

Towards a Helpful Gospel Outline

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This article explores a range of biblical ways in which the gospel can be presented with the purpose of finding simple gospel outlines that are relevant for contemporary Aussies.

1. Different expressions of the gospel in Acts

In the book of Acts, the gospel of Jesus seems to be preached in different ways by the Apostles. The expression of the gospel seems to be dependent on the nature of the audience.

- *To astounded Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost.* Peter linked the powerful signs they were seeing with the promised outpouring of God's Spirit on all people. Then he focused on Jesus the promised Messiah – his miraculous ministry, his dreadful death and his powerful resurrection and rule, all in line with OT Scripture.
- *To the Jewish religious leaders.* Twice Peter was blunt with the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8-12; 5:29-32). No careful explanation of Scripture for them but a clear declaration that they could only be saved by Jesus whom they had personally rejected and crucified but whom God raised from the dead. Stephen extensively recounted the history of God and Israel and then condemned and challenged the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:2-53) by adding them to the long OT line of those who rejected God and his messengers and resisted the Holy Spirit, culminating with their murder of Jesus.
- *To an interested Jewish God-fearer.* Phillip was much gentler with the inquisitive Ethiopian (Acts 8:35). He explained the good news of Jesus from the Old Testament prophecies about him, especially as a suffering servant.
- *To interested Jews.* The newly converted Saul proved (from the OT) to the Jews in Damascus that Jesus was the Messiah they were waiting for (Acts 9:20-22). At the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41), Paul gave a brief rundown of God's grace to Israel culminating in the sending of the Saviour Jesus. He particularly focused on God's affirmation of Jesus through his resurrection and promised God's forgiveness of sins through Jesus.
- *To very open Gentile God-fearers.* When Peter was invited to speak to Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:34-43), he reminded them of the powerful ministry of Jesus and his death and resurrection. He assured them that everyone who believed in Jesus (not just Jews) would receive forgiveness.
- *To Greek philosophers.* When Paul preached to the Gentile intelligentsia at Athens (Acts 17:22-31), he said nothing about Israelite history and referred to Jesus as "the man" who God raised from the dead and who would judge the world. He built his main case around the creator God's heart for mankind and the need to repent to avoid his judgment.
- *To angry Jews in Jerusalem.* After being arrested in Jerusalem, Paul preached to the angry crowd (Acts 22:3-21). He shared his conversion testimony. How as a zealous Jew he had persecuted Jesus followers until he met the risen Jesus himself and was transformed, resulting in his call to evangelise the Gentiles.
- *To a Jewish/Roman king.* Paul defended himself before King Agrippa (Acts 26:2-29) by sharing his conversion testimony especially emphasising his vision of the risen Jesus, the prophecies about the Messiah's death and resurrection, and the call to repent.

We need to be careful about developing a doctrine of gospel expression from preaching in Acts. These presentations of the gospel are just examples of communicating with specific audiences. But here are my conclusions:

- The gospel revolves around Jesus – especially his death and resurrection.

- The background of the listeners needs to be taken into consideration in presenting the gospel.
- Different listeners will have different reasons for responding to the gospel.
- Not every aspect of the gospel needs to be mentioned in every gospel presentation.

2. Various expressions of the gospel in the New Testament

The New Testament outlines a range of gospel expressions. In this section, I will try to categorise various expressions of the gospel drawing on the whole of the New Testament.

Tim Keller (2012, *Center Church*, 39) says: “It is obvious that the various biblical writers express the gospel in significantly different ways.” So while there remains a basic gospel centring around the work of Christ, this gospel can be expressed in a range of ways.

To be able to contrast different expressions of the gospel, we need a common pattern. While it is an over-simplification, the simple pattern I will use consists of four components:

- GOD’S INTENTION: God’s original intention for his creation.
- COLLAPSE: Our rebellion and failure and its consequences.
- RESOLUTION: The work of Jesus in resolving our failure and its consequences.
- GOOD NEWS: The results of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus and his work.

Please note:

- I have contained myself to listing two New Testament Scriptures that pertain to each expression of the gospel. The biblical record says much more than this.
- With each expression of the gospel, I have added my guess as to the hearers who would be most receptive to this gospel expression. This is a work in progress. You will probably have better ideas.
- There is much overlap between these gospel expressions. Gospel expressions are like the Trinity – they are one but also different, there is both unity and diversity in these expressions of the gospel.
- As you grasp the concept of expressions of the gospel, I am sure you will be able to add further expressions to my list. As I hear back from pastors, I will add to the options.

THEME	1. Eternal Life
GOD’S INTENTION	God created us to live eternally with him.
COLLAPSE	Our rebellion and sin have alienated us from God. God must punish sin and so we face eternal death (separation from God).
RESOLUTION	Jesus died on the cross and took the punishment for sin that we deserved, so that we can be forgiven and set free from death.
GOOD NEWS	If we repent and trust in Jesus, we will be forgiven and put right with God through the sacrifice of Christ so that we have eternal life.
NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT	John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Rom. 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
MOST RECEPTIVE PEOPLE	1. Believe in God. 2. Are aware of Christian moral standards and their own failures. 3. Feel some guilt about this.

THEME	2. New Kingdom
GOD'S INTENTION	God created this world beautiful and good and intended us (as his image bearers) to rule his earthly kingdom, living well and worshipping him as the loving King, and living in harmony with each other and our world.
COLLAPSE	Our rebellion against God and his plan, destroyed relationship with our creator which then led to broken human relationships, a broken creation, and our enslavement to idolatry (worshipping the created in place of the creator).
RESOLUTION	Jesus came to establish a new kingdom in which we could live under God's loving rule. He taught us how his kingdom operates in love and died on the cross and rose again to secure his kingdom and change people's hearts so that they can again live in trusting relationship with their King and each other.
GOOD NEWS	God's kingdom is on the move. As we submit to Christ's rule, we become kingdom people through Jesus' death and resurrection. As representatives of Christ's rule, we reflect his heart and values (as seen in the Gospels), especially his concern for the oppressed. Finally, God will recreate our world and we will lovingly serve and rule the new earth/heaven with Christ as King.
NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT	Luke 4:18-19 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me [Jesus], because he has anointed me to preach good news [gospel] to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Matt. 24:14 "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."
MOST RECEPTIVE PEOPLE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are concerned about the brokenness of the world. 2. Have a heart for social issues and the environment. 3. Struggle for purpose in life and will respond to a challenging cause.

THEME	3. Spiritual Victory
GOD'S INTENTION	God created us to share the responsibility of ruling his world with love and goodness and power.
COLLAPSE	Under Satan's influence, we try to grasp this authority for ourselves and therefore join Satan and submit to him, rejecting God's rule and authority. The whole world suffers as evil powers rule.
RESOLUTION	Jesus came to this earth to re-establish his authority and kingdom on earth. This was evident in his supernatural ministry. Through his submission to death, he conquered the evil powers, and then he rose victoriously as the ultimate power.
GOOD NEWS	Through submitting to Jesus and experiencing the victory of his death/resurrection, we enter God's cosmic, powerful, eternal reign. We are set free from the power of sin. We join the battle against Satan and his powers, having access to all God's supernatural resources and being assured of our final victory.
NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT	Rom. 15:17-19 "Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done - by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." Eph. 6:12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."
MOST RECEPTIVE PEOPLE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are aware of the spiritual realm. 2. Have had spiritual experiences. 3. Recognise that evil has power over them; that they are trapped.

THEME	4. Adoption into God's Family
GOD'S INTENTION	God intended us, as his children, to live in a close, loving, trusting, dependent relationship with him forever.
COLLAPSE	We do not trust God. We assert our independence. We abandon his care. This breaks up the family and removes us from God and his guidance and protection.
RESOLUTION	Jesus died to reconcile us with our Dad and enable our adoption into God's family.
GOOD NEWS	Through believing and trusting Jesus and his work, our rebellion is forgiven and we are adopted into God's forever family.
NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT	Luke 15:20 "But while he (prodigal son) was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." Rom. 8:15 "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"
MOST RECEPTIVE PEOPLE	1. Feel lonely or isolated or insecure or abandoned. 2. Struggle to feel accepted or at peace. 3. Want to belong.

THEME	5. New Life and Hope
GOD'S INTENTION	God intended that we would live a wonderfully fulfilling and productive life as we governed the earth and enjoyed his presence.
COLLAPSE	Our rebellion has wrecked our lives and our world so that many things are broken and difficult and disappointing and hopeless.
RESOLUTION	By living on earth, Jesus identified with our struggle. Then he died and rose again victoriously to a glorious life in order that we can share the hope of his new life.
GOOD NEWS	As we give Jesus our lives, through his death and resurrection we receive new hope and purpose - a new quality of life with God that begins immediately.
NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT	John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I am come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Rom. 6:4 "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just a Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."
MOST RECEPTIVE PEOPLE	1. Find their life unfulfilling. Feel that life has not worked out the way they hoped. 2. Feel anxious or afraid or depressed or hopeless. 3. Are attracted by the quality of life they see in Christians.

THEME	6. Jesus as Lord
GOD'S INTENTION	God intended for us to live in loving dependence on and obedience to him as we served him.
COLLAPSE	We rejected God and his love, asserting our independence and arrogantly pleasing ourselves.
RESOLUTION	Jesus took our sin on the cross so that we can be forgiven for our arrogance and have our relationship with Jesus as Lord restored.
GOOD NEWS	As we repent of our pride and submit to Jesus, we find joy and fulfilment in loving obedience as God fills our heart and uses us to change our world.
NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT	Luke 9:23 "Then he [Jesus] said to them all: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.' Rom. 10:9 "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,'" and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."
MOST RECEPTIVE PEOPLE	1. Feel that they are doing fine and yet are not satisfied. 2. Want to invest in something costly and significant. 3. Are convinced that Jesus really is God.

3. The need to present the range of expressions of the gospel

The different expressions of the gospel frequently do not sit together in Scripture. The New Testament writers never seem to put all aspects of the gospel together in one passage. They tend to focus on different features at different times addressing different contexts.

We have seen evidence of this in the evangelistic preaching in Acts. Jesus too preached many different facets of the gospel. For example, at different times he spoke about the need to be born again (John 3:3), the centrality of miracles in preaching the gospel (Matt. 10:7-8), the importance of being ready for God's judgment (Matt. 25:1-13), and the basis of God's final judgment being our care of the needy (Matt. 25:31-46).

Tim Keller ("The Gospel in All Its Forms," *Leadership Journal*, 29/2, 2008) says that he does not try to integrate the various aspects of the gospel in his preaching. He finds that too difficult and without biblical precedent. Instead, he forges his gospel presentation to the needs and background of the listener. For example, materialistic moderns who try to find their identities in "self-creation and self-promotion" and who are struggling with the purpose of life need to hear about personal sin and God's grace through Jesus. Environment-conscious postmoderns need to know about the story-arc of the Bible that presents God's work to transform the whole of a broken and disintegrating world through Jesus. Spiritual New-agers need to see that belief in Jesus is not a dry, intellectual choice, but an engagement with a caring and powerful God who intervenes in our lives through the power and presence of Jesus. However, Keller points out that he does preach all aspects of the gospel over a period of time. This stretches the listeners but is essential for a true understanding of the whole gospel. See <https://www.acts29.com/tim-keller-explains-the-gospel/> for a fuller elaboration of Keller's argument.

We probably all try to do the same. I remember one particular outreach Sunday. I preached in the morning about the unconditional love of God and his offer of grace through Jesus' death and resurrection. I stressed that people didn't have to do anything but receive. In the evening, I spoke about Jesus' call to anyone who would follow him to take up their cross and sacrifice everything. I said that this was the only way to be a disciple of Jesus. I remember driving home that night thinking that those who had heard both sermons would think that I had completely contradicted myself. But both truths are biblical. Both belong to the gospel. Both need to be preached.

The truth of the gospel is best seen in the holistic truth incorporating all expressions. We need to be very careful that we don't reduce the gospel to our preferred expression but see it and live it and share it in all its breadth and beauty. The church is impoverished by a watered-down, narrowed gospel.

Another danger of narrowing our gospel to one expression is that there is an all-too-human tendency to diminish other expressions of the gospel and those who emphasise them. This produces conflict and the church then becomes divided over what is our foundational message – the gospel of Jesus.

4. The need for familiar gospel presentations

While we need to cover all expressions of the gospel to help develop holistic Christian faith, it is still helpful to have some main gospel presentations that are easy to remember and that we can teach to others. This is the gospel presentation(s) we will share at the end of a sermon when we want to explain to unbelievers how to become a Christian.

When I was growing up in the middle of the last century, the main gospel expression we used was the "Eternal Life" expression. It was used extensively during the Billy Graham era. It basically said that people are sinners and deserve God's punishment, that Jesus took God's punishment for our sin on the cross, and that through repenting and believing in Jesus we would receive eternal life. This

expression of the gospel was very appropriate for a time when most people had been to Sunday School and believed in God, knew vaguely that they were not doing what they should, and felt some residual guilt over this.

The problem is that this still tends to be my default expression of the gospel when I am under the pump. It is a valid expression of the gospel, but in a culture that generally has no idea of God's standards or sin or guilt, this expression of the gospel may not make a lot of sense to people. It is a biblical expression of the gospel as we have seen, but in our present cultural context for many people it may actually raise confusion and barriers to following Jesus.

So what should be our familiar gospel presentations? This depends on who we are trying to reach for Jesus. You will need to work this out for yourself, but here are a few thoughts:

1. The "New Kingdom" expression is appealing to many young people searching for a cause.
2. Successful middle/upper class people need to hear the "Jesus as Lord" expression.
3. For many hurting/disillusioned people (often the ones most likely to respond to the gospel), the New Life and Hope expression may be the most relevant and helpful.

Whichever expressions of the gospel you choose to use more frequently, make sure that you explain the gospel simply and attractively. The gospel should be good news for the receptive.

5. Examples

I will have a go at doing what I suggest you do. Here are some brief gospel outlines that could be used as appeals for listeners to become Christians. They are not particularly well written or persuasive. I'm sure you will do a better job. But I wanted to have a go as an example of what I am advocating. You will note that:

- They are written in parallel forms. This is not necessary of course but I thought it would be easier for you to compare them if I did this.
- They are not full biblical explanations of each expression of the gospel. They would follow a more extensive explanation of the gospel (especially concerning the role of Jesus).

1. Eternal life

"You know that you have rejected God and have chosen to live in disobedience and sin. You deserve God's punishment. But God loves you so much that he sent Jesus to take the punishment for you on the cross so that you can have eternal life. You need to say sorry to God for your rebellion and be forgiven so that you can live forever with him."

2. New kingdom

"You understand the brokenness of this world and wish that things could be better. This brokenness ultimately stems from our broken relationship with God. But all is not lost. Jesus established a new kingdom based on love and grace and justice and through his death and resurrection he calls you to join this kingdom. You need to admit your own brokenness, submit to Jesus, and join his mission to restore this world."

3. Spiritual victory

"You feel trapped by your brokenness and lack of ability to live in freedom and strength. Evil spiritual forces are dominating your life. Jesus broke the dominance of all evil through his death and resurrection and you too can know his authority and power and victory. You need to repent of your brokenness and powerlessness and submit to Jesus' authority and you will find freedom and triumph."

4. Adoption into God's family

"You realise that you don't belong to God's family. You have been trying to go it alone and it is really tough. God loves you and invites you to come home. Through the grace of Jesus and his work on the

cross you can today become part of God's family. You need to acknowledge that you have lived without God and ask him to adopt you. He wants to be your Dad and is waiting to welcome you home."

5. New life and hope

"You regret the way your life has turned out. You had such high hopes but you have experienced your share of difficulties and disappointments and have no real hope. It feels dark. But Jesus is the light of the world and through his death and resurrection, you can experience new life and hope. You need to turn away from your darkness, put your trust in Jesus, and receive his light. He offers you a new start – new purpose and hope and life."

6. Jesus as Lord

"You have found a lack of significance and satisfaction in all your effort and achievements. Nothing has filled the void in your life. That is because God designed you to love and serve him. Jesus died and rose again to establish his lordship over everything. He calls you to abandon your own agenda and let him love you and direct all your life, so that you become part of his work to serve and save the world. He has a significant purpose for you that will start today."

6. Conclusions

Here are my main conclusions:

1. Scripture expresses the gospel in different ways including the ways I have described.
2. Each one of these expressions of the gospel is important in recognising the truth and breadth of the gospel and needs to be included as the gospel is proclaimed.
3. It is not usually possible or desirable to share all expressions of the gospel equally well in one gospel presentation. People in the Bible did not seem to try.
4. While we need to be able to explain all expressions of the gospel, we need familiar expressions that we can express simply and attractively.
5. These familiar expressions of the gospel will depend on our context and the people we are mainly reaching for Jesus.