

Restoring Truth: Telling the Correct Story

Abstract: Jesus' command to make disciples is not being satisfied with the "sin management" gospel presented by most traditions today. This paper raises multiple questions regarding the validity of a message that does not duplicate the biblical Gospel and was introduced centuries after the close of the New Testament. To answer these questions, the author offers Paul's summary statements in Romans, Corinthians, and Timothy as a counter to the contemporary gospel that does not satisfy Jesus' command to make disciples.

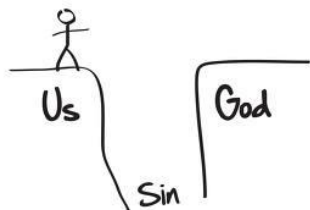
Introduction

When Martin Luther challenged the Roman Church, he unlocked a Pandora's box from which all the issues that could plague a church were released. While the benefit of opening the Bible to the public was a long overdue blessing, it also became the means of validating the harm released on the church. The traditions formed from new interpretations produced a variety of lenses through which God's redeeming plan was viewed, creating myopic versions of the Gospel. The one most commonly used in the contemporary church, to include many with a Restoration background, is the gospel of sin management. This interpretation of God's redemptive purposes reduces the Gospel to a clipart version of humanity separated from a loving God by a deep chasm of sin. This reductionist view produces "massive nominal, non-disciple Christianity" (Dallas Willard, "Forward").

Thus, the intent of this work sounds "the trumpet from the wall," warning the academy and church leadership to ignite a renewed passion for the biblical Gospel, the story of the *historical* Jesus. The means of reaching this goal is to raise valid questions about the gospel preached today, answering them with an explanation of the *bad news* that mandates Jesus' visitation, and present categorical summaries of the Pauline Gospel. To begin, the focus turns to the contemporary gospel being presented by the larger majority of those sharing their gospel.

The Contemporary Gospel

Scot McKnight contends that "The assumption on the part of many that the gospel can be reduced to a note card—or a napkin—is already off on the wrong track (*The King Jesus Gospel*, 164). You've seen and maybe drew this out as well.



How does Paul's description of "the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:2-4) become an appeal for sin management, which **is** the motivation of the contemporary gospel? How does the Gospel that focuses on "the fullness of deity in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9) become the story of fallen humanity? How does a story of redemption that details how the Father reclaimed His creation for His service, become a "vampire Gospel" that cultivates "vampire Christians," who only want a little blood for their sins but nothing more to do with Jesus until heaven, when they have to associate with him?" (Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 403n.8). Willard continues, the "Gospels of Sin Management presume a Christ with

no serious work other than redeeming humankind.” “One, in effect, says to Jesus: ‘I’d like a little of your blood, please. But I don’t care to be your student or have your character. In fact, won’t you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I’ll see you in heaven’” (Dallas Willard, “The Problem With Vampire Christianity”).

Further, how did the historical Gospel of Acts that moves Jesus from preaching, teaching, healing, and other action verbs in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to the subject of speeches Christians gave to non-Christians, become a plea for a forgiven person *going to heaven*? The gospel of “being saved,” when the only mention of salvation on Pentecost was Peter’s “Be saved from this perverse generation” (Acts 2:40)? The historical trajectory begins with Jesus, active in history, moves through the Apostolic Writers “who left us little about the subjective side of faith, but they said much about the objective content of their faith” (Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 22) to Nicaea that shifts focus to the person and nature of Jesus, ending with the Revivalist of the 18th – 20th centuries. The latter spawned by Luther’s attempt to reform Catholicism that produced the myriad of lens through which the Bible is read. Please consider this quote from Richard Foster:

We can send our roots deeper into our own denominational tradition. Let’s never kid ourselves: we all read the Bible through a church tradition, but the problem today is that our understanding of that tradition is so shallow that it produces extremely provincial systems of belief. Therefore, let’s learn not only from the gifted and winsome leaders of today but also from the leaders of the past. If you are a Methodist, read John Wesley; if you are a Lutheran, read Martin Luther; if you are a Mennonite, read Menno Simons (“Editorial: Getting the Big Picture,” 13).

Even the Restoration Movement, which, according to Rick Cherok was built on the triune pillars of truth, unity, and evangelism (“History of the Restoration Movement - Session 1: Philosophy and Background”) laid its western foundation on preaching like that of James McGready whose “fiery preaching and vivid depictions of heaven and hell snatched the apathy from his congregations” (Sharon Rusten with E. Michael, *The Complete Book of When & Where in the Bible and throughout History*, 331).

NOTE: Because of the prominence of the issue of baptism in the early movement, that topic will be used in connect with the Gospel in the following section on the Restoration Movement.

Following Foster, Restorationist should then read the leaders of the past. For instance, read Thomas Campbell who contends “That the reconciliation of a guilty world, in order to complete and ultimate salvation, was the proper and primary intention of the gospel, is evident from the uniform tenor of the gospel testimony, as recorded in the New Testament” (“Essay on the Proper and Primary Intention of the Gospel, and Its Proper and Immediate Effects,” 11). This is from an article that uses the term “gospel” thirty-five times, without definition, yet the intent may reveal his definition – the remedy of the human condition.

Alexander Campbell published *The Christian System*, devoting a large percentage of the book (“more than a third”), presenting the “mature presentation of his beliefs.” Thus, “it is fitting that it should serve as a primary resource for consideration of his beliefs and the beliefs of those *who*

look to him as a patriarch in the Restoration tradition” (this author’s emphasis) (Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, 305). Searching *The Christian System*, 110 occurrences of the term “gospel” can be found. The first impression of the content speaks to “the gospel report of his (man’s) sins and submit to Jesus Christ as the only Mediator and Savior of sinners” (30). He considers the gospel to be the “Christian system” (31), declaring “the righteousness of God” and His mercy (44-45). Further, it is the “living oracles” (52), “gospel of salvation” (63), and is something to be obeyed (74-75). These provide just a few examples of the many instances where the Gospel is focused on the human condition and remedy. Additionally, for Campbell, the Gospel was irrevocably connected and identified with baptism. In an article from the “Christian Baptist” entitled “The Ancient Gospel – No. I,” Campbell mentions the word “Gospel” only once and that in reference to it being told, combined with “Christian immersion.” It wasn’t until “The Ancient Gospel – No. III” that the Gospel is defined as “belief in Jesus” (423). The description is followed by “next immersion; then forgiveness; then peace with God; then joy in the Holy Spirit” (423). Sadly, Campbell softens this position with “The whole gospel is exhibited in *this symbolic action*” (this author’s emphasis) (“Ancient Gospel. No. II.: Immersion,” 415).

This view of a symbolic (gnostic) Gospel is present in many Restoration churches today. The following represents a small sample from notable Christian Churches’ websites:

- Because of the fall, Jesus Christ came to reconcile us with God. He pays the penalty for our transgressions ... offers as a free gift eternal life to all who follow Christ. The Spirit is given at baptism.
- Man rebels and is lost in sin, under God’s judgment. Christ came to save us from sin and reconcile us. Response: “God offers us His gift of salvation by grace, which we receive through faith in Jesus.”
- Jesus is the Savior, historically lived, died, and resurrected. Salvation “is a free gift from God provided by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, and is received through faith. It is available to everyone who accepts Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. That faith is expressed through repentance of sin and baptism by immersion.”

For the theologian who wants to think logically about God (*theos logos*), the conclusion should be that one cannot read the past leaders or depend on the “gifted and winsome leaders of today.” To know the Gospel, one must read the Gospel from its historical setting found only in Scripture. In fact, found in detail primarily in the book of Acts where there are records of the presentations of Christians to non-Christians. This perspective raises the question regarding post-biblical interpretations. That is, do the denominational lens drawn from past leaders of their traditions correctly express the biblical Gospel. This question must be examined.

More Questions

Yet, more questions must be considered before “Restoring Truth: Telling the Correct Story.” Per Foster, the denominational lens serves as the biblical view that provides the gospel told. Another way to put this is that the denominational perspectives are drawn from their interpretations of the actions of God through Messiah Jesus based on the historical and systematic theology of the tradition. Whether the mid-fifth century of Augustine, Luther and Calvin’s sixteenth century, or the movements generated by the Great Awakening/Revivalists, it is helpful to understand their theological context to determine how this contributes to their interpretation of Scripture.

The background for the Reformation and later movements and the focus on human frailty grew out of Augustinian teachings that became the central tradition of Catholicism after the fifth century. Luther was an Augustinian monk, steeped in the Greek fatalism that was foundational to the church's view of humanity. The Reformer John Calvin took it one step farther by saying that man was not only guilty of Adam's sin but was so totally depraved that he could not respond to a divine call unless God turned his dial (gave him spiritual sight). This message is more appropriately called the "Plan of Salvation," which is not the Gospel. Scot McKnight summarizes this well. "The Plan of Salvation emerges from the Story of Israel/Bible and from the Story of Jesus, but the plan and the gospel are not the same big idea" (*The King Jesus Gospel*, 39). Hence, the question that is naturally drawn from this historical trajectory focuses on the post-biblical interpretation of the denominational lenses.

Post-Biblical Interpretation – the Denominational Lenses

How does a wildly different interpretation of the Gospel introduced hundreds of years after the closing of the New Testament correctly represent the intent of the New Testament writers? While it is admitted that Catholicism added much to the tradition, the writers of the pre-Augustinian era uniformly presented a common interpretation and understanding of Scripture relating to the Gospel. Everett Ferguson concludes, "The impression given is one of a fidelity to the biblical facts of the Gospel, a 'history of salvation' view. The Christian faith centered in Christ and what God did through him" (Ferguson, 22). This same fidelity is evident regarding their teaching on baptism. "Quite impressive is the way all second-century authors speak of the meaning and benefits of baptism. Among the blessings ascribed to baptism in these writers are the following: remission of sins, salvation, illumination, eternal life, new birth or regeneration, and the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Ferguson, 34).

There is substantial, historical evidence for a reliable body of early Christian writings that validate the church's understanding of the biblical Gospel and the place of baptism in that Gospel. Interpretative variations do not appear until Augustine reverses the church's teaching on free will, introducing a Greek-based concept of the human condition rather than a Gospel centered in God's work in His Messiah that "was prepared for in the Old Testament revelation" (Ferguson, 22). The final nail in the biblical Gospel's coffin is driven by Luther and the Reformers who shift the focus to human faith alone as the primary means of salvation. Initially validating the biblical purpose of baptism, the shift that places humanity at the center of the Gospel soon detours away to a separation of human actions from subjective faith that, as taught by Catholicism, is infused by God, not the product of hearing the message of the Messiah (Romans 10:17). As is often said, "the rest is history." A comprehensive survey of the historical shifts to a "notecard/napkin" gospel is presented adequately by Scot McKnight in chapters 5-6 of *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*. This verifiable history continues the deception of the garden with Satan holding humanity captive by the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15).

The primary concern is that the contemporary Gospel offers hope without making disciples. One need only hold the confidence of forgiveness and heaven, which are suitable motivators. Living in a light shaded by the contemporary church's focus on human need (spiritual or physical), the "Christian Vampire" happily avoids the light of day when the servants of king Jesus are out "early in the morning," laboring for the harvest (Matthew 20:1-16). This attitude mandates Jesus'

stern warning that “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). “The will” is not a later message given in a *discipleship class*, which few ever attend. Nor is it a “what we believe class” that gives the church teachings. It is a “faithful until death” commitment to King Jesus.

One more picture is required to move this paper to the primary focus – Restoring Truth: Telling the Correct Story. Before hearing the “Good News,” it is required to ask, “What’s the Bad News?” In order for there to be Good News, there has to be bad news. It's not really good news if it doesn't oppose something that's really bad. So, what makes the good news *GOOD*?

The Bad News

According to the Genesis account, it was a time of chaos. It was a time of order. YHWH had created a perfect world that He often said was “good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). But that world was invaded by an evil counterpart to the creator who deceived humanity. Because of the deception, all of creation was cursed! The curse was the result of man's transgression, breaking the creation covenant between YHWH and his image bearer (Hosea 6:7). Now, having the knowledge of good and evil, they were like God (Genesis 3:22). The Father had no choice but to exile his children from his presence. Prior to the expulsion from YHWH's temple, He promised a child who would destroy the deceiver, once again establishing peace (Genesis 3:15). Separated from perfect purity and righteousness, humanity is now driven by their expiration date (death). Their bodies have taken control, driven by the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Contra the Greeks, Augustine, and the Reformationists (notably those with a Calvinist bent), having the knowledge of God holds humanity accountable for that knowledge, which was not taken away with the expulsion from God's presence. Humanity knows God because they know the difference between His “good” and the evil that stands opposite His nature. As Paul told the Romans, since what is known is evident, “they are without excuse” (1:20). Though under the influence of the body, humanity is still responsible for their actions. Thus, humanity became self-serving rather than serving as God's redeemed people. THAT'S THE BAD NEWS!

It's All about JESUS

As already stated, the plan of salvation is not the Gospel. Rather, the plan is the covenant intent (what most call the will of God) to restore humanity to the Eden-type existence by means of the Gospel. The Good News is that God has invaded this cursed world through His Son Jesus to establish a colony on earth from which He can make disciples for King Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). This is his “new humanity” (Ephesians 2:16), comprised of citizens of the kingdom of the Beloved Son (Colossians 1:13-14) who are new creations in Messiah Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17).

When one pledges allegiance to Lord Jesus, they are united with His historical death, burial, and resurrection by means of water baptism (Romans 6). “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:17-18). Thus, baptism is the disciple's historical intersection with the historical death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, initiating the believers' exodus (redemption) from the dark authority of this

world into the kingdom of the Beloved Son (Colossians 1:13-14) where, having been purified (remission of sins/wash away your sins [Acts 2:38; 22:16]), so that you are clean enough to serve King Jesus (Titus 2:14).

However, the way the plan is presented today emphasizes sin management so that the believer can avoid eternal punishment. The Jesus Gospel is about a *change of allegiance* from the one who controls humanity by the fear of death (the expiration date that drives people to go for the gusto!), rendering the devil powerless over humanity (Hebrews 2:15). To validate this claim that goes against hundreds of years of church tradition, one need only turn to the Bible and examine the Gospel that the early Christians preached that converted thousands.

While the book of Acts is the only record of Christians presenting the Gospel to non-Christians, it Paul who left three Gospel summaries that provide a clear, definitive description of the Gospel. These statements validate that the focus of the Gospel is Jesus, designed to ignite a passion for the one that God has exalted, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). This is not an end time only statement. The response to the name of Jesus is that of a redeemed person who is a productive citizen in the kingdom of the Beloved Son (cf. Colossians 1:9-20).

Paul’s Gospel

Luke tells the story of Paul’s conversion three times in Acts (9:1–18; 22:1–21; 26:2–29). He was a devout Jew with a passion to honor the covenant his people had with their Lord God. However, as with many of his countrymen, he did not recognize his Messiah. At least, not until Jesus went toe-to-toe with him on the road to Damascus. Like those on the day of Pentecost when Peter confronted the worshippers with the Gospel of King Jesus, Saul was cut to the heart when he heard, “I am Jesus the Nazarene” (Acts 22:8). “The Nazarene” places Jesus into history by giving Him a physical location in this world. The importance of Jesus having a verifiable history is very obvious in Paul’s Gospel and teachings. “Fullness of time,” “born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4), “fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9), and “being made in the likeness of men ... being found in appearance as a man” (Philippians 2:7b-8a) are some of Paul’s more direct statements regarding Jesus’ historical reality.

To help the student sort and grasp the fullness of Paul’s summary statements, his descriptions can be placed into three categories that will emphasize the nature of the King Jesus Gospel:

1. Historical Gospel: Romans 1:2-4
2. Scriptural Gospel: 1 Corinthians 15:3-4
3. “My” Gospel: 2 Timothy 2:8

Unpacking these passages within the context of the category will provide the fuller picture of Paul’s Jesus Gospel.

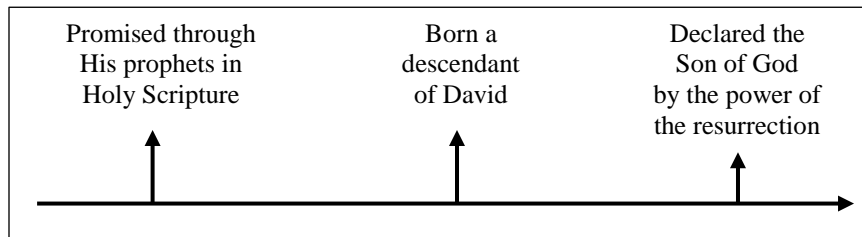
Romans 1:1-4

Historical Gospel. Even a casual reading of the Bible reveals that God’s book is a story. The story starts with God creating and moves into deception and death. Next comes murder, floods, and the formation of cultures and languages that divide all humanity. The story then introduces

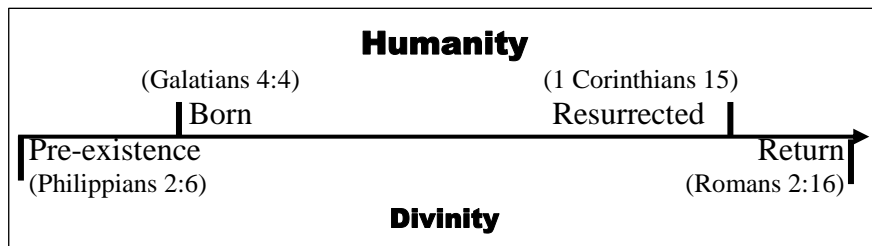
Abraham, the patriarch who is to become the one through whom the various nations (cultures) will be blessed. To have such a story, you must have history. Otherwise, all one has is fiction.

Paul identifies the source of his Gospel as being “of God.” His connection to this Gospel is his service and his call (1:1). Regarding the former, he considers himself a slave “of” Jesus Christ.” This is a statement of ownership, as this is what Paul’s Gospel requires. The second bond is in his commission as an apostle. Together, these contend that ownership and service are the essential nature of the King Jesus Gospel.

The verbs Paul uses – Promised, Born, Declared – set Jesus’ story, and thus, the Gospel, onto a historical timeline. This validates both His humanity and divinity.



Here’s a graphic to support Paul’s dual view of Jesus:

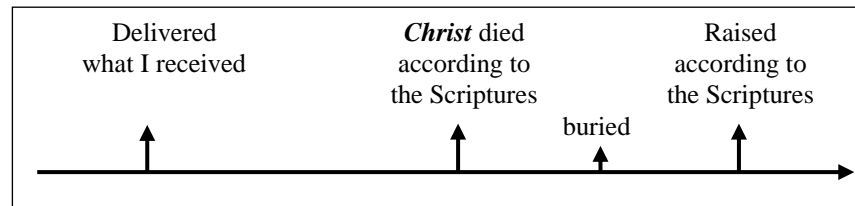


The connection to King David establishes both Jesus’ divine Messiahship and His right to reign. Paul contends that the death and resurrection confirm this (Romans 14:9). Plus, the resurrection is the ultimate declaration of Sonship, giving Jesus the authority (Romans 1:4). His authority and Paul’s Gospel are historically verifiable. The Gospel is the story of Jesus. The reliability is also confirmed from Scripture.

Scriptural Gospel. The beginning of the Gospel is found in Genesis, not the Gospels according to the four evangelists. Mark and John make this evident with the linguistic reference to Genesis, “the beginning” (Mark 1:1; John 1:1). It is in Genesis 3 that “the good” is cursed and an expiration date placed on humanity that drives their passions for personal satisfaction rather than service to *YHWH ’elōhîm*. Thus, the story is preserved in writings that the Apostle Paul contends to be sacred and “able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:15). Scripture has a divine source as indicated by Paul’s description of them as “the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2). Thus, Jesus’ history is irrevocably bound to the Jewish tradition. YHWH invested hundreds of years into teaching Israel and His church through them how to understand the Jesus Gospel that would accomplish God’s will. To do this, Jesus

needed a body to satisfy what God taught us in the sacrifices and offerings (Hebrews 10:5-6). The body steps into history, continuing the story, writing the next chapter.

In Romans, Paul's presentation of the gospel from a historical perspective validates both the humanity of Jesus and YHWH's intervention into human history. As in Romans, so in Corinthians, he builds his defense of Jesus as the Gospel with three verbs – Delivered, Died,



Raised –that is confirmed, endorsed, and justified by the authority of Scripture.

Interpreting Paul. This verse is often the proof-text for the Gospel as “Jesus died for my sins” since this is included in the text. When used like this, two misinterpretations take place:

1. The resurrection that is the emphasis of the chapter is often overlooked or, at best, under emphasized, and
2. “Dying” is the focus, especially “for our sins.”

Neither is correct when you consider that the subject of the sentence is “Messiah” (Christ). Paul's point here is to answer the question, “Which Christ.” He is identifying the only Messiah who died for humanity's sins according to the Scriptures, and was buried, and the one raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. Thus, for Paul, the Messiah is the Good News. Which Messiah? Jesus, the one who died, was buried, and raised according to the Scriptures, historically verified by over five hundred witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:6). Paul's historical Gospel validated and understood scripturally was also a personal Gospel that he claimed with the expression τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου, “the announcement possessed by me (genitive). “He has appropriated it and made it his own” (Leon Morris, 129).

“My” Gospel. Three times Paul includes a description of the Gospel, referring to it as “my Gospel” (Romans 2:16, 16:25; 2 Timothy 2:8). His personalization of the Gospel prompts his statement of value in Philippians 2:8-9a. “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him.” The high value placed on knowing Jesus inspires Paul to encourage Timothy to “remember Jesus Christ.” He puts this in the form that means remembering something to be done continuously. It does not imply that someone has forgotten as much as to keep thinking about the subject. Paul is telling Timothy to keep Jesus on his mind all the time. Here, Paul narrows the Gospel to the dual elements of the resurrection and Jesus' royal status. If the sum total of the Gospel were limited to just these two features, the anticipated response could be the same as when those present on Mar's Hill, “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, ‘We shall hear you again concerning this’” (Acts 17:32). Allowing the Spirit of Christ to convict the world in Jesus' physical absence will produce this result (John 16:10).

Intersecting Histories

Remembering is a personal, ongoing history, the present tense of the human life. The Gospel is Jesus' history in humanity as the son of David and His resurrection, the two elements of the Gospel that Paul instructs Timothy to remember. Our timelines intersect the Gospel at our baptism. It is here that a believer obeys the form (Jesus' Death, burial, and Resurrection) of the Gospel (Romans 6:17). Baptism is the time and place to meet Jesus. It is a rebirth in the sense of a new beginning. This birth is required to belong to the New Covenant community, the new humanity (Ephesians 2:16), which is the church. Baptism is not for church membership as some teach. It is our initiation into service in and for the body of Christ.

Conclusion

Two general questions raised about how the biblical Gospel was minimized into a napkin presentation of the human condition and how traditions that developed hundreds of years after the closing of the New Testament text were answered with the historical Gospel of "the fullness of deity in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9), intent on doing the will of God (Hebrews 10:5-7). The Gospel is the story of Jesus who fulfilled Scripture (the Law and the Prophets, Matthew 5:17; cf. Luke 24:44; John 1:45), experienced a vicious, historically verifiable death, and declared the Son of God by a historical resurrection witness by hundreds (1 Corinthians 15:6). This is the Gospel that produces disciples. This is the Gospel Jesus intended with the instruction to "Go" (Matthew 28:18-20).

It is long past due for the academy to concern itself less with the minutia of theological details that have separated it from the churches and make itself a useful tool for church growth. Theology is talking logically about God. The Gospel is the logical word of God made flesh. That should be the focus of the academy. This is not a *high Christological*, Nicaean credal study. It is exposing the simple words of the biblical text with the goal of converting a "massive, non-disciple Christianity" (Dallas Willard, "Foreword," in *The King Jesus Gospel*, 15) into a viable force that counters this perverse generation (cf. Acts 2:40). It is long past due for the graduates of the academy to use their education to elevate the church's knowledge about King Jesus. It is long past due for Christian leaders to acknowledge and accept the responsibility of protecting the biblical teaching. It is long past due for every disciple of King Jesus to live as servants who have been bought with a price.

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