

## Deep Gospel must be Full Gospel – Reflections on Matthew’s Vision of Gospel Reality in the light of Jim Belcher’s call for “Deep Gospel”

Review Essay: Jim Belcher, *Deep Church. A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional*. Downers Grove, Ill.; IVP, 2009. “Deep Gospel”, pages 105-122.

By Larry J. Perkins, PhD

In the introduction to his book, Jim Belcher indicates that he borrowed the phrase “Deep Church” from C.S. Lewis who was engaging the debate between “high” and “low” segments of Anglicanism and was seeking a third term that would enable those in both camps who believed in supernatural revelation to unite around an alternative slogan. Lewis suggested the phrase “Deep Church” or, as he also suggested “mere Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> His slogan serves Belcher’s goal in establishing an alternative brand under which those committed to biblical Christianity, but not entirely happy with either “emerging” or “traditional” forms of Evangelicalism might find suitable residence. Belcher proposes the use of the phrase “Deep Gospel” to describe a “Gospel” that neither Emerging or Traditional forms of evangelicalism would necessarily embrace, but which nevertheless presents a more complete expression of biblical Christianity than either group currently proclaims, in other words a “full” or “complete” Gospel. This is an admirable goal within Belcher’s larger agenda. But does he achieve it?

First, we must ask whether we agree that both ends of this Gospel spectrum, i.e., Emerging and Traditional, are categorized correctly by Belcher. He argues that both Traditional and Emerging understandings of Jesus’ Gospel message “suffer from reductionism.”<sup>2</sup> In his view, the Emerging church wonders why the Traditional church has lost the vocabulary of “Kingdom” that is so central to Jesus’ message. According to Belcher, the Emerging Church movement popularized by Brian McLaren believes that from the time of the Reformation the doctrines of atonement and justification

---

<sup>1</sup> Jim Belcher, *Deep Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2009), 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> p.112.

have been emphasized to the exclusion of the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> Belcher sees the Traditional church centred on individual salvation, with justification, atonement and penal substitution being central focuses, i.e., a Pauline flavor, while paying little attention given to the social impact that Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom expects. The Traditional Gospel urges personal salvation because of sin and based upon Jesus' substitutionary, atoning death and resurrection.

The Emerging Gospel<sup>4</sup> embraces a gospel that has social/cultural impact. Belcher is concerned that the Gospel of the Emerging church conversely reduces the Gospel to social action, obedience and moral living. "Without the doctrine of atonement at the center of Christianity,...it is easy to abandon the King of the Kingdom."<sup>5</sup> Referring to Darrell Guder, he worries that historically, "the mainline no longer linked social action to the proclamation of the gospel."<sup>6</sup> This dispute within evangelicalism about the place of the Kingdom in gospel definition is rather surprising. Thirty years ago, no less a theologian than Carl Henry, in Thesis Fourteen of his six-volume theology entitled *God, Revelation and Authority*, argued that "The church approximates God's kingdom in miniature, mirroring to each generation the power and joy of the appropriated realities of divine revelation."<sup>7</sup> Concluding his chapter "Good News for the Oppressed" Henry says, "The Christian should know himself by spiritual birthright to be in the fallen world as a member of the already existing 'new community' which is not only called 'out of the world' but also dispersed through it as 'salt' and 'light.'... God's incarnation in Jesus Christ has in view the restoration of his fallen creation to its originally intended purpose."<sup>8</sup> Henry vigorously championed the message although it fell on deaf ears within the Evangelical constituency. This is significant because one would accuse Henry of embracing an Emerging church theology.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> p.109.

<sup>4</sup> The terms 'emerging' and 'emergent' have different connotations in this discussion. However, I would classify 'emergent' as a sub-category of 'emerging' church in the overall perspective.

<sup>5</sup> p.112.

<sup>6</sup> p.111.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority. Volume IV. God Who Speaks and Shows. Fifteen Theses. Part Three* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1979):542.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 553

<sup>9</sup> Of course, there are many factors that can produce "gospel reductionism." In one sense every believer suffers from this malady because we do not grasp completely all that Scripture teaches us about "the good news of the Kingdom."

Belcher paints with broad strokes, seeking to identify the key elements that fuel the dispute between the Emerging and Traditional church. His discussion echoes other debates – Jesus as Lord and Jesus as Saviour; personal salvation and social gospel; teaching of Jesus and teaching of Paul; Kingdom as present reality or future expectation. Focusing on one aspect of the Gospel message to the exclusion of other key elements tends to lead to a distorted and reduced Gospel and in some instances a non-Gospel, as Paul argued in Galatians 1. Also, the lack of integration between Kingdom teaching and the concept of justification as frequently portrayed in Paul’s writings, at least in North American contexts, has much to do with the legacy of Dispensationalism. Belcher fairly summarizes the “Gospel-reduction” tendencies in both groups, although he admits that exceptions exist in both camps.

Belcher’s general analysis and his plea for a “Deep Gospel” are sound. However, his presentation of the configurations of a “Deep Gospel” requires comment, first on minor issues and then on Belcher’s proposal, using Matthew’s vision of the Gospel as a grid.

## **Minor Issues**

### **Four Commitments**

Belcher affirms that “[f]or the deep church, the gospel is at the center of all we do – our worship, discipleship, community groups, mercy ministry and cultural renewal (seeking the shalom of the city).”<sup>10</sup> He then suggests that four commitments are necessary for the church to have a complete and transforming Gospel: Gospel – Community – Mission – Shalom. In presenting this, Belcher is responding to McLaren’s criticism that Traditional Evangelicalism has truncated the Gospel into “an individualistic theory, an abstraction with personal but not global import.”<sup>11</sup> Belcher’s responds by using the word “Gospel” to describe one part of God’s missional program in the world, thereby perpetuating the idea that the term only applies to the personal

---

Canadians have to be particularly careful of the WEIRD effect: “WEIRD” is an acronym for: Western, educated, industrialized, rich and, democratic societies. Immersion in a specific culture does shape influences perceptions of the Gospel.

<sup>10</sup> Belcher, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 108.

and private response of an individual to Jesus' offer of salvation. He would respond better to McLaren's challenge if he were to reserve the term "Gospel," i.e., "good news of the Kingdom," to define the entirety of God's eschatological program for the redemption of humanity and creation. This is what Paul did in Romans and what the nascent church sought to communicate by defining the first four books of the New Testament as "Gospels." Perhaps terms such as "initiation" or "righteous standing" or the older term "conversion" would suit better and explain more clearly what he desires to define as the first of his four proposed commitments.

### **"Grace ethics" combined with "Value ethics"**

Belcher contends that "without the daily, renewing grace of God, which comes from the cross and is applied to my life by the Holy Spirit" believers end up with a new legalism as people try to "pull this virtue ethic off on their own."<sup>12</sup> However, believers will only discern and sustain the appropriate relationship between "Grace ethics" and "Value ethics", to use Belcher's terms, if they set them within "the story of what God is doing to create a new heaven and new earth."<sup>13</sup> Without the narrative of God's covenant purpose initiated with Abraham and fulfilled in the life and death of his Messiah, it will be impossible or at least very difficult for believers to discern God's goals and values, perceive how their 'called-life-in-Christ' fits into his program, and effectively integrate "Grace ethics" and "Value ethics" into a robust framework of "Kingdom ethics."

N.T. Wright has got it right when he urges evangelicals to embrace "the framework of Paul's vision of God's single plan of salvation, through Israel and hence through Israel's Messiah, for the sake of all nations and ultimately the whole cosmos."<sup>14</sup> Wright's challenge to North American evangelicals, to revisit their ecclesiology and discern more carefully the role of the church in the Messiah's mission, is urgently needed for precisely this reason - many have lost sight of God's story and greater intention by focusing upon either "Grace ethics" or "Value ethics." A "Deep Gospel" will proclaim this full story which integrates God's promise to Abraham, the Messiah's atoning life,

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>14</sup> N.T. Wright, *Justification. God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2009),247.

death and resurrection, and evangelical engagement in the Messiah mission through justification by faith and the residence of the Holy Spirit, for purpose of including the nations in the people of God, just as Paul explained in Galatians and Romans, elucidating Jesus' Kingdom teaching.

### **The Challenge of Reductionism**

Belcher is properly concerned about the danger of "Gospel reductionism." The only protection from reduction of the Gospel to something less than God intended it to be is immersion in study of the whole of Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament. "Deep Gospel" requires a commitment to the authority of the whole Scripture as described by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. If God's person is to be "thoroughly equipped for every good work," then the "Deep Study" of Scripture is the fundamental path to follow in order to understand and communicate a "Deep Gospel." Coupled with this has to be a humble acceptance of the Scriptures' continuing critique of our traditions. Evangelicalism needs primarily a "humble orthodoxy," one that avoids falling into the Pharisees' failure, using one part of Scripture as a reason to void obedience to another part of that same Scripture (Matthew 15:1-20). The disciples were unable and unwilling to hear Jesus because they were so enmeshed in traditional Jewish theology that their hearts were hardened to what God was doing. If it happened to Peter and Paul or James and John, it can happen to evangelicals today. Some degree of Gospel reductionism may result from pastors' inability to interact well with the Hebrew and Greek biblical texts and wrestle directly with the interpretation of those texts. The constant pressures upon pastors' time with multiple duties may lessen the time or motivation to engage deeply in the study of God's word. One antidote to the danger of Gospel reductionism is an ever-maturing competence in hermeneutics that generates a robust, biblical, missional systematic theology. Another antidote would be churches so committed to "Deep Gospel" that they ensure their primary pastoral leaders can commit the time and effort necessary to preach and teach such a "Deep Gospel."

What must the church's presentation of Jesus' "good news" communicate if it is to be a deep, full Gospel? Matthew's presentation has been considered in the history of the church the most complete repository of Jesus' teaching and holds first place in the New Testament Canon. It written

about 40-50 years after the time of Jesus, sufficient time to reflect upon the decades of “good news” proclamation Jews and non-Jews.

## “Deep Gospel,” as Defined by Matthew’s Gospel Narrative

### Matthew Defines His Understanding of Gospel

Matthew defines his understanding of Gospel in all five of his discourse units, as well, as in his portrayal of Jesus’ entire mission, as fulfillment of God’s “righteousness,” i.e., his commitment to his covenant promises. Biblical theology discerned long ago that God reveals himself in word and deed. The incarnate Christ used the same modes to communicate τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας (“the good news of the Kingdom”) (Matthew 4:23), characterized as διδάσκων ... κηρύσσειν ... θεραπεύειν teaching...proclamation... healing”).

Matthew does not use the noun τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (“good news”) frequently (4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 26:13), but when he does, apart from 26:13, he defines it by the noun ἡ βασιλεῖα. The reference in 9:35 virtually repeats 4:23<sup>15</sup> as an editorial comment by the writer summarizing the methods of Jesus’ mission. These two references enclose the Sermon on the Mount and the cluster of miracles that follow (Matthew 4-9), thereby affirming that both his deeds and his words that comprise “the good news of the kingdom.” Only in Matthew is this term qualified directly by the noun ἡ βασιλεῖα,<sup>16</sup> perhaps indicating that in Matthew’s view the word “εὐαγγέλιον” is not sufficient in and of itself to refer technically to Jesus’ message and mission. Initially then, the “good news” focuses upon the renewed exercise of God’s rule in history expressed through Jesus’ words and deeds as defined in Matthew 4-9, and requiring a response of repentance.

In 24:14 Jesus prophesied that κηρυχθήσεται τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ (“this good news of the kingdom shall be proclaimed in the whole inhabited world”), despite the opposition that

---

<sup>15</sup> Matthew inserts these references in his own summaries, thus indicating that he is purposeful in his use of this phrase to define the content of Jesus’ message and mission.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed examination of Matthew’s use of Kingdom language see Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), especially chapter 12. He also argues that the concept of βασιλεία in Jesus’ teaching finds its referential setting in the book of Daniel.

arises to eliminate this witness. Jesus made a similar statement in 26:13 (ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὅπου ἐὰν κηρυχθῆ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦτο ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ (“truly I say to you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world”). What is unusual is Jesus’ use of the demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο (this) to define “the gospel of the kingdom” (cf. Mark 13:10 τὸ εὐαγγέλιον; Luke has no equivalent) in these two contexts. In both cases, Matthew reads the demonstrative pronoun in distinction from the Markan parallels (Mark 13:10; 14:9). Nolland argues that the pronoun locates this proclamation in the post-resurrection mission of the disciples, but identifies this “good news” with that which Jesus himself proclaimed and demonstrated.<sup>17</sup> If Matthew intends his gospel narrative to be read as the post-resurrection proclamation of the church, and because this expression occurs in the last discourse (23/24-25) which focuses on the significance of Jesus’ death, resurrection and return, for Matthew “this good news” includes the entire scope of the Messiah’s ministry, from beginning to end, i.e., eternity, and thus has an eschatological dimension.

τὸ εὐαγγέλιον for Matthew has its locus in “Kingdom theology” which comprises the entire mission of Jesus Messiah. God is doing a new thing in fulfillment of previous promises, defined in the Jewish Scriptures. This is the “good news of the kingdom.” Humans must respond to Jesus’ teaching, proclamation and miraculous activities with repentance and “obedient following,” even at the risk of death. For this reason Jesus’ followers will “proclaim” it, will “teach” its significance, and will demonstrate its power in miraculous ways. Matthew expects the same loyalty that pious Jews gave to the Law and its practices in the Second Temple period in the face of foreign opposition. Part of the “good news” is that Jesus is “Lord” and he will judge all humans in accord with their deeds (Matthew 7:13-27; 16:27). The wise will hear and respond to his divine word, by constructing the rest of their lives in accord with his teaching.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew. The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 1055.

<sup>18</sup> Another question to consider is the way in which Matthew 28:19-20 define “this gospel of the Kingdom” as a post-resurrection proclamation and activity.

## Matthew Locates the Significance of Jesus' Death Within the Larger Purposes of God's Covenant with Israel

The reign of God only finds expression in redemption as God remains faithful to his covenant promises, now affirmed in and brought to completion in the life, death and resurrection of the Messiah. In Matthew's presentation of "the good news of the Kingdom," Jesus initially is presented as the Messiah who σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν ("will save his people from their sins" 1:21) and who comes as Ἐμμανουήλ (a name meaning "God with us"), just as Isaiah had prophesied (Isa. 7:14; 8:8, 10). This epithet expresses his mission and his status. At his baptism Jesus declares that his baptism is a God-ordained action because πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην ("it is necessary for us to bring to completion/fulfillment all righteousness"; 3:15). Presumably the "us" includes John and Jesus as they carry out the roles assigned to them in God's plan. The many references to the Jewish Scriptures in Matthew's Gospel and their "fulfillment" in the various aspects of Jesus' life and ministry connects his mission integrally with God's faithful response to his covenant with Abraham and thus his determination to act "in the right" or justly.

Jesus' "good news" in Matthew's narrative locates itself completely within the framework of God's prior promises to Israel. The consistent call by Jesus for Jewish people to repent and seek forgiveness for sins underlines their failure to live obediently to the Mosaic covenant (especially as articulated in Deuteronomy 30-31) such that "all the families of the earth would be blessed" (Genesis 12,15,18). In the initial genealogy, Matthew begins the story of Jesus with Abraham. Jesus is Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαβὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ ("of the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham"), a setting we cannot ignore and still be able to grasp the essence of "the good news" centred in and brought by Jesus. In the seventh woe that Jesus pronounced against the Jewish religious leaders, he reminds them of the murderous actions their ancestors took against προφῆτας καὶ σοφοὺς καὶ γραμματεῖς ("prophets and wise people and scribes"; Matthew 23:34), rejecting God's message, even to the point of killing Zacharios ben Barachios μεταξύ τοῦ ναοῦ καὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ("between the sanctuary and the altar"; Matthew 23:35). The result of this rebellious response is that Israel's house is left to them ἔρημος ("desolate";

Matthew 23:38, probably a reference to Jeremiah's oracle against the temple recorded in Jeremiah 7). Jesus is ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου ("the one who comes in the name of the Lord": Matthew 23:39; cf. Psalm 118:26), to fill the role that Israel failed to fulfill and present a renewed opportunity, a new covenant within which Jew and non-Jew would be able to serve as God's people and enjoy the blessings promised to the nations in God's covenant to Abraham. This is the meaning of Jesus' concluding statement in the Parable of the Tenant Farmers (Matthew 21:33-43):

ἀφθήσεται ἀφ' ὑμῶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ δοθήσεται ἔθνει  
ποιοῦντι τοὺς καρπούς αὐτῆς.<sup>19</sup>

Matthew makes very clear the historical roots of "the good news" in God's dealings with Israel. However, he also emphasizes the other terminus on the salvation continuum, namely the return of Jesus and the consummation of God's plans. This eschatological dimension of "the good news," stretching from Abraham to the second coming of the Messiah, has to form part of the warp and woof of τὸ εὐαγγέλιον that churches proclaim, lest it be deficient and thus distorted. Matthew's eschatology finds expression in various contexts:

8:11 - peoples from all over the world will enjoy the benefits of God's covenant "in the Kingdom of heaven."

19:28 - Jesus announces a παλιγγενεσία ("renewal") when "the son of man shall sit upon his glorious throne," and his followers will join in him in governing the "the twelve tribes of Israel."

28:19-20 - Jesus affirms that there will be ἡ συντελεία τοῦ αἰῶνος ("the end of the age," cf. 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3). In his explanation of the Parable of the Weeds Jesus used this terminology twice, as well as once in the Parable of the Net of Fishes. His appearance at "the end of the age" will be markedly different from his current incarnation.

---

<sup>19</sup> ESV: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people [nation?; cf. Exodus 19:5-6] producing its fruits."

Matthew's concept of Jesus' "good news" is thoroughly eschatological. To proclaim "good news" that claims to represent Jesus' message, but to strip it of these significant salvation history and eschatological dimensions, inevitably results in a deficient Gospel.

### **The Focus of the "Good News"**

Jesus' "Good News" focuses on one primary outcome, the establishment of the Messianic Assembly (16:18). Personal and corporate elements of Kingdom theology, as well as the Messiah's death and resurrection, find coherence in this messianic, missional priority. The previous section considered Matthew's perspective on the past and future aspects of "the good news." This section considers how Matthew defines the implications of "the good news" for the present time, the in-between time.

Matthew incorporates two commissions into his narrative. In the first commission, Jesus sends the twelve apostles throughout Israel to proclaim ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ("the kingdom of heaven has come near/arrived"; 10:7) and with full authority to "heal sick people, raise dead people, cleanse leprous people, cast out demons." The structure of his command mirrors that found in 28:19:

10:7 πορεύεσθε δὲ μᾶλλον πρὸς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραὴλ...πορευόμενοι δὲ...κηρύσσετε ("go rather to the lost sheep of Israel's house...and as you go...proclaim")

28:19 πορευθέντες...μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη...βαπτίζοντες...διδάσκοντες ("as you go... make all nations disciples...baptizing,...teaching")

In the first commission, Jesus empowers his twelve apostles to summon Israel, through proclamation in word and deed, to respond to the Messiah's presence and mission. As they go, they replicate the ministry of the Messiah - proclamation and healing. In the second commission, Jesus empowers his eleven disciples to multiply themselves as disciples, using baptism and teaching as the primary means to incorporate all nations into the people of God. These commissions have different purposes because they occur at

different stages in God’s program, separated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Messiah, with all of its implications.<sup>20</sup>

These commissions indicate that Jesus’ mission extended beyond his personal, human experience and had as its central objective the development of a group of disciples who lived in obedience to his values, purposes, and ethics. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told Peter his primary intent: οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν (“I will build my assembly”). The foundations for this new assembly are the very person of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. Humans who put confidence in the claims and promises of God will become part of this re-visioned assembly. The term “assembly” rather than “church” is used to keep focus on the fact that Jesus’ purpose is the creation of the Messiah’s people.

Many scholars argue that Jesus would not and did not use this term ἐκκλησία (whether in Aramaic or Greek form). This discloses a failure to note its significant usage in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Beginning with Greek Deuteronomy, critical texts describe the congregation of Israel as ἡ ἐκκλησία κυρίου (“the assembly of Yahweh”; 23:1, 2, 3, 8), which has very clear boundaries. The entire “assembly of Israel” receives the Song of Moses (31:30). Psalm 88(89):6 refers to ἡ ἐκκλησία τῶν ἁγίων (“the assembly of the holy ones”) which may describe the heavenly assembly but, according to Psalm 149:1, God’s praise is ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ὁσίων (“in an assembly of the devout”). Many similar examples could be cited, particularly from the Greek translation of Chronicles. In the Old Testament, the assembly of God’s people based upon his covenant is his ἐκκλησία and his Messiah comes to re-vision and re-create the assembly of those who are loyal to God and his Messiah. As a term, it was frequently used to describe the covenant community of Israel. When Jesus used this term to define the core outcome of his mission, he was making “ecclesiology” central to his purpose.

A “Deep Gospel,” if it is to be consistent with the emphasis of Jesus and subsequently Matthew’s narrative, should similarly have this vision of the Messianic assembly (μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν) as a primary frame of reference. Note the emphatic position of the possessive pronoun “my.” In other words, the “good news” is that the Messiah has determined to complete God’s

---

<sup>20</sup> Note the different ways in which Jesus orders these respective commissions to be completed.

covenant promise to Abraham. As Paul argues in Galatians 3:25-29, through Jesus' life, death and resurrection all who put faith in Jesus Messiah can claim to be "sons of Abraham." The message cannot have an individualistic focus that fails to celebrate the new community into which a new believer enters through baptism, or ignores Jesus' emphasis that commitment to him results in commitment to his assembly, as difficult and challenging as this might be.<sup>21</sup> Through this new assembly, the Messiah by means of his resident Spirit implements his Kingdom program within history. "The good news" is that human beings can be part of this assembly. According to Revelation 7:9, it will become so great that it cannot be numbered as it stands before God's throne and the Lamb. This assembly's form and essence as defined by Jesus must govern its contemporary functions and structures.

A "gospel" devoid of this 'ecclesial' dimension or only tangentially related to it comes very close to being a non-gospel, i.e., a failed expression of Jesus' good news. Jesus himself claims that his assembly will overpower the very gates of Hades, i.e., death itself and all the powers associated with it. In his chapter on "Deep Ecclesiology," Belcher focuses primarily on issues of structure, leadership and worship and how current models reflect biblical principles and/or tradition. Unless the understanding of the "Messianic Assembly" that Jesus articulates as part of his "good news of the kingdom," is recovered, churches will not succeed in forming "Deep Ecclesiology."<sup>22</sup>

### **The Mission of the Messianic Community**

The foundation of the Messianic Community is the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus, with the subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit, but the mission of this community is to be a living, prophetic challenge to all peoples to embrace the wisdom of God as expressed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In his chapter entitled "Deep Gospel" Belcher refers to the work of Hans Boersma who "is trying to find a way to safeguard the doctrine of penal atonement while rooting it deeply in the message of the kingdom."<sup>23</sup> This is the direction churches must take. Paul was not being heretical in his

---

<sup>21</sup> Paul's celebration of the Messiah's assembly reaches astonishing levels in Ephesians 5:24-33.

<sup>22</sup> In saying this I do not dispute the need for the organism of the Kingdom body to have appropriate organization.

<sup>23</sup> Belcher, *Deep Church*, 116-117. Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

theological understanding of the significance of Jesus' death and use of language that describes the atonement as substitutionary, and in some sense penal, as well as demonstrating the victory of God over sin, death and hell, and giving opportunity for reconciliation. This was not a substantive and fundamental remake of Christianity on Paul's terms, in response to which the written Gospels are a necessary corrective. As Paul argues in Galatians 2, the "pillars of the church," i.e., Peter, James and John, agree with his presentation of "the good news." Similarly, in Luke-Acts we sense no discrepancy between "the good news" Jesus announces and the message Peter and Paul proclaim. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 and Romans 1:1, 3 & 5 fundamentally connect Paul's presentation and the "good news" of Jesus, or Peter's rehearsal of "the good news" in his proclamation to Cornelius in Acts 10:34-43 and its relationship to the content of the written Gospels. Scot McKnight proposes that "what unifies Jesus and Paul [is] that both witness to Jesus as the center of God's story."<sup>24</sup> This is the correct, biblical perspective to take.

What does Jesus in Matthew's narrative say about his role in "the good news?" First, he is the primary means through which God is completing Israel's story. Whether the trajectory of God's salvation is followed backwards or forwards, Jesus sits at the very centre of the enterprise. Beyond Matthew's post-resurrection claim, this is the very essence of Jesus' message. Jesus' response to John the Baptist in Matthew 11 ends with his remarkable confession that only through Jesus can humans τὸν πατέρα ... ἐπιγινώσκει ("know/acknowledge...the father") and that this "unveiling" of the father comes at the discretion of the son (11:27). Only Jesus can provide true "rest." Jesus' declares in response to Peter's confession that he is Messiah and he claims that it is "my assembly" that will confound Hades itself (16:18). In the ending to the Parable of the Tenant Farmers (21:33-44), Jesus proclaims that he is the "cornerstone" (cf. Psalm 118:22-23) and in v. 44, warns that personal devastation comes to those who reject this "stone" that God has set to be the foundation for his new temple, built upon the living stone and composed of living stones. Jesus' explain his death to his disciples in 26:28 as τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμα μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν ("for this is the blood of my covenant [or "my blood of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Scot McKnight, "Jesus vs. Paul," *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/december/9.25.html>

covenant”] poured out for many for forgiveness of sins”). These words of Jesus in the context of his Passion remind us of Passover definitions in Exodus 12-13 and covenant-making in Exodus 24, define the reason for his death, and explain what happens as a result, “a covenant” based in the Messiah’s blood (cf. 20:28 δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν (“to give his life a ransom for many”). In some significant sense, all this “fulfills all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15) and results in his ability to σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν (“he will save his people from their sins,” Matthew 1:21) because he is Ἐμμανουήλ (“God with us”).

Matthew does not explain how precisely the sacrifice of Jesus’ blood “ransoms” repentant humans. Nor does he define how the sacrifice of Jesus operates within the framework of Jewish jurisprudence to produce “righteous status” for repentant Jesus followers. If humans require a δικαιοσύνη “righteous status” that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20), how is this status achieved in Jesus Messiah? The language of covenant used by Jesus in the context of the Last Supper provides the fundamental explanation. Paul teases out the specific linkages and defines them more precisely, particularly in Romans 3-8. He demonstrates that the “good news” is indeed δύναμις...τοῦ θεοῦ...εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι (“power...of God...unto salvation for everyone who exercises faith,” Romans 1:16).

## Conclusion

In *Deep Church*, Jim Belcher seeks to discern the significant, biblically consistent values expressed in both traditional and emerging church visions, proposing “a third way” to use his terminology. He calls evangelicals to deep and fierce conversations with God’s Word, with church traditions, with culture, with our Christian callings, to discern an understanding of ecclesial life that, echoing Carl Henry’s words, “approximates God’s kingdom in miniature” because it is fully committed to our Messiah’s vision for an assembly empowered to destroy hell itself. Reforming churches into this Messianic shape will require a truly “deep Gospel” as well as “deep Spirit.” The Spirit inspired the entire Scriptures and communicated this comprehensive “deep Gospel.” This same Spirit resides within each Jesus follower to provide the heart and capacity to be kingdom agents and to form

kingdom communities based upon Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. The "good news" churches proclaim must communicate this rich eschatological and ecclesiological framework which Jesus himself set and which Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and the writer of Hebrews collectively articulated under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Larry J. Perkins is Professor Emeritus in Biblical Studies and President Emeritus of Northwest Baptist Seminary. He has been teaching for forty years in Greek language, biblical studies, Septuagint Studies, and Leadership at masters and doctoral level. He is the author of *The Pastoral Letters. A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Text, 2017) and *The Art of Kubernēsis (1 Corinthians 12:28): Leading as the Church Board Chairperson*. He also contributed *Exodus*, in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under that Title*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin Wright (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Author copyright.

Larry J. Perkins, review essay of *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional*, by Jim Belcher, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. [www.nimer.ca](http://www.nimer.ca), (November 15, 2021). Peer Reviewed.