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Centering Gospel  
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# **The Nature and Importance of Gospel Literacy in the Local Church**

# “What is the Gospel”?

- » “The elephant in the Evangelical Church room”  
(McKnight)
  
- » If church leaders struggle to define “Gospel,”  
where does this leave the majority of believers?

# Key Questions

- » What is this “Gospel” about which Jesus Followers need to be literate?
- » How do we define and measure “Gospel” literacy and why is it important?
- » How can Christian leaders in local churches equip believers with “Gospel” literacy?

# Approach

- » Work from the New Testament data into the modern context.
- » Interact with Keller's perspective in "Center Church."
- » Reflect to some degree upon the Canadian context.
- » Discern strategies to advance "Gospel Literacy" today.

# Section One: Defining Gospel

» Keller's take on Paul and the Gospel writers:

“the good news [has] three basic elements: the identity of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation” (p.33)

“the gospel is a message about how we have been rescued from peril...a news report about some life-altering event that has already happened” (p.29)



# Section One: Defining Gospel

- » Canonical 'Gospels' – 40+ years after the events (65-90 AD)
- » Defining the “Gospel” – preoccupation of the church in its first 25 years of existence. (Gal. 2:7-10; 1 Peter 1)
- » Later epistles – dealing with false teaching (Pastoral Epistles, 2 Peter, Jude, 1 John, Hebrews). Paul’s concern (Acts 20:29-30).
- » The language of “my gospel” (Romans 2:16; 16:25;) or “our gospel” (1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3; 2 Tim 2:8).

# Section One: Defining Gospel

» The witness of Jesus and the Apostles to the “Gospel” -- one of Paul’s definitions (2 Timothy 1:9-11):

“God saved us”

“God called us with a holy calling”

“Not in accordance with our works, but in accordance to God’s own plan and grace”

“This grace/favourable response began in Messiah Jesus before creation”

“This grace/favourable response has become public knowledge through the appearance of our Saviour, Messiah Jesus”

“Messiah Jesus destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light **through the Gospel.**”

» The “telos” of the people of God.



# Section One: Defining Gospel

- » τὸ εὐαγγέλιον as μυστήριον (cf. Romans 16:25; Eph. 3:3-4; 6:19; Col. 1:26-27; 4:3; cf. Greek translations of Daniel)
- » Other elements – fulfilment of covenant promises:
  - > 1 John – Jesus is Son of God – human and divine
  - > Synoptic Gospels – entering the Kingdom is entering life, based upon the covenant that Jesus has established “in his blood” (Mark 14).
  - > Galatians – Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham – faith in Christ, reception of the Spirit
  - > 1 Corinthians 15 – death, burial and resurrection of Jesus in accordance with the Scriptures
  - > Romans 5, 8; Ephesians 2:8-10 – no works – God’s gracious intervention with eschatological transformation – moving people into the kingdom of grace.
  - > 1 Peter 2:9-10 – sprinkling of blood and obedience – new, re-visioned people of God.



# Section One: Defining Gospel

- » Gospel defines our Christian existence, personal and corporate, and results in ethical transformation based upon the work of the Holy Spirit which finds expression in a new Messianic community.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

## » Definition

Knowing the content of the “good news” and being able to enrich this understanding with self-directed Bible study.

Gospel literacy defines the process which motivates people and develops their capacity to define and articulate the “good news” consistent with biblical truth and with sufficient understanding so that they can apply that meaning to generate personal and corporate life-changing discipleship and explain its basic meaning to other people.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » What does the NT have to say about “Gospel Literacy” as a value and goal within local congregations?
- » Given that generously 15% of the population in antiquity formally was literate, what expectations would the apostles, evangelists and other church leaders in the first century have for people in the house churches regarding the dissemination of the Gospel?
- » Because our standards of literacy are much higher today and people’s ability to interact directly with Scripture enhanced, how does this change the congregational dynamics and expectations related to Gospel Literacy and “Personal evangelism”?

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » NT Examples of those who “proclaim the Gospel.”
- » Paul says he “was entrusted with the Gospel” (Galatians 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:11; Tit. 1:3 (ἐν κυρύγματι)).
- » The role of “the evangelist” (τοὺς εὐαγγελιστάς Eph. 4:11; cf. Acts 21:8). Paul’s instruction to Timothy (“do the work of an evangelist” (ἔργον ποιήσων εὐαγγελιστοῦ) (2 Tim. 4:5)). Seems to be formal, somewhat defined role.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Who actually “proclaims the Gospel” according to the NT record (εὐαγγελίζομαι in the NT)?

Jesus (Mt. 11:5; Lk.4:18,43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1; Acts 10:36; Eph. 2:17)

John the Baptist (Lk. 3:18)

Angels (Lk. 1:19; 2:10; Gal. 1:8; Rev. 14:6)

God (Rev. 10:7)

Moses (Heb. 4:6)

Apostles generally (Acts 5:42)

Phillip (Acts 8:12,35,40)

Peter and John (Acts 8:25)

Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:32; 14:7,15,21; 15:35)

Paul + ??? (Acts 16:10)

Paul (Acts 17:18; Rom. 1:15; 15:20; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:16(2x),18; 15:1,2; 2 Cor. 10:16; 11:7; Gal. 1:8b, 11,16,23; 4:13; Eph. 3:8)

Timothy (1 Th. 3:6)

Generic (Acts 8:4; 11:20; Rom. 10:15 (Isa. 52:7); Heb. 4:2; 1 Pet 1:12, 25; 4:6).

How many references are to “average” Christians?



# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Keller claims that “not only the apostles ([Acts] 5:42) but every Christian ([Acts] 8:4) did evangelism – and they did so endlessly. Passages such as Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Hebrews 3:13; and 1 John 2:20,27 indicate that every Christian was expected to evangelize, follow up, nurture, and teach people the Word” (p.227).
- » He cites M. Green’s reference to “informal missionaries” being responsible for the spread of the Gospel – but most of Green’s evidence comes from writings later than the NT.
- » What do these texts actually say?

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Believers have the Holy Spirit who instructs and encourages them in their Christian obedience. They have knowledge of Gospel truth, but the focus is on using this knowledge for mutual encouragement, not formal evangelism.
- » Christians were expected to “nurture and teach people the Word” within the church. The NT has little to say directly about average believers being engaged in the formal communication of the message as good news (εὐαγγελίζομαι).
- » The verb κηρύσσω (herald, proclaim) + τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (Jesus, the apostles, Paul). Passive form (Matt. 24:14; 26:13; Mk. 13:10; 14:9). Jesus/Messiah sometimes is the object, when Philipp or Paul is the subject, with others mentioned occasionally (Phil. 1:15; 1 Tim. 3:16).
- » 1 Cor. 9:14 – a formally recognized role (Eph. 6:19).

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » What do we do with Jesus' commandment in Matthew 28:19-20?
- » Jesus addresses his words to the Eleven, who are charged with the responsibility to "make disciples of all the nations."
- » As the apostles "disciple all the nations," some among these new Jesus Followers will become evangelists and teachers who have the giftedness and training to proclaim the good news in diverse ways.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » So what have we come to through this brief review?
- » The formal proclamation of the message about Jesus as good news seems to reside primarily with trained, gifted people.
- » We find few, if any examples where “average Christians” are involved in this formal proclamation directly.
- » Average believers are expected to know the content of the Gospel, but this knowledge serves primarily to enhance their ability to live the Gospel within their network of relationships. It also gives protection against false, deceptive teaching.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Another factor – the power of ‘imitation’ and mentoring
- » 2 Timothy 3:10-16 – “follow my teaching,…”
- » Much of the “training” that enables believers in the first century to learn how to “proclaim the gospel” occurred through mentoring or apprenticing relationships, some of which are revealed in the NT (e.g. Peter and Mark, Paul and Timothy/Titus, Priscilla-Aquila and Apollos).



# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » What does the NT have to say about “Gospel Literacy” as a value and goal within local congregations?

Acts 2:42 “engage with the teaching of the apostles”

Phil. 1:12,15 collaboration in the advancement of the good news

2 Tim. 2:2 entrust to reliable men / Tit. 2:3-4 – mature Christian women teach what is good

Luke 1:4 κατηχέω – teach, instruct

No use of διδάσκω + τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (cf. Matt. 28:19-20)

Paul and Apollos “teach the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 18:25; 28:31) – in an evangelism setting, not a training setting. (cf. Acts 15:35).

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » What does the NT have to say about “Gospel Literacy” as a value and goal within local congregations?

Paul denies that he “was taught” the Gospel (Gal. 1:12).

καταγγέλλω “proclaiming the word of the Lord” or “the Messiah” (Phil. 1:17-18; 1 Cor. 2:1; Col. 1:28; Acts 13:5,38; 16:17; 17:3, 13, 23).

Eph. 4:20-21 – most direct statement

Heb. 5:11-6:3

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Teaching was a frequent occurrence within the house churches.
- » Such teaching would have various emphases, such as demonstrating the truth of the gospel from the Jewish Scriptures, explaining how the gospel should affect ethics and relationships, and helping people discern the “times” in which they were living.
- » Gospel Literacy was something desired, but “gospel” in such an expression has a rather broad scope.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Given that generously 15% of the population in antiquity formally was literate, what expectations would the apostles, evangelists and other church leaders in the first century have for people in the house churches regarding the dissemination of the Gospel?
  - > Leaders (cf. 1 Tim. 3) need to demonstrate an aptitude and ability for teaching.
  - > Different versions of the Gospel presented – creates conflict.
  - > Acts 15 – entire church involved in the discussion about the Gospel.
  - > Roman Epistle – Paul presents “my Gospel.”

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Logistics of manuscripts – their use and cost
- » Oral presentations – memory
- » Synagogue precedents



# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Because our standards of literacy are much higher today and people's ability to interact directly with Scripture enhanced, how does this change the congregational dynamics and expectations related to Gospel Literacy and "Personal evangelism"?
- » 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, general educational levels, and the general literary sophistication of much of the population, specifically in Canada, indicates that expectations might and should be greater today among average believers.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » Contextualization is the key concern of Gospel literacy in the NT.
- » Keller's formulation of contextualization:
  1. Connecting people to God – through evangelism and worship.
  2. Connecting people to one another – through community and discipleship.
  3. Connecting people to the city – through mercy and justice.
  4. Connecting people to the culture – through the integration of faith and work (p. 293).

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » “The Bible tells all Christians to evangelize and love their poor neighbor. Yet some people have gifts of evangelism (Eph. 4:11)” (p.293)
- » Does Keller’s conclusion need any modification?
- » Consider 1 Peter 2:10 in the context of 1 Peter 3:1-2, 15-16 and 4:10-12.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » The NT focus in this project of gospel literacy and communication encourages believers to **lived contextualization of the principles** centred in the good news within their network of relations – in the household, in the marketplace, and in their civic contexts.

# Section Two: Gospel Literacy

- » How did early church leaders measure “gospel literacy”?
- » How much “commotion” did the believers cause in their communities?
- » What is the “suffering” quotient?
- » How are people choosing to engage their cultural contexts?
- » Understanding of the Jewish Scriptures and the relationship between the Messianic movement and Judaism.



# Section Three: Equipping People

- » What does the New Testament offer as guidance for us today regarding this matter of “Gospel Literacy”?
  1. Proclaiming the Gospel was an important role, but it seems to be allotted to specific leaders within the church.
    - a. Discern those gifted to be “evangelists”
    - b. Specific training required to be an evangelist.

# Section Three: Equipping People

2. This is not to say that average Christians were left out of this activity entirely for we find, for example, in 1 Peter 3:16ff the responsibility for believers “to give a reason for the hope that they possess.”
  - a. focus on people’s stories
  - b. “witnessing” requires awareness of the apostolic content of the good news and personal experience of saving encounter with Jesus
  - c. some of this “training” occurred through mentoring

# Section Three: Equipping People

3. The nature of Christian witness on the part of the average Christian in the NT primarily is behavioural and relational.

- household relationships

- patron-client relationships

- civic relationships

- more formal opportunities – led by key leaders

(Acts 19:9-10)

# Section Three: Equipping People

» Proposals for today:

intentional development of pastors with a heart for Gospel literacy

intentional development of evangelists

intentional development of “lay ministers”

Keller (281) who “actively bring their Christian example and faith into the lives of their neighbors, friends, colleagues and community.”

intentional equipping by pastors

Keller (286-87)

One-on-one informally

One-on-one in planned and intentional contexts

Provide an experience of Christian community

Share one’s faith.

# Conclusions

- » Gospel literacy is a critical element in the ministry of evangelism primarily because it enables Jesus followers to live Christianly in the context of their current relationships.
- » The more believers are engaged in “doing good” as believers and understanding why this is important, the more able they will be also to “give a reason for the hope they possess in the good news.” In this they become living samples of kingdom reality, empowered and led by the Holy Spirit.



# Conclusions

- » Developing such Gospel literacy must be intentional if faith communities are to express their Gospel potential.
- » The ability for people to contextualize their faith commitment within relationships, business activities, civic contexts, etc. is a key element of this gospel literacy as it is nurtured within local church contexts.
- » Training through mentoring is also an important strategy.