

Introduction

“What is the gospel?”

Some years ago I witnessed a seasoned missionary fumble around in response to this question during a public presentation. The incident left quite an impression on me because it seemed to exemplify the struggles I had seen throughout the church, at both a popular and academic level.

The gospel is the very lifeblood of the church, for it informs its identity, purpose, and values. Unfortunately, it has been so chastened and generalized (e.g., “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”) that it has become largely irrelevant to the modern world, which suffers from a host of ailments including pluralism, relativism, and hedonism.

The intent of this book is to impart a concise yet holistic explanation of the gospel. I believe this explanation is not found in the minutiae of theological detail commonly found in so many biblical and systematic theologies, but rather in the outlining of redemptive history as a whole and in the emphasizing of its major redemptive events (creation, covenants, cross, consummation, etc.). Indeed, we will engage in theological arguments, but only for the sake of greater clarity and simplicity concerning the redemptive narrative, which I believe holistically forms the Bible’s good news.

Chapter 1 is an abstract introduction to the nature of truth and the concept of worldview. How we interpret the Bible (i.e., hermeneutics), and how we understand life in general, is conditioned by our worldview—and *vice versa*. Our search for truth is caught up in the antiphonal hermeneutical voices of the Bible and our own worldview. Back and forth we continually reform and regenerate our minds in accordance with either the eternal word of God (cf. Rom. 12:2; Eph. 1:18) or the systems of thought produced by the world. Thus it is helpful (though some may find it a bit tedious) to examine the concept of worldview and its different components. All worldviews (i.e., belief systems) have the same basic elements, which give context and meaning to our lives as they answer the primal questions of existence—questions such as Who am I? Where did I come from? And where am I going?

As with most games, we seek to know the field of play, the players on the field, the rules of the game, the history of the game, and the goal of the game. Similarly, our worldview tells us the field of existence, the main players of existence, the laws of existence, the history of existence, and the future of existence.

Chapter 2 examines the framework of the Judeo-Christian worldview—its field of play, so to speak—which is summarized in the Bible’s first verse: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Throughout the Scriptures the heavens are understood as physical, plural, and continuous. That is, there are multiple heavens above the earth, which is below, and they are substantial and real, not immaterial and ethereal. Moreover, they are continuous, meaning there are no clear lines of delineation between the heavens. Thus movement between the heavens and the earth is relatively easy and smooth. Throughout the Scriptures both angels and humans ascend and descend through the heavens. This view of the universe stands in stark contrast to the common Western view of a singular “heaven,” which is immaterial and discontinuous with the materiality of earth.

Within this unified framework of the heavens and the earth, God is presented as dwelling within creation (cf. 1 Kings 8:43; Ps. 102:19; Isa. 63:15; etc.). He stretches the heavens as a tent, so to speak (cf. Isa. 40:22; Ps. 104:2), dwelling at the height of the heavens within a paradisaal temple (cf. Ps. 11:4; Mic. 1:2; Heb. 8:5; Rev. 11:19). Likewise, humanity is created in an earthly paradise, resembling the divine heavenly dwelling, with angels mediating between the two. In this way, the playing field of life with its initial players is set out in the opening chapters of Genesis. Such ideas may seem strange to the modern ear, but ancient readers would have had few qualms about them.

Chapter 3 outlines the biblical hope for a restored creation. There will be a *new* heavens and *new* earth (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1). As it was in the beginning, so it will be in the end when “the time comes for God to restore everything” (Acts 3:21, NIV). This renewal of the heavens and the earth is the basic thrust of the Bible’s vision for the future (cf. Matt. 19:28; 2 Peter 3:13). However, this rejuvenation cannot be accomplished by the strength or ingenuity of humankind. Rather, God alone will carry out this great vision.

The event whereby God creates a new heavens and earth is described throughout the Scriptures as the “day of the Lord” (Isa. 13:6; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 4:5;

Acts 2:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10). God will come suddenly with his angels to purge the heavens and earth of ungodliness and unrighteousness. It will be a day that is cataclysmic and apocalyptic beyond all imagination or description. It will be a day of divine wrath, judgment, and recompense. The sins of humanity will finally be rectified, and God will finally be honored in his wise governance over creation.

The day of the Lord is the predominant theme of both the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, it is the event that ultimately unifies the Christian and Jewish Scriptures, for all hold to the ultimate divine end that God “has *fixed a day* on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). Furthermore, the day of the Lord is so dynamic and extraordinary that it creates a fundamental delineation of time: “this age” before the day and “the age to come” after the day (cf. Matt. 12:32; Eph. 1:21; Heb. 6:5).

Human sin and depravity will progress until the end of this age when God judges humanity on the last day, rewarding the righteous with eternal life and punishing the wicked with eternal fire. Through the day of the Lord, God will initiate the age to come, which will go on in righteousness, peace, and joy for unending ages (i.e., “eternity”).

Because the day of the Lord and the age to come are markedly punitive in nature, this age is broadly defined by divine mercy. Everything that happens before the last day must be understood as a restraint of divine wrath and judgment upon sin. This age *is* this age because the day of judgment has not yet arrived. Indeed, God is patient, not wanting any to perish but all to repent and be saved (2 Peter 3:9). As such, the event of the cross exemplifies all divine activity during this age. God has ultimately shown humanity his mercy and love by offering his Son, that we might be saved from the wrath to come (cf. John 3:16; Rom. 5:8–9; Titus 3:4–7).

This age, therefore, can be broadly described as “cruciform” (i.e., shaped like the cross), while the age to come is generally “apocalyptic” (i.e., established by the day of the Lord). If we seek to describe biblical theology as a whole, it is best summarized as *cruciform-apocalypticism*. Though there are indeed temporal blessings and judgments, these must be understood within the greater narrative of Scripture, pointing us to the eternal blessings and judgments to come.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role of God’s Spirit in creation. The Spirit was the agent of life in the beginning (Gen. 2:7; Ps. 33:6), and the Spirit will be the agent

of life in the end (Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 3:6). By means of the Holy Spirit, the dead will be raised to life on the last day and judged according to their deeds. Thus all activity of the Holy Spirit in this age is understood in light of the activity of the Spirit in both the beginning and the end. This is why the New Testament describes the Holy Spirit as a “firstfruits” or “guarantee” of the resurrection (Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:14). What we have received in a small measure in this age is an assurance of what we will receive in the age to come.

Chapter 5 introduces the concept of Christ, or Messiah, and tracks the development of messianic expectation throughout the Scriptures. God could have chosen to restore creation through his Spirit without any external involvement or mediation. He has chosen, however, to execute the day of the Lord by means of someone else: a human being whom he will appoint. In this way, the Christ/Messiah is simply God’s agent, “anointed” to act on his behalf. Thus the day of the Lord will be “the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:10; 2:16), when the Messiah comes and, by the Spirit of God, raises the dead, punishes the wicked, and creates the new heavens and new earth.

Though this messianic expectation could have been stated outright from the beginning, God chose to reveal it progressively. After the initial sin of Adam and Eve, God promised that an offspring of Eve would be born who would crush Satan’s head (Gen. 3:15). This same promise of an anointed offspring is reiterated to both Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 17:7; 22:18) and David (2 Sam. 7:12; 1 Chron. 17:11). Hence God’s agent would be born “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Such messianic expectation was commonly assumed when Jesus was “called Christ” (Matt. 1:16; John 4:25).

Thus the apostolic witness emphasized the messianic character of Jesus (Acts 2:36; 5:42; 8:5; 9:22; etc.), because “he is the one *appointed* by God to be *judge* of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). The event of the cross did not change any of the previously held messianic hopes. Those hopes, rather, were only intensified, as God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness *by a man* whom he has appointed; and of this he has *given assurance to all* by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Chapter 6 details the kingdom that the Messiah will establish when he comes (i.e., “the kingdom of God”). The new earth will have a definite form and structure, as the resurrection and eternal life will be administered by means of the messianic kingdom. The Messiah will rule from Jerusalem, over Israel, and to

the ends of the earth. The messianic kingdom, therefore, will be fundamentally “Israelocentric,” for Jesus will return to “redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21), “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6), and rule forever as “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). In this way, eternal life will be administrated “to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile” (Rom. 2:10, KJV).

The New Testament clearly repudiates any idea that God no longer relates to humanity on the basis of ethnicity (though, of course, he does not show favoritism according to ethnicity). He is still the “God of Israel”; and he has not rejected the Jewish people—even in their unbelief (cf. Rom. 11:1,11)—for “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). The idea that Jesus somehow changed, reinterpreted, or spiritually realized the hope of the Jewish messianic kingdom is a grave misunderstanding. Along with the day of the Lord, the resurrection of the dead, and Old Testament messianic expectations, the cross did not change the hope of the kingdom of God. Rather, it only *amplified* the Jewish apocalyptic expectations. Concerning our “entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11), “we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed” (v. 19).

Some may question why Jewish election (a topic so central to the Scriptures) is not addressed until chapter 6. My answer is that the choosing of the Jewish people is predicated on a number of eschatological concepts that are often overlooked in modern presentations of the gospel. Thus chapters 1 through 5 seek to lay a foundation, generally addressing Genesis 1–11 and extrapolating the main themes therein (i.e., worldview, human depravity, divine judgment, eternal life, messianic expectation, etc.) to their eschatological conclusions. Chapter 6 picks up in Genesis 12 and extends God’s choice of the Jewish people in light of the apocalyptic framework previously laid out. In this way, biblical theology is more pointedly summarized as *Jewish cruciform-apocalypticism*.

In light of this Jewish eschatological hope, chapter 7 embarks on an explanation of the crucifixion and death of the Messiah. Why would God allow his “anointed one” to die? Moreover, how and where was this prophesied in the Old Testament? These questions are the substance of the Emmaus Road encounter (Luke 24:13–27), where Jesus explains his rhetorical question, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should *suffer* these things and then enter into his *glory*?” (v. 26, NRSV). The redemption of Israel (v. 21) and the eschatological glory

would indeed come. God deemed it necessary, however, that his Christ should suffer first.

Over the centuries, many have sought to identify the content of Jesus' exposition on the road to Emmaus. Assuming the New Testament is a faithful representation of what Jesus revealed to his apostles during his forty days of postresurrection teaching (Acts 1:3), we can identify four broad areas of explanation concerning a suffering Messiah. First, Jesus would have pointed to direct prophecies concerning the suffering of God's Servant (Isa. 53; Ps. 22; Dan. 9:26; etc.). Second, because of the fallen nature of this age, the wicked generally prosper and the righteous generally suffer. Moreover, the wicked have always persecuted the righteous (cf. Matt. 5:10–12; Acts 7:51–52). If God has allowed all of the righteous to suffer, why would he spare the Righteous One? Third, in light of his crucifixion during the Passover festival, Jesus undoubtedly would have interpreted the Jewish calendar typologically, pointing to redemptive history as a whole (cf. Luke 22:16; 1 Cor. 5:7). Fourth, and most importantly, Jesus would have interpreted the sacrificial system typologically, pointing to the necessity of a vicarious, sin-bearing sacrifice that holistically reconciles the enmity between God and humanity (cf. Eph. 5:2; Heb. 8–10).

Chapter 8 unpacks the sacrificial interpretation of the Messiah's death. The apostolic declaration of the "forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) assumes this sacrificial understanding, because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). God accounts the Messiah's death as a "sin offering" (Rom. 8:3, NIV) by which depraved humans are "declared righteous" (Rom. 2:13; 3:20, NIV) in his sight. Such sacrificial shedding of the Messiah's "blood" is referenced throughout the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19), for by his blood propitiation is made (cf. Rom. 3:25; 1 John 4:10), justification is accomplished (cf. Rom. 5:9; Titus 3:7), and redemption is achieved (cf. Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:15).

These reconciliatory realities (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20) do not negate or reinterpret the Jewish eschatological framework, but rather *reinforce it*. Thus the day of the Lord and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel are never questioned when speaking of the ways in which God relates to the death of his Messiah. God has simply provided propitiation in light of the day of wrath, justification in light of the day of judgment, and redemption in light of the day of recompense. In this

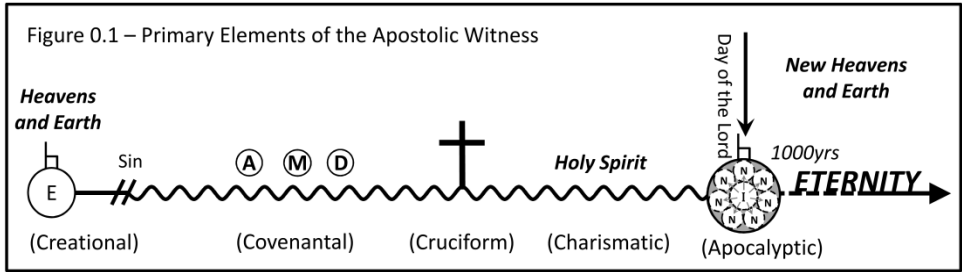
way, God has worked reconciliation between himself and humanity, granting eternal life to those who repent and believe—both Jew and Gentile.

Though rather simple and straightforward, these divine workings create a great challenge of faith. Modern sensibilities militate against both the apocalyptic realities of Jewish eschatology and the substitutional realities of sacrificial atonement. Nevertheless, these must be received *by faith*, which is the means by which God has ordained our participation in both Christ crucified and Christ glorified. If we live this life by faith in his sacrifice (cf. Rom. 6:5; Gal. 2:20), then we will be found in him on the last day according to that faith, inheriting with him eternal glory (cf. Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:9–11). Regrettably, those who lack faith—that is, those who put their faith in the ways of the world and the strength of the flesh (cf. Phil. 3:19; Col. 2:8; 1 Tim. 6:5)—will be destroyed. Thus we are called to persevere in the cruciform-apocalyptic faith handed down to us, which depends not on human strength but casts itself continually upon God’s mercy in the cross unto the day of Christ Jesus.

Chapter 9 concludes the book with a summary of the characteristic elements of the apostolic witness. In light of the great eschatological courtroom where all of humanity will be charged with their sins (i.e., the day of judgment), Jesus commissioned the apostles to be his “witnesses” (Acts 1:8; Luke 24:48). The legal connotations were evident to all. The apostles sought to testify faithfully to the acts of God throughout redemptive history, particularly his workings in the Messiah being sent the first time as a sacrifice and the second time as a judge (cf. Acts 3:19–26; Heb. 9:28). So Peter summarized that Jesus “commanded us to preach to the people and *to testify* that he is the one appointed by God *to be judge* of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives *forgiveness of sins* through his name” (Acts 10:42–43). For the sake of this testimony, God gave believers the gift of the Holy Spirit to embolden and empower the proclamation of the truth, both in word and deed, even unto death and martyrdom.

I believe the apostolic witness is a faithful proclamation of the gospel in its fullness. When we consider the testimony of the apostles as a whole we see that it was rather unsophisticated (in contrast to much modern theological exposition). The apostles sought to communicate a simple, linear timeline of events (see figure 0.1), which begins with creation (cf. Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15); incorporates faithfulness to the covenants, particularly those with Abraham,

Moses, and David (cf. Acts 1:6; Rom. 9–11); highlights the implications of the cross (cf. Rom. 3:21–26; Col. 1:20–23); emphasizes the empowerment of the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 2); and strives toward the day of the Lord (cf. Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6). In this way, the apostolic witness can be holistically described as creational, covenantal, cruciform, charismatic, and apocalyptic.



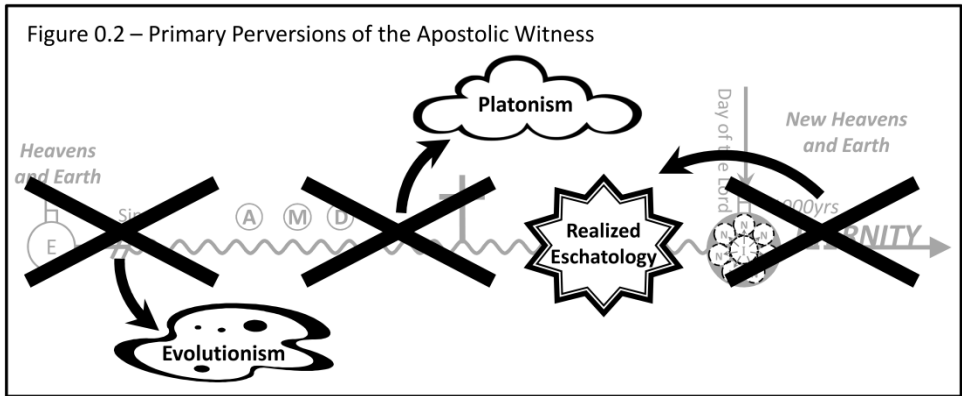
In stark contrast, much of the modern church’s proclamation scoffs at the historicity of Genesis, flagrantly rejects God’s covenantal dealings with the Jews, sets aside a substitutionary-sacrificial understanding of the cross, scorns the gift of the Spirit, and ignores the return of Jesus. Though various movements and traditions seek to emphasize one or two of these elements (often to the detriment of other elements), few of them seem to seek a proclamation that *holds them all together*. Yet it is the holistic proclamation of redemptive history, from beginning to end, that comprises the gospel and characterizes the faithful witness.

If we investigate the reasons why and how the apostolic witness has been distorted, the answers become quite complex. Much has happened in the last two thousand years, and millions of human beings have devoted incalculable time and energy to expounding the Bible. (Anyone who has been to seminary can testify to the mountains of literature.) For the sake of clarity, nevertheless, here are a few generalities concerning the primary perversions of the apostolic witness.

First, the earliest and most prominent distortion is Platonism. The common idea found throughout church history of an amorphous heavenly destiny, in which we float on a cloud forever playing a harp, is directly traceable to Platonic and Neoplatonic influences on the early church. Second, roughly from the time of Constantine, “realized eschatology” has sought to reinterpret the Jewish messianic kingdom and actualize it spiritually in this age by setting up a utopian order through the strength of the flesh. Third, after the Enlightenment,

evolutionism has relentlessly sought to invalidate the historical account of Genesis, without which there is no vision or direction for the restoration of all things.

These three ideologies (Platonism, realized eschatology, and evolutionism—and their myriad of theological derivatives) are broadly the source of most corruptions of the apostolic witness (see figure 0.2).



Each of these aberrant ideologies produces its own effects. Though they can function independently, they are often combined (e.g., liberalism often incorporates both evolutionism and realized eschatology). Each is devastating in its own right, however, because any perversion of the timeline breaks the timeline as a whole. Like removing one piece of a mousetrap, deviation from the fundamental chronology of the Bible, or any of its major elements, ruins its functionality entirely.

Though each of these ideologies warps the biblical timeline in its own way, the combination of these ideologies (and the multitude of their theological offspring) results in exponential confusion and theological disarray. Therefore, in an effort to clarify issues and bring some relevance to modern thought, each chapter ends with a broad summary of the history and impact of these distortions upon biblical thought (though a sustained critique of evolutionism is beyond the scope of this work). The appendix focuses solely on realized eschatology and the Scripture passages commonly referenced for its support.

