



The Gospel and Its Meaning

A Theology for
Evangelism and Church Growth

Harry L. Poe

The Gospel and Its Meaning

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

 **Zondervan Publishing House**
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Poe, Harry L. 1950—

The gospel and its meaning : a theology for evangelism and church growth
/ Harry L. Poe.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 0-310-20172-1

1. Evangelistic work. 2. Church growth. I. Title.

BV3790.P57 1996

269'2'01—dc20

96-1033
CIP

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Edited by Verlyn D. Verbrugge

Printed in the United States of America

96 97 98 99 00 01 02 / ♦ DH / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For
Rebecca
and
Mary Ellen,
who slept peacefully while this book was being written,
with the prayer that as they grow older
they will find this gospel
sweeter than all else in life.*

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Preface

The completion of this book comes with a surprising sense of disappointment. What I hoped to accomplish could not be done in a reasonable amount of space. I could not go into depth; as a result, the book will suggest rather than prove its thesis about the gospel: the different elements of the gospel speak to different levels of spiritual concern in different cultures at different times. Sometimes the death of Christ speaks most meaningfully to a people, while at other times the resurrection of Christ speaks more powerfully.

The concern that prompted the writing of this book stems from the evangelistic ministry of the church in the latter days of the twentieth century. Christians have a tendency to proclaim the gospel *from* the perspective of their own spiritual issues rather than *to* the perspective of their audience. Furthermore, Christians tend to speak of the gospel in terms of the aspect of the gospel that means the most to them, rather than in terms of the aspect of the gospel that might offer the most good news to another person. This habit creates the oft observed situation in which the church answers questions people are not asking.

This book is written to provide Christians with a way to begin to think about the extent of the good news of Jesus Christ and how this good news touches different levels of human experience. The writing of the book has only demonstrated to me the extent to which I represent the same habit of minimizing the gospel. I discovered things in writing that I did not expect to find. Likewise, I have found myself in the distasteful position of realizing I was wrong. I have even come to appreciate the perspectives of church traditions vastly different from my own. Rather than attempt to perpetuate the mythology of scholarly detachment, I should say that I write from a faith perspective as an evangelical Southern Baptist, concerned about an issue that affects Christ's whole body.

My methodology will please few, for I have committed one of the unpardonable sins of academia: I have crossed disciplines. This study necessarily involves a biblical treatment of the gospel, but it also includes a theological treatment in historical perspective. In

order to do justice to these, however, I have also borrowed from cultural anthropology, pastoral care, and sociology. This study cannot stand as a legitimate study within any of these disciplines, though I would argue that at some point an effort at integration of disciplines must take place in order to arrive at an adequate theology for ministry. In this case I am concerned with developing a foundation upon which ministries in different settings may understand a theology for evangelism.

The first chapter of the book revisits C. H. Dodd's "quest for the historical kerygma."¹ It concludes that the early church understood the good news to include the existence of a Creator, the fulfillment of Scripture, the incarnation of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Son of David, his death for sins, his resurrection, his exaltation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the return of the Lord. The good news was also offered with the expectation that humans would respond. The rest of the book devotes one chapter to each of these elements of the gospel. Every chapter contains a biblical treatment, a discussion of the historical/theological development of an element over the past two thousand years, and the implication of the discussion for evangelism.

I did not construct the biblical treatment in the way I thought I would. I originally began by using several of the tools of New Testament research, but I found that they were not answering my questions. The atomizing of texts and traditions and theological perspectives tends to obliterate the larger mosaic created by the nuances. I have looked for how each book of the New Testament uses the elements of the gospel, some with an evangelistic (*kerygma*) purpose while others have a discipleship (*didache*) purpose. Regardless of the purpose, the same elements have been used. What startled me is the surprising similarity of gospel themes common to the variety of books and writers. In microcosm, however, the books use the themes in particular ways to address the spiritual issues of particular cultural contexts.

The historical/theological sections explore how the various elements of the gospel have played a dominate role in the life of the church. Each element became the basis for the development of entire doctrines. Eventually, the church developed dogma and systematic theology through defining, explaining, qualifying, expound-

ing, and speculating on the elements of the gospel as the church lived out the faith in response to specific cultural, political, economic, social, and religious forces. At different times and in different cultures, different elements of the gospel have provided the point of orientation for the church or for systems of theology. While this approach speaks powerfully to its context, the church has also tended to cling to the answers of past generations, which, over time, can distort or veil the gospel that lies hidden under all of the contextualization.

The brief application section at the end of each chapter provides a more personal interaction with the material. It suggests how some of the dominant themes of the gospel address some of the spiritual issues people face in different contexts. One of the implications of this study is that the presentation of the gospel may not be reduced to a single formula of presentation that addresses all people in all cultures. While I argue that the gospel contains fixed affirmations of faith, it is not a formula, for its implications are truly astounding in their complexity.

I did not write this book under the most conducive of circumstances. The research and writing took place in the context of a heavy administrative load in addition to teaching responsibilities. It was written in airports, motel rooms, airplanes, cars, vans, and buses as well as at home and in my office. It was written in Louisville, St. Paul, San Diego, San Francisco, Boston, Denver, Chicago, Orlando, Atlanta, Pawley Island, River Falls, The Cove, Arrowhead Springs, Memphis, Glorietta, Greenville, Fort Collins, North Platt, Estes Park, Boulder, and Moscow. Most of the writing took place between ten o'clock at night and one o'clock in the morning. While this schedule does not commend itself as a standard for writing projects, it actually allowed me to observe the gospel dynamics in a variety of cultural and ethnic contexts.

Throughout the five years of this study, I have grown aware of the extent to which other people have influenced me or provided me with insight through our interaction.

I was first introduced to the question of what is the gospel almost thirty years ago in a Bible study for teenagers led by Fern Christman. My supervisory professor in my doctoral studies, Lewis A. Drummond, introduced me to the work of C. H. Dodd. Barrie

White, with whom I read church history at Oxford, introduced me to the changing concerns of the Puritans and the way their focus shifted as the circumstances of England shifted. Timothy George, now of Beeson Divinity School, spurred me to examine different emphases of the gospel when he insisted that all English churchmen of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries agreed about the gospel. George R. Beasley-Murray demonstrated during my doctoral studies how to engage in critical scholarship from a faith perspective, but he should not be held responsible for the idiosyncrasies of my approach. Richard Cunningham guided me through a seminar on the philosophy of history that incubated my interest in the relationship between history and Scripture.

This study has provided many topics of conversation with colleagues in various disciplines over the past five years. In the context of those conversations the study has taken shape. I owe particular gratitude to Herb Klem, Ralph Hammond, Dennis Phelps of Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and to David Dockery of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Marvin Anderson and Jill Bierwirth offered guidance through some less well-known periods of history. This study has also taken shape in the classroom through teaching and dialogue with students. I wish to acknowledge the stimulation and insight generated by students in my theology of evangelism seminars at Bethel Seminary and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: David Harkreader, Ben Thomas, Michael Eldridge, Tim Harris, John Pate, Liz Radic, Scott Wiggins, David Elks, Gregory Qualls, Irene Myhro, Leeland Stevenson, John Able, Al Shuck, Raymond Daines, Gary Marshall, Jon Dainty, William Shrader, David Jones, Paul Fife, Tracie Pogue, Aaron Mockley, Kip Smith, Rodman Williams, Kory Tedrick, Brian Jones, Allen Raub, David Murphy, Cher Moua, Cottrel Carson, and Peter Vogt.

The following students in my Ph.D. colloquium at Southern also rendered valuable assistance in proofing the final draft of the book: Don Cox, Tommy Ferrell, Scott Guffin, Charles Lawless, Ron McLain, and Rob Jackson (my Garrett Fellow at Southern Seminary). Nick Matchefts, my teaching assistant at Bethel Seminary, also helped with early proofreading. The staffs of the libraries at Bethel and Southern patiently helped with my research and made

my hours in the libraries a joy. The manuscript was prepared by Gloria Metz, faculty secretary at Bethel, and JaRhonda Staples, Brenda Wessner, Bev Tillman, Laura Allen, Carmen Faison, and Winnie Reed, who serve as faculty secretaries at Southern.

This project could not have been completed without the help of Lea Andra Foster, secretary for the Research Doctoral Studies Office at Southern Seminary, and Joyce Durham, secretary for the Professional Doctoral Studies Office. During a time of institutional reorganization that coincided with the final revisions to the manuscript, these ladies rendered extraordinary service in putting the manuscript into final form. Chuck Lawless did the work of compiling the indexes. Ed van der Maas and Verlyn D. Verbrugge of Zondervan Publishing House have been not only helpful but delightful to work with in the production of this book.

Most of all, I thank my closest colleague in the ministry, Mary Anne, who has helped me think through this project from beginning to end. Her insights as a minister have helped me keep this book grounded in the purpose for which Christ came.

Harry L. Poe
Moscow
September 1995

NOTE

1. Portions of chapter 1 originally appeared as "Renewing the Quest for the Historical Kerygma," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism*, 9 (1994): 59–71.