

The Theology of a Robust Gospel

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I remember the moment it hit me. Maybe you remember your moment, or maybe there have been too many along the way to count.

It's the moment you realize the Gospel of Jesus you are preaching or telling your friends about is only part of the story. And by leaving out part of God's story you have created a new narrative that isn't really God's at all.

I realized, for years I had been talking only of the parts of the Gospel that put me firmly in the center of the universe and in so doing, I had created a new and improved Golden Calf.

It was a terrifying discovery, one that initially led me to double down on the truncated Gospel I had grown to love, but there were moments along the way that pulled at my soul in ways I could no longer ignore. I had to address my shortcuts.

Bob Roberts Jr's words from several years prior in my reading and preparing to plant a church were coming back to haunt me, I chased down my tattered copy of his book, Transformation, to find the following quote,

“Before we can figure out where we go from here, we have to realize how deep into the woods we’ve wandered. In other words, we have to understand how we became lost in order to find our way back. We thought that the hallmarks of modernity – individuality, reason, science, and optimism – would build the church like never before. And it did grow. And lives were changed. In American culture, production, momentum, and results reign supreme. However, as Western pragmatists, we too often believed that as long as we could produce results, we didn’t need to examine the results we were getting.” –pg 22

This cut through me like a knife. I was filleted wide open, and my mind immediately went to thoughts of Carl Reed.

Carl and Michelle have been part of Disciples Church since our Dark Days in Exile. They are a fun, intelligent, and well-educated couple in their early 40's. They married young and ten years into a pretty wonderful marriage, Michelle had an encounter with God, faced with her own sin, the prospect of forgiveness, and new life. She experienced a powerful conversion and immediately immersing

herself in Bible studies, books, worship and the local church. She started coming to disciples about 5 years into her journey of faith.

Carl, on the other hand, remained a very kind and irreligious guy. Smart, well read, and while far from God, he was by most measures, a better Christian than most of the Christians in our church at the time – myself included.

During a California mortgage crisis when Christians left and right simply stopped paying their own mortgages and instead chose to live in their homes as squatters for months – in some cases years – Carl kept paying his upside down mortgage because he signed his name on the line and it was right.

When he and his wife had trouble having children, they researched adoption and found that there were thousands of kids in need of good parents so he bought his wife a 10-passenger van and just adopted.

I mean this guy is a really good guy, he's a Boy Scout Leader for goodness sake. But he also appeared to be a thousand miles from any desire to know or follow God in any transformational way.

An engineer by trade, Carl is good with numbers, empirical evidence, things that make sense. So I just assumed he needed an apologist. I was wrong. He was the guy who came to church twice a year with his wife and kids to be a good team player but showed no interest.

I remember my earliest conversations with him about God and feeling so silly to start with forgiveness of sin – not that Carl did not need forgiveness, he was of course a sinner – but it all just seemed ill advised or at least ill-timed.

We planted Disciples to help people find their way back to God – it's part of why Michelle came to our church in the first place -- in hopes that Carl would find his way back to God in our midst. So don't misunderstand me, I wanted Carl to have a life changing conversion experience and place Jesus at the headship of his life, following the leading of the Holy Spirit in his day-to-day. Who wouldn't want that for Carl!?

But beyond a powerful moment in the presence of God himself, continuing to present a million-dollar bill plan of salvation wasn't going to move Carl.

TRANSITION

For the Carl's of the world with no Judeo-Christian background, they don't know that the Jesus in the manger is the same Jesus on the cross; or that Mary Magdelane is different than Mary, mother of Jesus.

They are dying for lack of God's oxygenating Lordship and we as pastors just keep giving them a hit on a paper bag of atonement, like a little kid who's hyperventilating.

How does the language of the prophets talking in vivid words of God's work to right all things transport Carl back to the story of the Garden and then forward with great expectation to Jesus talking to the woman at the well?

Without a robust Gospel these connections are missed and the whole thing feels really easy to discount.

And that is why telling only PART of the story, you and I have sold satisfied skeptics and the "generally-nice" irreligious in our world a bill of goods for which very few in a post-Christendom culture have any interest in buying.

In fact in leaving out all of the other bits, we hurt ourselves, and the relevance of the very good news we seek to live and tell. But the hurt is not because the good news has somehow become merely, OK NEWS. It's because in bending their ear only to the crescendo of the symphony, they have missed all nuance early on with Abram, Israel, and the prophets that makes the crescendo of the Cross a life-changing moment.

Our friends are walking away saying, "nice song," but they are left unmoved. We have settled for proposition but left out all the power!

We tend to share what Dallas Willard loved to refer to as, *The Gospel of Sin Management*, something which Willard would say fosters, "Vampire Christians," who only want a little blood for their sins but nothing more to do with Jesus until heaven.

But if we return back to those in that room in Acts 13 and the experiences that followed their lives from there moving forward we realize, in part, that their impact was the result of the Holy Spirit's work through the telling of a Robust Gospel.

Scholars would take us on a long journey through 1 Corinthians 15 and John 1, and several other stops in Romans as well to frame in a picture of a robust Gospel, a journey I trust you've taken in your studies, but if not, add those texts into this frame – they will only help you!

However, for the sake of this article, let's look at the same picture from another angle in Colossians 1

Colossians 1:13-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

13 He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, **14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The Supremacy of Christ

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; **16** for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. **17** He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. **18** He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. **19** For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, **20** and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Now, with this as one of our additional texts we see the Good News of Jesus as simple to understand and live, but inescapably robust.

It places Jesus at the center of creation..in verse 15 -16
And carries through every age and season – in the waiting, in the Desert, in Exile, Promised Land and every other –

As Vs. 17 says, “and in him all things hold together.”

So this Kingdom theology is introduced here for Carl...God is currently at work in your life.

And finally, it carries right through to the current age of working out our faith in the church in Vs. 18

In his book, How God Became King, N.T. Wright, says, **“The whole point of the Gospels is to tell the story of how God became king, on earth as in heaven.”**

Scott McNight, King Jesus Gospel, calls out the elephant in the room when he reminds us,

“Most of evangelism today is obsessed with getting someone to make a decision; the apostles however, were obsessed with making disciples.”

And he goes on to write further...

“Evangelism that focuses on decisions short circuits and – yes, the word is appropriate – aborts the design of the gospel, while evangelism that aims at disciples slows down to offer the full gospel of Jesus...”

So when a church stops being obsessed with decisions and now starts developing an obsession with disciple making everything changes. I am completely convinced, this is the progression of the missional life God has called you and I to live as disciples of Jesus.

Remember Peter and John’s boldness of Acts 4? The religious leaders indict them after a healing but take pause when they see their boldness.

Acts 4:13

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. (NRSV)

Scott McNight in his chapter entitled, “Gospeling Today,” advocates for this kind of boldness once again can only be found when it is framed in Israel’s Story: the narration of the saving story of Jesus,

FIRSTLY

We often get a bit of the life of Jesus
We never miss the death,
We speed over resurrection

And typically leave out completely his exaltation and ascension.

His coming again makes clear the completion of the story of Israel.

SECONDLY

The Gospel centers on Jesus’ LORDSHIP, that he was becoming King in earthly skin.

THIRDLY

Our Gospel telling must include the ***summoning of people to respond to the call of God in repentance, faith in Christ and baptism.***

AND THEN FINALLY

The gospel saves and redeems. The apostolic gospel promises forgiveness, the gift of the Holy Spirit and justification.

But this final crescendo is just a pleasant tune or a nice fairy tale bedtime story to anyone outside a Christendom worldview who has not been introduced to the first three.

As you might have guessed the story of Carl has a glorious continuance. In discussions with his realtor, Dan, Carl began to awaken to his deep desire to welcome God's rule and reign in his life.

His realtor also happens to be a pastor on our staff – just one more reason we advocate for bi-vocational ministry in a missional context.

Their house deal was getting a bit bumpy, Carl was stressing and Dan – along with another Christian friend began to discuss the beauty of this robust Gospel.

The God IN OUR waiting
The God IN THE Desert
The God of Exile
The God of the Promised Land

The full story was coming into focus for Carl and he was seeing this grand arc of God's story of reconciling all things. A story that comes to grand completion in Christ and subsequently celebrated and reflected in the life of a disciple.

Carl needed forgiveness of sin, and I know for a fact he is very grateful for the promise of heaven. But what Carl now understood was the Kingdom of God all around him and yet it sat just out of reach until he placed his life under the reign and rule of Jesus. Watching him lift his hands in worship these days, or stay for a second service to take additional notes on a study is exhilarating.

CLOSING

The unfortunate reality of getting multiplication RIGHT but not getting the Robust Gospel is that we simply multiply that which we know we can count:

Attendance
Decisions
Budgets and buildings

Been when the Robust Gospel is the centerpiece of our Multiplication we find God's Kingdom advancing and joy abundant in every season.

Colossians 1:24-29 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

24 I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. **25** I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, **26** the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. **27** To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. **28** It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. **29** For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.