

The Gospel We Preach

Brad J. Kallenberg

"Issues of Truth and Power: The Gospel in a Post-Christian Culture"

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Two school teachers in the hallway overhear a little girl say to her friend "And he's like, 'No way! And I'm all like "Duh!" To which one teacher remarks: "Perhaps we shouldn't make English the official language."¹

This story satirizes a deep cultural problem. The other day my wife returned from youth group at the church—she works with ninth-grade girls—and told me that the oddest thing happened. She had divided the girls into groups of three to exchange requests and to pray for each other. At the end of the meeting she instructed everyone present to remember to "pray for their threesome." The girls exploded into giggles but were too embarrassed to let my wife in on the joke. Here's the joke: today, fifteen year-old girls most often hear the word "threesome" spoken in the context of 2-on-1 sexual encounters.

If the shifting of culture has wreaked havoc with ordinary words like "threesome," what do you suppose it has done with the vocabulary with which we attempt to frame the timeless true Gospel?...the Gospel that we received? ...the Gospel in which we stand?...the Gospel by which we are saved? Namely,

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time.... (1 Cor. 15:3-6)

Well, for one thing, we ought not be surprised that evangelists get some goofy questions: "I heard that *Chrestos* was a common name for slaves—is that how Jesus got his last name?" or

¹ Steve Kelley, San Diego Union-Tribune, 1995.

"Did the coroner really put down 'sin' as the cause of death?" or "'Scriptures'? Which scriptures? the Koran or the Bhagavad-Gita?"

In this era of growing biblical illiteracy I want to turn my title into a thesis. I will argue that in the phrase "the Gospel we proclaim," the verb governs the noun as much as the noun governs the verb.

We fairly easily recognize that the message we share governs the manner in which the Gospel ought to be proclaimed. The Crusader who cries "Christ is Lord!" while cleaving the skull of the Turk has got something wrong. As John Howard Yoder points out, in order for the Good News to remain *news*, it must be offered in a way that that can be rejected. Granted, we hanker after ways to make the Gospel irresistible. But if we offer it in coercive or manipulative ways, it ceases to be good *news* and becomes instead propaganda (or worse). In fact, rather than a willingness to cleave the metaphorical skulls of our opponents, it is our readiness to bear their hostility against us that validates (in part) our message.²

The fit between the content of our message and the style of our presentation is an extremely important subject. But I want to restrict my remarks to the other side of this coin. I want to examine the senses in which the verb "proclaim" illumines the meaning of the noun, "the Gospel."

Look back at my title, "The Gospel we proclaim." In the New Testament, the infinitive "to proclaim the Gospel" is a single word: εὐαγγελίζω. Fifty-four times the word shows up as a verb: *to gospelize*. That's an odd word, "to gospelize." Yet I want to use it rather than the more common word "evangelize" in order to help us get past what we think it means and come to hear it in a fresh way. So my title ought to read, "The Gospel We Gospelize." Although by the time of the NT, the word had been around for hundreds of years (Aristophanes was the first to use it³), it

² John Howard Yoder, "On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation," *Faith Phil* 9, no. 3 (1992): 285-300.

³ Gerhard Friedrich, "Εὐαγγελίζομαι," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 3:710.

was not very common. You might have heard it used to describe the report of a messenger-slave that a battle had been won or that so-and-so are to be married.⁴ Good news in both cases. But strangely, the word virtually drops out of public circulation after the first century. Why is this? How does a word stop being spoken? In this case, the word became stigmatized because it was co-opted by a group of religious nuts; members of the Jewish sect, contemptuously called "*Christianos*" by their detractors,⁵ began using the verb "gospelize" to describe one of their most distinctive practices.⁶ In other words, what the word came to mean had more to do with its close ties to Christian activity than by its previous lexical range. This means that we must look closely at these activities in order to get a handle on "gospelize."

On the one hand, to gospelize did not mean to propagandize or even to proselytize if by these terms we mean something coercive or manipulative. As mentioned above, the very rejectability of the news is part of what makes it *good* as well as news. And in point of fact, gospelizing was not irresistible. The author of Hebrews tells us that those who were gospelized "failed to enter" for reasons of their own disobedience and unfaith, rather than for some failure on the part of the gospelizer.⁷

But on the other hand, for NT Christians, the verb could never mean a simple mundane recitation of the facts. On the contrary, both the noun (*gospel*) and the verb (*gospelize*) show up in the text accompanied by other verbs and participles such as "healing,"⁸ "teaching,"⁹ "solemnly testifying,"¹⁰ "proclaiming,"¹¹ "boldly speaking,"¹² and "preaching."¹³ The close proximity of these

⁴ James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1930), 259.

⁵ Michael J. Wilkins, "Christian," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 1:925-26.

⁶ For an account of how traditions are constituted by their cooperative practices, see ch. 2 of Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, repr.).

⁷ Heb. 4:1-6

⁸ Lk. 9:6; Mt. 4:23, 9:35.

⁹ Acts 5:42; Mt. 4:23, 9:35.

¹⁰ Acts 20:24.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 9:14.

verbs to "gospelize" ought to make us wonder whether gospelizing can really take place if these other activities are absent.

Take preaching for example. I suspect it doesn't bother us to learn that the word "preaching" normally accompanies "gospelizing." But by "preaching" do we mean what the NT writers meant? Paul, as you remember, came to Corinth full of weakness and fear and much trembling. In *this* condition, his preaching was persuasive, but not because of its tight logic and rhetorical coerciveness. His preaching was marked instead by a "*demonstration* of the Spirit and of power."¹⁴ If gospelizing involves preaching and preaching involves demonstration, what sort of demonstration are we talking about?

The demonstration Paul has in mind is *practical* rather than theoretical in nature.¹⁵ In other words, what authenticated Paul's preaching as "spiritual" and "powerful" was not some logic-chopping *apologia* or finely-tuned argument, but *skills of living*. Perhaps an illustration can help. The *Tebtunic Papyri* dating from the second century uses the same word for "demonstration" (ἀποδείξις) to explain that when an Egyptian priest got carded outside the Temple of Isis, he or she could demonstrate their qualifications by translating some sample hieroglyphics.¹⁶ Nobody but cultic priests could do that. His or her skill at reading hieroglyphics *demonstrated* that he or she was in fact, the Real McCoy.

In a similar way, Paul offered *practical* evidence that his preaching was authentic. The twist is that the evidence Paul offered was not a set of skills that he possessed, but skills that the *Corinthians* embodied.

You [plural] are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that *you* [plural] are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with

¹² 1 Thess. 2:2.

¹³ Mt. 4:23, 9:35, 24:14, 26:13; Mk. 13:10, 14:9, 16:15; Gal. 2:2

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 2:1-5.

¹⁵ On the difference between practical and theoretical reason see Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, 60-61.

ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.¹⁷

Through Paul's gospelizing the Spirit of God was actually crafting the Corinthian community in such a way that the *persona* of Christ could be read off the shape of their life together as easily as one reads a letter (ἐπιστολή Χριστοῦ; 2 Cor. 3:2). Thus Paul explains in his earlier letter that what he expected to "detect among them" (εἰδέναι ἐν ὑμῖν; 1 Cor. 2:1) was precisely what he "proclaimed" (καταγγέλλων; 1 Cor. 2:1), namely "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). This same expectation lay behind Paul's confident admonition in his later correspondence that they look and see whether Christ was recognizable in their corporate life—"among you all" (ἐν ὑμῖν)—unless they failed the test.¹⁸ So, Paul's gospelizing of the Corinthians entailed a sort of meddling declaration (κηρύσσω) that entangled itself with the way people actually conducted themselves.

Likewise for the other verbs that are found in the presence of "gospelizing." The giving of solemn testimony (διαμαρτύρομαι), ordinary conversation (λαλέω), proclamation (καταγγέλλω), and teaching (διδάσκω) are all, in the main, linguistic practices. But they are distinct from each other—as different as telling a joke is from arguing a case in court. So we must not be fooled into thinking that gospelizing and these other linguistic practices reduce to word games or semantic manipulation of vocables. Anyone can speak a sentence, but the mastery of each of these linguistic practices is perhaps the most demanding task we will ever face.

What do I mean? Let's compare them to digging a ditch. I can dig a ditch in an afternoon. How long does it take to master a language? One of the curses of graduate school was the requirement that we translate into English texts written in Greek (not to mention the ones written in Latin...and Hebrew...and French...and German!). After my basic Greek courses were out of the way, I spent an intensive six months preparing for my reading exam. Every morning

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 3:2-3. Emphasis added.

I'd try to read devotionally in my Greek NT. But the cornerstone of my strategy was to take a pack of flashcards onto deserted mountain trails for long runs of an hour, sometimes two. After six months I could limp my way pretty well through most biblical passages. But of course I wasn't fluent. I could only read. I could neither speak nor write nor hear nor think in Greek. My "fluency," so called, rode piggyback on my knowledge of English. Truth be told, what I did was more like decoding than reading. I'd look at a text and make the English substitution phrase by phrase. But I still *thought* in English—a language I'd spent a lifetime learning. If I were to become *fluent* in Greek, it would take much longer than six months.

Of course the disciples didn't share my disadvantage, they had already learned Aramaic on their mother's knee and picked up Koine Greek in the marketplace. But I'm really not talking about *natural* languages—as time-consuming as they are to learn. I'm talking about the life-transforming task of learning a new *conceptual* language. And the disciples didn't pick up that any faster than we do. For example, Luke reports that when Jesus spoke about a crucified Messiah the disciples did not and could not understand what he meant!¹⁹ They, as well as we, needed to *learn* the new language—and that took time. Even those who traveled with Jesus for three years were still trying to wrap their minds around the implications that the Gospel held for race relations (to name but one example). By Acts 15 they made a pretty good go of sorting it out. But the Judaizers still snared Peter. Paul responds by confronting Peter. But Paul also *revised* the Acts 15 policy. His revision shows us that whatever progress toward fluency the disciples had made by Acts 15, they still had further to go!

The timefulness of learning this new conceptual language called "Christian" is brought to the fore by the verb "teaching" that is sometimes associated with "gospelize." When Paul visits Corinth for the first time (Acts 18.1-11), we read that he borrowed the home of Titus Justus in order to set up a school right next to the synagogue. This precedent of giving instruction to those

¹⁸ 2 Cor. 13:5.

¹⁹ Lk. 9:45; also Jn 12:16.

in the process of converting is imitated by the Church Fathers. They conducted pre-conversion instruction (catechesis—a sort of acclimation to the way Christ followers think, act and talk) in order to help potential converts understand what they were converting to. Augustine reports that his own pre-conversion catechesis lasted at least nine months. Nine months may have been shorter than was typical. To be on the safe side, one pastor (Hippolytus) recommended three full years of pre-conversion instruction!²⁰

(As an aside, the length of time our forebears devoted to pre-conversion instruction ought to give us pause. If we live in a post-Christian age of neopaganism, how much time is *now* required for gospelizing? Ten minutes? Ten hours? Ten days? Ten weeks?)

Second, I can dig a ditch alone, but learning a language requires a team effort. My fluency requires participation by other speakers. That explains why Hebrew all but abandoned me as soon as my last exam was over: no one spoke Hebrew with me. But even during my coursework, when people did talk at me in Hebrew, I had no emotional engagement in the conversation. In other words, the participation needed must go beyond simply talking at one another. It must involve a complicated interplay of reactions enmeshed in the whole hurly-burly of our life together.

Think of how we learn pain language.²¹ Babies cry when doctors poke them with syringes. Crying is an instinctive, primitive reaction to their environment—like blinking in the wind or sneezing at pepper or puckering at lemons. Now when a child skins his or her knee on the sidewalk, they will fight back the tears all the way home. But when they burst in the door and see Mom in the kitchen, the floodgates open. That sort crying is different than what a baby does. It is a different sort of primitive reaction; it is a kind of communication. And through the crying, the child hears the mother coo, "There, there, I know it hurts." Slowly the child learns that words

²⁰ St. Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, translated into English with Introduction and Notes by Burton Scott Easton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 43, 87.

²¹ Karen Fiser, "Privacy and Pain," *Philosophical Investigations* 9, no. 1 (1986).

like "hurts" can go proxy for crying. So as an adult, when you or I trip on the sidewalk, we grab our knee and say "Man! That really *hurts!*"²²

But the hurly-burly doesn't stop at these first-order primitive reactions.²³ It belongs to the mother's primitive reactions to respond sympathetically to the injured child. Her *visceral* response is also bound up in pain language. Moreover, a third party has a certain reaction to the scene of a mother giving comfort (or failing to give comfort). These third-party reactions are also part of the grammar of the word "hurt." And then there's the fourth party who reacts to the perceived indifference (or empathy) of the third party witnessing the scene of injury and comfort (or neglect). And so on. And so on. All these layers of reactions are tangled up with speaking a language fluently.

Third, one can dig a ditch armed only with a shovel, but one cannot master a language without simultaneously mastering a vast web of behaviors that constitutes a form of life. For example, think of how children learn to use the word "chair." A child doesn't learn what chairs are when adults point to chairs while speaking the word "chair." Rather, a child picks up what to do with the word "chair" by overhearing the word spoken in a wide range of physical activities involving chairs. We stack chairs, stub our toes on them, reupholster them, buy and sell them, stand on them, tip them over, paint them, count them, fetch them, and sit on them. As the child becomes increasingly familiar with these activities, the child develops fluency in using the word "chair." When Wittgenstein wrote that part of the grammar of the word "chair" is our actually sitting in them,²⁴ he meant that our familiarity with the whole range of activities involving chairs is put on alert the moment we hear the word "chair" spoken. Conversely, to the extent that

²² For a more careful explanation of the connection between behavior and the learning of language see Brad J. Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar: Changing the Postmodern Subject* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 101-12, 203-15.

²³ For more on primitive reactions see Lars Hertzberg, "Primitive Reactions—Logic or Anthropology?," in *The Wittgenstein Legacy*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: V. 17* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 24-39.

someone is unfamiliar with these activities, that person will have a proportionately thin understanding of the word "chair."

Our fluency in theological terms is likewise bound up with our activities. If a young child is asked who God is, the response is likely to include "He's the one we pray to before bed," "we're 'pposed to confess our sins to God," "We sing songs to him and visit him on Sunday," "He's the one we thank before we can eat," and "He's the one we tell our friends about." The richer this child's engagement with these activities, the richer will be his or her understanding of God and of how to use the concept "God" fluently.²⁵ But catch the significance for evangelistic conversations: You or I may talk with someone who neither prays to God, confesses sin to God, thanks God, worships God, sings to God, nor testifies about God. How then can we possibly assume he or she has even the slightest inkling of who we're talking about? For them the word "god" is very nearly a null set. This is why the best way for someone to understand what we mean by the word "God" is to look at how we behave:

I should like to say that in this case...the *words* you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God?...*Practice* gives the words their sense.²⁶

Let me take a step back. In defending the claim that the verb "gospelize" informs the noun "Gospel," I've tried to make two points. First, in order for me to be a proper gospelizer, I must master a whole range of community-constituting linguistic practices, if for no other reason than that these practices are associated with the word "gospelizing" in the canons of Scripture. Second, I cannot achieve fluency in these linguistic practices without being immersed into the

²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 24.

²⁵ George Lindbeck writes, "In short, it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience." George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 37.

community of believers for whom this conceptual language is their *first* language, because I need familiarity with their activities in order to become fluent in the conceptual language of the Gospel.

Here's the surprise: two similar but reciprocal conditions hold for those who are on the receiving end of gospelizing, for the ones being "gospelized," as it were. First, *in order for someone to be gospelized, they must embark on the journey of mastering the Christian conceptual language.* George Lindbeck was not the first to suggest that the very heart of becoming a Christ-follower is the learning to speak, think and act in another language. But he did say it well: " just as an individual becomes human through learning language, so he or she begins to become a new creature through hearing and interiorizing the language that speaks of Christ."²⁷ If Lindbeck is right about this, then many contemporary gospelizing strategies are bound to fail. Why? Because these strategies presume the Gospel must be translated into terms anyone can understand. However, just as one cannot master Chinese by reading English translations of Confucius, neither will conversion be genuine so long as the Gospel is expressed in the lingua franca of secular society.

Although this conclusion may be stated too severely, we need to remember what happened to liberal Protestantism. Hendrikus Berkhof recounts the sad tale of liberal Protestantism's boat ride down the river of history.²⁸ As it approached the shoals of modernity (17th Century), liberal churches adopted a strategy of lightening their payload. One by one, orthodox doctrines were thrown overboard in the name of retaining relevance. Eventually, liberal Protestantism

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch, English translation with the amended 2nd. ed. (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 85e.

²⁷ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 62.

²⁸ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989).

succeeded in clearing the sandbar. But once it had done so, liberal Protestants discovered that they no longer had anything distinctively Christian to say.²⁹

My worry is that contemporary evangelicalism has adopted the identical strategy of speaking to the culture by translating terms and phrases that ought not be translated. Listen to some of the contrasts between pop theology and the language of the New Testament. The NT authors do not so much describe "knowing God" as "being known by God" (Gal. 4:9). It isn't so much a "*personal* relationship with God"—that notion of person doesn't emerge until the 6th Century—it is a matter of being baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). It isn't "going to heaven when I die," it is the hope of being resurrected into an eschatological kingdom. It might not even be about "Jesus in my heart," though it certainly is a matter of being a brick, side by side with other bricks, together constituting the living temple, the *whole* of which is indwelt by God's Spirit (Eph 2:21-22).³⁰ Things go from bad to worse when the "abundant life" (Jn. 10:10) is marketed as the prosperous life; or when reconciliation is diluted to mere conflict resolution; or when "peace" becomes a way to make career decisions but has nothing to do with foreign policy.

I also worry that these examples are evidence of our basic inattention to the distinctiveness of the Christian language. Perhaps in our eagerness to translate the Gospel into terms more amenable to the modern mind, we evangelicals are unwittingly adopting the same strategy employed by liberal Protestants a century ago. Like them we are at risk of ending up with a toothless, heartless, narcissistic, consumerist Gospel that is not salvation at all.

Fortunately, there is an alternative strategy to that of "translation." This brings me to my second reciprocal point: *In order for those being gospelized to master the Christian conceptual*

²⁹ So too, Alasdair MacIntyre: "any presentation of theism which is able to secure a hearing from a secular audience has undergone a transformation that has evacuated it entirely of its theistic content." Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Fate of Theism," in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 25-26.

language, they must be immersed into a community of believers for whom this conceptual language is their first language. Members of this community become *trainers* rather than *translators* of the Gospel. In other words, instead of translating the Gospel into modernese, we seek to achieve communication by raising the fluency of potential converts until they can hear the Gospel on its own terms. Thus the Gospelizer is at heart a *language coach*.

Suppose you and I are at an impasse in a conversation. You have advanced degrees in mathematics and I do not. You are eager to explain linear algebra to me, and I am eager to hear it. If I, because I lack sufficient education, expect you to explain linear algebra to me in terms I already am familiar with, our conversation will get nowhere. You might be able to tell me what linear algebra is *for* ("You can use it to figure out how much lift an airplane wing has at a given speed."). But unless you are able to introduce special vocabulary, such as "partial differential equations," I'll never understand linear algebra itself. Moreover, I'll need more than a glossary of terms. I'll need a set of skills to build on. Before I can get an inkling of how to solve partial differential equations, I'll need to know how to integrate normal differential equations by having first mastered calculus. My achievement of understanding requires training over time. But if linear algebra is worth knowing—if, for example, it is a matter of my salvation—then the training is worth the time, effort, and tutelage.

Where have we gotten to? There's no way to understand *what* we are talking about except by more talking. It follows that how *well* we talk—what I've called fluency—sets the limits of *what* we can say. To say the same thing differently, verbs (forms of speaking) control nouns (the message). Moreover, how well we talk is in an important sense dependent upon the vitality of language practices in the speaker's host community. In our case, this means that communication of the Gospel is a function of the sort of community out of which we speak. This link may seem

³⁰ For a discussion of holism vs. individualism in the NT see Brad J. Kallenberg, "All Suffer the Affliction of the One: Metaphysical Holism and the Presence of the Spirit," *Christian Scholar's Review* 31,

counterintuitive, especially in light of evangelicalism's recent history of lone ranger evangelism. But I can bolster the case I'm making by showing how this my conclusion resonates with Scripture. Let me give three examples of surprising scriptural passages that become clearer when we assume that there *is* a close connection between gospelizing and the shape (or character) of the Christian community from which the gospelizer speaks.

The first surprise is the wordplay of 1 Thessalonians 1:5. There Paul writes, "our gospel did not come (ἐγενήθη) to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...." Paul deliberately uses a very bland verb—the word "to come" (γίνομαι³¹) or "to become" or "to happen"—in order to highlight by contrast the powerful and divine and persuasive manner the Gospel was actually delivered to them. The Gospel didn't just "happen." Mere words (ἐν λόγῳ μόνον) didn't simply show up by themselves, because mere words would have fallen flat. Here's the pun: mere words didn't come, *we* did: "... just as you know what kind of men we became (ἐγενήθημεν) in your midst for your sake."³² By using the same bland verb, Paul draws attention to the fact that the power of the Holy Spirit could not be conveyed by the mere words of the message ("in word only"), it was importantly bundled *with the messengers*. What was crucial was not *who* the messengers were, but what *sort* (οἶοι) of people they were, because practice gives the words their sense. These gospelizers initiated with the Thessalonians a conversation in an entirely alien language and then stuck around long enough for the Thessalonians to gain fluency by hearing them speak and watching them behave. They remained on (as Paul's team always did³³) as trainers, conversation partners, language coaches. That's where the transforming power is. In reflecting on this process, Paul could not separate (as we are so very prone to do today) the Gospel words themselves (ἐν λόγῳ μόνον) from the *manner*

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³¹ For those readers unfamiliar with Greek, differences in spelling operate like those in English. The English word "go" becomes "went" when it changes to the past tense. Greek has the additional advantage of using spelling changes to convey changes in mood, person, vice, number and gender as well as tense.

³² Here the difference in spelling is simply the addition of the pronominal suffix "we."

³³ Paul and Barnabas spent an entire year in Antioch. Acts 11:26.

in which the gospelizers spoke, acted and lived with each other during their tenure with the Thessalonians. This is because the communication of the Gospel is a function of the sort of community out of which we speak.

A second surprise is heard in the odd locution of Romans 15:19 where Paul says he has "fully preached the Gospel." One well-intentioned Christian organization once tried to take this text seriously by quantifying "fully preached" with a "70% exposure" policy. They reasoned that because so much of the world has never heard, Christians are obligated to move on to new ground after a goodly chunk of the population (70%) has had a reasonable chance to be exposed. So, for example, if Billy Graham comes to a town of 10,000 and the stadium holds 7,000, then the Gospel has been "fully preached." In their minds this conclusion holds even if only 13 people showed up: since the stadium holds 7,000, then 7,000 were given the *chance* to be exposed to the Gospel, even if, sadly, it was not an opportunity they afforded themselves.

The trouble with this policy is that it is out of sync with the text itself. Romans 15:19 actually asserts that Paul "*fulfilled* (πεπληρωκένας) the Gospel." We are all familiar with the "filling" of the Spirit (as the verb πληρόω is used in Acts 13:52) and with the "fulfilling" of prophecy (as the verb is used in Acts 3:18), but what can "fill" or "fulfill" *the Gospel* possibly mean?

The context provides clues for a better reading strategy. Listen as I back up and read verses 18-19:

For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word *and deed*, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ. (Emphasis added)

Again we see that the Gospel cannot be identified with mere words, but with "deeds" (not to mention "attesting signs"³⁴). The term "deed" (ἔργον) typically conveys the human response to God's Spirit. For example, Acts 20:26 describes the turn to God as displayed in the performance

of "deeds in keeping with repentance" (ἄξια τῆς μετανοίας ἔργα). Perhaps nowhere is the Spirit's activity more clearly attested than in the erasure of social divisions that have had such a long violent history. But now in the body of Christ, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Believers across the empire took this very seriously. The second-century pastor in Rome, Clement, wrote that *freepersons* were actually selling themselves into slavery, thus becoming slaves, in order to ransom believing slaves, thus transforming former slaves into freepersons.³⁵ Their reasoning? Simply this: Christians ought to live in imitation of Christ, who though he was rich, for our sakes became poor that he might make us rich. Their actions tell in miniature the story of redemption. My point is this: because the brave deeds of these early believers embodied the story of Christ, their deeds supplied the crucial backdrop for making sense out of the language of the Gospel. Thus the communication of the Gospel is a function of the sort of community out of which we speak.

A third and most difficult puzzle. In Colossians 1:15 Paul describes the Gospel as literally "the word of truth." But Paul throws us a curve ball in 1 Timothy 3:15:

in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar (στῦλος) and foundation (ἐδραίωμα) of the truth.

In the first place, we are surprised to hear that the truth needs a pillar and foundation. Even more troubling is the identity of the foundation. Where we'd expect to see God named as the foundation, we discover that it is the *church*; the *church* is the foundation of the truth and not the other way around.

Admittedly we don't like this. We desperately want to say that the word of truth, the Gospel, is the foundation of the church. How then can Paul deliberately reverse the order? For

³⁴ The term "signs and wonders" was used almost exclusively to signify the miraculous. The authenticating role of miraculous signs is beyond the scope of this paper.

reasons described above. The Gospel is not the Gospel unless it is a living language actually spoken and lived by a real community. Without this community the message is reduced to gibberish, or worse, it becomes a wax nose that can be twisted in any direction. Infamously, the Bible has been used to defend slavery in the deep south as well as justify mid-century Nazism. But when it becomes a living language, the community of speakers becomes normative for the use of that language.

This conclusion is corroborated by the other term used to describe the church: pillar. The pillar (στῦλος) was the ancient equivalent of a showcase.³⁶ It was a pedestal whose use was for the holding up of something (perhaps an ornament or a book) for all to see. This is the sense that Paul intends in his letter to Timothy. How the church behaves is crucial because it is the pedestal, the showcase, the plausibility structure of the Gospel.

Together the dual roles of the church as foundation and as pillar evoke an image of *incarnational evangelism*: the Gospel is embodied in the life of the believing community. Please don't misunderstand me, however. By "incarnational evangelism" I don't mean (as some apparently do) that the Gospel can be spread without words. Just the opposite: we *must* speak the words. However, we must speak the words with each other as well as with outsiders. And the words we must speak are many more than those that comprise a tidy summary of the plan of salvation. Moreover, the very words we use remain unintelligible to outsiders (and eventually fall into unintelligibility for us as well) unless spoken against the backdrop of a robust and distinctive form of life. In fact, it is this form of life—consisting in a complex web of deeds and words—that is itself an essential part of the Gospel message.

In sum, getting to the truth of the Gospel requires a journey by the traveler into the very heart of the believing community. If one loses a coin in the basement, one does not search for it

³⁵ Clement, "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers—Justin Martyr—Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and Jame Donaldson (Edinburgh & Grand Rapids, MI: T & T Clark & Eerdmans, 1885), 55.2 (p. 20).

in the backyard simply because the light is better outside! Where one searches depends on what one is looking for. And the Gospel is found *inside* the believing community. Maybe this is what the Church Fathers meant by the claim that "Outside the church there is no salvation." It is certainly why the earliest apologists, when they had their backs against the wall, instinctively pointed to the crazy cross-shaped way Christians lived with each other. Listen to the words Aristides sent to the Emperor Hadrian (second-century).

But the Christians....show kindness to those near them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly....they do good to their enemies....if one of them have bondsmen and bondswomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction. They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another.... And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their own homes and rejoice over him as a very brother....And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity....And if there is any among them that is poor and needy, and they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food....

Such, O King...is their manner of life....And verily, *this is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.*³⁷

CONCLUSION

Now that we've looked closely at the NT use of "gospel" of "gospelize", I will revert back to our more common way of talking about evangelism and offer some application questions for our roundtable to consider. The NT uses the noun "gospel" and the verb "evangelize" 130 times. I have touched on just a handful of these to make the case that the verb (evangelize) in some sense dictates the content of the Gospel message by showing that the evangelist and those being evangelized are engaged in learning a language and that the learning of this new Word requires a community of fluent speakers already to be in place. The central question that remains,

³⁶ Ulrich Wilckens, "Στῶλος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 7:733.

therefore, is this: "What sort of community must we be in order to properly execute the verb, *evangelize*?" On the one hand, *Are we capable of sustaining the distinctive vocabulary of our new first language?* Or are we in danger of losing important concepts because we are no longer employ words like "holiness," or "propitiation," or "saint"? However far we are currently off course, the road back will require us to become intimately reacquainted with the text. Lindbeck writes

[I]t is questionable that the churches can seize the opportunities that this intellectual shift provides....Biblical literacy, though not sufficient, is indispensable. This literacy does not consist of historical, critical knowledge about the Bible. Nor does it consist of theological accounts, couched in nonbiblical language, of the Bible's teachings and meanings. Rather it is the patterns and details of its sagas and stories, its images and symbols, its syntax and grammar, which need to be internalized if one is to imagine and think scripturally....What is to be promoted are those approaches which increase familiarity with the text.³⁸

But he fears that the church in the West may not be up to the task: "Relearning the [conceptual] language of scripture is difficult, and at present there are no signs that the church can do it."³⁹

On the other hand, *Are we capable of sustaining the form of life necessary for making our language intelligible?* It is of enormous importance that no apologist today writes in the manner of Aristides (and Clement and Mathetes and Athenagoras and...), because we seem to lack an authentic church at which to point. I'm not suggesting that the early church was perfect—Good heavens, who'd want to worship with the Corinthians! Nevertheless, even the Corinthians were marked by counter-cultural *deeds*; deeds that exemplified the message. I fear that in contrast, the mega-church, currently so much in vogue for American evangelicals, has simply broadened the narrow way by reproducing within its walls a microcosm of *civil* society rather than a microcosm of God's peculiar people. I'm at odds with myself on this issue. I am a member of a

³⁷Aristides, "The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers (First Series). Original Supplement to the American Edition*, Volume 10, ed. Allan Menzies (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 276-278. Emphasis added.

³⁸ George A. Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission to a Postmodern Culture," in *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, ed. Frederic B. Burnham (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1989), 51-52.

³⁹ Ibid.

mega-church. But I find myself agreeing with Robert Jenson's conclusion that, if God be merciful our churches will of necessity get much *smaller* than they are.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ Robert W. Jenson, "What Is a Post-Christian?," in *The Strange New World of the Gospel: Re-Evangelizing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 29.

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