

# Good news for God's world

Advance in Faith Unit 108

**Week 2 — Recovering the Good News**



## Introduction

What was the content of the good news Jesus announced?

*The good news of .....*

(Mt 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mk 1:14-15; Lk 4:43; 8:1; 16:16)

Our difficulty is that we don't like kingdoms. We live in a democracy. We don't want power concentrated in the hands of a king. History has taught us that power corrupts. It ends up being abused, so we separate the powers:

- a) Parliament makes the laws.
- b) The police enforce them.
- c) The courts deal with violations of the law.

The church is separate again — separation of church and state.

As a result, we don't think of God as a king or a political figure at all. For us, God belongs in the religious category. We go to church to meet God. We ask God for help with our personal lives. We encourage people to develop a personal relationship with God.

Within this worldview, *a kingdom of God* makes no sense at all. That's why we've drifted from Jesus' gospel: we don't understand it.

The gospel is a story about Jesus overthrowing evil, restoring God's reign. It's good news for the world! But we've reduced it down to a story about me: my personal sins, and how I can get relief from my guilt. We market it as personal benefits for the individual. This appeal to selfishness cannot save anyone, and it can't transform the world!

## How we drifted from the good news

How did our Western culture come to think the way it does?

Christianity was a minority religion until the Roman Emperor Constantine converted in AD 312. With imperial backing, Christians were transformed from a disparaged and persecuted sect into the most powerful people in the Empire. The western church (Roman Catholic) held power as the Holy Roman Empire. You were "Christian" because you belonged to a Christian Empire (baptized as a baby).

The church held your destiny in its hands. You received forgiveness only when you confessed your sins to the church (confession), paid the penalty (penitence), and attended mass to receive the sacrifice (the body of Jesus offered again).

600 years ago, the church's absolute hold on power was challenged by the Renaissance and Reformation. Art, learning, literature, research and science side-stepped the church's control.

It's been a bouncy ride ever since:

- 1) **Scientists** like Galileo faced excommunication for challenging the church's views. 6000 "heretics" were killed in the Spanish Inquisition as the church tried to keep control (1400s – 1500s).
- 2) **Luther** declared that God, not the Church, declares who's right with him (justification). **Calvin** declared that God, not the Catholic Church, is sovereign. The printing press spread information outside the church's channels, including the Bible in people's languages (1500s – 1600s).
- 3) "**Enlightened**" people rejected "the divine right of kings." They overthrew their rulers (e.g. French Revolution, US War of Independence). **Secular** governments arose, separating the power of church and state, promising liberty and justice for all (1600s – 1700s).
- 4) **Science** explained the natural world as cause-and-effect, instead of acts of God. **Evolution** explained how living things came into existence through natural causes (1700s – 1800s).
- 5) The **industrial revolution's** machines redefined society. People moved into towns, as cogs in the big machine. Big business drives consumerism (1800s).
- 6) **Secularism** became the hope of society. Friedrich **Nietzsche** (German philosopher) declared we'd killed God. Karl **Marx** saw religion as a painkiller that keeps people oppressed, so society must be saved through revolution. Sigmund **Freud** took people on an inward journey to uncover how the Judeo-Christian religion had repressed their sexual urges. These guys viewed religion as bad for us: outdated and repressive (1800s).
- 7) In the 1900s, people discovered that science had not delivered utopia, but **weapons** of mass destruction. Communism and fascism were brutal. People lost trust in governments: **Propaganda** misled them to fight two world wars, followed by fear of a nuclear holocaust. People became disillusioned with modernity and suspicious of power. They rejected **metanarratives** — the big stories that have traditionally given us our sense of identity and meaning. Neither church nor state is trusted in this **postmodern** world. The individual rules: no one tells me who I am; I am what I choose to be.

Does any of that feel familiar? It's a gross oversimplification, and there are many other factors. But does it help us understand the society we live in, and how religion's role has changed?

Based on your conversations with people, which of these factors shape the way they think about God, church, faith, and themselves?

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### Rethinking our gospel presentation

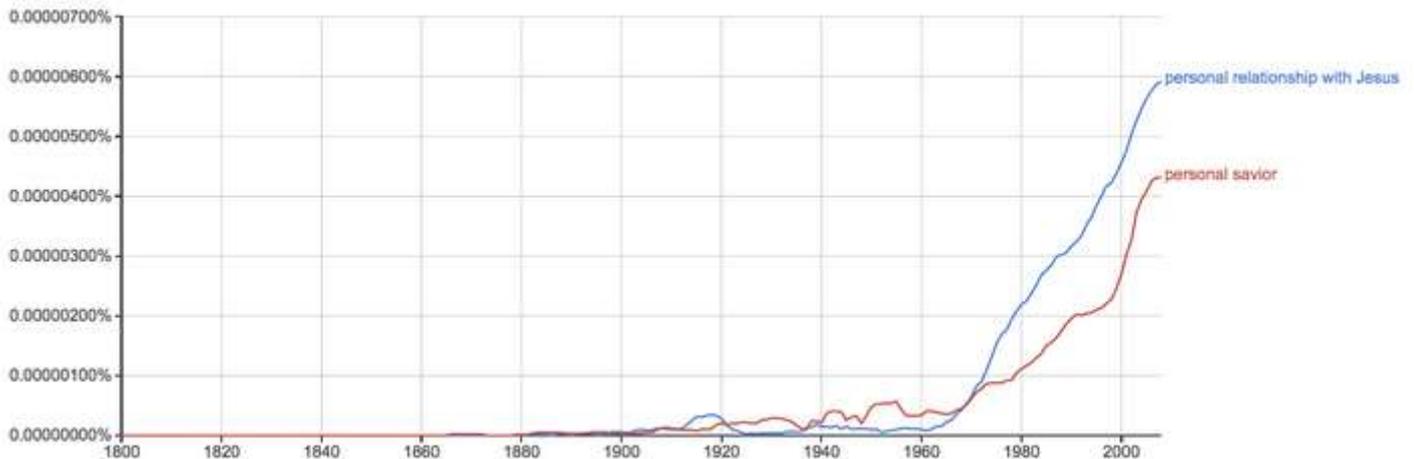
Listen to the phrases we use to present “the gospel.” What are we saying? It is the language of Jesus’ regal authority over the world? Or is it the language of individual consumer choice?

What does our “gospel” language say?	Individual consumer choice	Jesus’ kingdom authority
Make a decision	✓	
Offer an invitation		
Accept Jesus		
Invite Jesus into your heart		
Have a personal relationship with Jesus		
Invite Jesus to be your personal saviour		
Raise your hand while no one is looking		
Pray the sinner’s prayer		

Where are any of these phrases in Scripture? This is not the way the gospel has always been told. This is recent language, reflecting our culture. It’s not the gospel of Jesus.

For example, the ngram below shows how the phrases *personal saviour* and *personal relationship with Jesus* have come to prominence only in the last 40 years.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=personal+relationship+with+Jesus%2C+personal+savior&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cpersonal%20relationship%20with%20Jesus%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cpersonal%20savior%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=personal+relationship+with+Jesus%2C+personal+savior&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cpersonal%20relationship%20with%20Jesus%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cpersonal%20savior%3B%2Cc0) accessed 18 September 2018,



The pseudo-gospel of individual consumer choice has no power to change the world. It cannot bring an end to war because it doesn't call nations to obedience to our true ruler (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 1:5; 16:26). It cannot bring justice to communities because it's only about individuals being justified. It cannot bring reconciliation to Australia because it's only about individual reconciliation with God. It cannot bring an end to violence because we don't understand why Jesus suffered violence at the cross. It cannot rebirth God's creation because it's only about individuals being born again. It's a shrivelled me-focused self-centred substitute for Jesus' kingship.

We need to pray, "Deliver us from Me-ville."

In fact, we could reframe our prayers as petitions to earth's king, asking him to sort out what's wrong in in his earthly realm. We could pray for the world to acknowledge his kingship. We could pray that his purposes are done in his earthly realm, just as they are in heaven.

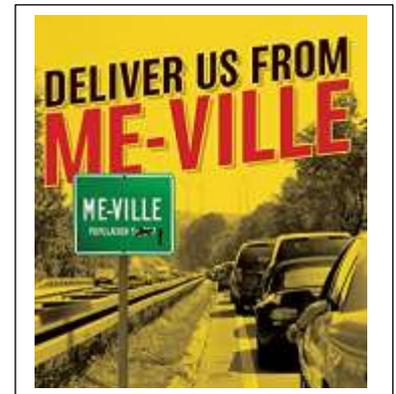
The Lord's Prayer calls us to acknowledge our true king:

**Matthew 6:9-13 (paraphrased)**

<sup>9</sup> Our Father who lives in the heavens, may your authoritative name be given the reverent recognition you deserve (earth living with allegiance to our true sovereign).

<sup>10</sup> We request your kingship be restored over the whole world. May your purposes—what you want done—be done on earth, just as happens in your heavenly realm.

<sup>11</sup> We ask you to provide fresh bread for us all each day. (Trusting you as our provider, we have no need to hoard resources as "mine" while others starve.)



<sup>12</sup> Release us from the obligations to you that we haven't fulfilled. We've already celebrated our standing as your community by releasing each other from the obligations we've held against each other.

<sup>13</sup> As you lead us, don't take through testing times where we might turn away from your authority. Instead, deliver us from the evil that has oppressed the planet so long, to live under your governance where we belong.

## Living reconciliation

Why should self-focused postmodern people believe the good news of Jesus? A sales pitch won't win them. They need to see the good news in action: God reconciling people to his kingship, and to each other.

Immediately after the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said that if you don't forgive people, God won't forgive you either (Matthew 6:14-15). This makes no sense in the framework of the postmodern idea that forgiveness is a private moment, "just between you and God."

Jesus was describing the life of the community. The "you" is plural — you all, together. If we hold out on forgiving each other from the obligations we hold against each other, we can never experience what it's like to be a community knows God's forgiveness.

### **Matthew 6:14-15 (paraphrased)**

<sup>14</sup> For if you together release people from their obligations when they step out of line, your sovereign father who rules from heaven will also release you all from your obligations. <sup>15</sup> But if you together don't release people, your sovereign father won't release you all either.

If we cannot reconcile with each other, on what basis can we claim to be the community that's been put back together under God? No one will believe us, because it's not a living reality.

The gospel is the story of reconciliation. In the beginning, God created heaven (his place) and earth (our place), in right relationship, so we functioned as earthly images of our heavenly ruler. He was really pleased with that setup (Genesis 1).

But his people grasped power that belonged in God's hands, using that power to harm each other. The whole Biblical narrative is the story of God reaching out to reconcile with a world that is now ruled by sin because of this coup against his kingship. The story of how our true sovereign reconciles with the rebels is astounding! God doesn't force himself on people: in his anointed ruler (Christ), we see him standing

unarmed before the rulers of this world who do away with him because he claims to be king.

Here's the good news:

### **2 Corinthians 5:18 (original translation)**

In the Messiah, God was reconciling the world to himself, not holding the rebels' trespasses against them, laying out his message of reconciliation.

His goal is to reconcile heaven and earth. The goal of the story is the marriage supper: the rebellion has failed. The wedding's back on.

## **Conclusion**

The way we reconcile with each other now is the gospel in action.

The rebellion made enemies out of brothers (Genesis 4:8).

The reconciliation makes brothers out of enemies (Hebrews 4:24).

That's the good news.

## **Memory Work**

### **2 Corinthians 5:18 (NIV)**

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

## **Group Questions**

1. How are you feeling after the way we've describe the gospel? Anyone feeling like the rug has been pulled from under your feet? Are you okay?
2. How do you relate to God? Is he someone who stays in the religious dimension (church worship and private prayer)? Or is he the political sovereign in charge of the public life of all nations?
3. If "invite Jesus into your heart" is not the gospel, what is the gospel? What words can we use to explain the good news?

## Take Home Exercise

Choose someone you know well enough to sit down and enjoy a coffee or a beer—someone who doesn't already attend church. Arrange a time to enjoy their company. Before you meet, pray for them and their family, asking Father's wisdom for anything they need.

When you meet, be a friend by exploring how they're doing. If they have issues with work, family, finances, or health, just be there as a friend to let them talk through what's important for them (without having to fix it for them).

If they are not facing big issues, invite them to share something of their beliefs. Don't compare them to your own beliefs: listen and try to understand what they think, feel, and believe. What experiences have led them to this point? What has that journey been like? Reflect both the content and feelings of what they share.

As you listen, ask yourself, "Where is God in this person's life?" Do you see God at work in their journey? What do they already know? What are they still searching for? The goal is not to convert them to your way of thinking, but to genuinely care for them—to love them by listening to them.

Afterwards, have a conversation with God about what happened. Is this something you do all the time, or was it unusual to share like that? Could you see where God was already at work in their life? How do you see their Heavenly Father caring for them?

Next Monday night, be ready to share with your group regarding how this experience went.