
Freed to Proclaim: Evangelism and Discipleship

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“I’m a Christian, but...” This is a frequent comment from Christians in the U.S. American twenty-first-century society, particularly in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).¹ In a society where we are surrounded by people of various religious and non-religious traditions—and where there is a frequent distortion of who Jesus was, is, and will be for us—it is the right time for Christians to reclaim how we define and confess the Gospel. Especially in the ELCA—which has the name “Evangelical,” relating to the “Good News” (the Gospel!) in its name—it often feels like “evangelical” is a dirty word used to describe a certain group of “those Christians” but is not embraced as a matter for discipleship in ELCA congregations. In part, this is because we have grown accustomed to listening to the louder voices and have been intimidated to join the discussion. However, it also means we do not do a thorough enough job of teaching congregations how to define and confess the Gospel for themselves, especially in today’s society that is no longer primarily Christian.

At the end of the 1980s, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, British theologian and missionary, published his provocative text about how to define and proclaim the Gospel in a pluralist society.² Ours is not a new situation for Christianity, and it remains one of the questions that Christians ask today. In a society filled with “fake news,” a lack of trust in one another (especially those in authority), and what has been called a “post-truth” movement, it is urgent we determine how to define and confess the Gospel today, and what the Gospel means for us and the world. This article addresses that process, as it examines the way that different theologians have tried to deal with the challenge of defining and confessing the Gospel in their own times and places, as well as emphasizing why evangelism is an important, essential aspect of discipleship that needs to be reclaimed today.

While the challenge of defining and confessing the Gospel is one that largely appeals to theologians, it should be noted that this is not only the work of academic theologians. According to

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Kathryn Tanner, this is also an essential aspect of discipleship for all Christians:

In order to witness to and be a disciple of Jesus, every Christian has to figure out for [themselves] what Christianity is all about, what Christianity stands for in the world. Figuring that out is the primary task of systematic theology.³

By this standard, systematic theology is freed from the narrow confines of academia and is entrusted to the work of all Christians as an act of discipleship.

Dorothee Soelle writes: “I would like to offer an invitation to theological thinking because I want to communicate something of the joy in doing theology, of the enthusiasm which can come over one and also turn to anger in the face of a botched theology which belittles human beings and reduces God to a potentate.”⁴ For all Christians, our understanding of what Christianity—specifically the Gospel—is and why it matters that we interact with others and the world around us shapes the way in which we view our relationship with the Triune God. We are able to talk about God because of the relationship that God has established with us, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit. As Soelle observes: “I think that faith does not come from theology, from reflective acceptance, but conversely, that faith, the experience of God, comes first, and

1. In honor of Dr. Norma Cook Everist, whose published work includes two books on evangelism: Norma Cook Everist, ed., *Christian Education as Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) and Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nesson, eds., *Forming an Evangelizing People: Perspectives and Questions for Use in the Church* (Dubuque: Wartburg Theological Seminary, 2005).

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

3. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), xiii.

4. Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1990), 1.

reflective acceptance is a second stage.”⁵ Our faith does not come from having the right words to describe God, rather we come to understand and talk about God through faith. If we focus too much on having the right words to talk about God, theologians, not the Triune God, become the subject. We forget that we are saved by what God in Christ through the Spirit already has done for us.

As Christians, our theological articulation of the Gospel must remain grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity. Catherine Mowry LaCugna expresses this well in *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life*:

I hope the reader will see that the doctrine of the Trinity is not above all a theory about God’s ‘internal self-relatedness’ but an effort to articulate the basic faith of Christians. In Jesus Christ, the ineffable and invisible God saves us from sin and death; by the power of the Holy Spirit, God continues to be altogether present to us, seeking everlasting communion with all creatures. Christianity and Christian theology simply cannot do *without* a trinitarian doctrine of God that articulates the heart of this faith.⁶

LaCugna’s statement is timely and helpful as Christians address what is at stake for the Christian faith in the world today, namely the heart of faith: how we define and confess the Gospel, understood as the saving and redemptive work that has been done for us by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. If we neglect any Person of the Trinity, we cannot fully articulate the unique identity of the Blessed and Holy Trinity, the decisive action of what the Triune God has done for us, and how the Triune God continues to impact our lives today. We confess a distortion of the Christian faith if our confession does not include all three Persons of the Trinity.

While our articulation of the Gospel is grounded in a Trinitarian understanding of what God in Christ through the Spirit has done for us—namely Jesus Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection—this does not mean that we are all required to have the same understanding of what the Gospel means in our lives. Newbigin writes: “This is why we have to listen to the witness of the whole Church of all places and ages. [Christ’s] word of judgment and grace comes to each person in unique and often mysterious ways.”⁷ While we remain with a common core of what the Gospel means, these understandings are impacted by the culture in which we were raised.

This can be observed in denominational differences as well. For example, in the major work that was the fruit of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue (national and international), the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*, the two churches reflected on past condemnations of each other, in order

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to come to a common understanding about how to describe the justifying work of Christ’s death and resurrection. The *JDDJ* states: “... [The present *Joint Declaration*] does encompass a consensus of basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.”⁸ While these churches have come to “a” common understanding on the Doctrine of Justification, they recognize that with other topics on which there is ongoing division, the *JDDJ* has created space for the evolving, creative, and reforming work of the Holy Spirit to continue to shape the dialogue moving forward.⁹

This can also be recognized in the liberation theologies that have developed in recent decades, such as Latin American liberation theology, black theology, queer theology, womanist theology, and feminist theology—just to name a few. Carl E. Braaten has been critical of these approaches to theology, arguing that liberation theology is in conflict with “the Christian gospel of freedom,”¹⁰ and that “the root cause of radical pluralism is the triumph of experience as the source and criterion of theological reflection.”¹¹ The core of the Gospel is at stake for Braaten, however, it should be argued that the core of the Gospel—the salvific and redemptive work of God in Christ through the Spirit—remains central to these liberating theological interpretations. We can only understand the Gospel through our own experiences in the world. It is a beautiful gift of the Spirit that we are free to talk about God relationally from our experiences with God.

Dismissing our experiences of God will have a detrimental effect on our understanding of evangelism. It is through faith that we come to talk about God for us and for the world, and it is through theology that we come to have deeper faith. Soelle writes: “Theology is not there for its own sake but to help us grow in faith.”¹² Theology must be freed from these narrow confines if theological thinking and evangelism are to become more

8. Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 11.

9. Here, particular attention is drawn to paragraph 43 of the *JDDJ* document.

10. Cf. Carl E. Braaten, *That All May Believe: A Theology of the Gospel and the Mission of the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 87.

11. Braaten, *That All May Believe*, 33.

12. Soelle, *Thinking about God*, 6.

5. Soelle, *Thinking about God*, 3.

6. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), ix.

7. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 153.

prominent aspects of how the church understands discipleship. Theology is not simply about having the perfect words but involves growing in deeper relationship with the Triune God. Hugh T. Kerr asserts: “But we misunderstand the function of theology if we expect it to give definitive and conclusive answers to all perplexities and puzzles of life. . . . First comes faith, the gospel, and one’s own most cherished religious convictions as well as one’s doubts, anxieties, and questions. Whenever we reflect on these, we are theologizing—whether we know it or not.”¹³ Faith is God’s gift; theology is how we talk about this gift.

When we talk about this gift, it is always centered in the simple Gospel—that God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth; lived and taught among humanity; and suffered, died, and rose again to free us from sin, death, and the devil. We have a tendency to make our articulation of the Gospel either too complex or too simplistic, missing Kerr’s point that we should focus on the simple Gospel.¹⁴ This is the core of the Gospel, the gift that we receive. Yet, how this gift impacts our lives will inherently be different according to our human experiences. While some may argue that forms of theology arising from experiences of suffering threaten the center of the Gospel, it is more accurate to understand them as different means by which we receive the same gift, because our experiences of sin, suffering, and death are not the same. As one person hears law, another might hear gospel.

From the perspective of one who identifies as gay, transgender, or bisexual, this freedom involves being able to truly live as God created them to be, trusting that God loves them as they identify. Homophobia or transphobia does not have the last word, but the Gospel does. We are invited to trust that the Gospel has the last word and, that through Christ’s death and resurrection, we receive eternal life. We are given the gift of new, eternal life in Christ, as described by Tanner:

Eternal life infiltrates, then, the present world of suffering and oppression, to bring life, understood as a new pattern or structure of relationships marked by life-giving vitality and renewed purpose. Eternal life is a present reality; we possess now, in a fashion, life in God as a source of all good and need not wait for death to pass from the realm of death to that life.¹⁵

If one believes that the demonic “isms,” the systems of oppression, in our world do not have the last say, but rather Gospel, then we are freed to go out in service to the neighbor to fight against and break down those structures that oppress all of God’s children.

While this looks different from the way that the church, at least in the United States, has understood evangelism, this is one of the ways we evangelize. It does not mean that we must be out on the street corner telling people to repent or they are going to hell; instead, it is an invitation to share about our experience of

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God’s life-giving gift through word and deed, for the sake of the neighbor. Tanner succinctly claims: “God saves in and through the living of a human life.”¹⁶ This should not be understood as the works that we must do to be saved by God, but rather sharing the gifts that we have received from God is the only response we can have to such a gift. It is not ours to possess and hold onto but is ours to share with others. We do this by living our lives in Christ according to our understanding of the universal and particular human condition: sin and the brokenness of the world that surrounds us.

In U.S. American society one of the biggest difficulties in defining and confessing the Gospel is the human need to be right, at the expense of the neighbor. The need to have the right words about God has led to condemnation of the neighbor who does not believe the exact same way. Instead of loving our neighbor and sharing the gift that God has given to us—freedom from sin, death, and the devil in Christ through the Holy Spirit—some people preach hatred and condemnation as the word of God. We put God into a box so that God is for us and against them; yet God in Christ through the Spirit came for the sake of the whole cosmos, not just a select set of human beings.

The key for releasing God from the box where God has been confined is the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. We come to know God through the Incarnate Son, Jesus of Nazareth. As Tanner explains:

Christ is the key, we have seen, to human nature, and to the sort of grace human nature was made to enjoy. But Christ is also the key. . . . to the trinity and its significance for us. . . . Because he is the Word, Jesus Christ displays in his human life the relationships that the Word has to the other members of the trinity; as a human being he leads, in short, a trinitarian way of life.¹⁷

13. Hugh T. Kerr, *The Simple Gospel: Reflections on Christian Faith*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), vii–viii.

14. Kerr, *The Simple Gospel*.

15. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 112.

16. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 91.

17. Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), <https://www.cambridge-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/core/books/christ-the-key/F068A5952A12D85660699F16DC2589EE> (accessed Dec. 6, 2021), 140.

Centered in Christ as the key to understand the relationships among the Trinity, Christians gain a better understanding of how humans live in relationship with God, one another, and all of creation. In doing so, we are oriented again toward the neighbor, as we are continually invited to share the good news of what God has done in Christ through the Spirit, which we ourselves have experienced, with our neighbors in word and deed.

When we evangelize, we share the good news of what God in Christ has done through the Spirit because this sharing is the joyful response to God's gift. We share this good news because of the love that we have for our neighbor through the Triune God, not because we are trying to convert them. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, not that of any human being. At the same time, God works through created means, such as language, experience, and the human witness.

This same God entered human time and experience through the incarnation to dwell with creation most intimately. Our articulation of the Gospel must remain centered on this reality.

God wants to give us the fullness of God's own life through the closest possible relationship with us as that comes to completion in Christ. In the incarnation one finds the immediate convergence of the most disparate things – God and humanity suffering under the weight of sin and death – as the means by which the goods of God's own life are to be conveyed to us in fulfillment of God's original intentions for us.¹⁸

Because God entered fully into relationship with a broken humanity, we are able to experience proleptically the fullness of life in Christ in the here and now. Our response to this goodness involves our work for the sake of the world, even when it seems hopeless or like Christianity does not matter anymore. This does not mean that we will never experience suffering or that our suffering is a punishment from God, as with some who preach the "Prosperity Gospel" might suggest.¹⁹ Nor does it mean that we are sent into the world to coerce or persuade others to believe in God. Rather, it is an invitation to see others as ones whom God loves and for whom Christ died, and to live as if we truly believe that to be true.

We are freed to reclaim our identity in and with Christ, not arrogantly over and against the world but an identity as those who live in and care deeply about the reality of our world. When talking about the bleak reality of the end of the world, Tanner notes: "Irrespective of any likelihood that one's actions to better the world will succeed, and even though one knows all one's achievements will come to nothing with the world's end, one is obligated to act simply because this is the only way of living that makes sense in light of one's life in God."²⁰

18. Tanner, *Christ the Key*, vii.

19. The Prosperity Gospel holds that if you truly are Christian, you will be financially prosperous; prosperity is seen as a sign of one's authentic Christian identity.

20. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 122.

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Especially amid today's reality of violence and ecological crisis, our relationship with God can provide hope in the midst of our daily reality, not just at the end of life. Through our proclamation of the Gospel, we are able to provide hope for our neighbors. Proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed is part of our baptismal calling as disciples, as we are saved by grace through faith alone and freed to love and serve the neighbor for the neighbor's sake in God's name, not to merit some reward but specifically because they belong to God's beloved creation.

As people grounded in Scripture, who are called to faith in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, we are entrusted to share the Good News of the salvation of the world as revealed to us through Christ Jesus.²¹ We are able to do so because "God so loved the world that [God] gave [God's] only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."²² With Christ's inbreaking into human reality, God entered into human time and space that we might have eternal life. Grounded in this love, we love the world. We love the world enough that we dare show up as our authentic selves, without watering down our religious beliefs.

Living as our authentic selves—created and loved by God—is not an easy task. Today's society thrives on making idols of consumerism and capitalism, claiming money is the ultimate sign of power (sometimes also God's favor!) and that consuming products will make us happier. Yet, all of those fall short because it is through God alone that we receive life, healing, and forgiveness. All other ways of meaning will not be able to stand in the face of the suffering that exists in our world. God in Christ took the suffering of the world upon himself so that we might live in freedom. Let us now live boldly as to believe this is true!

For those who fall into the category of "quiet Lutherans," I know that this will be difficult as many loud voices in the public sphere proclaim their interpretation of the Gospel. Yet through the freedom that we experience in Christ through the Holy Spirit, we can begin to reclaim our identity as believers in Christ who are called to share the Gospel. We may not always have the right words, yet we trust that God's grace abounds. This article seeks to define and confess the Gospel today. I offer it as honest witness to turn the key and release the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from the boxes in which we have tried to trap our Triune God. God is *for* the whole cosmos.

21. Galatians 1:12.

22. John 3:16.