

# GOSPEL LITERACY, EVANGELISM, AND THE AVERAGE BELIEVERS

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*This paper evaluates claims made by Timothy Keller (Center Church) regarding the role of every believer as ‘evangelist.’ Early Church leaders focused upon developing ‘gospel literacy’ among Jesus followers so that they understood the content of the gospel, and could contribute significantly to building robust Kingdom communities, not to equip them to be ‘evangelists.’ Believers validated the power of the gospel by transformed ‘living-in-community.’ Specific, gifted and trained Christians filled the role of ‘evangelist,’ publicly proclaiming the gospel in formal and informal settings. Local churches should recover this role of ‘evangelist,’ equipping gifted individuals for this significant function. Generally speaking, Jesus followers were ‘witnesses,’ but this role was quite informal, even when it occurred in legal settings.*

Significant discussion continues to occur regarding the definition of the “gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller’s book, *Center Church*, devotes its first several chapters essentially to defining “gospel.”<sup>2</sup> At first it seems surprising that 2000 years after Jesus, Christianity continues to debate the question. Surely Christian leaders would have sorted out this most significant and essential issue centuries earlier.

The issues discussed in this paper focus on a second question, namely, if Christian leaders and scholars struggle to define “gospel,” what is the case with the majority of Christians? What responsibility does a local church and its leaders have to equip Jesus followers<sup>3</sup> with gospel literacy? If gospel literacy is addressed well, what does this do for the church or the individual believer? Conversely, if it is ignored, what harm ensues? Perhaps, more fundamentally, does the New Testament (NT) itself define “gospel literacy” or demonstrate how leaders might develop and nurture it within local churches? Keller discusses these questions, primarily in chapter 21, entitled “Equipping People for Missional Living.”<sup>4</sup> To paraphrase Keller’s view, developing and sustaining gospel literacy in a local church requires

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<sup>1</sup> The author presented the substance of this article at the “Centering Gospel” Conference sponsored by Northwest Baptist Seminary, February 8, 2014. The paper has been revised for this article.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “Jesus follower” describes a modern disciple of Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-90.

pastoral leaders who themselves understand the good news and its appropriate contextualization, as well as equipped lay leaders of both genders.

The thesis of this article is simple: when church leaders generate gospel literacy among Jesus followers, the mission of Jesus Christ advances and the opportunity for demonstrating Kingdom reality becomes possible. Conversely, when they neglect gospel literacy, the church becomes weak and anemic, resulting in defective evangelism. Responding to three questions will help to unpack this proposition:

1. How should the “gospel” presented by the apostolic witnesses be defined and why do Jesus followers need to possess “gospel literacy”?
2. How should “gospel literacy” be defined, and why is it important to develop this competence within the local church?
3. How can Christian leaders in local churches equip believers with gospel literacy and thus advance the church’s mission?

To develop appropriate responses to these questions, this paper will:

- a. assemble NT data, evaluate it, and apply it to the twenty-first century context;
- b. interact with Keller’s perspective in *Center Church*;
- c. reflect to some degree upon the specific Canadian church and its context;
- d. and discern strategies to advance gospel literacy within a local church today.

Defining “gospel” and “gospel literacy” involves the basic issues that characterize the mission of God and the essential nature of discipleship – enabling people to become obedient, fruitful Jesus followers collectively and individually.

### **Defining “Gospel”**

Keller devotes chapter 1, “The Gospel is Not Everything,” to answering the first question, namely, how should the “gospel” presented by the apostolic witnesses be defined and why do Jesus followers need to possess “gospel literacy”? He claims that “the gospel is a message about how we have been rescued from peril...a news report about some life-altering event that has already happened.”<sup>5</sup> A few pages later, based on Gathercole’s argument, Keller writes that Paul and the gospel writers considered “the good news to have three basic elements: the identity of Jesus Son of

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<sup>5</sup> Keller, 29.

God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus took three years to educate the Twelve about his “good news” or gospel (*euaggelion* εὐαγγέλιον) (Mark 1:15) and his work was not completed until the end of forty days after his resurrection and before Pentecost. It is important to remember that all of this took place within a Jewish frame of reference.

Defining “gospel” requires two steps. First, what did the term “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον *euaggelion*) mean in the first century Roman context as the Christian community emerged? Usage indicates it originally referred to the reward given to messengers of good news (as in OG 2 Kings 4:10; 18:22) and then comes to refer to the reports themselves. Usually it references significant events such as birth of rulers or their enthronement, and military victories. The birth of the god [reference to Augustus in the Priene inscription] is described as *euaggelion*. The cognate verb occurs in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (OT) (see particularly Isa. 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1) to describe news about prophesied actions of Yahweh. It is in this sense that Mark’s Gospel begins with the phrase “origin of the good report about Jesus Messiah, Son of God” (Mk. 1:1). The use of this term in Christian discourse goes back to Jesus himself. Its choice indicates the serious and significant nature of his arrival and his mission.

Second, what content does the term “gospel” reference? In some sense the announcement about the “Kingdom of God” is central to Jesus’ use of this term. The four canonical Gospels lay out through story, teaching and comment, in the form of carefully developed documentaries, how the early church in the middle of the first century was understanding the essence of the “good news” about Yahweh’s activities expressed in the person of Jesus and proclaimed by him in word and deed. Their production about 30-40 years after the resurrection of Jesus indicates that defining this “good news” from God carefully and completely had become an important desideratum for the developing church and its mission, particularly considering that false teaching was increasing and apostolic witnesses were dying.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 33. Simon Gathercole, “The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom,” in *God’s Power to Save*, ed. Chris Green (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006): 138-54.

<sup>7</sup> The introduction to Luke’s Gospel (1:1-4) focuses upon the accuracy of the things taught in this narrative. The writer uses the expression ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρεταὶ γινόμενοι τοῦ λόγου (“those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and servants of the message” delivered to us). This group has double responsibility as early witnesses who became “servants of the message.” Presumably this is a reference to apostolic witnesses primarily and their proclamations. Their witness gives Theophilus, the person for whom Luke composes his Gospel, assurance regarding the things he has been taught.

C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament Volume 1* (Peabody, MASS.: Hendrickson Pub., 1994), 235, defines αὐτόπται as “a spectator who sees with his own eyes.” Here it refers to “a qualified witness who personally affirms both that which he has seen and his conviction, thus making certainty possible.” They guarantee the

Such challenges to the essence of the gospel become the focus of later NT documents such as the Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude.

In the first 25 years of the early church, defining and preserving the “good news” were critical issues propelling the church’s mission to the nations. The voices of the apostles, including the voice of Paul, were instrumental in this debate. Acts 2, 10, 13, 15 provide significant statements, incorporated by Luke, that define the early perspectives of the church about this issue. Paul’s letter to the Galatians (2:1-10) summarizes the results of these early discussions. Paul and the “pillars” in Jerusalem agreed about the essence of this good news. Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians expresses a fuller and more detailed understanding (cf. Rom. 1:16-17). The letter of 1 Peter presents another complementary perspective.

In the 60s, 70s, and 80s of the first century, deviations from this “good news” arose, as the General Epistles make clear. While earlier examples of this debate occur (e.g., Gal. 5:4 “becoming alienated from Messiah” and “falling from grace”), the activity of false teachers (predicted by Paul in Acts 20:29-30) seems to escalate with tragic consequences as people “drive their ship of faith onto the shoals of false teaching” (1 Tim. 1:19). At the heart of such disputes is the question of the gospel’s content and how people who assume the mantle of teaching are distorting this good news by adding to it or subtracting from it.

Numerous times Paul uses the term “my gospel” (Rom. 2:16; 16:25) or “our gospel” (1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3; 2 Tim. 4:8). According to Moo, in Rom. 2:16 “my gospel...does not mean a particular form of teaching peculiar to him, but the gospel, common to all Christians, which has been entrusted by God to Paul for its preservation and proclamation.”<sup>8</sup> While Moo’s statement is correct in general, the sense of defensiveness with which Paul uses this expression with this pronoun cannot be eliminated, whether first person singular or plural. In almost every Pauline letter in the NT, there is definition of the gospel, indicating Paul’s perception that he needed continually to promote gospel literacy among his audience, so that there would be coherence among house churches as to the essence of “my gospel.” Proclaiming the good news is central to Jesus’ role and subsequently the role of the apostles as Jesus’ authorized delegates. Soon other key, early Christian leaders such as Stephen and Philip get involved.

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truth of the gospel because they participated in the event. Josephus, *C. Apion* 1.55 (cf. *War* 3.432) uses this term. The writer of Luke’s Gospel references common historiographical hermeneutics employed by Herodotus, Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Diodorus Siculus, and Josephus.

Paul uses ὑπηρέτης in 1 Corinthians 4:1 when he describes himself and his fellow-workers as ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ καὶ οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ (as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed (NIV)). See also its usage in Acts 26:16 to refer to apostles.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans NICNT* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1996), 154.

What did the NT writers regard as central and essential to the content of the good news, elements without which it no longer remains “good news?” Three times Paul used the expression “according to my gospel” (κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8), which resonates with the similar expression employed in the later titles to the narrative Gospels, i.e., “the Gospel according to Matthew (εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Μαθθαῖον).”

Paul provides several summaries of “his gospel” and his last in the canonical materials occurs in 2 Tim. 1:9-10, an expression of the “testimony of/concerning our Lord” (2 Tim. 1:8). Paul includes the following key elements.

- God saved us.
- God called us with a holy calling.
- God did this not in accordance with our works, but in accordance with his own plan and grace.
- This grace or favourable response began in the Messiah Jesus before Creation.
- This grace or favourable response has become public knowledge through the appearance of our Saviour, Messiah Jesus (implying that while God knew this plan, humans did not until he revealed it).
- Messiah Jesus destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light *through the good news*.

Each of the clauses in 2 Tim. 1:9-10 needs to be unpacked so that the full scope of this good news can be appreciated. Paul articulates additional elements central to this good news in Tit. 3:4-7.

Keller identifies the three major themes of the gospel, namely, the identity of Jesus as Messiah (and Son of God), the death of Jesus in some way related to sin and for justification (expressed as “salvation”), and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation (death and life language in accord with God’s plan). Additional elements would include the theme of “holy calling” with its ethical implications, as well as the need for the deity to reveal his plans, in order for this information to have any usefulness to humans. He articulates the necessary role of the Holy Spirit in the implementation of these plans. What Paul assumes in these definitions is the “telos” of this divine activity, namely the creation of the people of God.

Generally, the “good news” incorporates the themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration, i.e., the mission of God centred in Jesus Messiah and fulfilling various covenant promises expressed in the Jewish scriptures. Additional emphases discernible in other NT writers include the following.

- Jesus is Son of God, being both human and divine (1 John).
- Entering God’s Kingdom is entering life, based upon the covenant Jesus has established “in his blood” (Gospels; Mark 14).
- Jesus Christ embodies in his life and mission the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham (Gal. 3-4).
- The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus fully aligns with God’s purposes as revealed in the Jewish scriptures (1 Cor. 15).
- Spiritual salvation occurs solely through God’s gracious intervention and results in eschatological transformation - moving people into the realm of grace (Rom. 5, 8; Eph. 2:8-10).
- The result of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension is the emergence of a newly defined people of God who receive sprinkling of blood and live in obedience (1 Pet. 2:9-10).
- When people ignore this good news and reject God’s overtures, the outcome is divine judgment (1 Pet. 4:17-18).

In both Jesus’ teaching (Mark 4:10-12) and that of Paul’s (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3-4; 6:19; Col. 1:26-27; 4:3), the term *euaggelion* (εὐαγγέλιον) is linked with the concept of “mystery,” a term used in apocalyptic theology and literature (as in the two editions of the Greek translation of Daniel). This term sets the “good news” in the context of God’s eternal plans (salvation history) initially revealed in the OT. The term implies that this “good news” is a divinely ordered revelation consistent with its prophetic character (eschatological dimensions) and sets it within the larger conflict that deity engages with Satan and his hostile evil design to thwart the deity’s plans. For Jesus to be at the centre both of its production/execution and proclamation requires that he be a divine figure appropriate in all ways to the scope of God’s cosmic initiative.<sup>9</sup>

Developing gospel literacy among modern Jesus followers entails that Christian leaders teach these ideas to them. With understanding comes the opportunity and capacity to begin demonstrating Kingdom reality in the way Christians live individually and collectively. Gospel literacy enables the church to validate its claims about the transforming power of the gospel in the way it lives as a Kingdom community.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Paul expresses these ideas about Jesus in Col. 1:15-20.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term “Kingdom community” instead of “church,” because the term “church” no longer communicates well the vision Jesus communicates about his purpose.

## Defining “Gospel Literacy”

The term “gospel” frames the nature of Christian experience, both personal and corporate. With the appropriate human response, coupled with the work of the Holy Spirit, it generates faith communities, based upon personal, ethical transformation of humans. If the description of the gospel expressed by Paul in 1 Tim. 1:9-10 and Tit. 3:4-7 defines essentially this “good news of God” in Jesus Messiah, then what does the development of gospel literacy require? What is “literacy” and when applied to “the good news,” what does literacy entail?

A simple definition of “gospel literacy” might be:

knowing the content of the “good news” and being able to enrich this understanding by means of self-directed study of the OT and NT to discern God’s purpose more clearly.

However, gospel literacy is more than knowing. It is knowing with purpose, that is, to have the capacity to integrate gospel-informed, Christ-centred principles in all of life. Therefore, gospel literacy might be defined *as motivating people and developing their capacity to define and articulate the essential elements of the “good news” in a manner consistent with biblical truth, and with sufficient understanding to apply that meaning to their lives in order to develop robust Kingdom communities.* As a result, they express to other people the essence of the “good news” through speech and actions.

The gospel, quickly reviewed above, entails “three basic elements: the identity of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation,” reflecting Keller’s definition. The goal in developing gospel literacy is to enable people to be fluent with these elements, to be knowledgeable about where they find expression in the OT and NT, and to have the ability through personal study of the Bible to initiate serious contextualization of these principles in their network of relationships and in their personal decisions. The Holy Spirit, of course, is presumed to be active in these people and in their comprehension of this Christian paideia and worldview. As the mental maps of believers become transformed (Romans 12:1-2) and they grasp something of the grandeur of the *missio Dei*, they begin to form robust Kingdom communities displaying the kind of human living that God originally intended for his people.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In Peter’s formal, public proclamation of the news of God about Jesus at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43), Luke gives an outline of the historical actions of John the Baptist and Jesus, i.e., the core events that generate this “good news.” It should come as no surprise that Mark’s Gospel reflects this outline. Because precisely what Peter said

Among the many questions that deserve consideration, three will be engaged.

1. What does the NT have to say about gospel literacy as a value, a goal, and a function within the life of local Kingdom communities? Who actually “proclaims the gospel” in the NT churches?
2. Given that generously 15 percent of the population in the first century CE formally was literate<sup>12</sup>, what expectations would the apostles, evangelists and other church leaders have for the development of gospel literacy among early believers?
3. Because today’s standards of literacy are much higher, people can access the complete canon of scripture, and they have the literary ability to interact directly with the scriptures and process what they read.<sup>13</sup> How does this change the congregational dynamics and expectations related to gospel “literacy” and “personal evangelism”?

*NT examples of those who “proclaim the gospel”*

Paul claims that God “entrusted him with the gospel” (Gal. 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:11; Titus 1:3 (ἐν κηρύγματι “with the proclamation”). Is this declaration something that every disciple can and should be making or was this a function of Paul’s apostolic role? The data shows that in Paul’s perspective, God’s appointment of him as his authoritative representative, i.e., apostle, results in this divine entrustment with the gospel. Paul also recognizes the particular role of “the evangelist” (τοὺς εὐαγγελιστάς Eph. 4:11; cf. Acts 21:8 where Philip is described as “the evangelist” and 2 Tim. 4:5 where Paul enjoins Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist”).<sup>14</sup>

Some denominations do not identify apostles or evangelists as formal roles in their congregational leadership structures. In such cases, these roles, as they may continue to function in the church, are bundled together with general pastoral

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on that occasion is not known (the author of Acts may have shaped the speech in various ways), it is difficult to assert that the Markan author was aware of this specific gospel summary and reflected it in the outline of his gospel narrative. However, what these parallels do show is that key leaders in the early church had a relatively consistent understanding of the gospel’s content. When individuals composed the four Gospels now contained in the NT, they most certainly intended them to support the development of gospel literacy among early Christians.

<sup>12</sup> In *Oxford Bibliographies “Literacy New Testament”* (DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195393361-0177), Chris Keith notes that “literacy” in antiquity is a complex phenomenon. It is necessary to distinguish between the ability to read and the ability to write or formulate documents. Illiteracy was dominant among both males and females.

<sup>13</sup> However, Canadians also need to be sanguine about Canadian rates of literacy. According to a CBC radio report (Jan 17, 2021) “nearly half of adult Canadians struggle with literacy.” Church leaders rarely give this reality a thought as they engage their congregations through preaching.

<sup>14</sup> The Greek term is first attested in the NT. However, since within Paul’s letters it only occurs in Ephesians and 2 Timothy, this places the first usage in the 60s of the first century CE. The use in Acts would be a few years later, perhaps.



leadership responsibilities related to preaching, teaching, and evangelism. Generally, there is reluctance to recognize only certain disciples as gifted “evangelists” lest this recognition undermine the responsibility for every believer to be an ‘evangelist.’ These denominations consider “sharing the good news” to be every believer’s responsibility, regardless of gifting, using Jesus’ directive to the Eleven in Matthew 28:19-20 as the validation for this perspective. As a result, in their view every believer is “entrusted with the gospel” and responsible actively to seek ways to communicate it effectively.

It comes as something of a surprise to discover that the early Christian leaders, based on the data found in the NT, never used the term “evangelist” (εὐαγγελιστής) to describe a function that belongs to every disciple. It is the church leader, Timothy, whom Paul charges to “do the work of an evangelist” (ἔργον ποιῆτον εὐαγγελιστοῦ 2 Tim. 4:5), a role that seems to have some formal definition and is central to his work as a teaching leader in the Ephesian church. When Luke uses the term to describe Philip, one of the seven appointed to care for the needs of widows in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6; 21:8), again it seems to have a specialized application. If the terms “apostle, prophet, pastor-teacher” define specific roles in the church in Eph. 4:11, then Paul’s inclusion of the term “evangelist” in this list similarly would seem to describe a specialized role. This suggests that early church leaders did not use this term to describe the role of every disciple in the early church.

Who actually “proclaims the report about Jesus” according to the New Testament record, i.e., fulfills the function of an “evangelist” (εὐαγγελιστής)? Tabulating the subjects of the cognate verb “proclaim an ‘evangel’” (εὐαγγελίζομαι) in the NT reveals that the following individuals perform this function.

- Jesus (Matt. 11:5; Luke 4:18, 43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1; Acts 10:36; Eph. 2:17). It is a messianic function.
- John the Baptist (Luke 3:18), a prophet.
- Angels (Luke 1:19; 2:10; Gal. 1:8; Rev. 14:6), divine messengers.
- God himself (Rev. 10:7).
- Moses (Heb. 4:6).
- Apostles generally (Acts 5:42).
- Philip (Acts 8:12, 35, 40), one of the seven.
- Peter and John (Acts 8:25), apostles.
- Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35), apostles.

- Paul and others undefined (Acts 16:10).
- Paul (Acts 17:18; Rom. 1:15; 15:20; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:16(2x), 18; 15:1, 2; 2 Cor. 10:16; 11:7; Gal. 1:8b, 11, 16, 23; 4:13; Eph. 3:8), an apostle.
- Timothy (1 Thess. 3:6), an apostolic assistant.
- Undefined subject (Acts 8:4; 11:20; Rom. 10:15 (quoting Isa. 52:7); Heb. 4:2<sup>15</sup>; 1 Pet. 1:12<sup>16</sup>, 25<sup>17</sup>; 4:6<sup>18</sup>).

The data shows that in only one or two contexts, namely Acts 8:4 and 11:20 (people from Cyprus and Cyrene), the subject of the verb might refer to believers generally.

In contrast, Keller claims that

[n]ot only the apostles ([Acts] 5:42) but every Christian ([Acts] 8:4) did evangelism – and they did so endlessly. Passages such as Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Hebrews 3:13; and 1 John 2:20, 27 indicate that every Christian was expected to evangelize, follow up, nurture, and teach people the Word. This happened relationally – one person bringing the gospel to another within the context of relationship.<sup>19</sup>

What do these texts cited by Keller say and about whom are they speaking? And what are the implications for twenty-first century believers embedded in congregational life? It is important to validate whether these texts support Keller’s claim.

- Acts 5:41-42 “The apostles left the Sanhedrin...Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house they never stopped teaching

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<sup>15</sup> The author(s?), using a first person plural perfect passive periphrastic construction (ἔσμεν εὐηγγελισμένοι), claims “we have been ‘gospelled’,” i.e., we have been evangelized/given the good news/told the good news.” However, the text offers no insight into who might have done this.

<sup>16</sup> The writer refers to “those things [sufferings and glory of the Messiah] that now have been announced to you through those who have shared the good news with you (διὰ τῶν εὐαγγελισμένων) by the Holy Spirit.” No specific information identifying such individuals is provided. However, possibly Peter the apostle would be one of them.

<sup>17</sup> The writer describes the message about the Messiah as “the word that has been proclaimed to you as gospel (τὸ εὐαγγελισθὲν εἰς ὑμᾶς).” Who has done this remains unidentified.

<sup>18</sup> The writer indicates “there has been a proclamation of good news made to the dead (τοῖς εὐηγγελισθη)” and this enables them to “be alive...by the Spirit.” We do not know who has done this.

<sup>19</sup> Keller, 277. He references Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* and suggests that informal missionaries communicated the gospel through informal conversation naturally and enthusiastically.

and proclaiming the good news (euaggelizomenoi (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι))<sup>20</sup> that Jesus is the Christ.”

This text is explicit that the apostles “proclaim the gospel” as they move from house to house in Jerusalem and also herald it in the temple precinct. Keller uses this text to support this apostolic role.

- Acts 8:4 “Those who had been scattered went, communicating the message as good news (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν λόγον). Philip went down to a city of Samaria and proclaimed (ἐκήρυσσεν) the Messiah to them.”

This evangelistic activity follows the description of Saul’s attempts to destroy the new Jewish sect established by Jesus. The writer says that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem (8:1), apparently not directly affected by Saul’s efforts. Acts 8:4 picks up the note about persecuting and scattering expressed in 8:1. The primary example follows in v. 5 with Philip being the focus, presumably one of the Seven appointed in 6:5 to oversee the care for the widows among the Hellenistic Jewish Christians. Reading the text carefully in its context suggests that those among the scattered who “communicated the message as good news” were leaders and not ordinary believers. What Stephen did in Acts 6-7, Philip is now doing in Acts 8, but in Samaria. Who else was included remains undefined. Presumably, many believers remained in Jerusalem, along with the apostles. It might be that Christians among the Hellenistic Jewish community particularly were affected, given the narratives in Acts 6-7.

- Rom. 15:14 “I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.”

Paul is concluding his Letter to Roman believers. He affirms his confidence in their ability to disciple one another. However, there is no specific mention of “communicating the message as good news” to people who are not believers. It is Paul rather who has the “priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel (ἱερουροῦντα τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) of God

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<sup>20</sup> The venues are the temple courts and houses in Jerusalem. Presumably these are locations where believers and non-believers might come together to hear what the apostles were communicating. The temple courts would be very public venues.

so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (15:16). There is no implication in this text that Paul expected every believer in the Roman church to be “communicating the message as good news.”

- Col. 3:16 “Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.”

Here again the focus in Paul’s exhortation is upon discipleship within the faith community, not evangelism.

- 1 Thess. 1:6-10 “So you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message (ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου) rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it.... They tell (ἀπαγγέλλουσιν - report) how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...”

The three correspondents to whom 1 Thessalonians is attributed, including Paul, celebrate the faith of these Thessalonian believers, as they remain committed to their decision even in the face of suffering. Their transformation became the talk of believers in Macedonia, Achaia, and elsewhere. The verb phrase “they tell” presumably identifies believers in these other places who share with Paul their amazement at these developments. Again, can it be said with certainty that this data identifies average believers as evangelists? If so, it seems to be a very opaque reference.

- Heb. 3:13 “But encourage one another daily...so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

The conversation is among believers for the purpose of spiritual nurture and encouragement, not evangelism per se.

- 1 John 2:20-27 “You have an anointing from the Holy One and all of you know the truth...the anointing you received from him remains in you and you do not need anyone to teach you.”

These believers possess the Holy Spirit who is instructing and encouraging them in their Christian obedience. While they have knowledge of the truth, the focus seems to be on mutual

encouragement and exhortation, not specifically evangelism. The Holy Spirit can help them detect false teaching and protect them.

The texts cited by Keller certainly illustrate that early Christians were expected to “nurture and teach one another the message” within the faith communities. There is little evidence that average Christians were engaged in the formal communication of the message as good news or its proclamation as evangelists among their non-believing peers. Apostles and other leaders in the congregations did this, not the average disciple it seems. A caveat: *This paper is not arguing that average believers never proclaimed the faith formally, in the public domain. It is claiming that if they did, the NT does not give much information about their engagement in such activity.*

In the NT the use of the verb phrase “to herald the good news” (κηρύσσειν τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) demonstrates a similar pattern. This phrase occasionally describes Jesus’ activity (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14), the apostles’ focus (Mark 16:15), and Paul’s actions (Gal. 2:2; 1 Thess. 2:9). The passive form occurs without an explicit agent in Matt. 24:14; 26:13 and Mark 13:10; 14:9 as Jesus anticipates a mission beyond the cross and resurrection that involves the proclamation of the good news among the nations, without specifying who will do this. Several times the name Jesus or the title Messiah is the object of this verb, and the subject is Philip (Acts 8:5), Paul (Acts 9:20; 19:13; 1 Cor. 1:23; 15:12; 2 Cor. 1:19; 11:4), or others (Phil. 1:15; 1 Tim. 3:16). However, this phrase is rarely used explicitly to describe the activity of an average believer. Perhaps one example might be Mark 5:20, but this is a pre-resurrection occasion and the healed demoniac is commissioned by Jesus to tell his neighbours what the Lord has done for him.<sup>21</sup> The passive uses that occur as prophetic announcements by Jesus (as found in Mark 13:10 for example) may also allow for this perspective, but again are not explicit.

According to 1 Cor. 9:14, Paul affirms that “those who preach (καταγγέλλουσιν) the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” This affirmation suggests that some Jesus followers have received training and recognition as people gifted to proclaim the good news. In the context, Paul is defending his apostleship and so it would seem to describe an apostolic function. Paul asks prayer from the Ephesian Christians that he would have boldness to “make known the mystery (γνωρίσαι τὸ μυστήριον) of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19). The Philippian

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<sup>21</sup> John’s Gospel cites the example of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the town well (John 4). After this encounter, she returns and “tells (λέγει) the people, ‘Come, see a person who has told me everything that I have done. Is not this one the Messiah?’” (John 4:29). Many believe “because of the message of the woman bearing witness...” (4:39; διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς γυναίκος μαρτυρούσης ὅτι...).

believers share in the “advancement of the gospel” by supporting Paul in various ways (Phil. 1:5, 7-12).

Other NT texts might provide more support for Keller’s thesis. For example, Jesus commands the eleven apostles who have gathered in Matt. 28:16 at a mountain in Galilee to “make disciples” (28:19). The second person plural subject command, “make disciples,” logically and grammatically continues the reference to the Eleven (note the plural personal pronoun in verse 18, “he said to them”) and he commands them specifically to carry forward his mission of “making disciples of all nations.” They do this by baptizing and teaching people who respond. Logically, if the verb “make disciples” is interpreted as applying to all believers, then there should be no problem with them doing the baptizing and teaching, but this generally does not conform to practice. Churches tend to limit who performs baptisms and who teaches, suggesting some limitation to this command, in terms of its subject. However, as new Jesus followers emerge from the activity of the Eleven, the Holy Spirit will gift some to function as designated agents and evangelists so that the proclamation of the gospel can spread among the nations (2 Tim. 2:2-3). There is no expectation that every believer would carry such specialized responsibility. Rather, it is the responsibility of all believers “to obey all that Jesus commanded” and as they do so individually and collectively, their transformed lives and resultant dynamic Kingdom communities bear witness to the truth of the good news.<sup>22</sup>

What can be concluded from this brief review? Who actually “proclaims the gospel” in the New Testament documents? The formal proclamation of the message about Jesus as good news seems to be the responsibility initially of the eleven apostles, those who were direct eyewitnesses of his ministry and resurrection (as well as Paul), and then primarily with trained, gifted people (evangelists).<sup>23</sup> There are few,

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<sup>22</sup> Peter explains God’s purpose for the gospel in 1 Pet. 2:9-10. He paraphrases Isa. 43:21 when he insists that believers “proclaim (ἔξαγγείλητε) the virtues of the one who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.” In the context of his letter, the primary means by which such announcement occurs is through “doing good” and thus expressing their new relationship with the Holy God. In the event of oppression and arrest, they must be ready “to give a defense (ἀπολογία) for their hope” (3:15). However, this requirement is related to situations where Satan is doing evil, as in Mark 13:11. The good news is proclaimed, but in the context, it seems, of legal proceedings.

<sup>23</sup> Some regard Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8 “You shall be my witnesses” as prescriptive for all believers in every age. However, it is important to consider the language used in the context. The writer introduces the apostles (1:2) as the people he was instructing between his resurrection and ascension. They become witnesses of his resurrection, seeing him alive after his sufferings by means of many proofs (1:3). There is no sense that those addressed in 1:6 have changed. It still is the apostles who are gathered with the resurrected Jesus and enquiring about the future of Israel in 1:6. He mandates them “to be my witnesses” once they received the Spirit (1:8), i.e., witnesses of his incarnation and resurrection. These are the people who return to Jerusalem. The writer names them in 1:13. The mention of “women” in 1:14 could refer to their wives; as well, Jesus’ mother, Mary, and his brothers are present. The witnesses primarily are the apostles. As Jesus intended, they would become “fishers of men.” It is from those who witnessed the life and actions of Jesus that a replacement for Judas will be proposed. In Acts 26:15-18 Paul describes himself as “servant and witness” of the gospel among the nations for Jesus’ sake.

if any, examples where “average disciples” become involved in making formal presentations of the good news in public. Apostles (Matthew, John) or their close associates (Mark, Luke) compose the four written Gospels, at least this is the witness of the early church fathers. In Luke’s terms, this writing occurs to assure believers that they possess an accurate record of origins of the good news. Average disciples are expected to know the content of the gospel, but this knowledge serves primarily to enhance their personal spiritual formation and obedience, as well as that of other believers in their network of relationships. It also serves to protect them against distortions of the good news that some promote.

Another word group occurs in the writings of Paul that is related to these questions, and this is the verb “to imitate” (μιμηῖσθαι) and its cognate “imitator” (μιμητής; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1, 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:7; 2 Tim. 3:10-16; also Heb. 6:12; 13:7; 3 John 11). Related to this concept is the idea of a “pattern” (τύπος 2 Thess. 3:9; 1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:3). Much of the training or equipping for gospel proclamation seems to occur through mentoring and apprenticing relationships (e.g., Peter and Mark; Ananias and Saul; Paul and Timothy/Titus; Priscilla-Aquila and Apollos).

Paul summarizes this perspective in Ephesians 4-6, referring to “apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd/teachers, equipping believers to do assisting work...so that the body can build the body” (4:11-16). Through the transformative power of the good news, i.e., “learning the truth as it is in Jesus” (4:21), these leaders develop new mental maps that generate new patterns of behavior (defined in Eph. 4-6). By means of this new wisdom they imitate Christ and demonstrate the reality of this good news in their decisions, actions, and relationships, both within the Christian community and within general society.

The situations in which believers publicly “proclaim their commitment to the good news” occur in three different contexts. First, the context of personal baptism, witnessed by the faith community (and others probably), enables new believers to “confess that Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 8:36, 38). Note that new believers embrace this ritual as part of their conversion experience. Second, they proclaim their commitment in worship settings, particularly in relation to the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:26 “you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρις οὔ ἔλθῃ)). See also 1 Pet. 2:9-10. Finally, proclamation occurs in situations of oppression in which believers are being

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However, perhaps the NT concept of ‘witness’ functions as a general category of communication that includes both formal and informal presentations of “the good news,” whether by “evangelists” or by average believers in the normal course of their relationships and functions.

challenged to defend their confession of Jesus as Saviour and Lord (Mark 13:11; 1 Pet. 3:15-16; 1 Tim. 6:12). There is encouragement to “witness a good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (ὁμολόγησας τὴν καλὴν ὁμολογίαν ἐνώπιον πολλῶν μαρτύρων) as Jesus himself did (motif of imitation) during such a serious occasion before authorities.

*The NT and gospel literacy as a value, a goal and a function within local congregations*

Are there NT examples of congregations in which leaders encourage and promote gospel literacy intentionally among all participants, i.e., a full understanding of the good news that gives them the capacity to share that information with others who are not believers? A brief review of several NT contexts might provide some insight into this question.

In Acts 2:42, the believers in Jerusalem engage with the teaching of the apostles. This suggests that the apostles (the Eleven/Twelve) purposely gave witness to the good news and its implications among Jewish believers (5:41-42 - “in the temple and house to house, teaching and proclaiming the good news”). The apostles themselves possess gospel literacy and under commission from Jesus serve as its key source and its transmitters. However, there are no specific examples of such teaching (apart, perhaps, from Peter’s comments in Acts 1:15-26).

Later in Acts, when people from the Jerusalem church are scattered because of persecution, some proclaim the good news to people in Cyprus and Cyrene (Acts 11:19-21). The writer does not identify specifically who communicates this information, but since they come from the Jerusalem church and their audience is in Cyprus and Cyrene, presumably these are Hellenistic Jews, but people taught and trained by the apostles themselves in the Jerusalem church. As suggested earlier, they may be leaders among the Jerusalem Hellenistic Jewish Christian community (like the seven in Acts 6). In 1 Cor. 15:6, Paul refers to “over 500 brothers at one time” who saw the risen Christ. Perhaps Paul’s reference to Andronicus and Junia “who are outstanding among the apostles (ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις) and...were in Christ before me” (Rom. 16:7) might include such eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ who like Paul became recognized as apostles because of their remarkable, revelatory experience.

Paul expects the people in the Philippian house churches to collaborate with him “to advance the good news” (εἰς προκοπὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Phil. 1:12), because they have a common interest in and concern for the good news (1:5). He expects they “will live in a manner worthy of the good news” (1:27) because together



with Paul they “are contending in the faith of the good news” (1:27 συναθροῦντες τῇ πίστει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου; cf. 4:3 “contending together with me in the cause of the good news” αἵτινες ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ συνήθλησάν μου). The ability of the believers in Philippi to collaborate with Paul in these matters requires that they possess some degree of gospel literacy. The foundations for this literacy would have been established when Paul proclaimed the gospel in Philippi and a house church emerged, during his second (Acts 16) and third (Acts 20) church development tours. He reinforces this literacy by means of this letter. “Contending together for the faith” might describe “striving together with one life for faithfulness in the gospel,” as well as supporting Paul in his mission endeavours, rather than participating personally and directly in public evangelism.<sup>24</sup>

Paul instructs Timothy “to entrust to reliable men” the content of Paul’s teaching so that they in turn may “be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2). Part of this instruction involves the “correct handling of the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). This capacity seems to require that these people be able to read and interpret the scriptures and, in this way, express gospel literacy. Paul’s description of the godly person (2 Tim. 3:16) includes interaction with the holy writings by which the Holy Spirit enables “training in righteousness” (πρὸς παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ). In Titus 2:3-4 Paul instructs older, spiritually mature women to “teach what is good in order that they train/advise the younger women” (ἵνα σωφρονίζωσιν τὰς νέας). Presumably, the content of this teaching echoes the content of Paul’s letter to Titus in which he integrates gospel explanation with theological and ethical guidance.

The verb κατηχέω has the sense “to teach, instruct” and Luke employs it in Luke 1:4 to describe the purpose for which he writes his Gospel narrative, namely that Theophilus “will know the certainty of the things/matters which you have been taught/instructed.” What follows, then, is Luke’s account of the good news about Jesus. The composition of the other Gospels fulfills a similar purpose (John 20:30-31). According to Mark 1:1, this Gospel intends to describe “the origin of the good news about Jesus Messiah, Son of God.” Matt. 13:52 indicates that Jesus intends to prepare a new class of “scribes taught in matters related to the Kingdom of heaven” and possessing the capacity to “draw out of their treasury new and old things” (i.e., able to interpret correctly both the Jewish scriptures and Jesus’ teachings and actions). Matthew’s Gospel becomes the training manual for this new class of scribes.

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<sup>24</sup>J. Sumney. *Philippians. A Greek Student’s Intermediate Reader* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Pub., 2007), 35-36.

Surprisingly, there are no specific contexts where verbs of teaching or instruction have εὐαγγέλιον as the direct object, meaning “teach the good news.”<sup>25</sup> It surely occurred in the early church, but perhaps is described with different terminology. However, it seems that leaders in the early church focused on affirming for believers the accuracy of the good news and helping believers understand what obedience to Jesus’ teaching meant (as expressed in Matt. 28:19-20). Perhaps much of this had to do with helping believers read and interpret the Jewish scriptures properly in reference to Jesus and his mission so they understood God’s plan and their place in that plan.

Both Apollos and Paul in Acts (18:25; 28:31) are said to “teach the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.” The description of Apollos in Acts 18:25 is particularly illuminating. He possesses “ability in the scriptures (the Jewish scriptures),” he “had been instructed (ἦν κατηχημένος; cf. Luke 1:4) in the way of the Lord,” he “was teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus,” and he was doing this in the synagogue at Ephesus. He had received some instruction, but it was not complete. Priscilla and Aquila tutor him more completely and he continues to Achaia to carry on his evangelistic mission, particularly to Jews in the Diaspora (18:28). Apollos’ teaching is addressed particularly to Jewish people who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The kinds of skills demonstrated by Apollos are not typical of all believers.

Paul and Barnabas engage in similar activities in Antioch (Acts 15:35 “they and many others were teaching (διδάσκοντες) and proclaiming as good news (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) the word of the Lord”). The phrase “the word of the Lord” could include both the Jewish scriptures and teachings of Jesus. NT writers also use the verb “proclaim” (καταγγέλλω) to describe communicating “the word of the Lord” (Phil. 1:17-18; 1 Cor. 2:1; Col. 1:28; Acts 13:5, 38; 16:17; 17:3, 13, 23). In one context Paul argues that “those who proclaim the gospel (τοῖς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον καταγγέλλουσιν) should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14).

In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches his disciples that they are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (5:14-16). Christian leaders today frequently reference these texts to encourage Jesus followers to be active in personal evangelism. However, such presentations often overlook the conclusion to this short section, namely “let your light shine in such a way before people, in order that they might see your good deeds and give your father in heaven glory” (5:16). The focus is upon observation of obedient actions consistent with divine values, not oral proclamation.

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<sup>25</sup> Rather it occurs as the object of verbs describing proclamation and announcing. Christian leaders “declare” the startling news about God’s action in Jesus Messiah and people respond variously to their public announcements.

Similarly, in Matt. 6:1 Jesus enjoins people “to do your righteousness before people” in a certain way. In Matthew 7, he warns about false prophets and advises that “good trees produce good fruit” so that “you should recognize them based upon their fruits” (7:16, 19-20). It seems that Jesus primarily is interested in the powerful witness of transformed living, but probably not to the exclusion of any spoken witness.

Surprisingly, in Gal. 1:12 Paul claims that he “has not been taught the good news (by human agency).” Rather he received it “through a revelation/unveiling of Jesus Messiah.” The implication is that Paul’s instruction by the Messiah in this resurrection appearance is somewhat similar to that which the Twelve received directly from Jesus during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension.

In Eph. 4:20-21, Paul provides one of the most explicit descriptions of teaching people the good news, though the specific term εὐαγγέλιον does not occur in that context. He claims that believers in the Ephesian house churches “have learned (ἐμάθετε) the Messiah” because they “have heard him and been taught in him, in accord with the truth in Jesus.” This introduction to the Messiah has initiated essential transformations within them. “Learning the Messiah and hearing him” relates to gospel proclamation and “being taught in him” describes subsequent instruction. The result of these two processes is that the Ephesian believers now know “the truth in Jesus.” Paul does not identify who may be responsible for either stage of their spiritual journey but, presumably, they would be leaders who function as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11-12).

The author of Heb. 5:11-6:3 reminds that not every person who hears the good news and indicates interest that leads to further instruction will affirm a true confession. Apostasy does occur. In the context the writer refers to the “elementary truths of God’s word” (5:12) that “teachers” in the congregation communicate and that it is important for Jesus followers to “move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ” (6:1). When believers receive teaching, the expectation is that it will produce “maturity,” because they can use this knowledge “to distinguish between good and evil” (5:14). The section concludes with encouragement “to imitate” those inheriting the promises (6:12). The teaching function occurs within the congregation and the text suggests that the goal is for each disciple to attain the capacity to teach other disciples and lead them to maturity through their example of word and deed.

These and many other passages indicate that instruction regarding the essence of the good news, i.e., the grand sweep of God’s plans in Jesus Christ, based on the interpretation of the Jewish scriptures and traditions about Jesus’ teachings, was a necessary and frequent part of house church experience and activity. This teaching

would include instruction regarding various passages in the Jewish scriptures that explain the context of the good news and forecast Yahweh's intentions in the Messiah. It also included explanation about Kingdom ethics and the behavioural implications of the good news when Jesus becomes Lord, as taught by Jesus. Of particular concern were the eschatological principles that framed the gospel, especially providing wisdom about what "time" it was in God's schedule.

Gospel literacy was important and necessary if believers were to function together with "one mind" in their expression of Kingdom culture. There is no specific instance in the NT where a Christian leader intentionally teaches believers how to participate in personal evangelism. This may have happened, but there are no documented cases in the NT. What receives focus is the importance of helping believers gain wisdom and full knowledge about the significance of Jesus' teachings and actions, the role of the Holy Spirit, the importance of transformed lives expressing Kingdom values, and discerning God's great plans for humans in this age and the next. This is the "news" from God that forms the basis of gospel literacy.

There are situations in the NT documents where people who meet Jesus or hear the apostles' proclamations and see the accompanying miracle desire to share their discovery with people in their households. Examples include the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10) seeking the help of Peter the apostle, the Philippian jailer (Acts 16), and the Samaritan woman (John 4). However, these individuals do not personally conduct the evangelism, but rely upon the recognized witnesses such as Peter, Paul, and Jesus to communicate more fully the good news. Cornelius and the Philippian jailer do not possess sufficient gospel literacy to present the good news to members of their household. They share the interaction they experienced with Jesus or his designated representatives (cf. Mark 16:19-20 "signs following"). Their knowledge of the gospel in these contexts is quite minimal.

When discipling believers, early church leaders employed various terms to describe what they intended the development of gospel literacy to achieve. Both Paul and Peter used the verb *stērizō* (στηρίζω) meaning "to cause to be inwardly firm or committed, confirm, establish, strengthen"<sup>26</sup> in various contexts to describe why they keep repeating key elements of the gospel in their writings (e.g., Rom. 1:11; 1 Thess. 3:2, 13). This activity reflects the deity's desire to "establish" his people in their confession (Rom. 16:25; 2 Thess. 2:17; 3:3; 1 Pet. 5:10). Paul particularly employs the verb *noutheteō* (νουθετέω), meaning "to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct, admonish, warn, instruct" (1 Thess.

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<sup>26</sup> BDAG, 945.

5:12, 14; Col. 1:28).<sup>27</sup> He also uses the cognate noun *nouthesia* (νουθεσία), meaning “admonition, instruction,”<sup>28</sup> to describe his purpose in writing 1 Corinthians (10:11) and to instruct Titus in dealing with divisive people in house churches (Titus 3:10). Other verbs such as *parakaleō* (παρακαλέω), meaning “to urge strongly, exhort, encourage; implore; comfort”<sup>29</sup> and *didaskō* (διδάσκω), meaning “to teach, instruct,”<sup>30</sup> frequently describe the purpose that motivates attempts to develop gospel literacy among Jesus followers.

### *Expectations of early church leaders regarding gospel literacy*

Given that generously 15 percent of the population in the first century CE was literate, what expectations would the apostles, evangelists, and other early church leaders have for people in the house churches regarding gospel literacy and the dissemination of the good news to non-believers?

As the above review has demonstrated, early church leaders sought to develop some level of gospel literacy among participants in the house churches. These leaders had to have some aptitude and ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). The various controversies that enveloped Paul with respect to his gospel content suggests that others within these church communities also had a version of the gospel but considered Paul’s version to be deficient in some sense. Paul reveals (Gal. 2:4-5) that some “false brothers” in Jerusalem seek to prevent his gospel from being approved by the “pillars” in the Jerusalem church, namely Peter, James and John. In response, Paul presses the leaders of the Jerusalem church to recognize and validate his gospel presentation. These conflicts occur among church leaders, and they would garner some support from the rank and file (as Paul seems to intimate in 1 Cor. 1:10-17). In Acts 15, the entire Jerusalem church gathers to hear the discussion regarding the implications of the gospel for non-Jews to participate in God’s salvation. They also participate in affirming the solution discerned. Similarly, in his Letter to the Romans Paul is presenting his understanding of the gospel project to believers in the various house churches existing in Rome. He seeks their support for his anticipated mission to Spain. While these interactions occur among the early church leaders, the results of these discussions have significant implications for average disciples. When such letters were read in the house churches, people would affirm that Paul, or whoever the writer might be, was presenting the good news authorized by Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>27</sup> BDAG, 679.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> BDAG, 765.

<sup>30</sup> BDAG, 241.

Most gospel literacy preparation in the early church proceeded through oral instruction, rather than through personal study of written documents. The texts were too expensive for the average person to secure and perhaps not always available. To “proclaim the good news” might require the ability to read, the opportunity to access and study personally portions of the Jewish scriptures (in Greek translation) or Greek documents of instruction produced by the apostles, and the capacity to interpret them correctly. To equip oneself with these competencies required access to appropriate teachers and other resources. The goal of this instruction would be to equip gifted individuals with the skills and understanding needed to demonstrate from the Jewish scriptures and other early Christian documents and/or oral traditions about Jesus, that he indeed is Messiah and Son of God, and God’s purpose in sending him. Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul demonstrate this kind of ability in Luke’s account of the early church (Acts). If synagogue practice is an indication, texts were read publicly and then expounded publicly by recognized competent leaders. Jesus demonstrates such practices in Luke 4, when he reads and expounds a Hebrew text of Isaiah. Individuals have the capacity to refute false claims about Jesus by using the sacred texts. Paul’s use of the “lecture hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9) may be an example of a different arrangement.

#### *Congregational dynamics and expectations related to gospel literacy*

Rates of literacy in the twenty-first century are much higher today and people’s ability to interact directly with scripture is enhanced (both through skill and access to texts). These factors change the congregational dynamics and expectations related to gospel literacy and responsibility for personal evangelism.

General educational levels, available technology, and the general literary sophistication of many in the population today, especially in Canada, indicate that expectations might and should be greater among average believers. In other words, with improved resources and greater opportunity to develop skill and competency come greater responsibility. The theology of the “priesthood of the believer,” the residence of the Holy Spirit within believers, and the expectation of giftedness to support involvement in God’s mission supports such expectations.

As Keller argues, contextualization of the gospel must be a significant part of gospel literacy training. Keller considers contextualization to be important in four different ministry aspects: 1) connecting people to God, through evangelism and worship; 2) connecting people to one another, through community and discipleship;

3) connecting people to the city, through mercy and justice; and, 4) connecting people to the culture, through integration of faith and work.<sup>31</sup>

Keller presumes that “the Bible tells all Christians to evangelize and love their poor neighbor. Yet some people have gifts of evangelism (Eph. 4:11).”<sup>32</sup> Does Keller’s conclusion need modification based upon the New Testament data? As Peter states (1 Pet. 2:10), God’s people must “declare (ἐξαγγείλητε – allusion to Isa. 43:21) the praises/praiseworthy actions of the one who has called us from darkness to his marvelous light.” Peter allows for no exceptions to this expectation. In Peter’s view, this declaration occurs primarily through individual believers knowing what is “the good,” having the courage to “do good,” and thus “gaining the unbeliever” for the Kingdom (1 Pet. 3:1-2).<sup>33</sup> When opposition to this behaviour occurs either informally or formally, believers have a responsibility to articulate “the reason”<sup>34</sup> for their hope” that generates their counter-cultural way of life (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

The primary expectation from the apostle Peter’s point of view is that Christian leaders support, train, and encourage believers to live the gospel (as he does in the epistle of 1 Peter) in their relationships, with the practice of “submission” being a central feature of “doing good.” Submission is the primary responsibility of average believers as they “follow in the steps of Jesus” (1 Pet. 2:2). They need to know why they are doing this, what their situation is in the family of God, and how living loyally to the values of Kingdom culture expresses their living hope (1 Pet. 1:3-12). Some will be equipped with gifts that enable them to speak the message and others will have gifts that enable them to serve (1 Pet. 4:10-12). However, it is the “elders,” the older mature believers, who shepherd the flock as they demonstrate gospel hope and also explain it (1 Pet. 5:1-7).

The focus in this NT gospel literacy project is to encourage average believers to demonstrate practical contextualization of the good news within their network of relationships (household, marketplace, civic connections, and people of God; see Matt. 5:14-16). The Christian leaders focus on enabling believers to live the gospel

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<sup>31</sup> Keller, 293.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> “Gaining the unbeliever” may also occur as they observe worship, although Peter does not mention this possibility.

<sup>34</sup> The Greek term is ἀπολογία. In Acts 22:1 and 1 Cor. 9:3 it refers to “a speech of defense” or “the act of defense” (2 Tim. 4:16; Acts 25:16). The register of this term tends to be legal contexts or debate situations in which one person is defending an opinion or actions. Its use in 1 Pet. 3:15 may in fact refer to formal situations in which people face accusations regarding their behavior before some tribunal, whether Roman or Jewish. When believers face such situations, they should be bold and sustain their confession, as Jesus himself did (1 Peter 2:18-25). The writer is dealing with an exceptional situation and not the casual sharing of personal beliefs that might occur in the natural flow of daily relationships and conversations.

so that viable, genuine Kingdom communities emerge from its proclamation. There is little evidence that training in personal evangelism was part of this agenda.

### *How the early church leaders measured gospel literacy*

The NT data reveals that early church leaders employed several means to evaluate personal levels of gospel literacy. First, they measured gospel literacy by the degree of commotion caused by the believers' transformed conduct in the local communities (1 Pet. 4:1-5). This commotion is not agitation for change based on a political agenda, but behavioural change that created difference with cultural values and practices in local Hellenistic culture, whether Jewish or not. This clash of cultural values and practices generated a witness to holiness that the good news enabled and required through the action of the Holy Spirit. When upset neighbours made legal accusations regarding their disruptive behavior and demanded to know why they no longer participated in the commonly accepted cultural or religious practices,<sup>35</sup> believers had opportunity to explain.

A second measure was the intensity and extent of suffering that the believers experienced because of their transformed lives. When believers refused to participate in civic festivals regarded as essential to sustaining the welfare of the city, other citizens shifted from tolerance to attack. When believers embraced holiness as their lifestyle, stewarded their lives as continual sacrifices to God (1 Pet. 2:5-6), and committed themselves to practice *agape* (1 Cor. 13; 1 Pet. 1:22-24), others noticed the results and were not pleased with what they saw. Believers knew how to live and die well for the gospel.

A third measure was the way that people chose to embrace and express Kingdom culture within their faith communities. This expression includes "not forsaking the assembly together," forgiving one another, and caring for one another. Jesus teaches this Kingdom culture in Matt. 25:34-40, where he describes how believers assist one another in the case of severe oppression and hardship.

Other measures included the degree to which people understood the divine narrative as expressed in the Jewish scriptures and culminating in the first and second advents of the Messiah; God's fulfillment of his covenant promises to Israel through Jesus and the mission to the nations; and the ability of believers to recognize and denounce every form of idolatry (1 John 5:21).

### **Equipping Believers Today with Gospel Literacy**

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<sup>35</sup> These religious practices often involved actions done for the general civic good and abstaining would be interpreted as "hatred" towards the city.



Having discerned what the NT data reveals about the definition, development, and purpose of gospel literacy, what guidance might this data give Christian leaders today for discipling individual believers and developing healthy Kingdom communities?

Proclaiming the gospel in public, non-church settings had an important place in the early church, but it is the responsibility of specific, trained Christian leaders. This is something that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers would do because they are authorized, gifted, and equipped to do so. Generally, there are no contexts in the NT where average believers were engaged in “formal, verbal proclamation of the gospel” in public venues, such as we find described in Acts. It is trained and gifted leaders such as Peter, Paul, Philip, and Stephen who give public speeches articulating the gospel and urging people to repent. Paul expects Timothy to engage in a training project to develop additional, capable teachers (2 Tim. 2:1-2). This expectation suggests that proclaiming the gospel required some mentoring and educating. It indicates that pastoral leaders have a special responsibility to present the good news formally in public contexts, to train new evangelists, as well as to develop gospel literacy within the faith community.

One of the tasks of local congregations and their leaders is to discern who among them may be gifted as evangelists and equip and support them. Not every believer is a Stephen or Philip, but believers generally will steward their resources to assist such believers to fulfill their roles. Church leaders might do well to recapture the role of “evangelist” as defined in the NT and incorporate it into their ministry leadership strategy. If the lead pastor does not have this gifting, the church leadership should identify those in the congregation who have it and support them as such.

The task of evangelism takes special training because it is done in public settings where believers engage secularly trained philosophers and religious leaders. They require special skill, knowledge, and rhetorical skill to be heard in the public square. They require wisdom to discern how to interpret sacred texts in reference to Jesus’s mission and to contextualize the gospel in new cultural settings. Those who try to make every believer an “evangelist” tend to overlook those specially gifted for this role and deny them the support necessary to develop their gift well.

This is not to say that average Christians never spoke to others about their faith in Christ. For example, in Peter’s first letter believers have the responsibility to “give a reason [defense] (ἀπολογία) for the hope that they possess” (1 Pet. 3:15ff). Jesus sends the healed demoniac back to his village to tell what the Lord has done for him (Mark 5:19-20). Philippian believers “contend together (with Paul) for the

faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). Because the Holy Spirit is present in believers, they have the potential to be his witnesses and he will provide them with the message they should communicate (Mark 13:11). However, what is the content and context of such testimony?<sup>36</sup>

The testimony focus is upon people’s stories of faith – how did they enter into the Kingdom through faith in Jesus Messiah? In their stories of faith, they become “witnesses” to what Jesus has done for them personally. John’s Gospel emphasizes this element. For example, the Samaritan woman influences the people in her village by testifying or witnessing about what Jesus said and did for her. They should put confidence in Jesus “because of the word of this woman who bore witness” (4:39; 1 John 5:10).

In connection with the good news, Jesus says when addressing some of the Twelve, that they will stand before kings “for my sake, for a witness to them” (Mark 13:9; Matt. 24:14). Their arrest because they are Jesus followers becomes an opportunity to testify or give proof about Jesus and his message. In Acts, Jesus requires the Eleven “to be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8) and the Holy Spirit empowers this role (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15; 26:16). However, in Acts it is apostles who exercise this function as *μάρτυς* (“a witness”) of Jesus’ life, crucifixion, and resurrection. Paul includes himself in this vanguard. Presumably, others so called and gifted can be taught how to fulfill the role of “witness.” The NT documents contain the substance of that testimony. If this is the case, others not formally eyewitnesses could still, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and mentored training, become equally effective witnesses to their personal experience with Jesus. While this role and responsibility to some degree extends to every believer, this does not require or qualify every believer to function as an evangelist. Just as some believers may be gifted to function as pastors and teachers in a faith community, so also some are gifted to function as evangelists.

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<sup>36</sup> Perhaps pastoral leaders would reduce confusion about the role of Jesus followers in “evangelism” if they taught more clearly the distinction between the concept of “witness” and the more specific and formal “act of proclaiming the gospel.” Every Christian had the responsibility when called upon to confess Jesus, i.e., witness to their personal faith-commitment to the Messiah as Lord. Probably such exchanges occurred primarily in the normal conversations that occurred among people in households or the marketplace. If civic or religious leaders brought accusations against Jesus followers for failure to support civic religious rites and general social values, then the witness of believers about their faith experience might have to be given in a formal, legal situation. In Paul’s case, the NT documents characterize him as an evangelist offering formal gospel messages in public venues, whether the city agora or the Jewish synagogue, and also as bearing testimony to his personal faith in Jesus in legal proceedings. These are different contexts and the content of Paul’s presentations in these different situations should be noted (compare his speeches in the synagogue at Pisidia (Acts 13); his speech before the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17); and his defense speech before Agrippa (Acts 26)).

Average believers bear witness to the gospel primarily through behavioural and relational actions and ethics. Keller acknowledges Michael Green's finding that in the early church the good news spread primarily through relationships in the household (οἶκος).<sup>37</sup> Peter outlines a similar reality in 1 Pet. 2:18-2:8. Within the household there are occasions for teaching (Acts 5:42), as well as opportunities to share the good news with friends and others, employing authorized gospel communicators such as Peter (Acts 10:22). In the absence of buildings constructed for house churches in the first two centuries after Christ, the household became the natural venue for such activities – by invitation. People took friendship and the patron-client relationship seriously in the first century and these formed natural relationships within which people might observe changed religious loyalties and transformed behaviours. Formal presentations by trained evangelists would enhance this witness.

It is also the case that more formal occasions for gospel teaching occurred. Paul spent two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:9-10) “dialoguing interactively” about the good news (διαλεγόμενος), using the “lecture hall of Tyrannus.” Through this means, “all the inhabitants of the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” In this case, it is Paul the apostle and evangelist who teaches others, who then spread the word (perhaps someone like Epaphras who planted the church in Colossae (Col. 1:7)).

### *Contextualization of gospel literacy in the twenty-first century church*

Keller encourages the development of “lay ministers,”<sup>38</sup> who “actively bring their Christian example and faith into the lives of their neighbors, friends, colleagues and community.” He distinguishes between lay leaders, who guide programs, and lay ministers who are “servants of the gospel.” The leadership in the church equips and supports these lay ministers. The lay ministers will be “like and unlike others, Christians...engaged with others.”<sup>39</sup> Keller quotes with approval Kreider's observation that “the early Christians did not engage in public preaching; it was too dangerous. There are practically no evangelists or missionaries whose names we know....and still the church grew. Why?”<sup>40</sup> According to Keller, the answer is because people were attracted to the good news by the lives of people they knew. For Keller this issue of gospel contextualization becomes the significant means for communicating the

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<sup>37</sup> Keller, 278.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 285.

reality of the good news.<sup>41</sup> Even Keller recognizes that “evangelism” occurred in the early church primarily through the witness of changed lives and the emergence of remarkable Kingdom communities.

Keller’s distinction between “lay leaders” and “lay ministers” is artificial and misleading. Why not regard lay leaders and lay ministers as mature Christian leaders who have different roles, whether organizing groups of people to care for groups within the church (programs, if you like, that develop gospel literacy among God’s people) or evangelists who receive equipping to present the good news in public forums or to groups of people that believers bring together (like Peter does for Cornelius).

Keller also emphasizes the role of pastoral leaders in developing lay ministers who have relational integrity, such that they can share their faith. This can happen in various ways: 1) one-on-one informally; 2) one-on-one in planned intentional contexts; 3) providing an experience of Christian community where non-believers observe the good news in action; and, 4) sharing one’s faith.<sup>42</sup> This proposal by Keller needs to be sharpened so that it focuses more specifically on the discernment and training of “evangelists” in the local congregation. The evangelists then discern and train other believers who evidence the gift of evangelism. Such evangelists also become communicators of the gospel in more formal venues. Of course, all believers, when occasion provides, should be able and equipped to share their faith story (Keller’s #4 above). However, this sharing is different from the public proclamation of the good news to the general population, who have little understanding about God’s plans, the person and role of Jesus, and the mission of God in this world and the next. The author would distinguish between sharing one’s faith story as a witness and making a presentation of the gospel message as an evangelist.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Gospel literacy is critical if Jesus followers are to develop the capacity to live “Christianly,” i.e., contextualize the reality of the good news in the context of their current relationships and daily activities. As all disciples do this, they give expression to the reality of Kingdom values and the Kingdom culture the Messiah designs for

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>42</sup> Keller, 287-88.

<sup>43</sup> Practically speaking there is overlap. However, perhaps the different emphases we find in Paul’s defense speeches in Acts 24-26 in comparison with his presentations of the gospel in Pisidia Antioch (Acts 13) or Athens (Acts 17) illustrate somewhat the distinction between sharing one’s faith-story and a formal, public presentation of the gospel as an evangelist.

his assemblies, demonstrating in their life together the validity of gospel-based personal transformation. This is the “good news” for a new humanity.

The NT demonstrates that “proclaiming the gospel” in public contexts primarily is the task of gifted and equipped people, such as apostles and evangelists. This is what Matt. 28:18-20 refers to.

Average believers witness to the good news as they “do good,” i.e., express Kingdom values and God’s mission in their network of relationships. They understand why this is their obedient service as members of God’s family. When oppressed, they must be prepared to tell their faith story, i.e., “give a defense for their hope in Christ.” When they do this, they become living examples of the gospel’s power to transform lives, empowered by the Holy Spirit. However, such activity is not the same as the role of the evangelist.

Developing gospel literacy serves several, different purposes in a local congregation. It strengthens the faith of every believer so that they have the motivation and spiritual desire to “do good,” no matter what might threaten. Helping every believer develop a capacity to contextualize their faith commitment and values within the dynamics of personal relationship and daily activities is key to achieving gospel literacy. Some of this competence can be developed through intentional training, but other aspects require careful and intentional mentoring (“imitation”).

As believers develop gospel literacy, it fuels their desire to worship God daily, but particularly in unity with the faith community. Here they celebrate and confess the good news. Non-believers, attracted by this new “life in community,” hear their confession as they observe this collective worship.

A more limited group of believers in a local congregation will have gifts for pastoral leadership, teaching, and evangelism. Such people should be discerned, encouraged in their gifting, and equipped to exercise that gifting. These individuals need to have expertise in “rightly dividing the word of truth,” both the OT and the NT, as these documents witness to God’s plan for the ages.

Pastoral leadership includes intentionally and consistently promoting gospel literacy as the primary means for individual discipling, as well as the key to developing robust Kingdom communities. The capacity and commitment for believers to contextualize their faith commitment within their relationships, daily activities, and church life are the key outcomes that gospel literacy should achieve. These are measurable objectives. One of the greatest weaknesses within the evangelical church today, broadly speaking, is the dearth of intentional, sustained discipling produced through the intentional development of gospel literacy. A second is the failure of the evangelical church to recognize the special role of

evangelist within a congregation, discern people gifted for this role, and equip and support them to carry forward the local church's responsibility to publicly proclaim the gospel outside the boundaries of the congregation.

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