

The Truncated Gospel in Modern Evangelicalism: A Critique and Beginning Reconstruction

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KEYWORDS: *Evangelism, tracts, pragmatism, decisionism, individualism, Imago Dei, covenant, joyful love*

SINCE THE EARLY twentieth century a particular model for proclaiming the gospel has been dominant in American evangelicalism and exported to the world. I will refer to this gospel presentation (often presented by means of small tracts) as the *truncated gospel* because I believe it falls short of the liberating and transforming gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible and authenticated by the lives of his true followers.

The problem of the truncated gospel is subtle and profound. It centres upon

a commonly accepted gospel summary which has become the basis not only for gospel tracts but also for much of the conservative Protestant church's understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The format of the truncated gospel summary *per se* is not in the Bible but originated historically in the early twentieth century as a pragmatic attempt to explain logically and efficiently how one becomes 'saved' and a follower of Jesus Christ the Lord.²

Recently a number of writings from the American evangelical camp have begun to expose this gospel presentation as superficial at best and dangerous at worst.³ What has not yet

¹ Deepest expression to Jess Bousa and Gina Bellofatto, and particularly to Graedon Zorzi, whose behind the scenes labours have contributed inestimably to this project. Appreciation also to faculty colleagues John Jefferson Davis and William David Spencer for their ongoing encouragement.

² One of the earliest examples of a fixed formula was Austin Crouch's five-step 'Plan of Salvation' in 1924, cited in Ronald W. Johnson, *How Will They Hear If We Don't Listen?* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 50-51.

³ Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

appeared is a concise and detailed analysis of the core deficiencies of this presentation accompanied by a blueprint for how we might correct these inadequacies without throwing out the multiple truthful elements of the tract content. It is the goal of the present article to fill this void and to recommend the first elements of an alternative simple presentation of the gospel.

It should be emphasized that a simple and practical approach for presenting the gospel does not require a fixed formula. One of the earliest proponents of practical evangelism in the nineteenth century was Charles Finney who never advocated a standard approach with predetermined steps.⁴ Another early advocate of presenting the gospel simply in the nineteenth century was Dwight L. Moody, although he also advised against a rigid 'plan' of predetermined steps because he observed, 'God never repeats himself; he does not approach any two people the same way.'⁵

It is not easy for me to admit that our traditional gospel presentation truncates the biblical gospel in a way that must be corrected. At age seven I was personally guided to new birth in Christ through a presentation of the truncated gospel. Not only I but also whole generations of authentic followers of Christ were first introduced to him and led to new birth through this abbreviated gospel format. Nevertheless, it is increasingly clear to me that

our model of gospel communication is in need of major revision, retaining what is good and true in the old while simultaneously replacing what is deficient with a more faithful biblical model for our own day.

The materials presented in the truncated gospel are in some ways undeniably true and representative of aspects of biblical teaching. Although the order and format vary slightly, the core content includes (1) God's love for humanity, (2) humanity's sin and holy God's apparent predicament between his need to punish on the one hand and his love for humanity on the other, (3) God's resolution of his predicament through Christ's suffering and death as a substitute for our punishment, and (4) God's invitation to each individual to be saved from punishment and to become God's child by praying personally to receive the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness and new life forever. The truths expressed are consistent with the biblical record, and the simple prayer at the end appears to be a valid expression of belief in the truths revealed as well as an honest personal commitment to God. What then is the problem?

Pervasive evidence sadly demonstrates that many alleged converts of the truncated gospel subsequently deny Jesus' core teachings and violate his ethical commands with impunity.⁶ How can this be? The New Testament declares that the gospel is 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes' (Rom. 1:16) and that the

⁴ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 1988 reprint).

⁵ Dwight L. Moody, *Great Joy* (New York: E. G. Treat and Company, 1977 reprint), 277.

⁶ For example, see the web site of social science researcher George Barna at <barna.com>.

gospel eventuates in liberated and transformed lives (2 Thes. 2:14).⁷

The problem is that although the truncated gospel does *resemble* the biblical gospel it is not commensurate with the gospel. At best the truncated gospel eventuates in seedlings whose roots grow beyond shallow soil into the deep and rich earth of the biblical gospel to become healthy and mature plants who demonstrate the power and joy of their Lord's holy love in their lives. At worst, however, the truncated gospel eventuates in seedlings whose shallow roots produce withered and worthless fruits devoid of the biblical gospel: life without love that is not true life at all, words without works, function without freedom. These misguided souls believe they are followers of Jesus but do not know him as revealed in the Bible and have not encountered his love through the ministry of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Consequently they cannot follow the one whom they do not know.

We who have relied upon the truncated gospel as our means of communication must shoulder much of the blame for resultant spurious conversions. It might be tempting for us to dodge this responsibility by concluding that our message is adequate but the apparent converts were insincere. The phenomenon of people who profess Christ without really experiencing the transforming reconciliation to God that he offers is, after all, not a new problem. Ever since Constantine became the first Christian emperor of Rome in

the fourth century the church has had to deal with *cultural Christianity*, where large numbers of people choose to be nominally Christian for various reasons but lack any real transformation by the Holy Spirit. It is for this very reason that the great Reformers differentiated between the *visible*, institutional church, and the *invisible* church of true saints known only to God. Puritans addressed this dilemma by establishing *gathered* churches, supposedly filled only with authentically regenerate believers. Jesus himself warned in the parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:1-12; Lk. 8:1-15) that not all seeds planted would produce fruit.

We could try to hide behind these historical precedents by arguing that we are fulfilling our only responsibility when we plant the seed by proclaiming the Word faithfully. Tragically, however, our proclamation of the Word has not been faithful. Each generation in the church's history has had its own problems, and we in our generation must take responsibility for identifying and addressing our own. The time has come to proclaim the gospel truthfully for the twenty first century with authenticity and personal integrity.

In concluding this introductory section mention should be made of recent attempts to communicate the gospel with greater clarity. An excellent alternative to the truncated gospel, now extending around the world, is the Alpha Course originating from Holy Trinity Church in Brompton, UK.⁸ Another corrective to the truncated gospel over the past half century is the

⁷ All scripture citations in this article are taken from the *New International Version* of the Bible (NIV), unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Nicky Gumble, *The Alpha Course* (Brompton: HTB Publications, 2000).

work of my colleague, Robert E. Coleman who has expanded the church's understanding of what it means to be an authentic Christian disciple.⁹ Recently a plethora of writings have contributed to an understanding of the gospel with biblical fidelity.¹⁰

A number of evangelistic ministries have had a laudatory history of attempting to communicate the gospel faithfully, often resulting in genuine conversions and changed lives in spite of the deficiency of the truncated gospel for the twenty first century. These include Campus Crusade for Christ, the Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, to whom appreciation is expressed. These and other organizations are also currently seeking to develop alternative models for communicating the gospel, and so the author considers them to be valued partners to whom the American church is deeply indebted.

The remainder of this article will begin with a critique of how the truncated gospel falls short of the biblical gospel, and then conclude with a recommended alternative theological framework for a simple gospel presentation.

I How Does the Truncated Gospel Fall Short of the Biblical Gospel?

The truncated gospel is dangerous

because it employs a *pragmatic methodology* and delivers a *partial message*.

1 Pragmatic Methodology

The truncated gospel was designed out of recognition that the Great Commission is our Lord's command to work as diligently and efficiently as possible to spread the good news at whatever the cost. Apart from Christ humanity is separated from God. The gospel is good news indeed because without God we are in a desperate situation both presently and eternally. Therefore the motives behind the truncated gospel are to be praised.

The methodology that the truncated gospel employs, however, is fallacious. Driven by a characteristically American spirit of idealism and resolve to 'get the job done', proponents of the truncated gospel have adopted the *false ethical* system of pragmatism.¹¹

An important distinction must be made between 'pragmatic' as a synonym for 'practical' (who would prefer being impractical to being practical?) and 'pragmatism' as a false ethical system. We have unwittingly been betrayed by false ethical pragmatism to believe that by improving our methodology to get as many decisions as possible we will be 'saving' more individuals. There are two closely related reasons why, ironically, this false ethical pragmatism is not practical.

⁹ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006, recent reprint).

¹⁰ See Bibliography at the end of the article.

¹¹ Although beyond the scope of this article, the interested reader is referred again to Kinaman and Lyons, *Unchristian...* (cited above) for a critique of how the methodologies of a false ethical pragmatism are affecting the life of the American church today.

Firstly, we must begin by recognizing that our pragmatic methodology has been erroneous because our Lord's Great Commission is not *simply* to get decisions but to make disciples. Although obscured by most English translations, the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) has but one imperative—'Make Disciples (Followers)!'. I suspect that although, *when we are reminded*, most of us know better, nevertheless our methodology too often focuses simply upon getting decisions. We then hold a vague hope that somehow in the future the one who has 'been saved' will 'be discipled' to become a follower of Jesus. The underlying assumption is, 'At least they're saved now.'

But the questions must be asked, 'Are they?', and, 'How do we know?' In fact, our biblical responsibility is not simply to 'get decisions' but rather to 'make disciples' (followers), and only as the new 'convert' engages in that process can he or she evidence the authenticity of conversion to become a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the false ethical pragmatic system of the truncated gospel is erroneous because a pragmatic methodology can never produce salvation. At worst, the truncated gospel attempts to reduce God's sovereign action to renew human lives to a simple formula that can be implemented by humans. The adherents of the truncated gospel too often assume that if an unsaved individual affirms each of the truth propositions and then prays the 'sinner's prayer'—confessing sins and confessing belief in Christ—then on that basis God himself promises salvation.

When we seriously consider the matter we know that intellectual

assent to the principles is insufficient, because, as Billy Graham reminds us frequently in his sermons, 'Even the demons believe and shudder' (Jas. 2:19). We also know that no formula can force God to act, not even a formula prayer, because that would be akin to magical superstition or 'salvation by works' instead of salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone. But if the person is sincere, does not his sincerity save him/her when the person prays the prayer? Pragmatism would say yes. However, sincerity in and of itself has no value whatever. Paul's contemporary orthodox religious leaders were very sincere, in fact zealous for God, but were sincerely wrong and lost (Rom. 10:1-2).

Romans 10:9-10 is one of the passages most abused by those who believe that God is obligated to save anyone who goes through the steps of the truncated gospel:

If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

The advocates of the truncated gospel too often urge the inquirer, 'Just go through the steps. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. This is God's Word and he does not lie. He is obligated to save you if you do your part by going through the steps.' This ritual teaching is a gross misinterpretation of the passage.

It is unacceptable to turn Romans 10:9-10 into a formula to be manipulated rather than a promise to be

trusted with fear and trembling. It cannot be questioned that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' *by him*, because 'anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame' (Rom. 10:13, 11). Those who believe that Jesus is the resurrected and living Lord are enjoined to call on him for salvation (Rom. 10:14). Yet the interaction is personal, not mechanical. When God reveals the Lord Jesus Christ to us and we believe (trust) in him, we call on him in desperation and hope. God then responds freely, according to his sovereign will and way and in his own time to bring about a supernatural rebirth.

Most importantly, the truncated presentation minimizes the gravity of confessing 'Jesus is Lord' and believing that God raised him from the dead. A. T. Robertson argues, 'the word *kurios* was and is the touchstone of faith', noting that 'no Jew would [make this confession] who had not really trusted in Christ, for *kurios* in the LXX is used of God' and 'no Gentile would do it who had not ceased worshipping the emperor as *Kurios*'.¹² Moreover, the word translated 'confess, is a judicial term that indicates the binding and public declaration which settles a relationship with legal force'.¹³

Confessing, 'Jesus is Lord' is not some simple statement to be uttered lightly but is rather the public sign of heartfelt entrance into a binding

covenant to acknowledge Christ as God, trusting him for all things and obeying him in everything. Believing that God raised Christ from the dead is similarly rife with implications. The resurrection vindicated Jesus' actions and teachings, proving that God's loving kingship extends over everything in this sinful world (Col. 2:15; 1 Pet. 3:21-22; Heb. 2:8). Truly believing the resurrection therefore means *following* Christ, living in this sinful age after the model he presented (1 Jn. 2:6; Rom. 8:16-17; Heb. 13:13; Philp. 2:3-5; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:14-15).

It is vain to believe that such a commitment is easy for a sinful human to make. Jesus criticized the unfaithful religious leaders of his time by quoting Isaiah 29:13:

These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. (Mt. 15:8-9)

These leaders believed they had trusted in God and committed themselves to him but their actions betrayed their lack of genuine faith. Jesus warned that it would be the same with many who claimed to follow him, 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Mt. 20:21). As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones reminds us, 'Scripture teaches us very clearly that unbelief is always primarily a matter of the heart, not of the intellect'.¹⁴ Telling people

12 A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Volume IV: The Epistles of Paul* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 389.

13 Cleon L. Rodgers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rodgers III, *The New Linguistic And Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 335.

14 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 10, Saving Faith* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 154.

that they are regenerate Christians when they have affirmed some truths and prayed a prayer but have never experienced the regeneration of the heart brought about by God's divine action is misleading and irresponsible.

The adherents of the truncated gospel recognize at their best that obedience follows authentic faith and trust in God, and that all of this is made possible only through a spiritual re-birth by God's grace alone. As we proclaim the gospel and people respond by calling on the Lord Jesus Christ, God by his sovereign will and in his loving power brings individuals to new birth in his timing and in his own way. The apostle Peter describes Christian conversion in weighty terms: 'For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God' (I Pet. 1:23). Jesus spoke similarly:

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit...The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:6,8).

The apostle John teaches the necessity of this supernatural new birth in his Gospel, and says in his first letter:

The [one] who says, 'I know him', but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did (1 Jn. 1:4-6).

God's work of authentic conversion eventuates in a transformed heart and life—all because of God's grace, his

love freely given! Our conversion is entirely from God's gracious hand, including the saving faith that we express. God grants us the gift of faith and then as we accept it God responds by bringing about new birth in us so that we can live a new life for him (Eph. 2:8-10):

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

When we depend upon the false ethical pragmatic methodology we fail because salvation is God's work and not ours. We are simply God's humble ambassadors to proclaim the gospel of *his* salvation. *We* lack power to change the heart, making it turn from sin and to love God. It is the Holy Spirit poured out in a person that brings authentic conversion.

Few of my brothers and sisters in Christ who employ the truncated gospel would deny the inherent dangers just enunciated and many would quote the Ephesians passage just mentioned (2:8-10) as an integral part of their own gospel presentation. Yet even when our *articulated* theology (what we say we believe) has been sound, our *functional* theology (how we practise what we say we believe) has betrayed us. Furthermore, it is not merely the pragmatic methodology of the truncated gospel that is problematic. More fundamentally, the problem of the truncated gospel is its *partial message*, the subject to which we now turn.

2 Partial Message

Firstly, a narrow rationalism controls the *context* of the truncated gospel. Bare cognitive propositions come seemingly out of nowhere, along with isolated Bible quotations and a picture diagram here or there, all appearing pedantic to the modern or postmodern hearer. In the absence of a larger context, the attempted rational basis for the gospel is simplistic and fragmented.

The biblical gospel, by contrast, is by its very nature profoundly rational, satisfying the deepest quest of the human mind with a structure of reality that provides a framework for a lifetime of continuing inquiry and ongoing discovery. The biblical gospel is eminently simple without being simplistic, poignantly addressing the nagging questions of the human heart regarding where we have come from, the meaning of our world and our place in it, and where we are going.

Far from pedantic or naïve, the biblical gospel rationally addresses the intractable evil of our world and our brokenness in the context of this evil. The biblical gospel moves beyond despair to a rational basis for hope, spurring us to emulate God's courageous and sacrificial loving action toward healing and wholeness (biblical *shalom*) for ourselves and for the world.¹⁵ The biblical gospel pulsates with a vision large enough to capture our imagination and to inspire us to a lifelong purpose with passion.

Secondly, narcissistic individualism controls the *content* of the gospel. The underlying message is that you are the *raison d'être* for Jesus' coming to earth and dying on the cross. This aspect of the truncated gospel can be fairly represented as follows.

God loves you, so take advantage of what he has to offer. What do you have to lose? It is expected, of course, that you will give your life to him so you can get more from him forever, including no fear of death because he promises you heaven. Accept Jesus as your *Saviour* to forgive you for your sin in the past and your continuing sins which you should try diligently to avoid, and accept Jesus as your *Lord* so he can lead your life and you can get all the good things he has for you now and forever. Oh, and don't forget, you are making this life commitment for his sake as well as yours. Read the Bible and pray daily so you can get the most out of the Christian life and go to church so you can share all of these good things with others.

Many in the evangelical church who have 'accepted Jesus as Saviour and Lord' would agree with the foregoing description without question. Why would they not? The way they have been introduced to the gospel is that Jesus' sacrifice is *essentially* about them and for their sake. This representation of the gospel is a half-truth which is by itself unwittingly deceptive and erroneous.¹⁶

15 Cornelius Planginga, Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

16 David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

It is true that God does love us and Christ did die for us personally. He does call us each individually to a life-transforming love relationship with him. The larger truth, however, is that the second person of the Trinity became incarnate *for* a more significant purpose than 'me', and he came to call us *to* a more significant purpose than 'me'. A gospel that begins with me and ends with me is no gospel at all, but instead a futile, infantile, selfish pursuit.

The gospel begins with God and is for God! He alone is worthy to be the gospel's starting point and ultimate purpose. God creates, redeems, and recreates to display his glory, for he himself is the highest good and the ultimate end of all things. We are valuable (and even alive!) because God loves us, and we will experience joy and good things from God because God is joyful and good. Yet we must never confuse the matter and see our own individual (or even collective) destiny as the greatest value or deepest purpose of the universe.

The apostle Paul proclaims in doxology:

Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).

He then declares, 'Therefore, I urge you...in view of God's mercy, to offer

your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship' (Rom. 12:1). Paul calls upon 'followers' of Jesus to *follow Jesus*! For Jesus life was all about God his Father, and so for us his followers, life should be all about following God. For Jesus life was all about loving the Father through complete personal sacrifice on God's behalf (worship), and so for us his followers, life should be all about worshipping God through a life of complete sacrifice on God's behalf.

Jesus' sacrifice in his incarnation and in his obedient and faithful life inaugurated a heavenly kingdom revolution on earth—a revolution of victorious love-in-action uniquely different from that ever before witnessed on earth. This powerful love continued all the way to Calvary and was consummated by Jesus' victorious resurrection. God's Kingdom revolution continues through Christ's followers, under his authority and in the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel is a personal invitation from God to follow Jesus in a liberated and transformed life of complete sacrifice—not a burden but a joy, not a laborious striving but a supernatural gift of holy love in resurrection power through the Holy Spirit. However, if ever it seems not a joy to follow God, or if ever we are not immediately rewarded with good things because of our Christian walk, it remains good and necessary for us to follow our Lord. He is God! We too quickly forget his greatness and gravity. Jesus declared unequivocally:

If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Lk. 9:23).

If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him (Jn. 14:23).

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father (Jn. 14:12).

The true follower of Jesus Christ the Lord is a willing recruit in God's covenant army (the church) for God's invincible revolution of sacrificial love. The biblical gospel is about 'righteousness', that is, setting things right so that justice prevails in the life of the individual, the community, the nation, and the world. God is committed to righteousness, to saving those who are oppressed, and to saving his planet which is being desecrated. From eternity past Triune God made a covenant among the members of the Godhead to eradicate evil and to bring peace (*shalom*) to rule and to prevail. God's blueprint was to sacrifice himself in victorious love in order to create a 'covenant people', the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, who would victoriously sacrifice themselves in love:

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-21).

In summary, the gospel is living, loving sacrifice for God's sake, for his glory, and for the coming of his Kingdom. Jesus taught his disciples to pray,

'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt. 6:10). The gospel is for 'me' only if I am for God! More accurately, the gospel is for 'me' because I am one member of Christ's entire body that is for God. Far from narcissistic individualism, the biblical gospel is individual and collective *worship* that eventuates in *witness* to the world. The writer to the Hebrews summarily pens, 'Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name' (Heb. 13:15). This is the true gospel worth living for and worth dying for—the truth that God is at the centre of all things and invites us to labour alongside him to set things right.

This article began by stating that the problems of the truncated gospel are subtle and profound. As we have seen, the truncated gospel is not completely erroneous. The biblical truths in the older model must be preserved. However, the truncated gospel is not simply incomplete but rather complexly incomplete. Below are suggested point-by-point correctives for true but incomplete elements of the truncated gospel.

- 1 God's loving sacrifice on our behalf... leading to our loving sacrifice on God's behalf;
- 2 Christ's atonement as penal substitution... leading to his and our victory of invincible love and triumph over evil;
- 3 Christ rose from the dead... leading to his and our living Kingdom power, joy, *shalom*;
- 4 *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone)... leading to the written Word Revealing the Living Word

- through the Holy Spirit,
- 5 Rational truth... leading to relational truth,
 - 6 Our personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ... leading to our personal relationship with Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
 - 7 *Solo Christo* (by Christ alone)... leading to incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church;
 - 8 Our individual life with God... leading to our corporate life in the Church, with others, and with the natural world;
 - 9 *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone)... leading to a grace-filled life of obedience;
 - 10 *Sola Fide* (through faith alone)... leading to a life of faithfulness;
 - 11 Repentance at conversion... leading to a daily life of repentance and renewal,
 - 12 New Birth as a once-for-all event... leading to a lifetime of ongoing liberation and transformation through the Holy Spirit,
 - 13 Peace with God... leading to winning warfare by waging peace,
 - 14 Immediate righteousness from God at salvation... leading to a life of righteous purity for God,
 - 15 Immediate justification from God at salvation... leading to a life of social justice for God,
 - 16 Future perspective on life and death... leading to a present perspective on life and daily living.

The present article does not allow space to develop adequately a complete alternative presentation to the truncated gospel. A separate publication is now in process for that purpose. However, a brief sketch is given here

for one possible approach. No attempt is made below to ‘translate’ the terms and concepts for the audience of the unconverted inquirer, though that could readily be done, given more space and with illustrations—perhaps as a booklet but better yet as a brief portable Web-based video.

In formulating this presentation I am indebted to Timothy Keller.¹⁷ He and I both have Jonathan Edwards as our primary source.¹⁸

II Theological Framework for a Gospel Presentation

1 Background

While the truncated gospel may be viewed as pedantic and parochial, the biblical gospel is, quite to the contrary, profoundly relevant and universally applicable. The gospel brings light to a dark world and healing to a malignant world. Our planet reels with injustice and insecurity born of evil, from the working machinations of despots in totalitarian nations to the greed and corruption of pandering politicians in ‘democratic’ states. Not all leaders are nefarious, of course, and not all regimes are impossibly corrupt. Yet even among the best and most well

¹⁷ Timothy Keller, ‘The Dance of God’, in *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 213–226.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, ‘The End for Which God Created the World’, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 94–121. See also John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards, With the Complete Text of the End for Which God Created the World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006).

intentioned leadership, self-interest in government and attendant systems continually creates disunity and threatens the well being of humanity and the earth on which we live. Injustice is rampant and ethical and moral violations are commonplace. Problems at the macro level of governments intersect with problems at the micro level of individual, family, and community. Entire systems of nations are affected, including the economic, the educational, the social, the arts and media, the law enforcement, and yes, the ecclesiastical.

Where can humanity turn for meaning, for understanding, for guidance? C. S. Lewis was fond of pointing out that truth may be found in a variety of places but all truth is ultimately a reflection of the one biblical truth of the gospel.¹⁹

The Bible deals with evil without flinching—addresses the reality of evil and places it in historical context, describes evil's contest with us in spiritual warfare, explains God's decisive conquest over evil in our world, and invites us to follow him to overcome evil and be empowered for joyful life, for wholeness and for love, now and forever. The gospel provides both a 'strategy of coherence' for making sense of the seeming nonsense of selfishness all about us and then of doing something effectively about it.

2 Brief Sketch of a Gospel Presentation

As we come to understand the gospel we realize that none of the world's con-

dition has taken God by surprise. From eternity past he has had a design for our world and our place in it with him. Evil's intrusion cannot thwart God's design. To the contrary, God is sovereign and by his loving power he will *use* evil and stand it on its head in the end to accomplish his own design. God in his design has a destiny for humanity, for all who follow him. To this end he created us to be closely related to him. In fact he created us in his own image to reflect him by being like him, *Imago Dei*.

To comprehend *Imago Dei* we must begin by realizing God is God and we are not and never will be God. God created us to be *like* him, i.e. like him in our BEING and like him in our DOING. What does this mean? God is Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), a *covenant* community of love and of holiness. His very nature is **holy** and his very nature is **love**, i.e. **holy love**. For all eternity *covenant* God has engaged within the Trinity in a dance of mutually self-giving joyful love—'The Beauty of Holiness'—a dance infinitely glorious and purely unselfish, giving and receiving from one another in loving delight. For us to be created in God's image, therefore, means that we likewise are made to be ourselves a *covenant* community of love and holiness, i.e. a reflection of God's nature of being holy love and of doing holy love. Our dance of holy love with God and with one another is our expression of living joy for God's glory.

The biblical account of the Garden of Eden describes the origin of humanity's birth from God (*Imago Dei*) and humanity's betrayal of God (the fall). Triune God, the eternal *covenant* community of holy love, blessed humanity, empowered humanity, charged humanity with the privilege and responsibility

19 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper, 2001).

of maintaining *covenant* relationship with himself (worship of God) and covenant relationship with one another and his world which he entrusted to them (witness for God).

Parenthetically it is informative that etymologically 'covenant' may be traced to two independent but complementary sources in the life and literature of ancient Near East. The first may be summarized as *covenant kinship* (family relationship and responsibility).²⁰ The second may be summarized as *covenant kingship* (suzerainty treaty: vassal king rule under the greater suzerain king).²¹

God's creation call to humanity was to become caretakers of his world in the freedom of *covenant kinship* under God's holy loving *Kingship* and to do so by living in the freedom of *covenant kinship* under God's holy loving *kinship* through *Imago Dei*. Notice, there is no freedom outside of relationship (i.e. no joyful dance without mutually self-giving love), but only selfish isolation and pseudo-freedom. Humanity truly experienced freedom in Eden but only in faithful relationship with God.

Humanity's abject sin of infidelity to God in the Garden of Eden brought God's judgment upon the human race and consequently upon all of creation under their charge. *Covenant kinship* (relationships) and *covenant kingship* (governance) at all levels were no longer a reflection of holy love, but

rather of selfish duplicity. Instead of BEING themselves and DOING God's will, evil contaminated every part of their nature and that of their progeny. *Imago Dei* lost freedom and became broken and shattered image, judged and condemned by holy and loving God to separation from him. Creation is now in bondage to evil and humanity is bound to death.

The fall involved more than the natural world but spiritual forces of evil personified, represented in Eden as a serpent and known elsewhere in the New Testament as Satan—the devil, the tempter, the evil one, the prince of demons, the dragon, Beelzebub, the accuser. In Eden the battle for the soul of humanity was waged. God or Satan, which would it be? Adam and Eve chose Satan, and the battle was lost by humanity.

God could have justly left humanity to the consequences of eternal death. The good news, the gospel, is that God in mercy and love has come to humanity's rescue. God's design from eternity past has been that humanity and all creation be liberated from the bondage of Satan and of evil. God planned that he himself would come to earth as humanity (the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ) to defeat Satan, to pay the penalty for our sin, and to do so through fulfilling humanity's original mandate of the *covenant* of holy love. On behalf of humanity the God-Man came and lived a life of perfect obedience, died a death of complete sacrifice, and authenticated his victory over evil for all time and eternity through his resurrection from the dead. The Lord Jesus Christ brought atonement (at-one-ment) for humanity to restore holy loving relationship with God (wor-

20 Frank Moore Cross, 'Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel', in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 3-21.

21 Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997).

ship of God) and holy loving relationship with others and with creation (witness for God).

Through the power of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's call to humanity is now extended again to engage with him in the dance of holy love. Each of us is enjoined personally to respond to God's call to follow him by following Christ in holy love. When we personally commit our life to him he liberates us from the penalty of sin and begins a work of transformation of our heart and life to empower us with the freedom of holy love.

In the reality of the spirit realm we are literally born again. We are simultaneously born into a spiritual body (the church) within which he calls us to love one another and to love our world. The church is God's *covenant* community of holy love now restored, and the church is God's chosen means through whom he works to bring atonement to his world. Satan has been decisively defeated, but now the spiritual battle continues in order to secure the victory already won. In God's own time he will return in final consummation of victory over evil and inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth.

What does it mean to become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? The answer may be summarized in one phrase, 'Together we joyfully follow our Lord Jesus Christ in God's liberating power of sacrificial love.' This means nothing less than giving our life up entirely for him, as he has given his life entirely for us. During his earthly sojourn Jesus confessed again and again that he could not follow his Father except by his Father's power. Our Lord has given us his Holy Spirit so that by the power of God's Spirit we

can follow him and demonstrate the victory of living sacrifice and of joyful love: 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' *Soli Deo Gloria* (glory to God alone).

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