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# ‘According to the Scriptures’ The Whole Gospel in Biblical Revelation

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## I Introduction

Our purpose in this meeting of the Lausanne Theology Working Group (LTWG) is to reflect on the meaning of the phrase: ‘The Whole Gospel’. I have undertaken to lead our thinking on what it means in relation to the revelation of God in the whole Bible. I want to do this because too often, it seems to me, evangelicals when they speak the word ‘gospel’ have in mind one or two key texts, or a particular articulation of what they assume the ‘good news’ is. And when they think about evangelization as ‘spreading the gospel’, again, it is often a single concept of what ‘the gospel’ means that they have in mind.

I want to urge the Lausanne movement as a whole to be fully biblical (in line with its own DNA from the Lausanne Covenant). By this I mean three things: Firstly, the Bible as a whole *conveys* the whole good news. God has

revealed himself through this complex phenomenon we call the canon of Scripture. We must allow all of it to inform and govern what we understand the gospel to be and what we then commit ourselves to live out and proclaim.

Secondly, the Bible as a whole, in all its canonical parts, *contributes* to the good news. It is not something to be found in only the New Testament, or just the Gospels. All that God has spoken in his word is relevant to the good news we have heard and are to pass on. Thirdly, the Bible as a whole must function to control the *criteria* by which we are able to discern what makes the good news truly good, and what is actually bad news disguised as good, ie, to distinguish the true gospel from the many popular but false alternatives.

So, if we are to be the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world, we absolutely must go to the whole Bible for the comprehensive truth of the good news. In this paper, for reasons of space, I have been able to survey only the first two points above. My hope is that as Lausanne

engages in the necessary task of defending the biblical gospel and exposing and rejecting all false gospels, it will indeed turn to the whole counsel of God in all the Scriptures to do so.

## II The Bible as a Whole Conveys the Whole Gospel

In what ways does the whole Bible convey good news? I suggest at least three: by its existence, by its story, and by its central witness.

### 1 By its existence

The Bible is the record and product of the God who has chosen neither to remain hidden from us, his human creatures, nor to approach us only in anger at our rebellion and disobedience. God reaches out to us in love and grace, with words of promise and acts of redemption. The Bible is where we find these, and so, in and of itself, it is good news. Here is what I have written in relation to this point, in relation to the Bible being missional by its very existence.

A missional hermeneutic of the Bible begins with the Bible's very existence. For those who affirm some relationship (however articulated), between these texts and the self-revelation of our creator God, the whole canon of Scripture is a missional phenomenon in the sense that it witnesses to the self-giving movement of this God towards his creation and towards us, human beings in God's own image, but wayward and wanton. The writings which now comprise our Bible are

themselves the product of, and witness to, the ultimate mission of God.<sup>1</sup>

The whole Bible, then, actually constitutes good news by its existence as proof of the loving self-revelation of God intended for our redemption.<sup>2</sup> There would be no good news if God did not love us; there would be no knowledge of that good news if the story of God's love and its redemptive achievement were not recorded for us in the Scriptures.

### 2 By its story

The reason the Bible as a whole conveys good news is because it tells the whole story of what God has done to save the world. This narrative nature of the gospel is of utmost importance, especially in relating to other religions, since the only reason we can say that there is no salvation in other religions is *not* because they are inferior as religions (as if our religion were better; as if religion were the thing that saves anybody, when the Bible says religion saves nobody—only God saves), *but* because other religions do not tell this story, the story that constitutes the saving good news.

Once again, here are some extracts from what I have written elsewhere:

When the Bible talks about salvation, God is the key, the centre, the prime actor. Because salvation, according to the Bible, is the prop-

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Taber, 'Missiology and the Bible', *Missiology* 11 (1983), 232.

erty of God, then this means that salvation can never be a matter of *human* initiation or human achievement. Salvation is not something that we human beings can accomplish or earn by any means, *even including religion*. Salvation is in God's hands. It is not something that any human religion can offer as a reward for doing this or that ritual, or following this or that practice. Salvation belongs to God, not to any religion.

According to the Bible, salvation is initiated by God's grace, achieved by God's power, offered on God's terms, accomplished by God's Son, secured by God's promises, and guaranteed by God's sovereignty.

Salvation is fundamentally a story—*The Story*. Salvation is constituted within the all-encompassing biblical meta-narrative that forms the biblical worldview. The Bible is fundamentally a grand narrative with four major parts or sections: **creation, fall, redemption in history, and new creation**. And salvation, as biblically defined, is all that is contained in the third and fourth parts of that great story: redemption in history and the future hope of new creation. Salvation spans the great arch of history from God's covenant with Abraham to the second coming of Christ.

The story of salvation is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. The Bible is, above all else, the story of salvation....The gospel is not somebody's theory. It is not

somebody's *good idea*. The gospel is the *good news* about what the biblical God has done, is doing and will finally do, within the history of the world. That is why it is so important, as I have repeatedly emphasized, that we use our whole Bible in coming to an understanding of salvation, and not rely solely on a few isolated verses of doctrinal teaching from Paul's letters.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 By its central witness to Christ

It is a truism that the whole Bible bears witness to Christ. There are, of course, all kinds of hermeneutical alligators lurking in the placid waters of that affirmation—not to mention homiletical traps as well. But still, inasmuch as the good news of the gospel is essentially what God has done in Christ, it is to the whole Bible that we must go to find out the comprehensive richness of what that is.

For us, as for Jesus himself, it is from the scriptures of the Old Testament that we learn the rich contours of Jesus' identity and mission: who he was and what he came to accomplish. It is the Old Testament story of Israel that declares the mission of the God of Israel—for them and through them for the world of nations. That was the mission that Jesus came to see to its fulfillment. From the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament we understand the fullest significance of his life, death and resurrection. All that he said and did, in life and death, must be received

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3 Christopher J.H. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 39-40.

within the total context of the biblical world historically and the biblical revelation theologically.<sup>4</sup>

### III The Bible as a Whole Contributes to the Whole Gospel

As I pondered how best to explain what I mean by that affirmation, the following two questions came to mind. Firstly, what makes the good news good? And, secondly, what do all the major parts of the Bible contribute to the good news being good?

I worked my way mentally through the Bible, and the list grew longer and longer. Many of the points below need little elaboration. But the cumulative effect is quite stunning (at least to me!). There is just so much good news in the Bible! And so many ways in which it is *good* news. When I finished my list, I felt like singing the doxology, and indeed there may be the seeds of some very powerful liturgy here. With the example of Psalm 136, we need not fear a bit of repetition!

Now at this point I should correct a false impression that might arise from the following survey. I am well aware of the danger of etymological fallacy combined with invalid reverse logic. That is to say, just because the word ‘gospel’ translates *evangelion*, which means ‘good news’, I do not imagine

that one can make any kind of ‘good news’ the equivalent of the biblical gospel. To say, ‘the gospel is good news, therefore all good news is gospel’, would be like saying ‘dogs have four legs, therefore all four legged creatures are dogs’.

So although I do want to show the great variety of ways in which the Bible brings us good news, I do not imply that every one of these is in itself capable of being equated with ‘the gospel’, certainly as the New Testament uses that term. However, what I certainly do want to affirm is that, were it not for the fundamental gospel truth that the whole Bible conveys to us, of God’s grace and love and redeeming actions in history climaxing in the work of Jesus Christ, there would be no other good news of any sort to tell in the universe.

The same kind of point could be made about the many examples we might give of love, goodness or beauty in human history generally. Ultimately all of these flow from and depend upon the fact that God himself is the origin and sustainer of all that is loving, good and beautiful. He is the ontological source of any such particulars in human life. It is because of the love, goodness and beauty of God that we can experience such things.

Similarly, it is because there is good news rooted and grounded in the character and redemptive action of God, that human life can have multiple and ordinary examples of good news—such as the Bible portrays in great variety and richness.

Having made that point clear, let us survey the many dimensions of the good news the Bible conveys to us, all of which are fundamentally good news in and through and because of Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> For an extensive discussion of how we are to understand the centrality of Christ to the whole Bible, or how the Old Testament relates to him, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992), reprinted by Monarch Books and InterVarsity Press (USA), 2005.

## 1 Torah

### a) Genesis 1-11

*It is good news that we know our Creator:* Too many versions of 'the gospel' begin only with Genesis 3 (and end only at Calvary). In such versions, the good news is confined to the solution to our problem of human sin. Now there is no doubt that this is at the heart of the story, and indeed constitutes the longest part of the biblical narration. But when confined to that, we lose the beginning and the ending, Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22, which are universal in scope, encompassing the whole creation.

*It is good news that we live, not in a chaos but a creation,* that we are not the product of blind chance, but of benevolent purpose; that we are made in the image of the one true living personal God, not the spawn of competing malevolent gods.

*It is good news that we know the depth and breadth of our sin:* The value of any remedy depends on the seriousness of the sickness it cures. And the seriousness of the sickness can be known only by accurate diagnosis. False diagnosis leads to false or inadequate prescription, with fatal results. The Bible tells it as it is. Part of the good news that the Bible offers is its radical, comprehensive and uncompromising analysis of the bad news.

From Genesis 3 onwards, the nature of our human predicament is portrayed with ruthless simplicity and candour. If there is to be good news at all, it will have to be a very big answer to a very big problem, which involves every human person, every dimension of the human person (spiritual, physical,

intellectual, emotional, relational, social), and every culture throughout the rolling ages of history. The Bible's portrayal of the scale and scope of our sin contributes to the scale and scope of the gospel's remedy.

*It is good news that God is committed to life on earth:* The primal history from Eden to Babel includes several indications of God's merciful commitment to human well-being, in spite of the evil in which we wallow and revel. Genesis 3:15, sometimes referred to as the 'proto-evangelium' (the first declaration of good news), promises that the serpent will not have the final victory but will be crushed by a son of Eve. The story of Enoch shows that God's power is greater than the otherwise universal reign of death. But especially the story of the flood and its aftermath in the covenant with Noah explicitly declares God's commitment to life on earth.

*It is good news that God has not abandoned the nations:* The ethnic diversity of human nations is a creational good, which Genesis 10 implies was God's way of enabling the creation mandate of 'filling the earth' to be fulfilled. It ended up in arrogant stasis at the tower of Babel, in Genesis 11. But God's answer was not to destroy the nations, but to confuse their language such that they could not unite in schemes of totalitarian self-aggrandisement. So the scattering of the nations across the face of the earth continues; the redemption of the nations from the curse of sin and separation from God still awaits.

### b) Genesis 12-50

*It is good news that God has promised to bless the nations:* When we come to

God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, we know we are on 'gospel' territory, because Paul actually refers to this promise as the Scripture 'proclaiming the gospel in advance' (Gal. 3:8). It is a good way of talking about this promise, since the rest of the biblical story of redemption which constitutes the gospel begins here, and does not end until the promise is fully realized in the great assembly of the redeemed from all nations in Revelation. In fact, just as the promise of Genesis 12:3 needs to be seen against the background of the 'tribes, languages and nations' of Genesis 10, so does the picture of the fulfilment of that promise when people from 'every nation, tribe, people and language' in Revelation 7:9 gather in worship of the Lamb of God. The gospel is for nations.

As evangelicals we easily neglect this dimension of the gospel, by reducing it to a message of individual salvation. The biblical story of salvation that constitutes the gospel begins and ends with God and the nations, not just God and individuals.

*It is good news that God has called his people to be a community of righteousness and justice:* God's answer to the problem of human sin was not to whisk individual sinners off to heaven every now and then. It was rather the much longer-term project of creating a community, starting with Abraham, through whom God would bring blessing to the nations. This is to say that at one level, the gospel of God is inextricably linked to the people of God. Our doctrine of salvation cannot be severed from our doctrine of the church.

But what is also clear from the beginning is that this was to be a distinctive community, not only in reli-

gious commitment, but in ethical behaviour. Genesis 18:19 is a key text on this point. It expresses the very purpose of Abraham's election in terms of an ethical community walking in the way of the LORD (instead of the way of Sodom), and doing righteousness and justice, *so that* the LORD could bring about what he had promised Abraham, namely, blessing to all nations.

Herein lies the source of a trajectory in which election, mission and ethics are integrally linked within the meaning of the gospel itself, a trajectory that stretches ultimately to the way Paul speaks of the gospel as an ethically as well as a redemptively transformative message.

*It is good news that God works sovereignly for good in the midst of human evil:* The book of Genesis begins and ends with the goodness of God, the goodness of creation, and the goodness of God's sovereign planning. The words of Joseph in Genesis 50:20 echo the good creation of chapter 1, and point forward to the good plans of God for his people (eg, Jer. 29:11), and the eternal perspective of God's total gospel goodness in Romans 8:28-30.

There is good news fundamentally because God is good and plans good. The cross is the supreme demonstration of the truth of Genesis 50:20, universally applied.

### c) Exodus to Deuteronomy

*It is good news that Yahweh is the God whose character is both justice and compassion:* Genesis illustrated the justice and compassion of God, in stories such as Sodom and Gomorrah (cf Gen. 18:25), or Hagar (Gen. 16, 21). But Exodus provides both the paradigmatic

historical demonstration of the liberating justice of God, and the definitive articulation of the character of Yahweh that it proved. Exodus 34:6-7 becomes a theme text in the Psalms and Prophets for the merciful and redemptive character of God, and of course it also underpins the way Paul describes the gospel as the work of this God, accomplishing precisely and simultaneously the perfect demonstration of God's compassion and God's justice.

*It is good news that Yahweh is King and not Pharaoh:* The first significant mention of the kingdom of God comes in the wake of God's great liberating act of justice in the exodus. Up to that point, the only king in the story is the Pharaoh, and his kingship is the model of human empire, blasphemously arrogant and oppressive. The climax of Moses' song after the crossing of the sea is that it had now been proved who was the real king. 'The LORD will reign, for ever and ever' (Ex. 15:18).

Yahweh is king (and not Pharaoh), and that is exceedingly good news, which the rest of the Bible celebrates in another great trajectory that stretches through many Psalms affirming the same thing, prophets who longed for it to be demonstrated in history, and climaxes with the proclamation by Jesus that the kingship of Yahweh had been decisively inaugurated in his own ministry. The gospel of the kingdom of God is another of those great unifying biblical themes, stretching from Exodus to Revelation.

*It is good news that God's redemptive action is comprehensive—socially, politically, economically and spiritually:* Since the exodus stands as the classic biblical model of God in redemptive action (it called forth almost the first

metaphorical use in the Bible of the 'redeem' vocabulary with God as subject, Ex. 15:13; the only earlier one being Jacob's testimony in Gen. 48:16). It is highly significant that what God actually did in the exodus was so comprehensive. The people of Israel were suffering a form of bondage in Egypt that was political (they were an ethnic minority with no independent status); economic (they were being exploited as slave labour for the economic benefit of the host nation); social (they were suffering gross interference in their family life); and spiritual (their slavery to Pharaoh stood in the way of their worship of Yahweh—the same word is used for slavery and worship in the text).

The good news that God sent through Moses was not that they would eventually escape to heaven when they died, but that God intended to deliver them from all four dimensions of their bondage, which he spectacularly did. The exodus thus provides the biblical gospel with a holistic content that does not just evaporate in the New Testament, but needs to be included in the totality of our biblical understanding.<sup>5</sup>

*It is good news that God's law was given in the context of grace, redemption and covenant:* There is an ethical demand to the gospel, as we hope to make clear throughout, but it is founded upon the priority of the redemptive grace of God. This is as true in the Old as in the New Testa-

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<sup>5</sup> The exodus, of course, is a major text and theme in holistic theologies of the gospel and mission. I have explored the topic more fully in Wright, *The Mission of God*, ch. 8.



ment. When Israel reached Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, the good news Moses had brought them in Egypt has now become a historical fact. God had brought them out. And in the crucial hinge text of Exodus 19:3-6, God emphasizes that divine initiative of salvation before calling for the response of covenant loyalty expressed in obedience to the law. The law, in fact, was given only on the foundation of redeeming grace (cf Deut. 6:20-25).

*It is good news that God called Israel to holistic obedience in every sphere of life:* ‘This God thinks of everything’, was how a young Indian described to me his experience of reading the Old Testament law for the very first time, even before he became a Christian. He was from a Dalit background and encountered the Bible only when he got to his university hostel (it was a Telugu Bible put in his bedroom by Christian students). What he meant was that the whole of human life is represented in the covenant response that God called for from Israel on the basis of his redeeming grace—personal, sexual, parental, filial, agricultural, commercial, judicial, political, international.

This is good news because it meant (as the prophets saw very clearly) that people could not claim to please God through religious rituals while neglecting the social and relational dimensions of human life. The God of Israel would not accept the worship of those who oppressed the poor and needy. For a Dalit, this was very good news. ‘I never knew such a God existed’, he added, referring to the God of comprehensive compassion and justice that he found in the Old Testament. This understanding of the biblical God did not diminish or change when he was

introduced to Jesus Christ and received the gospel of personal salvation, as he later did.

*It is good news that God chose to dwell among his people:* In a world in which God had driven human beings from the garden of Eden, and from which (in a sense), humans had driven God by their sin and rebellion, it is good news that God chose to make a home among his people, through the tabernacle in the wilderness, and eventually the temple in Jerusalem. Fundamental misunderstandings of this reality could arise, as the prophets discerned and Stephen pointed out (Acts 7). But the essential truth of a God who chose to be present rather than distant is part of the gospel that the New Testament sees fulfilled in the incarnation, the indwelling Spirit, the metaphor of the whole church as the temple of God, and the hope of a new creation in which God once more dwells with his redeemed people.

Good news indeed, from a tent of cloth and skins, to a new creation that needs no such localized presence for God will be everywhere present with his people. Another trajectory stretches from God tabernacling with his people in the wilderness, to the incarnation itself, when ‘the word became flesh and “tabernacled” among us’ (Jn. 1:14).

*It is good news that God provided means of atonement for the weak and sinful:* The sacrificial system in itself was good news inasmuch as it took account of human failure and provided a God-given means for people to be restored to fellowship with God and inclusion in the community. But the particular good news for the poor was that those who could not afford the normally pre-

scribed animal sacrifices could bring either a pair of doves, or even a few litres of flour, and have them counted as a full blood sacrifice (Lev. 5:5-13). Clearly, the efficacy of the sacrifice in accomplishing atonement lay in the grace of God and his willingness to forgive, not in the material or the size of the sacrifice itself.

*It is good news that God anticipated Israel's failure, and built it into his long term plans of grace and redemption:* The book of Deuteronomy is remarkable in that it both begins and ends in failure. But in neither case is God defeated. It begins with the failure of the exodus generation to take the land of promise. But God offers a fresh choice and challenge to the following generation. It ends with the anticipated failure of the generations to come, after the death of Moses. And yet again, it holds out the promise of hope even in the face of a broken covenant and calamitous curses, of grace after judgment (Deut. 29-31).

This sequence of divine promise, human failure, and sovereign divine grace weaving even that failure into plans of gospel grace and a hope-filled future, is what ultimately shapes the New Testament understanding, articulated by Paul in Romans. The gospel is good news precisely because it takes human failure so seriously, yet refuses to be defeated by it, and uses it to accomplish God's redemptive purpose. The cross, again, is the supreme example.

## 2 The Prophets

### a) The former prophets

*It is good news that God persisted with his saving purpose in the highly ambigu-*

*ous world of Israel in their land:* the history of Old Testament Israel is so fraught with failure, rebellion and judgment that it is perhaps difficult to discern much that is gospel within it. And yet the very fact that God persevered with this people, repeatedly challenged and summoned them to repentance and return, and eventually restored them after catastrophic judgment, is in itself a monument to the quality of divine love and patience that the Bible as a whole predicates of the gospel.

*It is good news that the exile and return from exile modelled both the sovereign judgment and the sovereign grace of God—in both respects foreshadowing the cross of Christ:* The New Testament Gospels present the life and work of Jesus as the completion of, and in many ways, a recapitulation of, the story of Old Testament Israel. Matthew, for example, weaves exodus themes into his birth and infancy narratives.

The story of the exile foreshadows the cross in several ways. It was an act of simultaneous human wickedness, violence at the hands of the Babylonians, and divine sovereign justice exercised by that means. In the same way, as Peter pointed out (Acts 2:23), the cross was the work of human evil and divine salvific planning. The crucial difference was that, whereas the exile is presented to us as a deserved act of punishment for Israel's sins, the cross was endured by one whose sinless life deserved no such thing. The sin was ours.

Similarly, the prophetic interpretation of the return from exile is that it was an act of God's free grace and forgiveness. The hope of Israel lay not in their native ability to survive, but in God's unbreakable will that they

should live, and that his mission through them to all nations would be fulfilled. Thus, the New Testament gospel affirms that in the death and resurrection of Christ, God has kept his promise to Israel, finally and fully (eg, Acts 13:32).

### b) The latter prophets

*It is good news that the prophets analysed and exposed the complex anatomy of personal and corporate sin:* We have already noted the radical diagnosis of sin in the book of Genesis. To this, the prophets add layer after layer of insight and analysis. The stain of sin, as the prophets observed it, is deeply ingrained in every fibre of human life—individual, social, political, economic, etc. There is no part of human life that is free from it, and it is this profound analysis of the problem that makes their affirmation of God’s sovereign grace to be the astounding good news that it is.

*It is good news that the prophets persist in affirming the ultimate purpose of God to be redemption—for Israel and the nations and the whole creation:* Undoubtedly the greatest contribution that the prophets make to the biblical gospel is their refusal to give up hope in the God of Israel. However much Israel itself might fail in its covenant obligations, God would never abandon his promise that through Israel all the nations of the world would be blessed.

So they envisage that prospect in a rich variety of ways, in texts that portray the nations as being drawn to the worship of God, experiencing the salvation of God, called by the name of God, sharing the blessing of God, and ultimately included fully within the

people of God.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the prophetic gospel is good news for the whole creation, since God’s redemptive purpose includes it all (Isa. 65:17-25).

This great Old Testament gospel vision laid the foundation for the theology and practice of mission to the nations in the New Testament, and reminds us yet again that our understanding of the scope of the ‘whole gospel’ must go beyond individual salvation and have a national dimension, however we articulate that.

## 3 The Writings

### a) Psalms

*It is good news that we can worship the living God in response to his revelation and redemption, not as a mechanism to obtain them:* We have already seen that the gospel of exodus is that redeeming grace comes before law. Obedience is a response to grace. So is worship, and this is the gospel of the Psalms. We do not worship God in order to do him favours (eg, by feeding or placating him), or to persuade him to do us favours. On the contrary the whole thrust of Psalter worship is responsive to what God has done already, in the history of God’s people and in personal experience. Praise, therefore, in the Psalms is a gospel response to the sav-

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<sup>6</sup> The following texts will repay reflection in the light of this perspective: Is. 2:3-5; 19:19-25; 45:22-25; 49:6; 66:18-24; Jer. 4:2; 12:16; Amos 9:11-12; Jon.; Zeph. 3:9; Zech. 2:10-11; Mal. 1:11. This theme of God’s saving purpose for the nations is explored in much greater depth in Wright, *The Mission of God*, ch. 14.

ing work of God, not a legalistic effort to activate it.

*It is good news that relationship with God is intensely personal and involves the whole of life, including its pain, suffering and injustice:* Nevertheless, of course, praise in the Psalter is not a matter of happy thoughts or words, but is an acknowledgement of the reality and presence of God in all circumstances of life. It can therefore actually take the form of lament, the largest single category of Psalms.

The pervasive presence of lament in the Psalms is an essential part of the biblical gospel for at least two reasons. First, it recognizes that the whole of life is to be brought before God, is of interest to God, and can expect to feel the impact of God's character and action. Lament is holistic because no element of human experience lies outside God's concern. That is good news. And secondly, lament passionately believes that God's character is such that he must and ultimately will do something about evil (ie, finally destroy it and all who unrepentantly persist in it), and that is precisely the affirmation and hope of the gospel. Lament is the voice of trust in God's redemptive purpose in the midst of the long wait under the pressure of things that appear to deny it.

*It is good news that the worship of the living God will eventually be universal among the nations:* Like the prophets, the Psalms evince a mind-stretching imagination of faith which universalizes what Israel knew to be true for themselves in their own history into a remarkable vision of hope for all the nations on earth. Once again, there is no space to elaborate, but pausing to read the Psalms listed in the footnote

will establish this as one of the sources of the New Testament gospel for the nations, as clearly articulated and practised by Paul.<sup>7</sup>

## b) Wisdom

*It is good news that the world reflects the moral character of God (Proverbs):* The most universal part of the Old Testament canon is the wisdom literature, in the sense that it is open to and draws from the wisdom of surrounding nations, while recognizing the creation gifts of rationality, insight and experience in all peoples. Yet it still staunchly upholds the uniqueness of Yahweh, God of Israel, as the one whom we are to fear if we are even to start out on the road of wisdom. So there are elements of gospel grace in the way Wisdom links life on earth to the character and demands of God, in such a way that rational, spiritual and ethical spheres are integral to each other. To be wise is also to be godly and righteous.

To be ungodly or unjust is also to be foolish. Such insight is not in and of itself redemptive of course (and in the Old Testament Wisdom has to be set within the overarching narrative of redemption), but it does point to the nature of gospel wisdom, which sees all of these embodied in the person of Christ Jesus 'who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption' (1 Cor. 1:30).

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<sup>7</sup> Eg, Ps. 22:27-28; 47:7-9; 67; 72:17-19; 86:9; 87:4-6; 96; 102:13-15, 21-22; 117; 138:4-5; 145; 148:11-13. Consideration of some of these is also included in Wright, *The Mission of God*, ch. 14.

*It is good news that God can be known and trusted, against all that points in the opposite direction (Job), and that human wisdom is limited and not in itself redemptive, but is allowed to struggle with deep questions on the foundation of faith (Ecclesiastes):* The gospel implicit in Job and Ecclesiastes lies in the way they face up to some of the desperate contradictions of life in this fallen world (innocent suffering, loss, the apparent hiddenness of God, futility, unpredictability, death), and still continue to affirm the goodness and sovereignty of the one true living God and to hope in him.

To say that the cross and resurrection of Jesus constitute the ultimate answer to the questions posed by Job and Ecclesiastes, is of course true. But God has left them in the canon precisely so that we can see how seriously God himself takes these issues that trouble us so deeply, and thereby enables us not only to rejoice in the hope that the gospel provides, but to continue to wrestle with these things on the foundation of that faith and hope.

I hope this survey has not fallen into the trap of simply labelling everything that was remotely ‘good news’ in the Old Testament as functionally equivalent to the gospel, but rather has shown the rich and subtle ways in which multiple ‘good things’ that the Old Testament reflects on are either dimensions or anticipations or outworkings of the fundamental good news of what God has done for the world in and through Jesus Christ.

Because these Old Testament dimensions are so much less familiar, I have given more attention to them, and for reasons of space I will necessarily

have to handle the more familiar New Testament delineation of the good news in summary form.

## 4 The New Testament

### a) The Gospels

*It is good news that God kept his promise to Israel, and that Jesus as Messiah of Israel is also Saviour of the world:* All three synoptic Gospels take us back to God’s promises to Israel in their opening verses. John’s Gospel takes us back to creation. The New Testament thus begins by recognizing that the gospel it proclaims is founded upon all that we have just surveyed—the good news that is pervasively and holistically explicit and implicit throughout the Old Testament.

The New Testament gospel is not a sudden, exotic, new message never dreamt of before. It is the culmination of the biblical story, through which God’s saving message and action on behalf of Old Testament Israel has reached its climax in Jesus of Nazareth, and has thereby been released to bring about what had been promised to Abraham from the beginning—the blessing of all nations, through faith in Christ.

*It is good news that God became human and lived among us:* The incarnation is an essential part of the gospel, not only on the minimalistic grounds that for Jesus to die for us he first had to be born and live among us, but also on the intrinsic grounds that God chose to become human, the Word became flesh. The humanity of Jesus is utterly essential to the redemptive meaning of the cross, and it is also crucial to the universal significance of his resurrection for all creation.

*It is good news that the kingdom of God has come and is at work in the world:* The reign of God is a basic Old Testament affirmation—as a reality (his universal sovereignty over creation and history), and as a hope (that his reign would eventually be manifested, acknowledge and submitted to among all nations). The gospel proclaimed by Jesus was that that future hope was now beginning to be realized in and through his person, life and work.

*It is good news that Jesus demonstrated the quality of God's love in his life, the extent of God's love in his death, and the vindication of God's justice in his resurrection:* The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, of course, have to be affirmed as the very heart and soul of the biblical gospel. Whatever else is good news is good news because God was incarnate in the person of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth, bore our sins in our place on the cross, and rose again to defeat all the powers of evil and death.

#### b) Acts

*It is good news that God sent his Spirit, both universalizing and internalizing the presence of Jesus.* It is good news that with the gift of the Spirit, the new age of salvation is inaugurated. It is good news that the church was birthed as a community of forgiven sinners, committed to faith, love, care, justice, and costly witness. The church in its essence and character is actually part of the good news, not just the vehicle of it. It is good news that God has opened the door of salvation and covenant membership to people of all nations, as Luke illustrates from a Roman centurion in Acts 10 to the Roman capital in Acts 28.

#### c) Epistles

*It is good news that the gospel is so magnificent that only by many metaphors were the apostles able to articulate what God has accomplished through Christ.* It is good news that we are called to live out the truth of the gospel in transformed lives and communities.

#### d) Revelation

*It is good news that God is on the throne of the universe and that salvation belongs to him.* It is good news that the crucified Lamb of God reigns and all history is under his sovereign purpose. It is good news that God's people will survive and triumph over all that threatens to destroy them. It is good news that Jesus will return, the dead will be raised, God will bring all things to perfect justice, and evil will be destroyed. It is good news that there will be a new creation in which God will dwell among his redeemed humanity forever.

### IV 'According to My Gospel'

This is a phrase that Paul uses several times. Clearly he had an understanding of the good news in Christ that could be summed up in that one word. What did it signify?

In search of an answer to this question, I read through the whole Pauline corpus, noting every use of the word. My broad analysis of this suggests that Paul uses the word as shorthand for at least the following six things. In each case I list references in which Paul appears to use the term in these ways.

Firstly, the gospel is an account of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, understood in the light of the scriptures of the Old Testament, as the

means through which God has made our forgiveness possible. The gospel then, is good news about something that has happened in history, with a long pre-history. It is not merely a 'good idea', or a good myth that illuminates reality. It is first of all, historical facts in which God has accomplished salvation. It is what God has done for us that we could not do for ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, the gospel is therefore a message to be proclaimed, as all good news should be. It must be heard as 'a word', and on being heard, it needs to be received and believed. This message is to be preached to all nations, for it is precisely all nations that are in view in the scope of what God has done in Christ in fulfilment of his promise to Abraham. 'The work of the gospel', then, seems to refer primarily to this task of making the good news known by all means of communication possible and at whatever cost. There is an intrinsically verbal dimension to the gospel. It is a story that needs to be told in order that its truth and significance may be understood. And that significance is not only for individuals and nations, but ultimately for the redemption of the whole creation.<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, the gospel is thereby also truth that needs to be defended, against denial or perversion. So there

is a polemical dimension to the gospel. It exists in explicit contrast and conflict with other worldviews, and being a servant of the gospel necessarily involves costly struggle and spiritual battle.<sup>10</sup>

Fourthly, the gospel works transformation. The first aspect of its transformative power is that it transforms our status. Paul's message is that through the cross of Christ, the righteousness of Christ can become ours through faith in him, so that we can be *declared* righteous by God without violating his own justice. But furthermore, the status of Gentiles is transformed, along with believing Jews. From having been alienated from the covenantal grace of God, it is 'through the gospel' that Gentiles can enter into the same status with God as enjoyed hitherto by Old Testament Israel, so that the believing Jews and Gentiles can become one in Christ as a new humanity.<sup>11</sup> All the other metaphors that Paul uses to describe the work of the gospel in us have similarly transformative dimensions: redemption, reconciliation, adoption, and eternal life.

Fifthly, the second aspect of the gospel's transformative power is ethical. '*Repent and believe the gospel*', said Jesus (Mk. 1:15). Radical change of life goes along with faith in the good news. And when they asked John the Baptist what he meant by repentance, he was ruthlessly practical (Lk. 3:7-14). Paul agreed. The gospel involved

<sup>8</sup> Rom. 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:1-8; Gal. 1:11-12; 3:6-8; 2 Thes. 2:13-15 (which presents the story of the gospel in the same order as the story of Old Testament Israel—loved, chosen, saved, sanctified, glory); 2 Tim. 1:10; 2:8.

<sup>9</sup> Rom. 1:9,15; 15:16, 20; 1 Cor. 9:16, 23; 2 Cor. 4:3-4; Gal. 2:2, 7; 4:13; Eph. 1:13; 3:6-7; 6:19; Phil. 1:5; 2:22; 4:15; Col. 1:5, 23; 1 Thes. 2:2-9; 3:2; 2 Tim. 1:11.

<sup>10</sup> Gal. 1:6-9; 2:5, 14; Phil. 1:7, 27; 4:3; 1 Tim. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:8; Phlm. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Rom. 1:17 (read with 3:21-26); Gal. 3:6-29; Eph. 2:11-3:6.

a putting off of the filthy clothes of the old humanity and putting on the clothes that bore the aroma of Christ-likeness. So Paul's missionary goal was not evangelism only, in the sense of communicating the message, but nothing short of ethical transformation among those who received it by faith. His shorthand for this comes in the striking phrase with which he begins and ends his letter to the Romans—'obedience of faith among the nations'.

This is a vision steeped in Old Testament covenantal ethics and eschatological vision. And while Paul's whole understanding of the gospel was that it was the work of God's grace, not the achievement of our works, he was equally adamant that the whole point of grace being at work in us was to produce the fruit of lives that have been transformed, negatively from evil and positively in tirelessly doing good (Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 2:11-14).<sup>12</sup> The gospel that is intrinsically verbal is equally intrinsically ethical. There is no gospel where there is no change.

Finally, the gospel is the power of God at work in history and creation. For Paul this was something to marvel at and celebrate. The gospel seemed to have life of its own, such that Paul could personify it as being at work, active, and spreading. The great paradox of the cross—something shameful and absurd to Jew and Greek—was nothing to be ashamed of, for it was the very saving power of God that was transforming history and redeeming creation. All things that have been cre-

ated by Christ, and are being sustained by Christ, will be reconciled by Christ, through the blood of his cross. And, says Paul, 'This is the gospel' (Col. 1:15-23).<sup>13</sup>

## V Conclusion

If we could ask Paul what content he might give to Lausanne's phrase, 'the whole gospel', he might have taken even longer than this paper. But I think he would at least have urged us to understand that the whole gospel is

- a Christ-centred story to be told
- a hope-filled message to be proclaimed
- a revealed truth to be defended
- a new status to be received
- a transformed life to be lived
- a divine power to be celebrated.

And I believe, that in urging us to understand these dimensions, Paul would have directed us continually back to what he knew simply as 'the Scriptures'—our Old Testament, for it was 'in accordance with the Scriptures', that Jesus died and rose again for our salvation. Our whole gospel, then, must be drawn from the deep well of the whole Bible, and our mission must be integrated accordingly around its great resonant narrative of saving grace, its transforming demand for, and promise of, covenantal obedience, and its vibrant hope and vision of a new creation in which righteousness dwells, for God will dwell there with his redeemed humanity from every nation.

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<sup>12</sup> Rom. 1:5; 16:25-26; 2 Cor. 9:13; Phil. 1:27; 2 Thes. 1:8 (negatively); Tit. 2:11-14.

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<sup>13</sup> Rom. 1:16; Col. 1:6; 1 Thes. 1:5.