

70 A more beautiful gospel

(Numbers in square brackets [] refer to others of my articles at: <http://www.archivepub.co.uk/thoughts>)

Life is a journey, the Christian life is a journey – and for me that's 70 years and 50 years, respectively – but the past two years have been the most exciting of both, as my faith has grown and developed dramatically.

In the past 9 months, I've started writing short articles, each a thousand words or so – I guess you'd call them 'blogs'. This has been my way of processing my thinking about my faith; and this is blog number 70. I've shared that journey with a group of friends, and have now put the articles up on my (work) website. I've never read my Bible so much, or read so many Christian books, so you'll gather that I am highly motivated (obsessed?) – plus, I've had more time, being partly retired.

My first article, 'Full Circle' (you can find it as [0]), was written two years ago when I first 'discovered' the love of the Trinity, and got really excited by what I had 'found'. I wrote it because, as I looked back over my life as a Christian, I could see how God had been at work, including a period, about 7 years ago, when I reached spiritual rock bottom and wondered whether God even existed – maybe the Christian faith was just made-up wishful thinking?!

In fact, this article has mutated since I first wrote it, to try to make it more accessible to people who haven't walked with me through those 70 articles, and also because, having 'discovered' a more beautiful gospel I find that I've become dogmatic myself. So if you decide to read any of my earlier articles please realise that they are my immediate reactions. Indeed, I might not even agree now with some of the views I expressed then.

Also, this article comes with a...

Health warning: This contains much over-simplification (to cram 80,000 words into 2000) and definitely some over-statement for effect. I'm contrasting my faith as it was (left column) with where I am in my journey now (right column), so it sounds as if I'm saying that one view is right and the other is wrong – rather, I see it as a spectrum of views. Worse still, I have pushed the left-hand view to its logical conclusion, and deliberately given some of its more extreme expressions, but only to show how it can unnecessarily cause unbelievers to completely write off the Christian faith.

My writing spree started when my friend 'Martha' [1] felt that her church was saying that she should 'share the gospel' with x-number of her friends and family. She was very honest, and admitted to me that she didn't want to tell them that they were sinners bound for hell. So I wanted to help her (and myself) to find a way to present the gospel more effectively, but in those nine months, my understanding of what the gospel actually *is* has moved, and the difference is fairly stark as I have tried to present here, over-simplification notwithstanding.

My aim here is to help us find a way to present the gospel that people in the 21st century can actually understand and relate to ... and believe! But remember that the two columns aren't an either/or option, there could be a degree of both/and. Also, you could push my views to an extreme and think that I'm saying 'All you need is love' and 'It doesn't matter what you believe' or even 'Everyone will be saved anyway'. No, I'm not that extreme.

	The gospel seen more as <i>proposition and transaction</i>	The gospel seen more as <i>relationship and mystery</i>
The gospel:	The <i>proposition</i> is that God is holy, you aren't, Jesus died to take the punishment that you deserve. The <i>transaction</i> is that, by believing that this is true, you can receive new life now and a place in heaven when you die.	The narrative of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; through his death for us (as affirmed in the traditional creeds [16]), we come into <i>relationship</i> with God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a <i>mystery</i> [15] that we can explore and enjoy our whole life long.
The cross:	The centre point of history, where Jesus took my punishment, to set me free from God's wrath.	Don't even <i>think</i> of trying to sum up the cross in a phrase, or even a couple of sentences. I have tried to unpack the centrality of the cross a little in 15 of my articles [4,10,13,17,35,46–50,52–54,60,63].
Evangelism: (not actually, a word that appears in the Bible, so better...) Witness:	Evangelism – getting people to 'hear the gospel', in church or at a rally, or by using 'Two ways to live', 'Four spiritual laws', etc. to tell them the gospel.	Witness – living out the love of God, caring for people, being there for them when life is a bitch; and then, when they ask... <i>'Always be prepared to give an answer ... But do this with gentleness and respect.'</i> (1 Pet 3:5)
Man's main problem:	Sin as moral failure, which alienates us from God – God therefore turns his back on us.	Sin as self-focused independence, by which we alienate ourselves from God's love.
Solution:	Jesus took the punishment that we deserve (<i>the wages of sin is death</i> , Rom 6:23 – commonly misquoted [52]): eternal separation from God.	Jesus willingly died for us, to restore us to relationship with God. (<i>United with him in a death like his, we also will rise with him</i> , Rom 6:5.)
Main model or metaphor:	Crime and punishment.	Enemy love (<i>while we were still sinners Jesus died for us...</i> Rom 5:8).
Secondary model or metaphor:	None needed because, without Jesus' substitutionary death, there is no salvation. But maybe 'the bridge': a great chasm separates us from God, but Jesus' cross makes a bridge so that we can get back to God.	[<i>How long have you got?! The list of articles under 'The Cross', above, is a good starter.</i>] Outrageous undeserved love (e.g. prodigal father); restoration; redemption; wholeness (shalom); rescue; victory over sin, evil and death; etc.; etc.
God seen primarily as:	Judge.	Loving father, loving mother, lover (<i>all biblical images</i>).
God seen secondarily as:	Loving, and therefore sending Jesus to die for us.	Love! God IS love (1 Jn 4:7-21) – glorious!
God's main action:	Deciding whether you're going to heaven or hell.	Coming down into the crap of life, search and rescue, restoration, redeeming, etc., etc.

Central message:	INDIVIDUAL salvation – ‘Leave everybody out of it; it’s between you and God’, as one evangelistic website said [6].	RELATIONSHIP , covenant, kingdom, family, belonging to one another.
Effect of evangelism (witness):	As you evangelise, people either believe it and are saved OR they think you are deluded, bigoted, self-righteous, etc.; this is apparently caused by ‘the offence of the gospel’ (not a biblical idea in my view [69]).	As you witness, they understand that you love them. They are helped, encouraged and affirmed – all positive things that any human would want (and presumably things that Jesus himself would do if he were here).
Your main role:	Persuader: ‘Believe this’ or ‘Come to this meeting’: telling, arguing, refuting, proving, defending.	Lover: ‘God loves you, and so do I!’: listening (absolutely crucial!), empathising, discussing, sharing.
Effect of your input:	Too easily emphasises differences and disagreements – I think/believe/do this ... YOU think/believe/do that.	Need for drawing near, uniting, oneness, identification, empathy – convey that WE are in this together.
Acceptance by God?	Not unless and until they believe.	God loves us unconditionally (fact!); but we can choose to turn away.
Strategy:	Get alongside them in order to tell them the good news. To concentrate on influential people is a good strategy – especially celebrities who they can then persuade others.	Get alongside them for their own sake, just because God loves them. Concentrate on ‘the most important person’ [59], i.e. <i>all</i> are welcome.
What if they reject?	At what stage do we move on to someone else who is more receptive?	But God hasn’t rejected them! God still loves them and so do you!
If they accept:	Ensure that they are discipled: read the Bible, pray and evangelise. Do this last quickly, before their enthusiasm wanes and/or their friends get fed up. (Am I being cynical or realistic?!)	Continue to encourage, support, pray and share your knowledge of the Bible, encourage them to pray for the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) – an incredibly powerful witness [64]!
Attitude to family:	They will go to hell, so I must tell them the gospel.	Reach out in loving trust. <i>There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment.</i> (1 Jn 4:18 + 1 Cor 7:14).
Main emotions for family:	Fear that they are going to hell, and/or guilt for not telling them.	Love for them, and longing that they come to know Jesus as their friend.
Secondary emotions:	Striving and stress.	Relaxing in God’s love and enjoying spending time with them.
The Bible:	‘The Word of God’ [5]. Everything must be tested by the Bible. Concern lest the Bible be ignored, misinterpreted or demeaned. Some say it’s infallible or inerrant [7].	Inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16,17) [7] but culturally conditioned, so use faithful questioning [3, and many others], check out how Jesus used the scriptures because only THE Word of God (Jesus) is infallible [6,15].
Attitude to moral issues:	The Bible is our ultimate standard for morality. The Bible tells us what is right and true. Our job is to influence	The Bible is not primarily a manual for morality; the prime biblical principle is restoring and maintaining

	society to stick to God's moral standards (salt and light [61]).	healthy relationships, justice, caring for the poor and marginalised, etc.
Attitude to illness:	Not really relevant, except perhaps for 'power evangelism' – proving the gospel by people seeing miracles.	God hates it when people suffer, so empathise and help them if you can. God can heal: so pray for healing.
Attitude to the dying:	They need to hear the gospel before it's too late!	It's never too late, so hold their hand, assure them that they are loved by God and are safe in God's hands.
Attitude to good works:	Beware, because some people think that doing good works leads to salvation. Do good works by all means, but evangelism is more important – how else will people get saved, if we don't tell them?	Doing good works is just what you do if you love someone – you serve them and care for them. God thinks it's so important that he has prepared a specific set of good works for you to do (Eph 2:10).
How might people perceive us?	'Holier than thou', because we try to tell them (a) what sin is (and they are sinners) (b) that they are going to hell and we're going to heaven. – Insistent that the Bible has all the answers about what is right for all time. – Each denomination thinks it is right, and so others are wrong (to a greater or lesser extent).	Welcoming, loving, serving, inclusive, empathising with suffering, not pushing our views on others. – Accepting that the Bible essentially tells us about Jesus, but while it's powerful and exciting, that it's written by fallible authors, and is culturally conditioned [5,7,28,36,39]. – All churches are fallible and wrong to some extent, but we're all trying to work together to spread God's love, each in their own way.

This more beautiful gospel is, I believe, faithful to the Bible's teaching, but it is rather different from what most of us have been taught, so it will take quite a long time to be accepted.

At the same time, I'm encouraged, because I believe that this more beautiful gospel is actually **attractive** to outsiders, and I see signs around me that it is drawing numbers of people into our churches and, hopefully, into relationship with our glorious God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Lord, may it be so, please!

Paul Bev. 14.6.19

P.S. If you have found this summary helpful, there's a nine-minute video that illustrates this more beautiful gospel. It's called 'the gospel in chairs' – sounds weird, I know – you can find it at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUWLcQAsgHs>. It's presented by a Canadian called Bruxy Cavey, and if you have difficulty catching some of what he says, I've 'translated' it into UK English as article [22].