
Gospel- Centered Ministry

*D. A. Carson &
Timothy Keller*

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of churches and Christians from many different denominations that are united not only by belief in the biblical gospel but also by the conviction that gospel-centered ministry today must be strengthened, encouraged, and advanced. What follows gives a bit of the history of how and why we have come together.

Several years ago a number of us began to meet together annually. That group became The Gospel Coalition's Council. For the first three years we sought to do two things.

The Confessional Foundation

First, we sought to identify and strengthen the center of confessional evangelicalism. We believe that some important aspects of the historic understanding of the biblical gospel are in danger of being muddled or lost in our churches today. These include the necessity of the new birth, justification by faith alone, and atonement through propitiation and the substitutionary death of Christ. We sought to maintain and strengthen our hold on these doctrines, not merely by citing the great theological formulations of the past but also through continued, fresh interaction with the Scripture itself, and so we worked together to produce The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement.

Biblical-Theological Categories

Many members told me afterward that working on the Confessional Statement was one of the most edifying and instructional experiences they had ever had. About four dozen experienced pastors worked it over line by line. One of our goals was to draw our language as much from the Bible as possible rather than to resort too quickly to the vocabulary of systematic theology. Systematics is crucial, and terms such as "the Trinity," which are not found in the Bible itself, are irreplaceable for understanding and expressing large swaths of the Bible's teaching. Nevertheless, to maintain unity among ourselves

and to persuade our readers, we sought to express our faith as much as possible in biblical-theological categories rather than drawing on the terminology of any particular tradition's systematic theology.

Beginning with God

We also thought it was important to begin our confession with God rather than with Scripture. This is significant. The Enlightenment was overconfident about human rationality. Some strands of it assumed it was possible to build systems of thought on unassailable foundations that could be absolutely certain to unaided human reason. Despite their frequent vilification of the Enlightenment, many conservative evangelicals have nevertheless been shaped by it. This can be seen in how many evangelical statements of faith start with the Scripture, not with God. They proceed from Scripture to doctrine through rigorous exegesis in order to build (what they consider) an absolutely sure, guaranteed-true-to-Scripture theology.

The problem is that this is essentially a foundationalist approach to knowledge. It ignores the degree to which our cultural location affects our interpretation of the Bible, and it assumes a very rigid subject-object distinction. It ignores historical theology, philosophy, and cultural reflection. Starting with the Scripture leads readers to the overconfidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a system of perfect doctrinal truth.¹ This can create pride and rigidity because it may not sufficiently acknowledge the fallenness of human reason.

We believe it is best to start with God, to declare (with John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1) that without knowledge of God we cannot know ourselves, our world, or anything else. If there is no God, we would have no reason to trust our reason.

Evangelical

Also, as part of this process, we gave some time to the question, "Is the term 'evangelical' useful anymore?" A good case can be made for the position that it is not. Within the church, the word conveys less and less theological content. The word almost means "all who are willing to use the term 'born again' to describe their experiences." Outside the church, the word has perhaps the most negative connotations it has ever had.

Nevertheless, the term describes our churches and association.

Why? We come from different denominations and traditions—Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Charismatic, to name the larger groupings. We do not think the distinctives of theology and ecclesiology that divide us are insignificant—not at all. They shape our ministries and differentiate us in many important ways. (One could say “complementary” ways, but that would be another essay.) However, we are united by the conviction that what unites us—the doctrinal core components of the gospel—is far more important than what divides us. On the one hand, that conviction differentiates us from those who believe that there is no gospel to preach apart from the distinctions of their tradition. They do not think that their denominational distinctives are “secondary.” On the other hand, that conviction differentiates us from those who would rather define evangelicalism only in sociological or experiential terms and who would therefore not make such a robust doctrinal confessional statement the basis for fellowship and cooperation.

So we continue to use the important term “evangelical” to describe ourselves, often adding the word “confessional” to it to denote the more theologically enriched vision of evangelicalism that we hold.

The Vision for Ministry

We have not united, however, merely to defend traditional gospel formulations. Our second purpose was to describe, support, and embody gospel-centered ministry today.

Changes in Our World

Many younger leaders in our churches are reeling from the changes they see in our world. Until a generation ago in the United States, most adults had similar moral intuitions, whether they were born-again believers, church goers, nominal Christians, or unbelievers. All that has changed. Secularism is much more aggressive and anti-Christian; the society in general is coarsening; and the moral intuitions of younger people radically vary from their more traditional parents.

Many have called this new condition the “postmodern turn,” though others call our situation “late” modernity, or even “liquid” modernity. Modernity overturned the authority of tradition, revelation, or any authority outside of the internal reason and experience of the self. Yet for a long time, relatively stable institutions continued to dominate contemporary society. People still rooted their identities to a

great degree in family, local communities, and their work or vocation. That seems to be passing.

The “acid” of the modern principle—the autonomous, individual self—seems to have eaten away all stable identities. Marriage and family, workplace and career, neighborhood and civic community, politics and causes—none of these institutions now remain stable long enough for individuals to depend on them. People now live fragmented lives, no longer thinking of themselves in terms of a couple of basic roles (e.g., Christian, father, and lawyer). Instead, their identity constantly shape-shifts as they move through a series of life episodes that are not tightly connected. They are always ready to change direction and abandon commitments and loyalties without qualms and to pursue—on a cost-benefit basis—the best opportunity available to them.

Responding to Changes in Our World

In the past, many of our neighbors could understand traditional evangelical preaching and ministry, but they met it with disagreement or indifference. During the last fifteen years, people have increasingly met it with completely dumbfounded incomprehension or outrage. The American evangelical world has been breaking apart with wildly different responses to this new cultural situation. To oversimplify, some have simply built the fortress walls higher, merely continuing to do what they have always done, only more defiantly than before. Others have called for a complete doctrinal reengineering of evangelicalism. We think both of these approaches are wrong-headed and, worse, damaging to the cause of the gospel.

Preaching

Here is one example. Over the last few years there has been a major push to abandon expository preaching for what is loosely called “narrative” preaching. The diagnosis goes something like this:

These are postmodern times, marked by the collapse of confidence in the Enlightenment project and a rational certainty about “truth.” So now hearers are more intuitive than logical; they are reached more through images and stories than through propositions and principles. They are also allergic to authoritarian declarations. We

must adapt to the less rational, nonauthoritarian, narrative-hungry sensibilities of our time.

In our understanding, it is a great mistake to jettison expository preaching in this way. But in some quarters, the response goes something like this: “Because postmodern people don’t like our kind of preaching, we are going to give them *more of it than ever*.” They are unwilling to admit that much conventional use of the expository method *has* tended to be pretty abstract, quite wooden, and not related to life. It is also true that many traditional expository preachers like the “neatness” of preaching through the Epistles instead of the vivid visions and narratives of the Old Testament. But most importantly, expository preaching fails if it does not tie every text, even the most discursive, into the great story of the gospel and mission of Jesus Christ.

Justice and Ministry to the Poor

Another example is the issue of justice and ministry to the poor. Many young Christian leaders who are passionate about social justice complain that the classic reading of the book of Romans by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin is mistaken. They say that Jesus did not bear God’s wrath on the cross, but instead exemplified service and love rather than power and exploitation and therefore “defeated the powers” of the world. The gospel of justification, in this view, is not so much about reconciling God and sinners as about including the marginal in the people of God. In other words, they believe that if Christians are going to leave their comfort zones and minister to and advocate for the poor and marginalized of the world, we must deconstruct traditional evangelical doctrine.

All this rightly alarms many conservative Christian leaders, but some wrongly conclude that those who are strongly concerned to minister to the poor must abandon traditional Christian doctrine. Neither group is right. You do not have to change classic, traditional Christian doctrine to emphasize that ministering to the poor is important.² Jonathan Edwards, who is hardly anyone’s idea of a “liberal,” concluded, “Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?”³ Edwards saw a concern for the poor

that was rooted not only in a doctrine of creation and the *imago Dei* but also in the doctrine of the substitutionary death of Christ and justification by faith alone.

Since Jesus had to die to appease the wrath of God, we know that God is a God of justice, and therefore we should be highly sensitive to the rights of the poor in our communities. They should not be mistreated because of their lack of economic power. And because we were spiritually bankrupt and received the riches of Christ undeserved, we should never look down on the poor and feel superior to the economically bankrupt. We should be willing to give our funds even to the “undeserving poor” since *we* are the spiritually undeserving poor who receive the free mercy of God. Edwards argues powerfully and tirelessly for ministry to the poor from classic evangelical doctrines.⁴

Gospel-Centered Ministry Today

The Gospel Coalition is united by the belief that we must not ignore our context and setting, and we must seriously reflect upon our culture so that our gospel-ministry engages and connects with our culture. This is why we developed the Theological Vision for Ministry, which concludes that the gospel should

produce churches filled with winsome but theologically substantial preaching, dynamic evangelism and apologetics, and church growth. They would emphasize repentance, personal renewal and holiness of life. At the same time, *and in the same congregations*, there would be great stress on cultural engagement in art, business, scholarship, and government, and on justice for the poor. There would be calls for radical Christian community in which all members share wealth and resources and make room for the marginalized. These priorities would all be combined and would mutually strengthen one another in each local church.

So we in The Gospel Coalition believe that the gospel must always be defended and that one irreplaceable way to do that is to show the world and the church the power of a gospel-centered ministry. The best way to define and defend the gospel is to love, believe, embody, and propagate it. In our Confessional Statement, the Vision for Ministry, and “The Gospel for All of Life,” we map out some of the basic features

of what a gospel-centered ministry should look like today in Western culture.

During the first three years of our walk together, we sought to unite a diverse group of people around this gospel center. Our meetings were provocative and exciting because they were not dominated by one theological tradition or by a couple of dominant personalities. And as we gave time to these issues, we grew to trust each other more and more and came to greater unity of mind and heart.

Prophetic from the Center

More recently, The Gospel Coalition has moved into a new phase of ministry, and the most visible parts are our national conference, website, and TGC Network. But these are just means to being “prophetic from the center.”

The evangelical “tent” is bigger and more incoherent than ever. As we have noted, one of the main causes of this is the fast-changing Western culture we find ourselves in. One could argue that it is a much more difficult environment in which to minister than Greco-Roman paganism, largely because it is post-Christian, not pre-Christian. Because of this challenge, the Christian church is splintering and fragmenting. There are at least three types of responses, what James Hunter has called “Purity From,” “Defensive Against,” and “Relevant To.”⁵

“Purity From” responses are found among the Christians and churches that think we can have no real impact on culture, that all efforts to influence culture merely pollute and compromise us. By “Defensive Against” Hunter refers to those believers who think we can change culture through politics or through getting control of elite institutions and wielding their power. By “Relevant To” he designates many mainline, “emergent,” and mega-churches that think we can change culture mainly by becoming more compassionate, less combative, and more contextual, thereby winning enough individuals back into the church to make a difference in the culture. Ironically, all of these approaches are still too influenced by our “Christendom” past. Even the “Purity From” party, with its strong denunciation of Christendom, is like a man who is so violently committed to being *unlike* his father that his father is still basically controlling his behavior.

What does it mean to be “prophetic” from the center? It means to center our churches on the gospel, thereby producing a series of

balances that the other approaches do not have. We should be neither separatist nor triumphalistic in relationship to our culture. Believers (not local churches *qua* churches) should seek both to inhabit the older cultural institutions *and* to set up new, innovative institutions and networks that work for the common good on the basis of Christian understandings of things.

In our gospel communication, we should neither ignore baseline cultural narratives nor just change the packaging and call that “contextualizing.” We should stand for the irreplaceability of the local church, which has the task of evangelizing and discipling. But we should also encourage Christians to work in the world as salt and light. All these balances, we believe, flow out of a profound grasp of the meaning of the gospel for all of life.

The priority we give to the gospel of Jesus Christ may not immediately seem warranted to those who entertain a different view of what “gospel” means. At least two constraints are commonly imposed on the word. First, some think of the gospel as one important but relatively small part of the Bible’s content. Second, others think of the gospel as what tips us into the kingdom and gets us “saved,” while the life-transforming elements in the Bible’s content are bound up with something rather different—wisdom, law, counsel, narrative paradigms, and small-group therapy, but not gospel.

The response comes in two parts.

Biblical Theology Flowing toward Jesus and the Gospel

The first part is that biblical theology, rightly understood, flows through the Bible toward Jesus and the gospel, which fulfills all the revelation leading up to it, gathering all the strands of biblical thought into itself. Of course, there are irresponsible and misleading brands of biblical theology, just as there are irresponsible and misleading brands of systematic theology. The last thing we want is to extol the virtues of one of these two disciplines while emphasizing the weaknesses of the other, for both disciplines at their best bring great strengths to faithful biblical understanding and living.⁶ At their best, both disciplines aim, in their handling of Scripture, to be sensitive to the Bible’s different literary genres, not least the various ways the different genres make their appeals (compare, for instance, law, narrative, and wisdom literature).

By and large, however, systematic theology asks and answers atemporal questions. For example: What are the attributes of God? What did the cross achieve? What is sin? Because it aims to synthesize all of Scripture and to interact with the broadest questions, the categories it uses must transcend the usage of individual biblical books or writers. For instance, systematians speak of the doctrine of justification, knowing full well that the justification word-group does not function exactly the same way in Matthew as it does in Paul; they speak of the doctrine of the call of God, where exactly the same observation about “call” language must be made.

In other words, the theological words and categories that systematic theology deploys often *formally* overlap with biblical usage, but they may *materially* draw their meaning from just one biblical writer. Further, the question, “What are the attributes of God?” is both clear and important, but the fact remains that no biblical book speaks of the *attributes* of God. All readers of systematic theology understand these givens.

By contrast, biblical theology, by and large, asks and answers questions that focus on the contributions and themes of particular biblical books and corpora as these books and corpora are stretched out across the timeline of redemptive history. As much as possible, the categories used are the categories found within the biblical materials themselves. So now we are asking and answering questions of two kinds. (1) What are the themes of Genesis (or Ecclesiastes, Luke, or Romans)? How is the book put together? What does it teach us about the subjects it addresses? What does Isaiah, say, teach us about God? (2) How do these themes fit into the Bible’s storyline at their respective points in the history of redemption and take the unfolding revelation forward to Jesus Christ? What are the unfolding patterns, the trajectories that reach back to creation and forward to Jesus and on to the consummation?

The Council members of The Gospel Coalition want to encourage the kind of reading and preaching of the Bible that traces out these trajectories so that Christians can see how faithfully and insightfully reading Scripture follows the patterns and promises of the Bible to take us toward Jesus and his gospel. For instance, we cannot deal with what Genesis says about creation as if it were mere datum or mere sanction for ecological responsibility or mere establishment of our embodied existence, though all those things are true and have some importance.

Within Genesis, creation grounds the responsibility of God's image bearers toward God and sets the stage for the anarchy and idolatry of Genesis 3 that in turn produces the drama of *the entire Bible*.

Ultimately, the hope of the condemned human race is in the seed of the woman, who comes and engages in a new creation, which culminates in a new heaven and a new earth. Already in Genesis 1–2, however, temple symbolism is bound up with the description of the creation and its garden, which establishes a related trajectory through the Bible: tabernacle and temple, with their priestly and sacrificial systems, interwoven with the fall of the temple at the onset of the exile and the construction of a second temple decades later, rushing toward Jesus' insistence that he himself is the temple, the great meeting place between God and sinful human beings (John 2:19–22).

Along a slightly adjacent trajectory, the church is God's temple. In the culminating vision, the "new Jerusalem" contains no temple, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Rev. 21:22). Meanwhile the symbolism inherent in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2) is itself picked up and utilized in the culminating vision—but only after Christ himself has passed through a quite different garden, the garden of Gethsemane, to secure the better garden for us. It would be easy to follow these and many other lines as they intertwine to make an entrancing weave of God's purposes in bringing us to Jesus Christ and his gospel.

That brings us to the second part of our response to those who have a truncated view of what the gospel is.

Christian Life and Thought Flowing from Jesus and His Gospel

Not only does the gospel of Jesus Christ gather into itself all the trajectories of Scripture, but under the terms of the new covenant, all of Christian life and thought grow out of what Jesus has accomplished. This good news not only declares that God justifies sinners so that our status before him is secured but also that he regenerates us and establishes us in his saving kingdom. The gospel deals with more than the judicial, our standing before God, for it is the power of God that brings salvation (Rom. 1:18)—a comprehensive transformation. Everything is secured by Jesus' death and resurrection; everything is empowered by the Spirit, whom he bequeaths; everything unfolds as God himself has ordained this great salvation.

Especially telling are the motive clauses that underlie Christian ethics. We forgive others because we ourselves have been forgiven (Matt. 6:12–15; Mark 11:25; Col. 3:13). We walk in humility because no one has ever displayed more humility than our Savior in abandoning his rights as God and dying our death (Phil. 2:3–8). We hunger to live out the love on display among the persons of the Godhead because it was out of love that the Father determined that all should honor the Son even as they honor the Father, and because it was out of love for his Father that the Son went to the cross to do his Father's will (John 5:20, 23; 14:30–31). Our ultimate model for husband-wife relationships is predicated on the gospel: the bond between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22–33). We hunger for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord, because the Holy One has not only established our status before his Father but is at work to make us holy (Heb. 12:14; Phil. 2:12–13).

As all the wretched malice of assorted idolatries and transgressions is precisely what the gospel of Christ overcomes, we hunger to live as Jesus lived, our Savior and Lord, living another way in our individual lives, in our homes, in our world (Gal. 5:16–26; Eph. 4:17–6:18). We learn obedience through suffering because our Pioneer went this way before us (Heb. 5:8; 12:1–4). These and many similar themes cry out for detailed unpacking in pulpits and Bible studies. Small wonder the proclamation of this gospel with so many transforming entailments is central to our blood-bought existence.

In short, gospel-centered ministry is biblically mandated. It is the only kind of ministry that simultaneously addresses human need as God sees it, reaches out in unbroken lines to gospel-ministry in other centuries and other cultures, and makes central what Jesus himself establishes as central.

Notes

1. See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 61–64.
2. Cf. Tim Keller, “The Gospel and the Poor,” *Themelios* 33:3 (2008): 8–22 (available at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/publications>).
3. Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity: or, The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, revised and corrected by Edward Hickman (1834; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:164.
4. See esp. Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity,” which lays out two “reasons” for the work. The first is “the general state and nature of mankind. . . . [M]en are made in the image of God, and on this account are worthy of our love. . . . [W]e are made to subsist by society and union with another. God hath made us with such a nature, that we cannot subsist without the help one of another” (2:164). Edwards gives us the more intellectual grounding of creation theology: all human beings are in the image of God and have worth; the creation is good; humans are built for *shalom*, for inter-dependence. But then Edwards lays out a second reason for doing justice: we have been the recipients of the blood of Christ who though “rich” became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. Edwards uses the gospel to get at his readers’ “affections”: “What a poor business it will be, that those who hope to share these benefits, yet cannot give something for the relief of a poor neighbor without grudging! . . . How unsuitable it is for us, who live only by kindness to be unkind! What would have become of us, if Christ had been so saving of his blood, and loth to bestow it, as many men are of their money or goods? or if he had been as ready to excuse himself from dying for us, as men commonly are to excuse themselves from charity to their neighbour?” (2:165). One could argue that this is heaping guilt on the readers, but Edwards is not saying, “Because you don’t help the poor, God will reject you,” but, “Because Jesus was rejected in your place so that God now accepts you, how can you reject these folks?” It is, as Stephen Charnock would say, making people “miserable by mercy,” using joy and love to create humble conviction and change.
5. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
6. See D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 89–104.

“We hunger to live as Jesus lived . . . in our individual lives, in our homes, in our world. We learn obedience through suffering because our Pioneer went this way before us. . . . Gospel-centered ministry is biblically mandated. It is the only kind of ministry that simultaneously addresses human need as God sees it, reaches out in unbroken lines to gospel-ministry in other centuries and other cultures, and makes central what Jesus himself establishes as central.”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry's confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

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