

189 *Keep the gospel at the centre*

Today's title is inspired by those churches who perhaps say 'We're a gospel-centred church', but again I'm questioning what 'gospel' they mean... But first a couple of questions for you!

(1) Just in terms of the numbers of pages, what proportion of the New Testament was written by Paul? (It's not a trick – just Pauline as commonly accepted.) (2) What proportion of your church's preaching programme/home Bible studies is based on the Pauline books? Be honest.

Starting from ten years ago, when I questioned if God even existed, my view of 'What is the gospel?' was rebuilt on the traditional **Model 1** – penal substitution – but not happily so.

Five years ago I began to see more breadth, and moved to **Model 2** – a range of different ways of appreciating salvation: redemption, Christus Victor, etc. – my longing to share the gospel found wings again, as I had different ways to help different people in different situations. Brilliant!

Of late, my view has broadened even more. I now believe that the gospel that turned the world upside down in the first century was **Model 3** – the story of Jesus as fulfilling the story of Israel.

As I've tried to express this in the past weeks I've experienced some kick-back, especially from people with responsibility under God: church leaders and Bible translators, and that's perfectly fine: am I getting wishy-washy, am I going soft on sin, am I just saying 'love is all you need'?

The thinking for this present article started when I bought Zondervan's '**The Story** – *Read the Bible as one seamless story from beginning to end*' – you can see why I was attracted to it. It includes a 'Cast list', and the entry for Paul says, 'Paul wrote much of the NT.' I found that interesting, so I counted the number of pages from Romans to Philemon and was very surprised.

Having espoused Model 3 as being nearest to the NT model, I counted the pages occupied by the four gospel books (I see each of them as 'the gospel') plus Acts, which records the early gospel preaching, and the spread of the gospel. That's **60%** of the New Testament! Does this percentage reflect your church's teaching programme? (Paul wrote less than 25%.)

Why does 60% of the NT rely on story as a teaching medium? Story is **memorable** and story is **powerful**. I'm afraid that doctrine comes a poor second as a means of communicating truth. After all, it is a PERSON we're trying to communicate to people, not a religious belief system!

Our new church is brilliant, but I admit that I was disappointed, at first, to see that they stuck to the church lectionary – a bit of a straight-jacket, I thought. I think that no longer! If the gospel (as Paul insists in 1 Cor 15 and elsewhere) is 'according to the (OT) Scriptures', then to have three passages – OT, a gospel and an epistle – seems a great balance.

And next time you recite a creed, remember, it too is the story of Jesus – i.e. it's the gospel!

If our churches do overemphasise the Pauline books could it be from fear of 'getting it wrong'?