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Gospel, Good News

Craig Keener

The New Testament gospel, or ‘good news’, is especially the announcement of Jesus’ saving death and resurrection. The New Testament explains that it is ‘according to the scriptures.’ This means that this good news must be understood in light of the backstory of God’s saving acts in history. It also means that it must be understood especially in light of the Old Testament prophetic promise of future restoration effected through Jesus the Messiah. This article surveys some suggested background for the primary early Christian use of ‘gospel’, some key New Testament uses of the terms translated as ‘gospel’ and ‘preach the gospel’, the development and relevance of this gospel for the first-century Gospel texts, and (briefly) some of the language’s subsequent interpretations and applications.

Keywords: The gospel, Gospels, Good news, Living memory, Restoration eschatology, Kingdom of God, Bible, Jesus Christ, Messiah

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1 Background for gospel language

In antiquity, outside the New Testament (hereafter NT), the Greek term translated as ‘gospel’ applied – usually in the plural – to any announcement of good news. It thus applied to announcements such as athletic or military victories and (perhaps relevant to the ‘gospel of the kingdom’) celebration of the emperor. In the Greek translation of Isaiah, the word group around ‘gospel’ refers to God fulfilling the promise of restoring his scattered people to their promised land, saving them from their enemies. This is good news about God’s kingdom: the restoration demonstrates that ‘our God reigns’ (Isa 52:7). This promise of restoration was understood as unfolding in phases: Judahites’ return from Babylon, Jesus’s public ministry (note Matt 11:5 and Isa 35:5–6; 61:1), and eventually even the transformation of the world (Isa 65:17). The NT finds the climax of saving history in Jesus’ dying to deal with humanity’s sins, and his resurrection as the beginning of the promised era that includes the resurrection and full restoration of his people.

Although Jesus proclaims good news about God’s reign, he discourages public acknowledgement that he is himself king in that kingdom, until it is time to face the cross. His followers’ later proclamation that the risen Jesus is Lord remains the same message about the kingdom as Jesus’ message, now with the added specificity of the king’s identity and the previously unintelligible message of the cross. The narrative core of this gospel message is Jesus’ * * * death and resurrection, but it naturally extended to include the backstory in Jesus’ ministry that led to these events. Thus the term’s application to the first-century books now called Gospels is natural (and perhaps used from an early point to explain their purpose as narrative proclamation; Mark 1:1). The early Roman empire was the apex in ancient biographies of historiographic character, allowing a fitting climax for the Old Testament (hereafter OT) approach to prophetic, saving history. Some later uses of the title ‘gospel’, however, moved away from this focus on Jesus’ saving death and resurrection as the climax of God’s plan in human history.

Greek-speaking society often used the terms *euangelion* (a noun, ‘good news’) and *euangelizô* (a verb, ‘proclaim glad tidings’), so the terms were intelligible to any ordinary reader in Greek. Clear echoes of OT phrases in early Christian writings, however, suggest that early Christians often alluded to uses of the terms in the Greek translation of the OT, especially Isaiah. In what follows, this article will include references to both the noun and the verb, though English translations render these (especially the verb) inconsistently.

1.1 Greek and Roman uses

The terms *euangelion* and *euangelizô* applied to ‘glad tidings’ of any kind, such as the return of someone long lost (Homer *Odyssey* 14.150, 165) or the welcome of someone before a ruler (Ps-Diogenes *Epistle* 23). The terms often refer to celebratory new

information, including weddings and athletic victories (e.g. LXX 2 Sam 4:10; 2 Kgs 7:9). In Greek the noun *euangelion* usually appears in the plural, but early Christians used it in the singular because they applied it almost exclusively to what they deemed the best news of all. Greek terms related to *euangel-* also referred to information previously unknown to the hearers (i.e. 'news'); thus early Christians applied it especially to the act of preaching to those who had not previously heard the message (Dickson 2005).

Notably, *euangelion* and *euangelizô* were also applied to imperial accessions and birthdays, even among Jewish authors writing in Greek (Philo *Embassy to Gaius* [hereafter *Gaius*] 231; Josephus *Jewish War* 4.618, 656). These writers could also use it for good news of an emperor's return to health (Philo *Gaius* 18) and sometimes even of a tyrant's demise (Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 18.229). Imperial propaganda deemed emperors as sons of their deified predecessors and as saviours and lords of the empire. Many in Roman society would surely have heard a contrast with the emperor in phrases such as 'good news' about 'God's kingdom' (Mark 1:14–15) and 'good news' about 'Christ' (Israel's messianic king; Mark 1:1; Rom 15:19–20). Yet, far from being a message about a triumphant military messiah crushing Rome, the NT gospel narrates a messiah voluntarily crushed by Rome – in the short term. He submitted to this plan (Mark 14:36; 1 John 3:8) in order to defeat a more cosmic evil kingdom (Mark 1:12–13; 3:23–27) and the ultimate enemy of death (1 Cor 15:25–26).

1.2 Old Testament and Jewish context

The earliest Christian usage of the terms is rooted directly in the OT. Thus Paul claims that the gospel is 'according to the scriptures' (Rom 1:1-2; 1 Cor 15:3–4) and was already prefigured in the good news preached beforehand to Abraham (Gal 3:8). The good news preached by Paul fulfilled God's promise to the patriarchs (Acts 13:32–33). The author of Hebrews also describes the message heard by Israel in Moses' day as good news, while lamenting that generation's failure to obey it (Heb 4:2, 6).

Phrases such as 'good news about peace' (Acts 10:36; Eph 2:17; 6:15), 'good news about salvation' (Eph 1:13; cf. Rom 1:16), and 'good news about God's reign' (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16; Acts 8:12) all evoke Isa 52:7, which speaks of announcing good news of peace, salvation, and God's reign. (The Greek version of the OT also may associate eschatological good news with salvation in Joel 3:5 [Eng. 2:32]).

Christians who quoted Isa 52:7 were often aware of how its message introduced the mission of the Suffering Servant of Isa 52:13–53:12. Thus, for example, Paul in Rom 10:15–16 cites Isa 52:7 and 53:1 in succession (for applications of Isa 53 to Jesus, see e.g. Acts 8:32–33; 2:22, 24; Gathercole 2015). This early Christian reading drew on the wider context of this section of Isaiah. According to Isaiah, because God's servant Israel (Isa 41:8; 44:1–2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3) sinned (42:18–19), God would raise up one within

Israel to fulfil Israel's servant mission and bring Israel back to him (49:5–7). Whereas God punished Israel for sin (40:2), this one suffered for Israel's sin rather than his own (53:4–12). The Spirit of the Lord is on both restored Israel (42:1; 44:3; 59:21) and the herald of good news for Israel (61:1).

In context, Isa 52:7 directly refers to YHWH's (God's) return to Zion (the sacred city, Jerusalem; 52:8) to deliver his people. In the context of Isa 40:9, a way is made through the wilderness for God to lead his people back to the promised land (40:3; cf. 11:16; 35:8–10; 49:8–12; 62:10). Isaiah envisions this journey as a new * * * NOT FOUND NOT FOUND exodus just as God once brought his people out from slavery in Egypt, so he would bring them from other lands where they had been scattered (Isa 11:16; Jer 16:14–15; 23:7–8; Hos 2:14–15; 11:1, 11; Mic 7:15; Zech 10:10–11). A century before Jesus' ministry, Judeans still understood this 'good news' in terms of the restoration of God's people (Ps. Sol. 11:1).

Isa 61:1 describes the herald of good news of restoration as being anointed: 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed' (English translations are taken from the NRSV, here and hereafter). The depiction of this herald as 'anointed' is appropriate for a priest (e.g. Exod 28:41; 30:30) or a king (e.g. 1 Sam 10:1; 16:12–13; 1 Kgs 1:34; 2 Kgs 9:6). The latter could be more appropriate here when Isaiah elsewhere speaks of someone 'anointed', it refers to a royal restorer (there Cyrus; Isa 45:1). Early Christian interpretation connected this anonymous anointed one with promises made to the line of king David (Ps 2:2; 18:50; 132:17), since 'Messiah' (in Hebrew) or 'Christ' (in Greek) meant 'the anointed one', applied especially to the Davidic king (Ps. Sol. 17:32; 18:5–7). Jesus applies Isa 61:1–2 to his own mission (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22; Luke 4:18–19).

Good news about Zion's restoration was also good news that her oppressors were defeated: 'Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! [...] for never again shall the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off', cries Nahum (Nah 1:15), celebrating Nineveh's destruction (1:1). As when a Greek herald proclaimed good news of a victory for a competitor or an army, this entailed bad news for those who were not victorious. Thus, 'good news' for those being restored was not necessarily good news for everyone (cf. Amos 5:18).

Although some restoration prophecies speak of God's agent, often as an anointed king (Isa 11:1, 10), Isaiah's 'good news' announces the more direct coming of God himself as deliverer:

> Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'. (Isa 40:9)
>
> How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, [...] who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' [...] for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. 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. (Isa 52:7–10)

Without further clarification, some restoration passages appear to blend God and his royal agent (9:6–7; cf. Jer 23:5–6; 33:15–16). Ultimately, in whatever form or forms, the Lord's own arm would bring salvation (Isa 40:10; 52:10; 53:1).

The message summarized as the good news of restoration in Isa 40:9 is introduced in 40:3: 'A voice cries out "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."' Both Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1 speak of preparing the way for God's coming; the Gospels apply these passages directly to John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Jesus (Isa 40:3 in Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23; Mal 3:1 in Matt 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27): 'Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John "[...] This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you'"' (Matt 11:7, 10; Luke 7:24, 27).

In view of the frequency with which early Christians applied OT passages about YHWH to Jesus (e.g. Deut 6:4 in 1 Cor 8:6; Isa 45:23 in Phil 2:10–11; Zech 14:5 in 1 Thess 3:13), it is likely no coincidence in the Gospel narratives that the promised God-preparer, John, paved the way for Jesus. As if to confirm this, John soon announced Jesus as one who baptizes in God's Spirit – a role that scripture had foretold, and that was appropriate for God alone (e.g. Isa 44:3; Ezek 36:25–27; 39:29; Joel 2:28–29).

2 New Testament usage

The NT describes the 'good news' in various ways, especially: good news about Jesus (Mark 1:1; Acts 8:35; 11:20; 17:18; 2 Thess 1:8; cf. Rom 15:20; Eph 3:8); the good news of God (Mark 1:14; Rom 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thess 2:2, 8–9; 1 Tim 1:11; 1 Pet 4:17); and good news about God's kingdom (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 10:7; 24:14; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16; Acts 8:12); Paul's good news (Rom 2:16; 16:25; Gal 2:2; 2 Tim 2:8); good news about peace (Acts 10:36; Eph 2:17; 6:15); good news about salvation (Eph 1:13; cf. Rom 1:16).

The NT often uses 'good news' as a shorthand for the message about Jesus, the shared content of which seems already taken for granted by the time the NT was being written (e.g. Acts 8:25; 1 Cor 9:23). The good news of Isa 40:9 is God's eternal word (40:8; 1 Pet

1:25), and Christians often summarized the gospel as the ‘word’ (e.g. Acts 8:4; 15:7; 1 Cor 15:2; Eph 1:13; Col 1:5).

Jesus himself appears to initiate the early Christian usage of ‘gospel’ language: ‘[...] the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’ (Mark 1:15; cf. also 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9). Jesus probably grounds this gospel language at least partly in Isaiah’s vision of future restoration in Isa 61:1, as in sayings attributed to Jesus in Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22; Luke 4:18; see further discussion below.

The association of good news with God’s kingdom, or reign (Mark 1:15; Matt 24:14; Luke 4:43; 16:16; cf. Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 8:1; Acts 8:12) further links it with Isa 52:7: ‘who brings good news [...] who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”’ Once Jesus’ followers recognized that Jesus was king in the kingdom he proclaimed (a view shared – less benevolently – even by the governor who executed him Mark 15:26), it was natural for them to confess this same good news of God’s authority in more specific terms Jesus is Lord (Acts 2:36; Rom 10:9, 13; 1 Cor 12:3).

There is thus continuity between the good news that Jesus proclaims and the good news that he embodies. Paul’s letters, probably the earliest NT writings, elaborate some details about this gospel, both in terms of its activity and its content. In terms of its activity, Paul defines the gospel in Rom 1:16–17 as the expression of God’s power for saving those who trust him. In contrast to 1 Cor 15:1–4 and Rom 1:3–4, Paul’s definition in Rom 1:16–17 involves not cognitive content for humans to embrace but divine action, since God effectually speaks in this message (1 Thess 2:13). For Paul, this ‘salvation’ in its ultimate form is future (Rom 5:9–10; 10:9, 13; 13:11) and collective (Rom 9:27; 10:1; 11:26), but individuals already participate in this salvation through embracing the gospel. For Paul, however, the gospel also has a specific cognitive content, to which this article now turns.

2.1 The good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection

The most explicit NT definition of the ‘good news’ shared by Paul and the earliest apostolic witnesses appears in 1 Cor 15:1–7:

> 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: 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, and that 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.

Here Paul specifies the contents of this shared gospel (1 Cor 15:1, 11) as Jesus' death and resurrection, with its backstory in Israel's scriptures ('according to the scriptures'; 1 Cor 15:3–4, attested by the foundational witnesses; 1 Cor 15:15–7). That is, the good news is rooted in the narrative of saving history that climaxes in the ultimate saving narrative recounting Jesus' conquest of death. The above passage is also explicit that this understanding of the gospel is not unique to Paul, but is shared with the earliest apostolic witnesses of Jesus (1 Cor 15:3–7, 11).

Granted, in the context of the defence of bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul here has more than ordinary reason to emphasize matters of death, burial, and resurrection. Nevertheless, Jesus' death and resurrection remain a fundamental feature of NT proclamation in general (e.g. 2 Cor 13:4; Heb 2:9; 12:2; 1 Pet 1:3, 19–21; 3:18). Evangelistic speeches in Acts vary somewhat in content those given to Jewish believers include much of the biblical backstory explicitly (Acts 2:16–35; 7:2–37; 13:17–41); some start, as Mark's Gospel does, with John the Baptist (10:37; 13:24–25) or with Jesus' miracles (2:22; 10:38). The climax in Jesus' death and resurrection, however, appears quite widely in these speeches (e.g. Acts 2:23–36; 3:13–15; 10:39–42; 13:28–37; 17:31).

In Corinth, where upwardly mobile believers emphasized education and status, Paul hyperbolically claims that he preached only Christ crucified (1 Cor 2:2; cf. 1:23). There his preaching emphasized Jesus' execution, shameful and foolish by worldly standards (1 Cor 1:17–25; 2 Cor 13:4), though this message was also central to Paul elsewhere (e.g. Gal 5:11; 6:12–14; Phil 2:8). Like some other NT authors (John 3:16; John 4:10; Rev 1:5), Paul presents Christ's death as the ultimate expression of God's love (Rom 5:5–8; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:4; 5:2). He also regards it as essential for salvation (Rom 4:25; 5:6–10). This is also true, however, of Christ's resurrection (Rom 4:24; 10:9; 1 Thess 1:9–10), which Paul also preached in Corinth from the beginning of his time there (1 Cor 15:14–15).

2.2 The earlier biblical backstory

Paul's Corinthian Christian audience probably questions only their own future resurrection, not that of Jesus (1 Cor 15:1–2, 12–13). Nevertheless, Paul's narration of the gospel message continues beyond Jesus' resurrection to Jesus' subsequent appearances to those who witnessed him (15:5–7), adding Paul's own testimony to those who preceded him (15:8). He thus presents the gospel message as not a subjective and imaginative myth, but an event in history attested by witnesses (see further discussion in Wright 2003; Licona 2010).

Although the consistent core summary of saving events is a message about Jesus' death and resurrection, these are not isolated events. Instead, they are the climax of a fuller story, namely the prior history of God's saving acts. They occur 'according to the scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3–4; see also Rom 1:1–4; cf. Mark 1:1–3), thus evoking the OT backstory – the history of God's saving acts through the promised restoration. That the Gospels explicitly connect Jesus with OT events, patterns, and promises fits this crucial expectation.

Interpreters diverge as to the sense in which this message is 'according to the scriptures'. Jesus' death and resurrection echo many earlier biblical themes: atonement for sins, God redeeming his people, God raising up rejected deliverers (cf. Acts 7:9, 27–28, 35–37; cf. also Isa 53:1–3; John 12:37–38; Rom 10:16), and leaders' suffering before exaltation. Many find further background in the pattern of righteous sufferers in the Psalms and, most directly, the Suffering Servant in Isa 53, who dies on behalf of others' sins (see the argument in Gathercole 2015): 'But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, [...] the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa 53:5–6).

Jesus' resurrection also prefigures, and is the initial instalment of, the ultimate hope of future resurrection (Dan 12:2–3; cf. Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:11–14). Just as four beasts in the visions of Dan 7:3–8 represent four kingdoms (cf. 2:37–43) and their kings (7:17), the human-like one ('the Son of Man') in 7:13–1– embodies God's kingdom (7:18), both the role of the suffering holy ones (7:18, 21–22, 27) and of their eternal king. The holy ones suffer under the final evil empire (understood in the first century as Rome; 7:21), and the Son of Man receives worship among the nations (7:13–14; cf. 2:34, 44–45).

Jesus' suffering and exaltation thus on one hand bring to a climax earlier patterns of God's saving work, and on the other prefigure and inaugurate the ultimate future hope. Rather than a Messiah who would crush Rome in the short run, Jesus suffers with God's people under Rome but inaugurates the defeat of death. After this he reigns from heaven until the final subjugation of his enemies with the resurrection of all those loyal to him (Ps 110:1; 1 Cor 15:25–26).

2.3 The good news that Jesus is Lord

The gospel message also includes Jesus' messianic identity, demonstrated by his resurrection. Thus the NT often speaks of the good news about Christ (e.g. Rom 15:19; Phil 1:27) and can speak of the good news of God's Son (Rom 1:9; Gal 1:16). Paul begins his letter to Roman believers by describing the gospel in this way God promised in the prophets the good news about his Son, a Davidic descendant whose resurrection vindicated him as God's Son and Lord (Rom 1:1–4):

> Paul, [...] set apart for the gospel of God, which he [God] 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 [...] God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son. (Rom 1:1–4, 9)

Paul emphasizes that he is devoted to God's 'good news' (Rom 1:1), promised in advance by biblical prophets (1:2). Paul then defines the topic of this prior biblical message by human descent, Jesus is son of David (the expected Davidic Messiah, 1:3; cf. 2 Tim 2:8), but – even more importantly – the Spirit demonstrates Jesus to be Son of God by the resurrection (Rom 1:4).

Paul regards this message of God's son as already present in scripture before the time of Jesus, though not understood until fulfilled in him (1:2; cf. 16:25–26). As Israel's surrounding cultures could view kings as divine sons, God announced that he adopted David's royal line as his son (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; 89:27). That was a promise that could apply particularly fully to the ultimate Davidic descendant (cf. Isa 9:6–7; Jer 23:5–6; 33:15–16; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:25; Hos 3:5), as some early Judean interpreters recognized (4Q174 frg.1–2.1.11–13, 18–19). The exaltation of God's son would bring restoration to his people. The ultimate exaltation of a Davidic king, one that exceeded traditional expectations for David (cf. Ps 110:1 in Mark 12:35–37), came with Jesus' resurrection and heavenly enthronement (Ps 2:7 in Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5).

According to the likeliest reading, the Gospel of Mark's opening line also identifies the good news with Jesus being the Messiah, God's Son: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). That Mark frames his Gospel's introduction with good news – both the good news that Jesus preached (1:14–15) and the good news that Mark preaches about Jesus (1:1) – indicates that Mark believed that the two were connected.

2.4 Against contrary versions of 'good news'

Paul was consecrated for (Rom 1:1), and entrusted with (1 Thess 2:4; 1 Tim 1:11), the gospel; he regarded it as *his* gospel (Rom 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8), i.e. the one he proclaims (Gal 1:11; 2:2), particularly for the gentiles (Rom 11:13; 15:16; Gal 1:16; 2:2, 7; Eph 3:1–8). As well as being his, however, he also regards it as the core gospel message shared with the Jerusalem apostles 'Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe' (1 Cor 15:11; cf. also 15:1; Gal 2:7).

For the NT writers, embracing and persevering in this message was essential for eschatological salvation (Mark 8:35; Rom 1:16; 15:2; Eph 1:13; Col 1:23), for eternal life with God (2 Tim 1:10; 1 Pet 4:6). Still, different groups sometimes debated the particular salvific mechanics of its implications. Paul contends that his rivals in Galatia deem God's action in Christ insufficient for incorporation into the covenant (Gal 1:6–9). Personality cults could also distort the gospel (2 Cor 11:4). Despite differences on other issues, however, all extant sources suggest basic agreement between Paul and Jesus' original disciples about the core content of the gospel (see e.g. 1 Cor 15:11; Gal 2:7; 1 Pet 1:11–12).

Although the preceding passages define what the good news is, sometimes Paul also defines what it is not, and again can appeal to an apostolic consensus. Paul writes that his rivals in Corinth preach a 'different' gospel, a different Jesus and a different spirit than Paul preached (2 Cor 11:4). Paul describes these preachers as false apostles (11:13). Unlike the Jerusalem apostles they are rhetorically skilled (11:5), more so than Paul, but they cannot match Paul's revelations (12:1–6) and signs (12:12; cf. Rom 15:18–19), and especially his apostolic sufferings (2 Cor 11:23–33; 12:7–10). They apparently want power without suffering and weakness, but that is where God's power in Christ is revealed (cf. 10:10; 12:9–10; 13:3–4). They boast and seek to exercise authority over those whom Paul reached (10:12–18) – that is, they seek followers for themselves rather than for Christ (cf. Mark 9:38–39; Acts 20:30).

If the false gospel in 2 Corinthians 11 involves boasting in human power, the false gospel of Gal 1:6–7 apparently involves boasting in human works or ethnic markers. In both cases, the false gospel minimizes complete dependence on Christ. In Galatia, some were requiring gentiles to be circumcised to be full members of God's covenant. This requirement contravened the gospel that Paul received from Christ himself (1:11–12; 2:2), a gospel he refused to compromise (2:5, 14), and a gospel that Jerusalem's apostolic leaders also acknowledged (2:7).

2.5 Good news for all peoples

Paul often reasons from the gospel message just as he would extrapolate from the OT. Among the most common ethical implications Paul derives from his message is that the good news that uniquely restores all believers to God also removes grounds for boasting over any prior status before God. As such, it requires believers to surmount the historic division between Jews and gentiles.

Thus, when Paul defines the gospel in Rom 1:16–17 as the expression of God's power for saving those who trust him, he specifies that it is for both Jewish and gentile believers. Given the gospel's association with Israel's restoration in Isaiah (Isa 40:9; 52:7; 61:1), this specification is significant (though one consistent with Isaiah more broadly e.g. Isa 56:6–8). That the message is for Jew and gentile alike also reflects a theme highlighted in

Romans (2:9–10; 3:9, 29; 4:17–18; 9:24; 10:12; 15:8–12; 16:25–26), probably in keeping with cultural divisions among believers in Rome.

For Paul, fellow Jews who act as if they expect gentiles to embrace Jewish customs – especially as a condition for table fellowship – act contrary to the gospel (Gal 2:14). The principle behind the concrete issue in this passage would apply to imposing any culture's practices on another culture as if these represented the gospel itself. When Paul insists that scripture 'declared the gospel beforehand' to Abraham, this gospel included blessing to gentiles (Gal 3:8). Paul affirms that this eschatological promise is inaugurated proleptically – as a foretaste – in gentile believers' experience of the Spirit (3:14; cf. 3:2–5). Gentiles' reception of the ultimate promise of the new covenant (Ezek 36:25-27) rendered superfluous for them merely fleshly symbols of the covenant.

Ephesians 2:17; 3:6, and 3:8 (whether authored by Paul or someone immersed in his thought) also emphasize that the gospel message incorporates gentiles who embrace it into close connection with Christ and earlier biblical promises to Israel, alongside Jewish believers.

Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians challenge prevailing Jewish and gentile prejudices of the era that highlighted divisions (Gal 2:11–14; Rom 11:13, 18–20; Eph 2:11–12, 15–16). Paul expected the resultant unity to be expressed in practical ways (Rom 15:7, 26–27). Gentile support for the needs of Jewish fellow believers would encourage the latter's gratitude for gentiles' embrace of the gospel (2 Cor 9:13).

Paul's message for his contemporary situation offers a concrete model applicable to other settings as well. Since the Jewish-gentile division was initially established by God himself, the gospel's explicit surmounting of such a division must surely entail striving to maintain unity among Christ's people against all other, lesser divisions (cf. Col 3:11).

For the NT writers, God had intended the message to spread among gentiles already from the start (Matt 24:14; 13:10; Acts 15:7), since God destined for salvation to reach them (Isa 2:2–4; 19:23–25; 49:6; 56:6–7; Zech 2:11; cf. Gen 12:3). The gospel would ultimately spread beyond all cultural and ethnic barriers, being preached among all nations (Mark 13:10; 14:9). The first apostles (Acts 5:42; Gal 2:7), Paul, (Rom 15:20; 2 Cor 10:14–16) his colleagues (Phil 2:22; 4:3), and ordinary believers (Acts 8:4; 11:19–20) would all continue this mission of announcing good news to others who had not heard it. Not only apostles spreading the gospel in new spheres, but also those who helped them, shared in the mission of the gospel (Phil 1:5, 7; 4:15).

2.6 Ethical implications of the gospel

The gospel also has ethical implications beyond multi-ethnic, intercultural unity. New life embraced in Christ ideally should preclude sin, because being baptized into Christ

means sharing his death regarding sin (Rom 6:1–10; Eph 4:20–24; Col 3:3), no less than human birth had meant sharing humanity's propensity to sin (cf. Rom 5:12–21; cf. the 'old humanity' in Eph 4:22; Col 3:9). Christ's life now defines the identity of those united with him; to the extent that they recognize their participation in Christ's work, they can live consistently with it (Rom 6:11; Col 3:3–5; cf. Keener 2016).

Paul recognizes that in practice sin remains a temptation, so he includes warnings against it (Rom 6:12–21). Yet he seems to express shock, as well as disappointment, that some of his converts in Corinth are engaging in some of the sins that characterized their preconversion life (1 Cor 6:9–11). Paul reasons from the believers' union with Christ against actions such as intercourse with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15–17) and consumption of food offered to idols (1 Cor 10:20–21). 1 Tim 1:9–11 even offers a vice list, for examples of particular sins that the gospel opposes.

For the NT writers, this gospel was worth labouring (Rom 1:9; 15:16; Phil 2:22; 4:3; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 3:2), sacrificing (1 Cor 9:12, 18, 23; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Thess 2:9) and suffering for (1 Thess 2:2; Phlm 13; 2 Tim 1:8; 2:8–9). Through this gospel people could receive eternal life (1 Cor 15:1–2; Eph 1:13; Col 1:5, 23; 2 Thess 2:14; 2 Tim 1:10); those who rejected it rejected life (2 Cor 4:3; 2 Thess 1:8; cf. 1 Pet 4:17). Discipleship must ultimately persevere despite challenges (e.g. Mark 4:15–20; 8:34–38; John 15:4–6); in light of eternal values, Christ is worth everything (Luke 14:26–33; 2 Cor 5:15).

3 The gospel in the Gospels

Jesus not only preached good news of God's imminent reign; he demonstrated his divine authority for eschatological restoration by restoring broken people. But, while he demonstrated God's imminent authority, aspects of that authority are only realized in phases, as in OT narratives of Israel's exodus and conquest or restoration from exile.

3.1 Enacting the good news

Like earlier biblical prophets, Jesus sometimes teaches by symbolic actions as well as words. Thus, for example, he foreshadows judgment on the temple by cursing a fig tree (Mark 11:14, 21) and challenging the temple establishment's business interests (Mark 11:15–17). More regularly, however, he gives a foretaste of kingdom wholeness by his acts of benevolence.

Jesus not only preached good news about God's reign; he demonstrated this reign by exercising authority over sickness (Matt 4:23; 9:35; cf. Ladd 1978: 47), as did those he commissioned (Luke 9:6). Jesus presents his healings (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22) and exorcisms (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20) as demonstrating the imminence of the kingdom. The language in Matt 12:28 and Luke 11:20 evokes passages in Isaiah about the time of

restoration and new creation ‘the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, [...] the deaf hear [...] and the poor have good news brought to them’ (Matt 11:5; par. Luke 7:22); ‘[t]hen the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer [...]’, ‘the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed’ (Isa 35:5–6; 61:1; the Greek version of Isa 61:1 uses the same term for ‘poor’ as in Matthew and Luke). The language of Matt 12:28 and Luke 11:20 is even more direct: ‘[b]ut if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you (Luke 11:20; par Matt 12:28, which adapts ‘finger’ to ‘Spirit’ to fit the context in Matt 12:18, 31–32).

Similarly, signs continued among Jesus’ agents (e.g. Acts 4:30; 6:8; 8:6; 14:3). Paul’s ministry of the gospel was ‘fulfilled’ with signs as it broke ground in new spheres (Rom 15:19–20); elsewhere he notes that the Spirit attested the gospel in power, probably sometimes expressed in signs (cf. 1 Cor 2:4–5; 1 Thess 1:5).

Another way that Jesus foreshadows the kingdom, evoking Isa 61:1, is ‘preaching good news to the poor’ (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22). Luke highlights this passage, in the programmatic statement of Jesus’ mission as the anointed one in Luke 4:18–19 which foreshadows much of the rest of Luke’s narrative. Jesus’ preaching in Luke includes the promise of God’s kingdom for the poor (6:20; cf. 14:21) and the invitation to others to serve the poor (14:13; 18:22; 12:33; cf. 3:11; 19:8), a theme developed in Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts (2:44–45; 4:32–35; 6:1–3; 11:29–30).

Meeting human need in Jesus’ name, whether by human or superhuman means, is understood as one expression of God’s reign in the present. This action appropriately accompanies verbal proclamation of God’s kingdom.

3.2 Imminence versus immediacy

When Mark summarizes Jesus’ preaching, he does so as follows: ‘[...] proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “[t]he time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”’ (Mark 1:14–15). Matthew in turn summarizes Mark thus: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Matt 4:17), and ‘proclaiming the good news of the kingdom’ (4:23). Proclaiming ‘good news about the kingdom’ appears also in Matt 9:35; 24:14; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16; and Acts 8:12.

In Mark 1:14–15, Jesus’ good news is that ‘the time is fulfilled’ and thus God’s kingdom, or reign, is near. The ‘time’ that is fulfilled is the time of waiting for the fulfilment of OT prophets’ promises about restoration. This should include not least the 490 years mentioned in the vision of Dan 9:24–27, which some first-century Jewish interpreters apparently applied to their own time (Wright 1992: 351–352; Wright 2013: 142–146).

As already noted, for many first-century Jews ‘good news’ about God’s reign evokes Isa 52:7, where it refers to the time when God would restore his people. While the rhetorical force of prophecies about the imminence of God’s restoration demands readiness, ideally those immersed in scripture should understand that imminence need not entail immediacy. Everyone in that context knew that prophets had already been declaring for eight centuries that the day of God’s judgment was at hand (e.g. Isa 13:6; Ezek 30:3; Joel 1:15; Zeph 1:14). Moreover, earlier Judeans’ return from Babylon did not exhaust the prophetic promises of restoration (Wright 2013: 139–162). The majority of Jews lived outside the holy land, and many expected the return of the other tribes (see e.g. Sanders 1992: 291). Jewish expectation also included a new temple, well before the temple of Jesus’ day was destroyed in the year 70 CE (Sanders 1985: 78–86).

Mark’s Gospel may envision the kingdom restoration continuing in phases. Thus, in that story, select disciples appear to experience the kingdom coming in power through a private foretaste of Jesus’ future glory:

> ‘[...] the Son of Man [...] when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. [...] Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power’. Six days later, [...] he was transfigured before them. (Mark 8:38–9:2)

Similarly, the temple will be destroyed within a generation (13:2, 14, 30) but during Mark’s own narrative this is merely foreshadowed proleptically, when the temple veil is torn at Jesus’ death (15:38). Jesus’ death and resurrection do inaugurate a new, spiritual temple, however (see 14:58; 15:29; cf. John 2:19; 1 Cor 3:16). Although some scholars view Mark 13:24–27 as symbolizing the temple’s destruction, others see the temple’s destruction as merely prefiguring the ultimate, more global judgment in 13:24–2 – at Jesus’ return:

> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. (Mark 13:26–27)

Because early Christians recognized that their king had come, yet would come again, they understood this kingdom as occurring in multiple phases, inaugurated at Jesus’ first coming but consummated at his second (using passages such as Ps 110:1).

3.3 The kingdom’s crown of thorns

Within Mark's own narrative, the kingdom climax comes at the cross. Jesus initially speaks about the kingdom in a veiled way, as 'the secret of the kingdom of God', hidden in parables (Mark 4:11). To teach more explicitly that the kingdom was near because Jesus himself was its king would have hastened his conflict with the Roman authorities.

Toward the end of Mark's Gospel, however, royal language appears exclusively for Jesus, who is ridiculed and executed as 'king of the Jews' (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32). Crowned with thorns, Jesus fulfils this phase of his mission by dying for his people (10:45; 14:22–24). Mark's gospel of the kingdom inverts the expectations of his contemporaries: he preaches the good news of the cross (as in 1 Cor 1:17).

Rome viewed proclaiming oneself king as an act of treason, and until Jesus is ready to be crucified he preaches about God's kingdom without specifying the agent of God's reign. After his exaltation as king, however, there remained no further purpose for the 'messianic secret', the mystery of the kingdom. The more explicit proclamation about God's kingdom, then, includes Jesus' exaltation as king. In Diaspora circles (i.e. outside Judea and Galilee), where language of following a 'king' executed by Rome could sound treasonous (Acts 17:7), Paul most often reserves language of God's kingship for the future (as in 1 Cor 6:10; 15:24, 50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; 1 Thess 2:2). Rather than proclaiming Jesus 'king', many preferred the language of the exalted 'Lord' (e.g. Mark 12:36; Acts 2:36; 10:36; Rom 10:9–10, 13; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11). 'Jesus as Lord' thus remains the same gospel as the message about the kingdom, yet articulated more plainly.

Jesus' kingdom teaching affects not just how his followers should view his kingship, but also how they should view their own authority or status. Thus Jesus teaches that the kingdom belongs only to the lowly, not to those who depend on worldly power or wealth:

> 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 […] How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! [...] It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:14–15, 23, 25)

After witnessing many signs, some begin to associate Jesus with kingship (Mark 8:29; 11:10), but in an uninformed way (8:31–34), and they quickly begin to think of themselves in terms of the same worldly status that Jesus' enemies claim (9:34; 10:37). Yet Mark contrasts Jesus, who serves and gives his life for others, with worldly authorities who exploit power over others (9:35–37; 10:42–45), most explicitly the pseudo-king Herod Antipas (6:14, 27).

3.4 Where does the ‘gospel’ begin?

As already noted, the most concise version of the core gospel story focuses on Jesus’ death and resurrection as the climax of God’s earlier acts of salvation, with its backstory in the OT (1 Cor 15:1–11). But a fuller version of the gospel story includes Jesus’ ministry (as in Acts 2:22; 10:38), encompassing the events leading to the cross and empty tomb (as in Mark’s Gospel), and even Jesus’ incarnation (John 1:14) and infancy (Matt 1–2; Luke 1–2).

Mark’s Gospel opens with the phrase ‘[t]he beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ’ (Mark 1:1). If Mark means that he is narrating only the gospel’s ‘beginning’ in his work, it comes as no surprise that he does not recount the resurrection appearances (cf. 1 Cor 15:5–7), though he knows that they follow (Mark 14:28; 16:7). Because Mark wrote before the other three surviving first-century Gospels, no one had any preconceived notions for how a narrative ‘Gospel’ should begin or end.

Others argue that ‘beginning’ refers simply to the beginning of Mark’s narration, rather than to the whole; in this case, it begins with John the Baptist’s preaching that introduces Jesus (Mark 1:4–8). In any case, the way Mark begins narrating the good news recognizes earlier precedent in the biblical story (1:2–3).

Luke begins narrating good news even earlier (Luke 1:19; 2:10; 3:18), but Luke begins the full preaching of good news about God’s reign with John the Baptist: ‘The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed’ (Luke 16:16; cf. Acts 10:37; 13:24–25).

In different ways, Matthew also begins most of the gospel narration with John (Matt 3:2; 11:12–13). Matthew highlights the continuity of the kingdom message of John (3:2), Jesus (4:17), and Jesus’ disciples (10:7); after the resurrection, this message of God’s reign more explicitly identifies Jesus as king (28:18–20). Stressing the theme of fulfilment, both Luke and Matthew recognize that their story is grounded in the OT backstory, but their full ‘gospel’ proper begins with John’s introduction of Jesus.

3.5 Gospel and titles of the Gospels

Interest in the gospel message as a whole, rather than in one of the four accounts in particular, prevailed in the early second century. Because of this, citation of individual Gospels by name is better attested after the year 180 CE. They appear in extant titles not long after, in the early manuscripts p66, perhaps from c. 200, and p72, somewhat later (see Collins 2007: 3; Bird 2014: 257). The Gospels’ authors were not, however, unknown before that point (ancient works often neglected to name their author in their prefaces, but the original audience usually knew orally or from the scroll’s exterior the author’s identity; Keener 2014; Gathercole 2018). Papias of Hierapolis clearly believes that he

knows, based on late first-century information, the authors of at least some Gospels (see especially Mark in frg. 3.15; cf. Hengel 1985: 69; Bird 2014: 258). Justin Martyr considers Mark's Gospel to be the memoirs of Peter, probably independently confirming Papias regarding Mark (Papias fragments 3.15 [in Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39.15]; Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* [Dial.] 106.3). And it seems unlikely that Matthew and Luke, who by ancient standards follow Mark's content extremely closely, would have depended so heavily on Mark without any knowledge of his identity (Gathercole 2018: 462, 471). By the usual dates assigned, Matthew and Luke probably wrote within roughly two decades of Mark; authorship would be one of the last details of a work to be forgotten.

Moreover, once more than one Gospel account existed (a situation that existed at the latest within two decades of Mark), churches would need ways to distinguish them (Hengel 1985: 81; Bauckham 2017: 303, 537). If each church came up with their own suggested names for authors and works, we would expect from different regions the sort of different views over authorship that arose over other matters, such as the date of Easter. By contrast, when a work lacked a title at the beginning, it normally acquired different titles as it circulated in different settings (Collins 2007: 2–3). The Gospel titles' unusual unanimity suggests that the titles reflect genuinely early knowledge about the authors' names (Hengel 1985: 66–67; Adams 2011: 15; Gathercole 2018: 460–475; Bond 2020: 10). There are legitimate reasons why many scholars question whether the names reflect authorship or just associations, especially with some Gospels' final forms, but the associations are in any case early. Since multiple Gospels circulated well before the conclusion of the first century – certainly at least in Matthew's and Luke's circles (cf. Luke 1:1) – the standard titles were apparently in use already, at latest in the early second century (Hengel 1985: 64–84; Bauckham 2017: 537; Riesner 2019: 414–418).

The standard Gospel title in Greek, of *KATA* followed by an Evangelist's name in the accusative, is unusual, and would not have arisen in multiple cases by accident. Even the affixing of εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion*; 'good news') to such a designation need not be a late addition; its presence in earlier papyri suggests that the fourth-century manuscripts B and א might simply abbreviate the fuller form (Bird 2014: 257). Against the objection that εὐαγγέλιον does not appear as a book title until the mid-second century (where it appears in Justin Martyr *First Apology* 66.3), it has been shown to appear as such as early as the *Didache* (Did.), an early post-biblical Christian document (*Did.* 8.2, 11.3–4, 15.4; Kelhoffer 2004). Since opening lines sometimes functioned as titles, certainly in earlier biblical tradition, the author, early readers, or scribes may have added a 'gospel' title already based on Mark 1:1, providing a format for other Gospels once traditional authors' names were attached.

4 Gospels as literary-historical works

Because the good news about Jesus took various forms, originally especially oral form, the Gospels' current shape was not an inevitable consequence of their message. Tracing the salvation-historical backstory of Jesus' death and resurrection could begin with OT patterns or prophecies (Mark 1:2–3; John 1:1–18; Acts 7:2–37; 13:17–41), or with the passion narrative (a form that many proponents of a pre-Markan passion narrative suggest did exist; cf. 1 Cor 11:23–26; 15:3).

The OT history of God's acts could include biographic components (such as the story of Moses or David) without devoting a discrete work to a single character. By the first century CE, however, works devoted to single characters constituted a familiar genre, offering a unique opportunity to tell the story about Jesus' public ministry, shaped by the disciples' memory of his life. The disciples' memory focused especially on their experiences with him, from the preaching of John the Baptist to Jesus' exaltation. This facilitated writing about the climactic figure of biblical history in a form specially attentive to his person and mission.

The four surviving first-century Gospels each exhibit distinctive features. This is why we have four of them; not until the late second century did someone (Tatian) produce the earliest known Gospel harmony to combine them. But while the Gospels are each distinct (especially the fourth, John), they share much of a basic common story and common characters (Adams 2011: 3, 24–33). This differs substantially from later works that borrow the gospel title (see thoroughly Gathercole 2022).

The Gospels are, in short, works about Jesus, and the most defining characteristic about ancient biography was precisely that it focused on a chief character. If indeed Mark recounts Peter's preaching, we would expect him to write about Jesus – regardless of other ancient biographies – given the gospel message's focus on Jesus. But Mark would also surely recognize where his work stood among existing genres of writing in his day. Adding infancy narratives and genealogies to fill out more of Jesus' background, Matthew and Luke bring their narratives somewhat closer to typical biographies. The surviving first-century Gospels form a subtype of ancient biography that later Christians appropriately dubbed 'Gospels', as they recount the gospel narrative. What is most distinctive about these Gospels is not so much their general genre but the distinctiveness of their primary character.

4.1 Consensus regarding the Gospels' 'biographic' character

No later than the mid-second century (so probably within living memory of the final first-century Gospel), Justin Martyr describes the Gospels as 'the memoirs communicated by his apostles and organized by those who were involved with them' (*Dial*. 103.8; cf. often in Justin Martyr; comments in Abramowski 1991). The title 'memoirs' suggests the understanding that the Gospels were a matter of biographic interest (that is, they

were about a person), though it also risks depicting them as merely notes rather than cohesive literary works. By this period, many treated the Gospels as a collective source of information about Jesus, to be mined with limited attention to specific literary contexts (Frickenschmidt 1997: 501).

Most subsequent readers treated the Gospels as biographic in some sense, although not all were sensitive to differences between ancient and modern biography. Many scholars in the early twentieth century, such as Johannes Weiss and Claude Votaw, continued to explore the Gospels in light of ancient biography, but Romanticism's approach to the Gospels as folk (as opposed to 'high') literature shaped emerging form criticism (Collins 2007: 22, 24).

Form critics generally viewed the Gospels as a new genre, which could be mined as repositories for folk traditions (Collins 2007: 19). Rudolf Bultmann, for example, denied that the Gospels were Hellenistic biographies or had much interest in many characteristics of the historical Jesus (Bultmann 1968: 371–372). Yet 'folk' and 'high' literature are not themselves genres. Just as the Gospels vary in sophistication and register (contrast e.g. Mark and Luke), so did most ancient genres generally (Downing 1988; Aune 1987: 12, 63; Burridge 2004: 11, 153). Further, biographic features that form critics considered to be missing in Mark are no less absent in Lucian's biography of the sage Demonax (Burridge 2004: 93). Some have thus complained that Bultmann simply lacked adequate acquaintance with ancient biography (Hengel 1985: 139, note 8).

Interest in the biographic genre resurfaced notably with the work of C. H. Talbert, in 1977, and Klaus Berger's work in 1984 (and to a lesser extent Philip Shuler's work in 1982). It was especially Richard Burridge's Cambridge monograph (1992) that shifted the consensus of most Gospels scholars to recognize the Gospels as ancient biographies. Surveying a massive number of full-length biographic works from antiquity, Dirk Frickenschmidt, a student of Berger, provided extensive confirmation in 1997. Scholars have continued to discuss and develop related studies (e.g. Smith 2007; Keener 2011; Baum 2013). More recently, scholars have begun exploring the significance of this genre classification for literary analysis of the Gospels (Bond 2020) and for explorations of their historical character (Licona 2017: 2–17; Keener 2019). Meanwhile, historians of antiquity have continued to discuss the contours of ancient biography (e.g. Pelling 2002; McGing and Mossman 2006; Stadter 2007).

4.2 Character of ancient biography

The usual consensus, that the Gospels fit the broad category of ancient biography, does not resolve all questions about their character. Today, scholars increasingly recognize that genre categories are fluid and must be used heuristically (see e.g. Adams 2013: 26–67). Indeed, even the ancient genre of a *bios* or 'life', as such works eventually came to

be called, evolved over the course of a thousand years (see Momigliano 1971; Keener 2019: 68–103). Biography, especially as it began to emerge half a millennium before the Gospels, developed partly from funerary encomium. In classical Greece, proto-biographies by Isocrates and Xenophon praised their subject, and others soon developed person-centred works to vilify subjects as well. By the late Roman empire, both Christian and non-Christian biographies became largely hagiography, tales of holy persons with special powers (see Cox 1983).

However, from at least the period of Cornelius Nepos at the end of the Roman Republic to as late as Diogenes Laertius in the early third century, biographers of full-length works tried to recount existing information or traditions available to them. The first-century CE Jewish authors Philo and (in autobiographic form) Josephus also wrote information-based biographies. By the early Roman empire, then (especially the first and second century CE), full-length biography was essentially a special kind of historical monograph, focused on the character of an individual.

Some read Mark as a historical monograph (see e.g. Becker 2017; Collins 2007). This would fit Mark's limited chronological focus, as well as Luke's pairing with Acts, usually treated as a historical monograph (for Luke, cf. e.g. Moessner 2016). Comparable works would thus be Sallust's monographs on Jugurtha and Catiline. Because an ancient 'life' was simply a work about a historical person, however, the practical difference between historical biography and biographic history is fairly limited.

Even the most historiographic works include interpretive elements and some selectivity and latitude in how they recount the story, but their distinctive feature is their interest in prior information. Some postmodernist interpreters define selection and interpretation of information, necessary in all historical writing, as broadly 'fictionalization', but they normally distinguish this from 'fiction', which does not require prior information (De Temmerman 2016). In antiquity, historians and biographers – in contrast to most novelists – also sought to provide moral lessons based on the events and anecdotes they reported (Keener 2019: 132–134, 195–200). Biographers were also especially interested in highlighting the character of the person about whom they wrote, making some other details incidental.

Not surprisingly, then, the Evangelists wrote from their own perspectives, used their information about Jesus to teach moral and especially theological lessons, and focused on Jesus' identity. All this would be expected for the sort of works they were writing – in terms of both their essential gospel message and the expectations for ancient biographies.

4.3 How much information would be remembered?

Oral historians find the most accurate period of memory to be the period when the eyewitnesses or those who knew them remain alive. This is considered the period of

living memory, usually some sixty to eighty years. All four first-century Gospels, by virtue of being composed in the first century, were written within living memory. Give or take half a decade, most scholars today date the Gospel of Mark's composition, for example, within forty years of Jesus' execution. Memory studies abound today in relation to the Gospels, whether regarding psychological memory of the witnesses or social memory of the community (see e.g. Kelber and Byrskog 2009; McIver 2011; Eve 2013; Kirk 2018).

During most of that period, Jesus' own disciples and at least one of his brothers were leading figures in his movement: 'James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who were acknowledged pillars' (Gal 2:9; cf. further 1 Cor 9:5; 15:5–7). By definition, such disciples were students, normally expected to be able to pass on a teacher's message. This was true regardless of disciples' level of literacy (Keener 2019: 401–448).

Compared with most other ancient biographic works that have survived, the proximity of the writing to the events narrated is remarkable. Apart from Socrates and Jesus, few other sages from antiquity can boast multiple surviving works about them from their school or movement from within living memory. The Gospels thus provide historians a rare treasure (cf. Smith 2018: 17–18).

Casting the net beyond biographies of sages, only a minority of authors of surviving biographies lived within living memory of their subjects. The biographies of such figures that have survived can be shown to be heavily information-based rather than novelistic (Keener 2019: esp. 261–302). Even with works written much later than their subjects, however, historians often make do. For example, the best surviving source for Alexander the Great – Arrian's *History of Alexander* – comes from some 450 years after Alexander's death. As a biographic work from within some forty years of Jesus' death, Mark's Gospel stands in obvious contrast.

5 Later usage in antiquity

Interest in Jesus continued well beyond living memory. Starting more than a century after Jesus' execution, and continuing for centuries afterward, people began composing accounts that have been called gospels, borrowing nomenclature already used for the first-century Gospels. Most Christians from those periods never accepted those works as authoritative, however, preferring testimony from those who had closer knowledge about Jesus. That is, they insisted on first-century Gospels, composed by those associated somehow with the circle of the original eyewitnesses. This preference continued a pattern from the beginning (Luke 1:2; John 19:35; Acts 1:21–22), as well as being the normal expectation for historical inquiry (see Byrskog 2000; Bauckham 2017).

Despite the title 'gospel', these later works represent genres different from the first-century Gospels composed within living memory. Some apocryphal gospels were given the name

‘gospel’, such as a ‘gospel of the Hebrews’ (Gospel of the Hebrews frgs. 3–4) or the Gospel of the Egyptians (Gospel of the Egyptians frgs. 2, 6, 9–10). In the apocryphal Gospel of Peter 15.1, the ‘gospel’ refers more simply, as usually in the NT, to the message about Christ .

Apocryphal gospels, which proliferated in the late second and early third centuries – the heyday of novels – reveal typical novelistic interests. They entertain and explore questions of curiosity, but they lack the particular Judean and Galilean traits that characterize the memories in the first-century Gospels. Further still from the first-century Gospels are the so-called Gnostic ‘gospels’. Most of these lack narrative form, differing starkly from biographies, and are thus clearly of a genre very different than discussed above.

In the Apostolic Fathers and early apologists, the ‘gospel’ could encompass – in overlapping ways – Christian preaching (1 Clement 47.2), the Gospels or Jesus’ teaching as a whole (*Did*. 8.2; 15.3; 2 Clement 8:5; Justin Martyr *Dial*. 100; Theophilus *Apology to Autolycus* 3.14), particular Gospels (Papias 3.14; 6.2; 20.1; 21.1; Justin Martyr *1 Apol*. 1.66; Irenaeus *Against Heresies* [Her.] 1.20.2; 3.11.8; Theophilus 3.12), the good news that brings forgiveness (Barnabus 8.3), and the message of Jesus’ coming, death, and resurrection (Ignatius *Philadelphians* 9.2). The apostles proclaimed the saving Gospel now written in scripture (Irenaeus *Her*. 3.1.1).

6 Later movements with ‘gospel’ titles

Subsequent eras have appropriated the term ‘gospel’ in various ways, often even in titles for their movements.

6.1 *Evangelisch* and evangelical

Luther preferred to call his followers not Lutheran but ‘*evangelisch*’ (of the gospel) or simply Christian. In German, *evangelische* functions as ‘Protestant’. Most Protestant churches in Germany today belong to the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, i.e. the ‘Evangelical [Gospel] Church in Germany’. Using the title the same way, many Lutherans in the US belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The English label *evangelical* is a highly contested term, the senses of which have evolved over time (see Evangelical Theology). Some particular denominations also include ‘evangelical’ in their title. For example – in the West – the Evangelical Free Church and Evangelical Covenant Church, or – based in Africa – the Evangelical Church Winning All and Église Évangélique du Congo. More generally, the label historically has described churches with roots in eighteenth and later nineteenth century religious revivals such as Methodists and other Anglophone movements associated with the Great Awakenings. Other roots include German Pietism and Puritan Anglicans, with many evangelicals also

identifying with Anabaptist roots. Unifying features of evangelicals in this sense are an emphasis on the necessity of conversion (whether gradual or sudden), on the authority of scripture, on atonement for sin by Jesus' death, and on faith expressed in active ways such as evangelism, mission, and social action (Bebbington 1993: 3).

Beyond such common features, however, self-identified evangelicals hold a range of views regarding – for example – baptism, church government, political involvement, women's ordination, spiritual gifts, and end-time beliefs. Today, evangelicals constitute a global movement with well over a half billion adherents, a significant majority of them from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, often with practices and perspectives different from more traditional Western evangelical forms (see e.g. Stiller et al. 2015). Some movements call themselves 'full gospel,' a label sometimes appropriated in global Pentecostalism, which overlaps significantly with evangelicalism especially in the Majority World.

Most church movements, whether they use the label in their title or not, consider fidelity to the 'gospel' essential. Some circles have defined 'gospel' in ways that exclude other groups based on what others consider secondary issues. History has redefined the contours of 'gospel' in diverse ways, making the earlier biblical foundations of the language paramount as a basis for shared perspectives today. Some others have popularly defined 'gospel' as instructions for how to have eternal life (often envisioned as being a life exclusively in heaven).

6.2 Decision or transition?

No one is born a Jesus-follower; characteristic of all NT images of following Jesus is a transition from a former spiritual state to a new one. The descriptions are varied: forensically, a disobedient person is put right with God (e.g. Rom 5:1; 1 Cor 6:11); spiritually, a person is reborn (e.g. Gal 4:29; 1 John 3:9); they are described as passing from Satan's authority to God's (Acts 26:18; Col 1:13), from darkness to light (Eph 5:8), from death to life (1 John 3:14), and the like.

This transition can appear particularly vivid for those from non-Christian backgrounds, such as new believers in the book of Acts, who adopt new beliefs and a new way of life (especially for Gentiles, Acts 14:15; 1 Thess 1:9). In sociological terms, this is the most common sense of conversion (cf. debates about Paul's transition in Acts 9; discussion in Keener 2013: 1604–1605, 1614–1617). Yet calls to conversion may also address those whose Christian faith fails to meet Jesus' demand for truly following him. For some, faith is merely a nominal assent in principle to a Christian theological or moral heritage, while thinking and acting as if Christ were incidental to their life. Yet faith in Jesus, in the NT sense, is trusting in him so as to entirely entrust (commit) oneself to him. If eternity truly hinges on God's gift in Christ, then those who genuinely trust that claim will live in light of it. The gospel is worth everything:

> [...] those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:35)

> Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life’. (Mark 10:29–30)

> 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. (2 Tim 1:8)

> [...] my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. (2 Tim 2:8–9).

Those converted from entirely non-Christian backgrounds, including the author of this article, can often identify a distinct conversion experience. Nevertheless, it is committed dependence on Christ, rather than the ability to identify precisely when or how one was converted, that displays embrace of the gospel. Not all those who entrust their lives to Christ can pinpoint when their faith began; they may look back to their baptism, their confirmation, or a long process.

The Gospels illustrate that people’s relationship with Christ begins and grows in a range of ways. In the Gospel of John, for example, there are contrasting encounters with Jesus by Philip (John 1:47–49), Nicodemus (3:1–10; 7:50–51; 19:39), and the Samaritan woman (4:17–29). In Mark’s Gospel, there are the experiences of Simon Peter (Mark 1:16–18; 8:29–33; 14:72; 16:7), a Syrophoenician mother (7:26–30), a desperate father (9:17–27), and a blind beggar (10:46–52). What is common to them is not their particular pattern of conversion but their trust in the story of God’s work in Christ.

The gospel is about how God has acted in Christ to save, not about an invariable method or formula. It does involve affirmation of the core of the gospel. Central to early Christian affirmation was the confession, ‘Jesus is Lord’ (Acts 2:21; Rom 10:9–10; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5), probably often accompanying baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Baptism itself may have already been intelligible as a deliberate act of conversion, especially if, as many (but not all) scholars think, some Jewish tradition already required this act for gentiles abandoning their past lives to become Jews.

In seeking to communicate the gospel most simply and succinctly, so as to package it more marketably, some popular movements have provided summaries with a focus different from Paul's christocentric message. Paul did employ communication techniques of his day (e.g. rhetoric), but without compromising the offensiveness of the message of an executed Messiah (1 Cor 1:17–25). He claims to eschew rhetoric for the transforming power of the gospel (1 Cor 2:1–5). The focus in modern succinct presentations often becomes a moment of decision. This emphasis has some historic and biblical precedent Pietist and Wesleyan preaching, with continuing influence in the US Second Great Awakening, summoned nominal Christians to emotional decisions.

Yet such decisions, and the expected attendant emotion, were generally meant to demonstrate repentance and genuine embrace of Christ's lordship, with ongoing consequences for life and behaviour. Some modern decision preaching seems a far cry from this. A mere momentary decision, without enduring commitment, is likewise very different from early Christian baptism into Christ's death with knowledge that persecution might await for following the crucified Christ. Although both experience and Paul's correspondence with his churches illustrate that conversion does not immediately yield full maturity, the idea of conversion without transformation – or belief without allegiance to Christ – is a truncated gospel attenuated in its power.

Any summary of the core of the gospel without attention to Jesus' death, resurrection, and lordship must be judged inadequate by NT standards. In NT soteriology, Jesus' death and resurrection reconcile to God those who depend on Christ, so that their lives can be consequently lived under Christ's lordship. Christ saves humanity from its rebellion against God; embracing the gospel means recognizing that Christ has restored us to God's side instead of the side of rebellion.

7 Summary/conclusion

'Gospel' means good news. Jesus announced the good news that God's promised kingdom, or reign, was coming. This would fulfil earlier biblical promises of restoration. The NT argues, however, that the kingdom was not coming the way most of his contemporaries expected, however; Jesus inaugurated it especially through his death, resurrection, and exaltation to reign from heaven until his return. His followers thus preached the good news of his saving death and resurrection, announcing that Jesus is Lord. They regarded this message as good news, because it introduced the series of events that would ultimately be revealed in the full consummation of his kingdom in the future. The first generation of Jesus' followers would deem deficient any 'gospel' not focused on Jesus' identity and saving mission.

Attributions

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