

## **Gospel, Story, Mission, and Culture**

When the Argentinian mission leader René Padilla addressed the important Lausanne Assembly in 1974, he said there is “no use in taking for granted that we all agree on the Gospel that has been entrusted to us.” He believed the gospel had been truncated in various ways as it had been coopted by various idolatrous cultural spirits: “The greatest need of the church today is the recovery of the full Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> His concern was that the gospel had been watered down in two different ways by the ecumenical and evangelical traditions, and that this had deeply harmed the missionary movement. The ecumenical tradition had reduced the gospel to the social message of Jesus and consequently had diminished mission to action for mercy and justice. The evangelical tradition had narrowed the gospel to eternal salvation in heaven after death and thus had confined mission to evangelism. Both had something of the good news of Scripture but both had severely diluted the gospel and mission.

Where does one start to elaborate the robust good news in the Bible? Books on the subject show different starting points and that origin always impacts the conclusions. I believe we need to start with the proclamation of the good news by Jesus himself. He opens his public ministry, as recorded in the book of Mark, with these words: ““After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15) Jesus does not stop to expand on what he means by the kingdom. Why? Because every Jew knew Daniel 7 and Isaiah 40-55 and was waiting for the kingdom to come. The Jews believed they were part of a long story told in the Old Testament that was waiting for a climactic ending. They disagreed on how the ending would come, who would usher it in, how to live until it came. But they all believed God would bring history to its consummation soon. And one of the primary images of this goal of universal history was the kingdom of God.

Jews believed God had created the world “very good” and blessed humanity as his image with a rich social and cultural life in the creation. Adam and Eve had opened the gates of sin and ruin with their rebellion against God. God set out on the long road of restoration to heal and renew the whole creation

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<sup>1</sup> René Padilla, “Evangelism and the World,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization*, Lausanne, Switzerland (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 144.

and the entire life of humankind. God had chosen Abraham and his descendants to somehow be a solution to the problem. Yet Israel now had succumbed to pagan idolatry and was sitting in exile in need of salvation themselves; the lifeguard sent out to save a drowning world was now sinking itself. But they had the promise of the prophets that God would not give up on his intention but would gather them back, renew them, and restore his rule over all creation and human life. This would be accomplished by a Messiah and the Spirit. And so Israel awaited this climactic event.

Yet as they suffered beneath the beastly and oppressive rule of Rome their hope more and more focussed on a Messiah who in the power of the Spirit would destroy Rome – and they seemed to have Daniel on their side! (Daniel 7.9-14). And so when Jesus announces the good news that the climactic moment of history has arrived, “God is breaking into history in power to restore his rule over all of creation and all of human life,” the Jews were ready. But Jesus didn’t look like the kind of Messiah who would destroy Rome. He looked more like a Rabbi and a miracle-worker. Yet the Gospels interpret his mighty deeds as the God’s healing power at work giving windows into the kingdom of God (Luke 7.22). “If I cast out demons by the power of God the kingdom has come upon you.” (Matthew 12:28)

But when Jesus is crucified it seems clear that this cannot be the Messiah or the long-awaited kingdom. Rome had crushed him. Yet forty days later Peter, who certainly was one Jew awaiting a violent inauguration of the kingdom (Luke 22.38; John 18.10) and was utterly confused as Jesus gave himself up to die, proclaims at Pentecost that the last days had arrived (Acts 2.17) and they had been ushered in by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2.22-36). Paul would be the New Testament author who would reflect most deeply on the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus as part of this good news of the kingdom. These events were the hinge of cosmic history. The death of Jesus had defeated evil and all its consequences. The resurrection was the inauguration of the new creation, the kingdom of God that would one day fill the earth. The Spirit now gives this new life in foretaste in anticipation of the day when God’s rule over his creation will again fill the earth. Until that the day the church is sent out to embody and tell the good news!

The gospel invites repentance and faith, and one who believes that in Jesus God is restoring every corner of the creation and aligns themselves with this, enters a big story that began in creation and will

reaches its goal in the kingdom. And more, that person is summoned to be part of a new humankind that will inhabit the restored creation at the end of history, and until then demonstrate that good news with their lives and deeds and announce it with their words. Put simply: the gospel means we are part of the true story of the whole world and called to the holistic mission of making known the gospel of the kingdom. Gospel, story, mission – these belong together if one follows the lead of Scripture.

But there is one more aspect to this ecology of the gospel: a missionary encounter with culture. Throughout the biblical story God's people are chosen to be a people who embody the end of history for the sake of the nations. That is its vocation and mission. In the Old Testament Israel is set in the midst of the idolatrous ancient near eastern nations. Instead of being a light they are overcome by the pagan darkness; instead of being distinctive showing the rest of the nations what being human is all about they become like the nations serving the same death-dealing idols. When Jesus sends his people in the power of the Spirit to live in the midst of the nations the problem becomes much more intense. How are God's people to live in the midst of the idolatrous nations of North America, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and so on?

The missionary calling of God's people means "not being conformed to the world." (Romans 12:2; cf James 4.4). It means being a distinctive people who embody God's creational design for human life for the sake of the nations. As it relates to all human cultures that serve other gods, it means embracing the good gifts of each culture and rejecting the idolatry that twists it all. It is only as the church embodies the life of the kingdom, demonstrates the justice and mercy of the kingdom on behalf of the victims of cultural idolatry that its evangelistic words will carry weight.

Ecology is a branch of biology that studies how many different organisms are closely inter-related with one another, and that to understand one you must see how it is embedded in that web of relationships. To understand the gospel one must see an ecology of at least four components: gospel, story, mission, and a missionary encounter with culture. One cannot understand any one of those without seeing its integral connection to the other four. The *gospel* draws us into a *story* in which God's people have a *missional vocation* to make known God's redemptive work as a distinctive people amidst the idolatrous *cultures* of the world.