

## Epilogue: Proclaiming the Gospel of Resurrection

If the gospel is the “good news” of the kingdom of God, and if that kingdom – and therefore its announcement – has its substance in the truth of resurrection as unfolded above, what does this mean for Christian witness in the world? The obvious answer is that the Christian must testify to the kingdom as it actually is; he must bear witness to what God has wrought in Christ, what it means to human beings, and what it means for the future of this world. This witness, however, stands upon the following three considerations.

### 1. What the Christian Understands

The testimony of the gospel begins with what the testifier understands, for a person can only testify to that which he knows. Knowledge is the ground of testimony, but also its substance. That is, people will inevitably bear witness to what they hold to be true, whether that testimony is conscious or not, verbal or unspoken: “*As a man thinks within himself, so is he,*” and “*the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart*” (Proverbs 23:7; Matthew 12:34-35). Therefore, the accuracy – indeed, the truthfulness – of our message of “good news” depends entirely on what we understand the gospel and its implications to be.

Based on the above considerations of the gospel as resurrection, it ought to be clear that the heart of the gospel is the matter of reconciliation. In Paul’s words, the gospel of the kingdom is the truth that, *in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself*, not counting men’s transgressions (attitudes, thoughts, words and actions by which they have violated their inherent relational obligation of sonship) against them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

- a. The good news is that, in and through the incarnate Son – who Himself is the reconciliation and reunification of Creator and creature, God and man, the triune God has effected peace – *shalom* – between Himself and His creation. In Christ, God has “*reconciled all things to Himself, whether things in the heavens or on the earth.*”
- b. But this reconciliation is more than the forgiveness of sin; it is *life out of death*. This is so precisely because the essence of sin is estrangement from God; for man, the divine image-bearer, estrangement means death – the abolition of man as man.
- c. Reconciliation means that God has set all things right, and He has done so in and through man just as He promised at the outset. Jesus is that man, and as such He is man’s “amen” to God and man even as He is God’s “amen” to man and Himself. In a world of men alienated from the life of God, trapped inside fractured, disfigured and dysfunctional selves, Jesus entered the world as True Man, fulfilling human identity and calling by a life lived in perfect communion with His Creator-Father. In the totality of His being and existence He lived in perfect and delightful agreement with the truth that is God Himself and which comes forth from God. *Jesus is the righteous response of man to God:*
  - In his life, Jesus countered His Father’s faithfulness, goodness and love with His own response of faithfulness: yielded, dependent, grateful trust and devotion; the life of true sonship (Matthew 3:13-17; John 8:28-42, 14:1-11, 15:9-10, 17:1-8).

- So in his death Jesus gave His “amen” to His Father by embracing the truth of His own person and calling, His Father’s just recompense against Adam’s race and its outcome in a new creation (cf. Matthew 26:47-56 with John 4:30-34, 12:23-32, 14:30-31; cf. also Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 12:1-2).
- d. Reconciliation means the restoration of all things; it means the “life out of death” that is the kingdom of the new creation. The gospel is *that* good news – the truth that death has been abolished and light and life have come in Jesus (2 Timothy 1:8-11). Therefore the proclamation of the true gospel is the call to men to find life in Christ – to be reconciled to God by personally laying hold of the reconciliation He’s accomplished in the Son.
- e. But precisely because God has conquered the curse and inaugurated the new creation of the everlasting kingdom, *the world that meets the perception and experience of the natural mind has actually been abolished*. It stands judged and condemned by Christ’s work of renewal, so that any attachment or allegiance to it amounts to living a lie; it is to cling to a corpse (cf. John 12:23-26 with Luke 17:20-33; also 1 Corinthians 7:26-31).

True, the patterns, desires and ways of the world as we know it continue on in the midst of the new creation as it presently stands, but in the same sense that “life” continues in the condemned man who’s waiting for the prison doctor’s fatal injection to take effect (1 John 2:15-17). Though it does not yet meet the eye, the former order has been overthrown and all things have been reconciled to God and placed under the lordship of His Son (cf. Matthew 28:18-20 with Ephesians 1:15-23). *Therefore, a Christian cannot regard anything the way he did prior to entering into the new creation in Christ, and he must hold forth that newness as the glory of the gospel* (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

## 2. What the Christian Lives

The proclamation of the gospel begins with what the Christian knows and understands, but from there it moves to what he *lives out*. This truth is lost upon many who, even acknowledging that witness to Christ begins with one’s understanding, turn immediately to what ought to be said. But this movement from knowledge to words bypasses the most fundamental and crucial aspect of the believer’s testimony, namely the witness of his life. This point is most readily demonstrated by placing Christian witness within its Abrahamic framework.

***Bearing testimony of God’s gospel to the world isn’t simply a divinely imposed obligation; it’s the realization of the Lord’s ancient oath to Abraham. The Great Commission was Jesus’ amen to His own Abrahamic identity shared by all those who bear His life by His Spirit.***

- a. God’s covenant oath to Abraham was that he would be the instrument – the conduit – of divine blessing to the world of men. In effect, God had made Abraham *sacred space*: His singular point of contact and interaction with the world; by divine determination, the blessing that is true knowledge of the Living God and authentic fellowship with Him comes only through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). From Abraham himself God transferred this calling to Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 26:1-4, 28:10-14)) and then to the covenant nation descended from them.

- b. Israel was Yahweh's son, disciple and servant, but as the covenant seed of Abraham. Israel would thus fulfill its Abrahamic identity and calling by bearing the Lord's testimony to the world. All the earth's families were to be blessed as Israel mediated the knowledge of God to them. But the Abrahamic community was to accomplish this work, not by evangelistic "outreach" in seeking to proselytize the nations, but by living authentically before them as sons of their covenant God and Father. In biblical parlance, sonship means *essential likeness*, so that Israel's faithfulness to the Law of Moses – the covenant which defined and prescribed their sonship – would bear witness to their Redeemer-Father and so convey the knowledge of Him to the nations around them.
- c. In the light of Christ's coming and fulfillment, the Church has become the Abrahamic community – covenant sons charged with bringing the blessing of God to the world. The sons of Israel couldn't fulfill their Abrahamic identity and calling because, as a nation, they didn't know Yahweh. They couldn't bear testimony to what they didn't know, but only to what they did. A man is what he is in his heart, and Israel was an estranged and rebellious "son." In the end, they effectively joined the nations in testifying against God. Blasphemers themselves, they encouraged blasphemy from those who observed them (cf. Isaiah 7:1-8:22 and 36:1-37:7 with 10:5-11; also 2 Samuel 12:1-14).

But those in Christ have the life and mind of Christ; they possess the knowledge of Yahweh, not as a matter of studied prescription and injunction, but through union with Him in Christ by the Spirit (Colossians 3:1-3). True sons of Abraham in the singular Son of Abraham (Galatians 3:26-29), Christians are eminently fitted for fulfilling their Abrahamic calling, *and as such the marrow of their witness consists in bearing Christ's fragrance in every place* (2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

- d. As prefigured in the Israelite salvation history, Christians show themselves to be sons of Abraham when they live lives of covenant faithfulness, which is to live authentically as sons of God. But given the nature of what Christ accomplished and inaugurated and what it means to be sons in the Son, this authenticity consists in lives that testify to the fact and features of the *new creation* – to the restoration, life, and truth that have come in Jesus.

But if the marrow of Christian witness is life lived according to the truth of the new creation, then the believer's witness is undermined, if not destroyed, by *natural-mindedness* and all other forms and expressions of *unbelief*. The Church – the Body of Christ – is the beginning of the new creation and its only manifestation in the world. Thus the only way for people to realize that death has been swallowed up in life is for them to perceive it in those who are living proof of it (cf. Ephesians 2:1-10; Philippians 2:14-16).

This, then, shows the grave importance of living into the gospel: *Whatever the Christian's words, it is the fragrance of Christ in him that bears irrefutable testimony to Him as first fruits from the dead and the kingdom of the new creation in Him.*

- In fact, in the absence of this fragrance, all witness – whether word or deed – readily becomes an occasion for men to blaspheme God and His gospel. Israel had no choice but to bear false witness; Christians have no excuse for doing so.

- But if believers are to fulfill their Abrahamic identity and calling and mediate the knowledge of the living God to the world, they must “*put off the old man and put on the new man who, in the likeness of God, has been re-created in righteousness and holiness of the truth*” (Ephesians 4:11-24).

### 3. What the Christian Declares

The Christian’s witness to the gospel of the kingdom begins with and depends upon his understanding of the nature and substance of this kingdom, what the triune God has accomplished in the incarnate Son, what has come in this “new creation,” what it means for the Church and the world and what awaits the consummation of the last day. Those truths, in turn, need to inform and direct – even as they determine – the Christian’s life in this world: the way he perceives himself and his place and role in the present life. Only then does the matter of verbal proclamation enter into the picture. Sadly, however, this hierarchy is commonly overturned such that the presentation of gospel facts becomes the focus of the believer’s witness to Christ. And where this is the case, the foundational issues of right understanding and living witness tend to get obscured if not lost altogether; all that matters in fulfilling the “Great Commission” is learning and putting to use a well-oiled “gospel presentation.”

Rather than a skill to be mastered, witness to Christ should occur (and be regarded) as the outflow of a life lived in the truth of Christ’s new creation; it should arise naturally as the Christian is called upon to “give the reason for the hope that lies in him” as people perceive the fragrance of Christ in him. Sometimes that explanation comes in the face of opposition as Christ’s fragrance appears as the smell of death unto death; other times it comes as a word of life to those who find themselves drawn to His savor (cf. 2 Peter 3:14-15; 2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

- a. Some Christians fail to recognize that the gospel pertains to believers as much as unbelievers, but all agree that it is God’s “good news” to those who don’t know Christ. The gospel is good news to the “lost” because it speaks to their need, *but this is only the case when people’s true need and the gospel itself are correctly understood*. An ill-conceived “gospel” and/or a flawed understanding of man’s plight and need results in the hearer being led deeper into the darkness of his futile mind; his latter condition is worse than the former because he now has the added delusion of believing he has come into the light (cf. Galatians 1:6-9 with 2 Corinthians 11:1-15; also 2 Timothy 3:1-7; 2 Peter 2:1ff).

It is not enough to bear a burden for the lost and believe that the gospel is the answer to their need; in order to fulfill their Abrahamic calling – the Great Commission – Christians must correctly discern the human problem as well as the true gospel of the kingdom and how it addresses that problem.

- The gospel is the good news of creational restoration and reconciliation. It pertains to individual human beings, but as they play a central role in God’s all-encompassing purpose for His creation.
- The gospel reveals what it means for man to be *man*, and thus informs the Christian’s perception of what it is that people in their natural state lack and need.

Moral or immoral, religious or secular, all people are seeking identity, meaning and purpose in their lives. Every human being lives with the nagging sense that things in the world and in his own life are not what they ought to be; they may not be able to put their finger on exactly what is wrong, and different individuals identify and define the deficiency in different ways, but none can escape the sense that life ought to be more than what they experience it to be. The reason is simple: *To be human is to have an innate and compelling need for the intimacy and fulfillment of true relationship – to find happiness, peace, acceptance and love in communion with another.*

But this desperate need can never be satisfied for those who are alienated from the life of God because man is person *from* Person in order to be person *unto* Person. Human beings were created to find the fulfillment of relationship in the One whose image they bear, and then, through Him, with other people and the world He created. But, cut off from His life and enslaved within an estranged and darkened self, people have no choice but to try to find “life” – meaning, fulfillment and relationship – with themselves and other people who share their self-isolated and disaffected existence. In this woeful, hopeless state, they are like a blind man in a windowless room searching for a black cat that isn’t there. Thus the Scripture’s imagery (cf. Isaiah 59:1-15 with 42:5-7; Matthew 15:12-14; John 9:1-41).

And so the Christian’s witness to Christ isn’t so much an explanation of how a person can get his “sins” forgiven in order to go to heaven; it is the bearing of the good news that the Creator God, in His Son, has addressed the human plight and so satisfied the deepest need and true longing of every human being – the need to be authentically and fully human and realize the purpose and destiny for which one exists.

- b. The gospel illumines and speaks to the true need of every human being by setting forth God’s purpose and accomplishment in the person and work of Christ. But for that very reason the gospel discloses the sole remedy for human need. The “Christ event” exposes the solution as well as the problem, and yet, where the problem is misconstrued, so will be the solution. In that regard, while Christians recognize that the gospel calls men to *repentance* and *faith* (cf. Mark 1:14-15 with Acts 2:37-41, 15:7, 16:25-31, 17:30-31, 20:17-21; Hebrews 6:1-2), they often misunderstand just what those obligations entail.
- Most commonly, these two concepts are distorted and misappropriated by being separated from each other such that “faith” is treated as *belief* and “repentance” as *conduct*. Hearers are told that they need to believe in Jesus (typically understood as believing information about Him and His substitutionary death), but also are obligated to repent (that is, turn away from their sinful behavior and ungodly lifestyle). Within the so-called “lordship debate,” this dual responsibility is characteristically expressed in terms of receiving Jesus as *Savior* (the obligation of faith) while also submitting to Him as *Lord* (the obligation of obedience).
  - The effect – unintended or otherwise – is that the gospel message is reduced to a call to *conformity*: a call to conform one’s belief structure to a set of religious truths and one’s conduct to a set of ethical and religious prescriptions.

The good news of the kingdom *does* present men with truths to be embraced, but truths that testify to reconciliation and new creation and the glorious privilege and responsibility of human beings to enter into it (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). *The gospel holds forth life and wholeness, not religious and behavioral reform.* Thus obedience and faith are not separate entities, but different emphases of the same thing (cf. Romans 1:1-6, 16:25-26).

- Faith is itself obedience; it is the proper (“righteous”) response of a submissive embrace of the truth as it is in Christ. If God requires all men to embrace His Son, then faith is the marrow of obedience (cf. Acts 17:30-31 with John 6:22-29).
- So also obedience is faith. This is because faith is more than agreement with religious doctrine; it is binding oneself to the truth of the gospel of God’s new creation such that one’s entire life is henceforth defined and determined by Christ’s life – by union with Him and progressive, sure transformation into His image by His indwelling Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:1-3). Thus everything in the Christian’s life – and so every aspect of his practical obedience – is nothing more than the life of his faith; obedience is a person being who he is (cf. Galatians 5:16-25, 6:12-16; Ephesians 4:17-6:17; Colossians 3:1-17; etc.).

In proclaiming Christ’s gospel, Christians *are* to call their hearers to repentance and faith, but those concepts must be correctly understood and correctly presented and interpreted.

- 1) *Repentance* is fundamental to the gospel and the obligation attached to it for the simple reason that a person cannot truly embrace what he doesn’t rightly conceive. Repentance speaks to a change of mind – that is, to a reframing and rethinking of what is real and true, and people must undergo this reorientation precisely because everyone lives his or her life in a pseudo-reality. This is true first because each person lives in his own mind and his mind is cut off from the truth as it is in God. But people also live in a pseudo-reality in the sense that the world they inhabit has been judged and overthrown in Christ. Outside of Christ, all men are living a lie and are *themselves* a lie, but one they don’t recognize as such so that their embrace of the truth must begin with repentance.
- 2) Repentance involves the reorientation of the mind toward the truth of the person and work of Christ and what God has accomplished and inaugurated in Him. This new understanding then yields the response of *faith* – the wholehearted and unqualified embrace of Christ such that there is a reorientation of the person’s entire perspective and life (Proverbs 23:7).

Faith is “the substantiation of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith isn’t mere acknowledgement or agreement with spiritual facts; it is the rational faculty of the soul by which the transcendent is given substance and made real and present. Faith is the “*obedience of reason to the nature and reality of God.*” And because people always order their lives according to the reality they embrace, where there is the faith of the gospel of Christ’s new creation there is a life that reflects and expresses its real existence.

And so, calling men to repentance and faith presupposes that they have been confronted with the good news that is the person and work of Christ – that is, the kingdom of the new creation that is defined by and bound up in Him. This truth of the kingdom compels the hearer to radically rethink everything he thought he knew; indeed, he is forced to reconsider his very sense of what is real. For this reason Christ’s ambassador must labor to lead men into the knowledge of truth – not simply throwing a few scriptural propositions at them but working to apply salve to their blinded eyes that they may begin to see and do so with increasing clarity (cf. Mark 8:22-25 with Luke 24:13-27).

The implication is obvious: While Christians can expect brief encounters for witness in the course of their daily lives and must make the most of those opportunities, they should be striving for ongoing interaction with people. The depth of the riches of Christ and what has come in Him cannot be conveyed in a few short minutes, but must be worked into the minds and hearts of men over a period of time. Paul recognized that gospel ministry calls for ongoing engagement, and so should his contemporary counterparts (Acts 9:19-23, 13:1-44, 14:1-7, 16:11-18, 17:1-2, 10-11, 18:1-11, 19:8-10; etc.).

- c. The gospel holds out the word of life to a world still existing in the realm of death. In His Son, God has reconciled the entire creation to Himself, putting to death the enmity and estrangement between it and Himself. In this sense, the Creator-Father has reconciled His fallen image-son to Himself, but because men live in their own minds, they have to be liberated from the alienation and enmity that still exists within them and so determines the way they view God and live their lives in this world. *God has reconciled the world to Himself, but men need to be reconciled to Him*; they need to discern and enter into the truth of reconciliation and new life in Christ (ref. again 2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

The gospel calls men to repentance and faith; it calls them to recognize that the world as they have known it has been condemned and overthrown by Christ. The eschaton of the new creation has triumphed over the former age and men are thus obligated to renounce the dark delusion of their natural thinking and enter into what is true and real – the kingdom of the triune God. If righteousness is conformity to the truth, then man’s righteousness is found in his embrace of and union with Jesus Christ. This is so first because Jesus is *Himself* the truth: He is the truth of God and the truth of Man; the truth of Creator and creation; the truth of divine purpose, accomplishment and outcome. Union with Christ brings a man into the truth, but it also renders the man himself the truth as the Spirit produces and perfects Christ’s likeness in him.

For man, as for the entire creation, there is no truth – no authenticity, no *righteousness* – outside of participation in Christ. Thus Paul could proclaim that the consummate realization of all righteousness consists in the whole created order finding its identity, purpose and function in relation to Him (Ephesians 1:9-10; cf. Colossians 1:15-17). But this means that, in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ, a thing’s unrighteousness consists, not in its lack of moral or ethical rectitude as such, but its existence apart from Christ. Stated simply, every man’s righteousness is to be rightly related to the triune God in Christ – to be reconciled to the One who has reconciled all things to Himself. Anything other than, or less than, that will incur condemnation on the last day.

These considerations illumine the gravity of the “good news” and men’s obligation to respond to it in repentance and faith. The very nature and scope of what God has accomplished in His Son makes the denial or refusal of it the most grievous of sins.

- He has ended the enmity and broken down the wall of alienation between Himself and His creation. The triune God has done for the creation – and specifically for man, the divine image-bearer – what could not otherwise be accomplished; that which is bound in the prison of death cannot liberate itself, but God has broken the bonds that men might go free. A chained prisoner is to be pitied and any call to come forth amounts to folly or torture; but once having been unbound, such a call becomes a plea to act upon the truth, and the prisoner’s refusal to depart his prison cell constitutes a supreme act of unbelief, folly, and self-destruction.
- In Christ, God has broken the bonds of death, overcome the curse and restored His creation to Himself. That truth not only establishes every person’s responsibility, it removes every excuse. No one can plead that he cannot come forth into the light of day because the prison door remains barred. If a person continues to give himself to the bondage of what cannot satisfy, it is only because he is refusing God’s free and abundant bounty; it is only because he loves the darkness (Isaiah 53:1-55:3; cf. John 3:16ff, 5:39-40; Acts 13:44-46, 18:4-6; etc.).

The severity – and *determinacy* – of men’s refusal of Christ is most evident in Jesus’ teaching concerning the so-called “unpardonable sin” (Matthew 12:22-32). In context, the Pharisees were ascribing the renewing and restoring work of the Spirit to satanic powers; in this way they were guilty of blaspheming the Spirit. What is crucial to note is that Jesus singled out this offense as the only one that can never be forgiven. Blasphemy against the Son is liable to forgiveness, but not so blasphemy against the Spirit.

The explanation for this distinction doesn’t reside in some superiority of the Spirit, the Son’s unique willingness to forgive, a limitation in His atoning work, or any other such thing. *Jesus’ words must be interpreted through the lens of the salvation history and the Spirit’s role in its outworking.* As the Spirit was the divine agent of the first creation and its ordering and filling (Genesis 1:1-3), so He would be with the new creation. Thus the scriptural promise of the coming kingdom had a focal point in the coming of the Spirit, particularly in relation to the messianic person and work (cf. Isaiah 11:1-5, 42:1-7, 59:1-60:3 and 61:1-3 with 32:12-20, 44:1-4; also Ezekiel 36:16-37:28; Joel 2:28-29).

The Spirit’s presence with Jesus and the manifestation of His restoring power thus testified to the in-breaking of the kingdom (Matthew 12:28; cf. Luke 1:26-79, 3:15-4:21, etc.). The Spirit’s presence and work in the Messiah were the great sign that the kingdom of the new creation had now burst upon the world; to deny that sign by reassigning its meaning and significance was to deny and refuse the kingdom itself. For those who take such a posture, there is no remedy; how can a man enter that which he denies? How can he come into the light when he refuses to see that the day has dawned in the Sunrise from on high (Luke 1:76-79; John 3:17-21)? There can be no greater sin (John 15:20-25), and so no greater condemnation – all the more so as it is self-inflicted (Hebrews 12:18-29).