

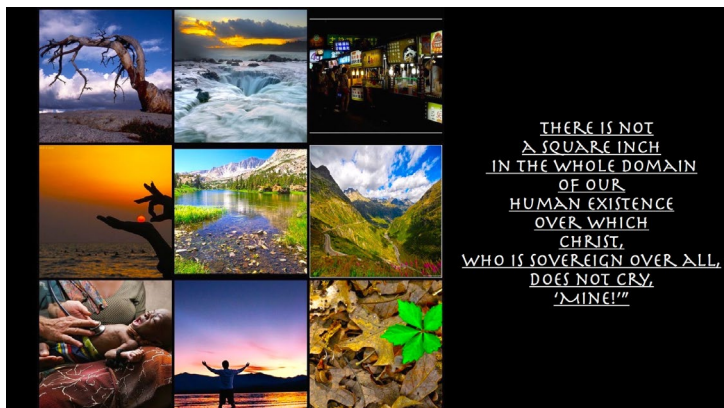
What is the Gospel? (Part 4)

Somewhere along the way we allowed the gospel to shrink. The “Good News” became equated with “saving souls” and having a “personal relationship with Jesus.” In this scenario, God’s main job seems to be “evangelism supervisor” as the church is sent on a frantic search to find others who will make personal commitments to Jesus. The “good news of the kingdom” becomes another consumer item in the religious market, and we, as God’s ambassadors, are reduced to selling salvation as an insurance policy for hell avoidance. This truncated rendering of the gospel coaches us to experience the presence of Christ only in our heart and soul (our private, interior spiritual world) and not in the rest of life. We begin to view Christ primarily as a “converter of souls” and not as the One who created all things, who holds everything together, and who has reconciled everything to himself. The future of this small gospel seems small. If the gospel is all about the salvation of souls, then the finale is all about the gathering of these souls “on God’s celestial shore.” But is there more to the story?

“Whatever Paul was heralding as he went around the Mediterranean world, our post-enlightenment category of ‘religion’ is far too restrictive to handle it. The good news is the news of a whole new kingdom. It’s not just the successful abduction of certain souls.”
--N.T. Wright

“Jesus came to rescue a creation that was pervasively infected by the curse of sin—an infection not limited to the psychic territory populated by human hearts. The curse of sin touches the natural realm, reaching into art and economics, affecting family relationships and educational endeavors, holding thrones and budgets in its grip....
‘Changed hearts’ will not ‘change society’ if the efforts at change are not also directed toward the structures and patterns of human interactions.”
--Richard Mouw

What if the work of Christ is about redeeming the entire cosmos from the effects of sin? What if Christ is renovating all of the created order and culture as well as humanity and relationships? A bigger vision of the gospel allows us to see Jesus not just as One who invades the human heart but as the Cosmic Glue that holds “all things together.” Jesus is not just interested in the “soul” or “heart” but in the whole infrastructure of the natural world, civilization and culture, and human relationships. We have been trained to see salvation as a personal transaction, a spiritual exchange between individuals and God, whereas Paul, in the first chapter of Colossians, wants to tell us that Christ came to rehabilitate and restore shalom in its entirety! Jesus wants to piece together all the dislocated parts of the universe!



The dream of this big gospel is not just about going to heaven when we die, but the good news includes a vision of a new heaven and earth where our natural planet and the heavenly city dwell together. God’s redemptive program in all its cosmic dimensions involves heaven and earth becoming one perfected state of God with us. This bigger framework of the gospel allows us to imagine and anticipate the renewal of creation, culture, and humanity (in God’s timing). It gifts us with a grand vision of what is to come and then thrusts us right back into our present world to heal the brokenness now where possible.



a world both beyond and presently among the world of appearances

In the meantime, it is as if we live in two worlds. We encounter both creation distorted and creation renewed in our daily rhythms. We begin to see heaven dripping into our natural environments and into the ways we organize our common life together, as well as into our social contexts. We are learning to see the different ways in which the future visits the present, and we long for more!

A broader version of the gospel message that links the end of the story (new heavens and earth) to our every day life might be articulated like this: God has always been eternal relationship, family, and community. Beauty, art, love, color, light, and joy all find their origin in the inner life of God. This God is love, and by its very nature love extends to the other. God created the world out of love to give a setting and context so that his plan to include us in his life could come to fruition. His heart has always been for adoption—that you and I might be made participants in the dance of the triune life. We are made in his image, so he invites us to subdue and fill the earth (just as he did in the beginning).



We are commissioned to “pastor” and “shepherd” the whole created order to help it reach its full potential. God commissions us to be culture-makers in his likeness. There was a rebellion, corruption, disturbance, and upheaval that introduced a prideful perversion into the natural and social world. It is a perversion that all of us see and participate in. So Jesus came to stand in our shoes (to see things from our angle) and to unite all that God is with all that we are. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus served to reverse the curse and renew all that has been disrupted. This too is a process that we can see and participate in. We believe that in God’s time heaven will once and for all descend to earth, God’s story will be complete, and creation, culture, and humanity will be in perfect harmony.



If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.

(C. S. Lewis)

For Reflection:

- Would you say that you have viewed the gospel of Jesus Christ as something for just yourself and other individuals, or as something that encompasses all of creation and society? What might be some of the implications for your own life if you start to see the gospel in this much larger way?
- What might be some of the challenges of learning to live in two worlds where the future visits the present? What might be some positive aspects of living with this already/not yet perspective for yourself? For the way you deal with others?
- What about this gospel might make it easier to talk to someone about the Good News that is found in Jesus Christ? What might be some ways that you could introduce this gospel into a conversation?