

# Apologizing FOR Public Theology

Arthur Dove, *Sunrise, Northport Harbor*

PART 1 • CHAPTER 2

## What is the Gospel, and How Does it Relate to Public Theology?

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It is hard to think of a more important question since “the gospel” summarises the message of Jesus (Mark 1:14), and is the message about Jesus with which the church is entrusted (cf. 1 Tim 1:11).<sup>1</sup> In the ESV translation of the Bible, “gospel” occurs 93 times in the NT. The gospel is right at the heart of the Bible and, thus, of biblical Christianity. Indeed, Friedrich notes that “If we were to sum up the content of the Gospel in a single word, it would be Jesus the Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, therefore, although Christians bandy the word around a lot, few seem to stop and ask, what exactly is the gospel?

In Mark 1:14–15 we find a pithy summary of the message of Jesus, of the major themes that we would have heard Jesus preaching on again and again if, like his disciples, we had travelled around with him.

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

In the original Greek, the noun for gospel is εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion*), and there is also a verbal form of the word, εὐαγγελίζομαι (*euangelizomai*), meaning to proclaim the gospel. “Gospel” is commonly translated as “good news,” and it is undoubtedly that, but “good news” easily downplays the enormity of what God is doing in and through Jesus. There are three important ways to unpack the dynamite of the gospel. One is to pay close attention to how it is unpacked in Mark 1:15, another is the use of the word in the Graeco-Roman culture of Jesus’ day, and the other is to attend to its background in the OT.



Cyprián Majerník, *Refugees*

<sup>1</sup> The ESV translation of the Bible is used throughout.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Friedrich, “Εὐαγγελίζομαι, Εὐαγγέλιον, Προεὐαγγελίζομαι, Εὐαγγελιστής,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds., Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–), 731.

## Gospel in Classical Greek

Neither Jesus nor the writers of the NT invented the word “gospel.” It was a well-known word in the Greek of the day. In Greek, *euangelion* meant the news of victory. It referred to something like a major “media” announcement. Friedrich describes this graphically: “The messenger appears, raises his right hand in greeting and calls out with a loud voice ... By his appearance, it is known already that he brings good news. His face shines, his spear is decked with laurel, his head is crowned, he swings a branch of palms, joy fills the city ... the one to whom the message is owed is honoured with a wreath.”<sup>3</sup>

*Euangelion* was also used in relation to the worship of the emperor, who was regarded as divine. The birth of a new emperor was *euangelion*, as was his becoming a man and especially his accession to the throne. This was thought to usher in a new dawn, a time of great hope for the world.

The public dimensions of *euangelion* are crystal clear in this classical Greek usage, and none of these overtones are lost in its use in the NT. Of course, the NT *euangelion* is filled with Christian content, but if anything, the public dimensions attached to the word are expanded, as the Roman emperors soon came to realise and thus oppose Jesus and then the burgeoning Christian movement, seeing Jesus rightly as a significant challenge to Caesar’s authority.

At the end of the OT, due to exile, many Jews were scattered around the Roman empire. They appropriated the Greek lingua franca of the day, and the need arose for the OT to be translated from Hebrew into Greek. The translation is known as the Septuagint. Remarkably, this paved the way for the early church’s mission, providing a common language and vocabulary for them to use to proclaim the gospel. Intriguingly, the word *euangelion* and its associated verb occur in significant places in the Septuagint.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich, “Εὐαγγελίζομαι, Εὐαγγέλιον, Προεὐαγγελίζομαι, Εὐαγγελιστής,” 724–25.

## The Old Testament Background

Isaiah 40–66 is critical in terms of the OT background. The word *בָּשָׂר* (*bāšar*), meaning to proclaim good news, is found in Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; and 61:1. When the OT was translated into Greek, *euangelizomai* is used to translate *bāšar*. In Isaiah 40–66, the prophet comforts Israel, explaining that she will return from exile – a geopolitical occurrence, it should be noted – as God returns to her. However, as is typical of much OT prophecy these chapters also look far beyond Israel’s return from exile, extending to what God will do in Jesus. In the NT, for example, the voice crying in the wilderness in Isaiah 40:3 is identified with John the Baptist’s ministry. We also find several of the Servant Songs in these chapters (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12; 61:1–3). For our purposes, what is noteworthy is that the good news proclaimed in Isaiah 40–66 extends to the whole creation and includes significant aspects of public theology. For example, the Servant Song of Isaiah 42:1–6 is all about the Servant bringing justice to all nations. Isaiah 40:9 is followed by a lengthy exposition of God as the creator and the ruler over all nations. Isaiah 52:7 is that beautiful verse that we often sing about:

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of him who brings good news,  
who publishes peace, who brings good  
news of happiness,  
who publishes salvation,  
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

Isaiah 52:10 clearly states that God’s action will be witnessed by the very ends of the earth. The words “peace” and “salvation” are comprehensive words related to all of life as God has made it, not just to our individual emotions. Furthermore, nothing is more comprehensive than the declaration that “Your God reigns.”

The final Servant Song in Isaiah 61:1–3 is perhaps the most interesting because Jesus relates it to his ministry in what scholars call his Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16–30). Jesus brings good news to the poor, binds up the broken hearted, proclaims liberty to captives, and releases





prisoners from jail. The “poor” certainly includes those who are poor in spirit but cannot and must not be spiritualised and thus restricted to “the spiritual.” Jesus’ ministry relates to the entire brokenness of the human condition and is indeed good news to the *materially* poor.

Clearly, this OT background is crucial for understanding what the gospel means on Jesus’s lips and in the NT. It certainly includes personal salvation but cannot be restricted to that. It extends to all the public dimensions of life, such as exile, prisons, healing, nationhood, geopolitics, etc. The good news extends to all areas of created life, to all public dimensions of human existence, extending to the ends of the earth as far as the curse is found.

**Mark 1:15**

This verse unpacks what Jesus meant by “the gospel.” It unequivocally alerts us that the gospel involves far more than mere good news. The OT looks forward to that time when God will act decisively to recover his

purposes for his entire creation and bring it all actively under his reign. The good news is that with the coming of Jesus, that time of fulfilment has arrived. God, in Jesus, has broken decisively *into history*, setting in motion the events that will lead the whole creation in all its dimensions out of its exile in sin and judgement into God’s glorious new heavens and new earth. This is not just good news; it is phenomenal news, epochal

news, news after which nothing will ever be the same again. Jesus’ coming and his message signal the centre point of history around which all revolves. No part of life is left untouched by the Christ event; it includes all of creation and every dimension of public life.

The kingdom of God is a central theme of Jesus’ teaching.<sup>4</sup> It refers to the reign of God, not just over our individual lives, although it certainly includes that, but over the entire creation. Early in the twentieth century, the view crept into NT scholarship that kingdom referred to reign, not realm. As many have come to see, this is a

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4 Readers are referred to the separate article on this topic.

false and misleading dichotomy. Kingdom is certainly about God's reign but also about *the realm* over which he reigns, and while this includes at its heart the church, it extends way beyond that to the entire creation. Little wonder that in Revelation 11:15, in words immortalised in Handel's *Messiah*, at which the audience stands, we read,

there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

God's reign includes all the public dimensions of life as we know them, and it is impossible to join with the loud voices in heaven or sing this section of Handel's *Messiah* without taking public theology seriously.

It is important to note that Jesus says that the kingdom of God is *at hand* or has drawn near. The Jews of Jesus' day were looking for one major intervention by God to set things right. Jesus bifurcates this coming of God into two separate stages with an important time between them. The initial stage is his first coming, largely incognito, which inaugurates the kingdom and sets things in motion, heading irrevocably toward the

end. The second and final stage is when he will return in glory, when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. The in-between time is that great act of the drama of Scripture in which we live, the era of mission, in which the good news is to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the gospel has everything to do with public life and, therefore, public theology. To separate the two is to subvert the gospel.

Rightly understood, therefore, the gospel must be proclaimed in word *and* deed with all the overtones unpacked above. If we do not embody it in all areas of our lives, our words will ring hollow. It certainly, and wonderfully, includes

personal reconciliation with God, but if we limit it to that or involvement in the institutional church, it will not be seen as the extraordinary news it is *for all of life*. Thus, the gospel has everything to do with public life and, therefore, public theology. To separate the two is to subvert the gospel.

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<sup>5</sup> See the article on the kingdom of God and public theology.



Niccolò Vicentino, *Christ Healing the Lepers*