: 88.9%

Diocese Represented: Connecticut, Eastern Tennessee, Georgia, Kansas, Litoral Ecuador, Long Island, Mississippi, Nevada, Northern Indiana, Ohio, Olympia, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Southern, and Springfield.

Years in Office      2.5   5   12   2   2   12   1   12   3   9   0.75   15   4   4.5   1.5      5.75

Category:	----- Scores (one column per responder)-----														Average
Forgiveness of Sin 10 10 8	3	7	10	10	10	10	10	8	10	7	10	10	8.9		
Personal Salvation 10 6 5	3	6	10	10	10	10	10	5	10	7	10	10	8.1		
Social Justice 10 6 10	8	7	7	2	10	10	10	9	10	7	10	10	8.4		
Acceptance/Tolerance 5 6 10	5	5	5	1	8	10	10	8	10	7	10	10	7.3		
Kingdom of God 10 10 10	10	9	10	10	10	10	10	9	10	10	10	10	9.9		
Getting into Heaven 1 1 5	3	4	7	1	8	5	10	8	10	3	1	10	5.1		
Spiritual Formation 5 8 4	6	5	7	8	8	10	10	8	10	7	10	10	7.7		
Transformation of Ind. 10 6 7	7	7	8	10	9	10	10	8	10	9	10	10	8.7		
Transformation SocSys 10 6 10	7	7	8	2	9	8	10	8	10	9	10	9	8.2		
Justification/the Cross 10 10 6	4	6	10	10	10	10	10	6	10	7	1	10	8.0		
Resurrection/New Life 10 10 9	8	7	10	10	10	10	10	9	10	10	10	10	9.5		
The Gift of the Holy Spirit 5 10 8	6	6	10	10	8	8	10	9	10	10	10	10	8.7		
Jesus as Messiah 10 10 10	8	9	10	9	10	5	10	9	10	6	10	10	9.1		

Answers to Question 4 % Agreement:

90, 60, 60, 75, 75, 50, 1, 80, 65, 100, 80, 70, 60, 90 and one n/a

Answers to Question 5 Gospel Agreement More Room to Diagree: Yes: 10 No: 5

Answers to Question 6 Number of Times Gospel Comes Up:

52, 50, n/a, 12, 55, 20, 100, 10, all the time, countless times, 10, 0, 30, 100, many

### Answers to Question One: What is the Gospel?

*We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)*

There is an old saying that you “shouldn’t let things go to your head.” It usually refers to people who, because of circumstances, might think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. It’s a way to keep one grounded with one’s ego in check. Today, though, we should let some things “go to our heads,” for we remember Jesus, not sentimentally to eulogize the great deeds of his life or with a morbid fascination with the mechanics of crucifixion. Let’s agree that it isn’t a humane death. Rather, we remember Jesus’ work on the cross. Today, we’re reminded that we’re a “sanctified” people by Jesus’ cross. We’re made holy in God’s eyes. Note this is in the passive mood. We’ve not made ourselves holy. That’s not our realm of competency or authority. God has done this for us without our permission and foreknowledge.

I imagine we don't often think of ourselves as especially holy people. If we did it might go to our heads. Well, it ought to go to our heads, not so we can feel superior to others, but so we can live into God's desire for us. God has made us a holy people for a reason. Our holiness isn't a badge of honor we wear in order to exclude others, but rather it's a way of life we receive and adopt so we can invite others to live into God's love for them. Being made holy means being so humbled by God's love on the cross that we humbly invite others to join us in this holy life. We're merely "beggars showing other beggars where to find food." We should let that go to our heads.

"We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ." Jesus in his life and death doesn't offer us mere words of wisdom or secrets for successful living. Jesus offers up his body. In Dickens' The Tale of Two Cities, Charles Darnay ends up on the gallows saying: "it is a far, far better thing I do now than I have ever done before." Jesus will have none of that. He's there to offer up his body as a sacrifice for our sin. Modern people are often put off by the bodily image of Jesus on the cross. But offering his body showed the depth of God's love for us. Jesus wasn't concerned about putting his reputation on the line. His concern was for us and he offered his body to prove it. In our discipleship as a people made holy by God, we need to be less concerned with our reputation, less concerned about words. We should let that go to our heads as well.

And this is "once for all." As people made holy by Jesus' cross, we still can find ourselves in despair of our sin. No matter where or who we are, sin lies close at hand. We should take that reality seriously. But we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously in that reality. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, "once for all." He doesn't need to die again each time we sin. That's giving sin way too much power in our lives. We must be bold enough to believe that our sins have been forgiven, that the death Jesus died, he died, once for all. In the words of that old Gospel hymn "It's been done." That's why our sin should never lead us to despair. And that's why we're liberated so we can dare to be holy people. Jesus died for our sins once for all. We should let that go to our heads as well.

Human beings are alienated from God and from one another. The Word of God became a human being to reconcile humans to God and to one another through a complete upending of every notion that we must measure up to be loved. God loves us without strings attached, and offers us a relationship with himself in Jesus Christ in which we are both justified and set on a path toward sanctification. The Good News is that we are loved, and are thereby freed to love others without regard to any notion of merit or privilege.

The Gospel is God's encounter with humanity and the proclamation that all are chosen and included in the love of God. Jesus is the bringer and bearer of that love and inclusion; that all of us are welcomed into the Kingdom of God's Grace and integrity (salvo) of his gift of full life, teaching and hope of and in the future beginning now in the present.

Jesus came that we might have life, abundant life. He lived as a Jewish rabbi, in his preaching, teaching and actions he invited people to live into the reign of God and suggested that living well in the reign of God was about sharing what you have, healing each other and living a life of prayer and thanksgiving. His death was a consequence of a life lived in and for God and God's people and as such it is salvific for us. We are called to live in that reign today and that is the gospel of Jesus.

The gospel, is the Good News of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Gospels tell of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Holy Scripture (Old and New Testaments) is the story of God's mission of reconciliation, and restoration of all people to unity with God. Holy Scripture is the Word of God contain all things necessary to salvation.

God created us to live in harmony with himself, with one another, and with nature. Human sin has shattered this intended harmony. God's ultimate response came in the incarnation of the Word: God took human flesh, lived, died, and rose. Jesus' death rescues us from sin; his resurrection offers us the gift of eternal life. The Holy Spirit transforms us from within and empowers us to follow Jesus. The redemption wrought in Christ is not simply personal salvation (it is indeed that, of course), but more: God inaugurates the Kingdom, restores the whole created order to harmony with himself, enables us to work for justice and peace, and enlists us as ambassadors of the Kingdom.

The whole created order is "fallen"—subject to the power of sin and death. Human beings are created in the image of God and find their highest fulfillment in communion with God. But that image and that communion are distorted by sin. Left on our own, the arc of our existence bends in the direction of separation from God and the annihilation of all that it means to be human. We are radically alienated from God and from one another. But God, on his own initiative and operating out of sheer infinite love, has acted to save us from our hopeless state. He became one of us in the person of Jesus, assumed our human nature, "lived and died as one of us," embraced the totality of our alienation in his death on the cross, and was raised from the dead, thereby breaking the stranglehold that death has on us.

I think no better brief description can be found than in 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul speaks of the new creation given by God being in Christ reconciling the world to himself. There is also a summary of the ethical implication as God gives to us the ministry of reconciliation.

The gospel – the narrative understanding of the early church of the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity. In its context and now, the gospel is inspired by the Holy Spirit to bring each generation into relationship with Jesus Christ, the church and the whole people of God. It is the teaching & life of Jesus portrayed in the context of the cultural, and historic setting in which it was used to bring people to a relationship with Jesus Christ. It is today an evangelical and apostolic tool upon which, with the lived tradition of the church and the use of inspired, holy reason, the ministry and teaching of the church rests.

They are the goods news that God showed us so that by means of its teaching we head toward its Kingdom and let us be salvos for Christ’s sacrifice.

The gospel is the core content of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we find the only perfect image of the Father and we are introduced to the nature of God. The nature of God which is revealed in Jesus is that God is love. The divine son became human, so that in him human beings might be adopted as children of God and be made heirs of God’s kingdom. By his obedience, even to suffering and death, Jesus made the offering which we could not make and in him we are freed from the power of sin and reconciled to God. By his resurrection, Jesus overcame death and opened for us the way of eternal life. We share in Christ’s victory over death when we are baptized into the New Covenant and become living members of Christ. (Book of Common Prayer, pp 849-850)

God has come to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus, has promised to love, forgive, and remain with us always – into eternity.

That God sent Jesus to save us from sin and death – which required his death on the cross and resurrection to new life. When we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death (God) in his infinite mercy sent his only and eternal son, Jesus Christ, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us to reconcile us to . . .the God and Father of all.

The gospel is the revelation of God’s pure love and grace gifted to us through Jesus Christ.

### Answers to Question 2: Why is This Good News?

See #1 Above

It does not seem like Good News if we need to feel that we have earned God’s love. But if we can get past that, it frees us from the whole agony of measuring up, and from feeling that we must compete with others or judge them. So it is about freedom and truth, and renewed access to the adventurous and open interaction with God and neighbor that we were made for.

No one is disposable and that the birth right is a gift not earned or inherited.

It is good news because it invites us to live this life well and in God, it invites us to be with God in this life as we are with the poor and disenfranchised, and it allows to know the reign of God now which we will fully know later.

It is the story of a restored, reconciled world, where people can come into unity with God and each other in Christ.

“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). We are the objects of the love the God of the Universe, demonstrated most powerfully in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Humankind is not at the periphery of God’s attention, but on the contrary at the heart. All of this has enormous implications for our daily lives. “Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). All of this is wondrously good news – for us as individual Christians, and for world God loves.

Alienation and death no longer have the last word in human experience. God has the last word—and that word is reconciliation and life.

It is something that I cannot effect by myself and opens to me a new and eternal reality.

The Good News is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and its lasting and holy effect on all of humanity.

This is executed through Christ’s proclamation to people, making that these they receive the offered salvation plan for heaven’s sake by means of the prophets and apostles, and today proclaimed by the Church strengthened by the sacraments.

This is good news to everyone because it gives us reason to have hope. “The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world.” (Book of Common Prayer, page 861)

Answers our deepest desire to be known, loved, and have meaning in our lives.

It effects our salvation/???/redemption/full humanity

It changes our fate from death to glory.

What doesn't? The church has, by and large, chosen to propagate "bad news, but most of that is not Gospel, and also God's Good News often starts as bad news to the world.

### Comments

Individual salvation and changing social systems are not opposites. I rated them each as 6 because I fear that each, taken alone, is misleading. We are made for life together, so there can be no individual salvation without a redeemed social life. That is why we must also work to change social systems that do not reflect God's will that we should live together in harmony, both in this life and the next.

I am pleased that we all do not need to agree on the gospel's intersection within our lives and within our societies. We all struggle with the message and the messenger (Jesus) and that for me is a good thing. I want to work out what Jesus is saying at time and what that means for me and the church. I do not have a corner on interpretation and the apologetic for this age, but I do have the joy, grace and love of God to listen to others and value them for who they are and for their understanding of Gospel and the issues of this age. Each age/time has struggled with this and for me that is part of the blessing of thinking and living within the Community of God's grace and love. What a blessing that we are so alike and yet different enough in our living and being.

Thanks for doing this work. I sent a similar survey on another topic to bishops several years ago and was glad to receive about 50% back! I hope you have a similar good response.

I'm afraid that I see this numerical ranking as somewhat artificial, since (on some level) an appropriate answer is: All of them encapsulate some part of the gospel and its imperatives. I ranked a few as less than 10 more because they've been somewhat distorted in recent discussions in the Episcopal Church rather than as a comment about their lack of importance.

I have heard colleagues speak of the gospel exclusively in terms of social transformation, others (a much smaller percentage) as personal transformation, and still others as a blend of the two. Even the question "Why did Jesus die?" would receive a dizzying range of responses in the church.

You have raised THE question. How one views the gospel affects how one conceived of mission. And how one conceives of mission affects how one "does church." Our conflicts and our decline is rooted precisely in divergent understandings of the gospel.

Sometimes we become pretty either/or about the gospel and its implications refusing to see its both/and nature. That says a lot more about us than it says about the gospel.

I am a bishop of the church – this is what we talk about, teach and preach. The people of God are in need of a clear understanding of how the gospel of Jesus Christ informs our lives and ministry as a church. Contrary to what many might think this is the main conversation of the church. How it is interpreted might vary – but this is the topic.

Related to question # 3.

a. You cannot numerically quantify the gospel.

b. Your question regarding Acceptance/Tolerance asks me to assume that you are speaking about acceptance and tolerance of those who differ from me. Our Baptismal Covenant assures me this is a key component to the "Good News."

4. I believe there is 100% agreement within the Episcopal Church that "the gospel" is a complex and diverse theological concept and that this "good news" is good news for many different reasons.5. I believe our acceptance of theological diversity and complexity has historically been the strength of the Episcopal Church.6. Often, I am talking with Episcopalians about the gospel even when I or we don't use the word "gospel." [put all 10's] I realize this is unhelpful to your project but my answers seem to be the case in my perspective.

There is far more concern with what our mission is.

Hard to put them on a scale of 1 to 10. Kingdom of God is 10 and it embraces the others that I gave lower numbers because they are a part of something much larger.

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