

The Gospel as the Power of God for Salvation (Rom 1:16)

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Long ago, I left Korea for Panama because my company sent me to its Latin American operation in Panama. That was the beginning of my long journey of migration. During my business career in Panama and later in Miami, I traveled to many Latin American countries and realized the importance of cultural diversity and the need for human solidarity. I was under the same sun and moon wherever I went. I saw tears and laughter from people I met on the streets or in offices. I saw part of me in their faces. Later, I was reassigned to the company's Miami office in Florida. So, I moved to the United States with my family, and my Korean American journey began. But soon I quit my job to study theology, because I felt a sense of a call. I studied hard and (un)learned a lot about the Bible, theology, and our world. From time to time, I struggled with my hybrid identity here in the United States. But after turns and twists, I came to celebrate my distinctive hybrid identity and life experience.

Over the years one topic that captured my immediate attention was the gospel/good news.¹ Many Christians (whether scholars or

1. As part of this ongoing interest in the Gospel, I edited a volume, *Paul's Gospel, Empire, Race, and Ethnicity: Through the Lens of Minoritized Scholarship* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2023). The contributors to this volume variously explore Paul's gospel and its relationships to empire, race, and ethnicity. While Yung Suk Kim, in his essay, "The Politics of Interpretation: Paul's Gospel, Empire, and Race/Ethnicity," challenges the Western gospel and the rigid body politic (9-21), Sze-kar Wan, in the chapter, "Mainstreaming the Minoritized: Gal 28 as Ethnic Construction," debunks the Western idea of the individual gospel, justification, and unity-driven monolithic community that subsumes differences (68-86). Demetrius Williams, in his essay, "'Let This Mind Be in You': Paul and the Politics of Identity in Philippians—Empire, Ethnicity, and Justice," tackles racism in America and the racist, prosperity gospel in the guise of the good news (43-67). Efraín Agosto, in his chapter, "Paul the Apostle of the Nations and Pedro Albizu Campos, the Apostle of Puerto Rican Independence: A Comparative Study of Race, Ethnicity, and Empire," more directly deals with Paul's apostleship, his teaching, and empire implications (22-39). Jeehei Park, in "The Pursuit of Impossible Hospitality: Reading Paul's Philoxenia with Jacques Derrida," discusses Paul's gospel and its implications for radical inclusive hospitality for foreigners or outsiders (89-106). Eka-putra Tupamahu, in the chapter, "From Alienation to Inclusion: Read-

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not) and churches in the United States, let alone other countries influenced by Western missionaries, have understood the gospel narrowly. First, they think of the gospel as a set of teachings about Jesus or individual (spiritual) salvation. Oftentimes Christians go to other countries to spread the good news and deny the culture and religion of that context. Second, they focus on spiritual, otherworldly salvation, which considers this world as transitory. Third, they understand the gospel as equal to Jesus' redemptive death. However, Jesus' death is not itself good news but a tragic event resulting from his radical love of humanity and his bold challenge to power. Because Jesus challenged the wisdom of the world that privileged the strong and wealthy, he was crucified. But God vindicated him and acknowledged his work of grace. From the cross, we must see his grace and love. Jesus is good news because he proclaimed the good news of God (Mark 1:14), which is equivalent to "the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43) or "the good news of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23).

ing Romans 3:21–26 from a Diaspora Lens," interprets Rom 3:21–26 from a diaspora lens and emphasizes the importance of the inclusion of the Gentiles (107-120).

“Good news” in several contexts

First, gospel/good news can be understood in the Roman imperial context. Emperor Augustus says he brought good news to the empire and his subjects. He claimed he was the son of God (*divi filius*) and took pride in all his accomplishments as inscribed on the monument titled *Res Gestae*. His good news of “peace and security” was possible through military conquest and subjugation of other people, and all who protested Rome were put to death. Rulers talk about peace, security, and unity only to cement their power. The emperor’s good news may be good for elites and those who have much. But to the mass of people, it is hollow news. It is no more than propaganda that brainwashes them not to rebel against the power in Rome. The emperor is on the top of the social ladder in hegemonic body politics and all others are stratified in society by their social status.

Stoicism undergirds the ruling ideology of the Roman Empire, telling people that they must stay in their place without protest. Menenius Agrippa tells a story in which the limbs should not strike against the belly that consumes food all the time without working. If they do so, not only will the belly starve to death but the body as a whole. His point is that the poor should not rebel against the rich or the government because society is one.² Interestingly, the best advice Stoics can give them is inner peace and self-control. The imperial gospel seems to promote tolerance and diversity among its subjects. But this is possible only insofar as people will not protest the Empire. In other words, there must be clear boundaries between the haves and have-nots, educated and uneducated, Greeks and barbarians, and male and female. So, the good news of Rome is not good news for the slaves, foreigners, and all the marginalized, who yearn for freedom, prosperity, and human dignity.

Second, gospel/good news also may be understood in Jewish tradition. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE to Assyria, Jews were in constant turmoil for almost 800 years due to foreign domination by Babylon, Persia, Greece, and the Roman Empire, respectively. During this period, many Jews expressed fervent hope in God and expected their messiah, someone like King David, to come and deliver them from foreign domination. In fact, different Jewish sects had different visions of the good news: restoration of Israel through military might (Maccabees), renewal of Judaism with emphasis on law observance (Pharisees), the salvation of the chosen few (Essenes), and maintaining their own status (Sadducees).

Third, gospel/good news can be also understood in the New Testament. The term “gospel” or “good news” (*euangelion*) is not a book or a genre. The four Gospels in the New Testament are called “Gospels” because, in later times, the Greek title was added to each of these books. They are close to a biographical, theological story of Jesus. In ancient literature, there is no genre called “gospel” either. Good news/gospel is an abstract noun, which expresses some form of good news. As such, the New Testament writings

2. Livy, *The History of Rome*, Book 2, Chapter 32.

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contain a variety of good news. Before Jesus, John the Baptist proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” throughout the Jordan (Mark 1:4). He emphasized the kingdom of God and God’s judgment. Jesus also preached the kingdom of God. According to Mark 1:14, Jesus began to proclaim the good news of God whose content is expressed in Mark 1:15: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Though the contexts and messages of the canonical Gospels are different, the core teaching of Jesus hinges on the kingdom of God.

Paul also uses the term (*euangelion*) frequently in his letters. Even though he writes letters to various congregations, what he is concerned about is the good news. For him, the good news is that God extended a covenant with Abraham to the Gentiles and that this good news was confirmed through Christ and his faithfulness. What Christ did for God and humanity constitutes “the gospel of Christ.”³ The good news is that all people—Jew and Gentile—can become children of God through faith (Gal 3:6-9; 27-29; Rom 1:14). This faith is not knowledge but trust in God through Christ. But when it comes to Deutero-Pauline Letters, Pastoral Letters, and Hebrews, we see a different aspect of the gospel that emphasizes individual salvation through faith in Christ (Eph 1:15; 1 Tim 1:16; 2 Tim 3:15), which requires salvific knowledge about Jesus, who made a vicarious sacrifice for sinners (1 Tim 1:3-5; 4:6; 2 Tim 1:13). Jesus gave himself for the forgiveness of sins and made obsolete the old sacrificial system (Heb 7:27; Eph 1:7; 2:13; 4:32; 5:2; Col 1:14; 2:13). Christ becomes the object of faith (Eph 1:12-15; 1 Tim 3:13). Faith and works are separated as if faith

3. “The gospel of Christ” appears in the following texts: 1 Cor 9:12; 2 Cor 9:13; Gal 1:7; Phil 1:27; 1 Thess 3:2. In this article, I define the gospel of Christ as follows: (1) the gospel/good news that Jesus proclaimed, that is “the good news of God” (Mark 1:14), “the good news of the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43), “the good news of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23); (2) the good news about Jesus because of his work of God; that is, Jesus’ grace and faithfulness are highlighted.

were possible without works (Eph 1:15; 2:8-9; 3:12, 17; 4:5, 13; 1 Tim 2:10; 5:10; 6:8; 2 Tim 2:21; Titus 2:14).

The gospel as the power of God for salvation

The gospel/good news is not knowledge about God or Jesus but the power of God that empowers the poor, the downtrodden, and the marginalized so that they may stay hopeful in God (Rom 1:16). As such, the gospel must deal with injustices, racism, oppression, poverty, and all related issues in society. Paul summarizes the law as the love of neighbor (Gal 5:14; Rom 13:8-10). Love fulfills the law. Talmud Shabbat 31a also has this teaching: “On another occasion a certain Gentile came to Shammai and said to him, ‘Make me into a Jewish convert, but teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Immediately Shammai drove him away with the measuring stick which was in his hand. When the same Gentile went before Hillel with the same proposition, Hillel said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary on it. Now go and study it.’”

All sorts of gospels that do not foster the well-being of the mass of people must be suspicious. The gospel must also foster a community of diversity, human dignity, and equality. Unity rhetoric without true diversity must also be suspicious because it may become the means of control of others.⁴ The ideal community is not a unity but a union where a diversity of people gathers in honor of one another as Christ loved them (Gal 3:28). Such a community of love and care is also found in 1 Cor 12:12-27. When Paul says that “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27), it means “you, the Corinthians, are the Christic body: Christic life, both individually and communally.”⁵

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This interpretation takes “the body of Christ” as an attributive genitive, as we see the example of such a case in Rom 6:4: “The body of sin” as a “sinful body.” So, “the body of Christ” is a Christ-full or Christ-informed body (in the sense of living). Paul’s point is not that the Corinthians constitute one unified community, like a social body, but that they are united to Christ—to the way of his life (cf. Gal 5:21-26; Gal 6:2). In this regard, James 2:26 is relevant: “faith without works is dead.” Or, similarly, as in Gal 5:6 and 1 Cor 13, faith without love is nothing. Lastly, Christian good news must be brought to the world through the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). When Christians live by the Spirit, they may have a simple, peaceful mind toward others and nature. They can be satisfied with what they have (cf. 2 Cor 8:13-15; Exod 16:18). When they live by the flesh (Gal 5:20-21), they may do harm to the community and nature alike.

4. Yung Suk Kim, “The Politics of Interpretation: Paul’s Gospel, Empire, and Race/Ethnicity,” in *Paul’s Gospel, Empire, and Race/Ethnicity: Through the Lens of Minoritized Scholarship*, ed. Yung Suk Kim (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2023), 9-21.

5. See Yung Suk Kim, *Christ’s Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008). My interpretation of the body of Christ in 1 Cor 12:27 has been the hallmark of my scholarship, which appears in various publications. For example, *How to Read Paul: A Brief Introduction to his Theology, Writings, and World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021). See also “Reclaiming Christ’s Body (*soma christou*): Embodiment of God’s Gospel in Paul’s Letters,” *Interpretation* 67.1 (2013): 20-29.