

The Gospel *Before* the Gospels

Unearthing the Old Testament gospel text of the Apostles for the next generation.

This is an amazing era of knowledge abounding exponentially through worldwide digital communication on hand-held smart devices with full language translation capabilities. The digital Tower of Babel is literally reaching to the heavens. We can hardly grasp the miraculous spread of the Gospel without digital internet technology. Yet the New Testament church numbering into the tens of thousands grew into a movement spanning three continents that for its first thirty years had not so much as a single document containing its beliefs, core values or mission statement. It would be laughable today to launch a new company or product by word of mouth, with no printed or digital advertising. It would be twenty- five years after Jesus ascended before there was a “Roman’s Road” list of verses to summarize the Gospel. Incredibly a half century would pass before John 3:16 would be penned.

What was the scriptural text that clearly explained the Gospel? Before anyone could hear a believer quote Romans 3:23, 6:23, 5:8, or 10:9-13, thousands were saved. Before anyone could have read the great commission of Matthew 28:18,20 the Gospel was on pace to reach the ends of the earth. Long before John 3:16 was even penned assemblies of believers existed all around the Mediterranean Sea. The mighty Roman Empire could persecute the proclaimers, but could not find, much less burn, any documents containing the Gospel. With nothing more than a verbal witness the followers of Jesus were accused of “turning the world upside down” with the proclamation of Jesus before the message was even in print! There was “The Gospel before the four Gospels.” This written Gospel I am referring to is nothing new. It is as old as Moses. It was the same thread of redemption given to Israel by the Jewish prophets that was proclaimed by the Apostles in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and then to the Gentiles. There was an Old Testament plan of salvation before there was a New Testament Gospel text. It is insightful to briefly overview the time between the writing of the Gospel autographs and the spread of their manuscript to the ends of the earth.

The sources can easily be seen in the preaching of Jesus and the Apostles in the Gospels and Acts. The earliest autograph of Mark’s Gospel was penned in 65 AD and the latest, John’s Gospel dates to 90 AD. The first thirty seminal years of Christianity had passed by the time Mark was written in 65 AD. The “Church” had grown from 120 disciples to 3,000 men at its birth at Pentecost. Then it spread to Alexandria Egypt, to Ephesus, and from Asia Minor to Rome. Tens of thousands of believers assembled among at least thirty congregations whose cities are named in the New Testament. Many became martyrs at the nod of Saul of Tarsus starting with Stephen. Hundreds more had been imprisoned and put out of the synagogues. By 40 AD Saul of Tarsus, known by his Greek name Paul, who became a convert and chief spokesman, was imprisoned in Rome where in 67 AD, he would be beheaded for the very Jesus he once persecuted. The only Gospel text for three to four decades was the one Jesus explained on the road to Emmaus “beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). It was with these same texts that He commissioned his Apostles unto the ends of the earth. “Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel” (Matthew 28:19,20). As late as 55 AD, and over three decades before our beloved Gospel of John was penned, the Apostle Paul referred to this O.T. Gospel in his famous declaration. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation, to everyone that believeth, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Rom. 1:16 The only textual source available at the moment Paul penned this was the Hebrew scriptures.

When would the churches have had their first manuscript copy of a Gospel? Most modern scholars fix the earliest dates ... of the four original gospel autographs as follows: Mark, c. 65; Luke, c. 80-85; Matthew, c. 85-90; John, c. 90-100.”¹ The Book of Romans was penned c. 57. No doubt, manuscript copies were being carried forth from the Apostles as soon as they were scribed. So many copies were made that today there are thousands of manuscript texts collected from which our New Testament has been translated. God’s inspired process had a divinely built-in redundancy.

Like the feathers of a torn pillow, the words of the Gospel carried by the wings of the wind has spread everywhere. “The New Testament (collection) was not ... substantially complete ... until about AD 100.” Our earliest recorded evidence of the use of a collection (canon) of books that make up the majority of the N.T. is that of “Justin Martyr, about AD 150, who wrote, “the 'Memoirs of the Apostles' along with the writings of the prophets, ... were read in meetings of Christians (*Apol* i. 67).” “Origen (c. 185-254) mentions the four Gospels, the Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as acknowledged by all; he says that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude” were accepted. It was not until the fourth century that “Athanasius c.367 lays down the twenty-seven books of our New Testament as alone canonical.”

Jewish Awareness of the context of the New Testament diminished until it was barely a flicker by the time the Church had a canonized a collection of the 27 books of the New Testament in the third century. Theological anti-Semitism flourished in the petri dish of Gentile disdain for Jews as evidenced in the writing of church fathers in the 2nd Century. The Old Testament Scriptures are the foundation this very Jewish Gospel that Jesus gave the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The Old Testament Gospel which He commissioned his disciples to preach to every creature unto the ends of the earth eventually became buried as it were in a capsule of time. Marcion a heretic prior to 50 AD believed that the Church ought to jettison all that appertained to the former (Old Testament). This 'theological anti-Semitism' involved the rejecting not only of the entire Old Testament but also of those parts of the New Testament which seemed to him to be infected with Judaism. Though He was rejected as a heretic for other doctrinal errors, his disparaging of any association with Judaism was not contrary to the view of the early Gentile Churches mentioned in the Epistles. Those who had experienced the harassment of the Judaizers that followed the Apostle Paul's ministry took to the extreme Jesus' renunciation the Judaic manmade traditions of the Pharisees and Sadducees as a rejection of all Jews. But neither Jesus nor the His Apostles taught that “Salvation of the Jews” by the Jews and for the Jews should be sterilized of **Biblical Judaism** or Jewishness. But the proverbial baby got thrown out with the bath water.

The diminishing impact of the Church on this modern pagan culture is felt everywhere in the western world. The unearthing of the O.T. salvation message of the first century church will revitalize the powerful context of the Apostles message to our postmodern culture like it did for the Pagan Corinthian world of the first century. Psalm 19 makes it clear that the perfect Law of the Lord converts the soul i.e.: convicts of sin unto repentance, readying the soul for faith in Jesus.

My personal journey of Jewish Awareness

Once I realized that the New Testament Gospel text with which I had become so well versed, would not be used in my initial witnessing to Jewish contacts, I felt like my right hand which I favor had been tied behind my back and I was having to learn to write left-handed. To be limited to using the Old Testament to introduce the Gospel was a whole new ball game. In 1983 as I graduated from Bible College, I began to visit my wife on her lunch breaks at her new position with a Jewish Mission Board. Soon after she became the administrative assistant, a new Director was installed. He was a Jewish believer who already had a great Bible College Education and years of Jewish evangelism experience with a large Jewish mission organization. As I visited my sweetheart, I was invited to help with mail outs, running off tapes etc.... As the new Director, Stanly Rosenthal began to mentor me. He exposed me to a whole new world of evangelism to Jewish people. I was intrigued by the challenge of becoming well versed in the Old Testament, but I was not ready to being limited to the Jewish scriptures in my initial witness to a Jewish person. Through visitation, study, teaching and traveling with him I began to be burdened about the field of Jewish Missions. This was as foreign to me as mission work in Africa. I grew up on a rural Carolina farm. I was saved at age 10 and surrendered to the Gospel ministry at age 15. The wonderful Bible preaching, soul-winning Pastor, in my home church, and youth ministry equipped me well to know and serve the Lord and seek the lost. Christian education from the third grade all the way through a tremendous Bible College gave me a firm foundation for a life of serving the Lord. But my whole cultural context was minus any contact

with Jewish people. To my small-town southern mind, all the Jewish people were either in the Old Testament or living in Israel. I began to realize the great mission field where 45% of the Jewish people lived in the United States. I became more burdened. How was it that I knew no one in my four years of college among thousands of students that was going to reach Jesus' own brethren according to the flesh. I expressed my concern over my deficit in Jewish customs and culture. As the burden grew and the call became clear, we were afforded the opportunity to take a ten-week summer Jewish Evangelism internship. At the urging of our trainer Mark Robinson also a Jewish believer we considered South Florida to minister among one of the largest Jewish populations in America. Following the Lord there we were involved in Jewish evangelism in some fashion or another for most of the next decade. I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to begin my ministry "to the Jew first." The depth of my understanding of scripture with a Jewish historical Biblical context combined with the emersion in witnessing to Jewish people enriched my Ministry tenfold. Although God later called me to pastor for twenty years in a rural non-Jewish setting, I believe the Jewish perspective to Bible study, preaching and teaching benefited my congregation's perspective of God and His word. It certainly did mine. In 2011 the church blessed me with a trip to Israel. Before that trip I read the Bible in black and white. Since that trip I read the scripture in living color. On that trip I became reacquainted with the Jewish believer who had mentored me years before. The burden that had never left me intensified and after two years of prayer I surrendered to return to my first love and we stepped out on faith and go into Jewish Missions. It has been a dream come true and now I am not just burdened and equipped to reach Jewish people, but I am deeply burdened to equip others to do so. In the dozens of churches I have preached in as I begin my deputation, I meet many who love God's chosen people but will rarely if ever meet a Jewish person. So what use is this approach to such believers. Reaching Gentiles with the wonderfully clear and powerful New Testament is sufficient...isn't it? Yes, for Gentiles. It's the same Gospel but needs the Old Testament.

The days of the Gospel before the Gospels. The Apostles, especially Paul who was the Apostle to the Gentiles, practiced what He preached. Every city that he came to he started by going to the Synagogue and using the method that Jesus did, expounded from Moses and all the Prophets the things concerning Christ. Many Jews believed. Many opposed. But always the visiting Gentiles in the synagogues sought him out to learn more. It was often in the response of these biblically illiterate pagans that we see the strength of the "Gospel before the Gospels" were written. The Jews knew the Biblical accounts so Paul could seam them together showing the thread of redemption by blood verifying how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the suffering, resurrected and returning Messiah. He did not have to start from scratch. With the Greeks and Romans, he had to start with the A, B, C's of God's plan of salvation. Remember, Paul had no "Roman's Road" to show them. It was not written till 55-57 AD. The only text he had was the O.T. which the Gentiles were completely ignorant of. Sound like a daunting task? Remember that the Gospel of Christ which is the power of God unto salvation to the Jews who believe is also the power of God to the Gentiles who believe. It was in the plan of God that His Gospel go forth before "The Gospels" were penned much less distributed. Why? Because a Biblically illiterate pagan even more than a scripturally knowledgeable Jew needs the whole story of redemption not just the post resurrection summary. A New Testament summary Gospel that fits on a tract is wonderful if that is all the time you have. Countless hundreds of thousands have received Christ by that means. The underlying problem is that the Missions and soul-winning effort of the church can become not only lawless in its definition of sin to produce repentance, but Jew-less in its outreach. But how can this Old Testament Gospel be applicable in an area with no Jewish people? Is church ministry going to be limited in areas with no Jewish population? Of course not. The Gospel has the full power to save everyone who believes. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin and coming judgment "converting the soul" by the righteous of God in the Law of God (Psalm 19). If there is not a conviction of sin by the righteous standard of God's law, then the righteousness of Christ will not be seen as necessary. A profession of facts is not a profession of faith.

The diminishing impact of the Church on this modern pagan culture is felt everywhere in the western world. Hundreds of books, articles, sermons, and research polls are addressing the waning impact of the Gospel on our "post-modern" pagan culture. One diagnosis being given is that our once Bible based culture has become Gospel hardened because

they have heard it so much. Others are saying that America is beyond having a revival because of this hardening. Others are saying we are so wicked that God has turned us over to a reprobate mind to be blinded to the truth. While America's culture may be accurately described in some of these diagnoses we must stop and recall the godless, pagan culture of the first century as the Gospel witness moved beyond Jerusalem and Judea. They were in as ungodly a society as ours just without the technology. While some may be "gospel hardened" or burned out on organized religion, many right in our own communities have never even had the chance to hear this Gospel. Churches with active witnessing programs or bus or urban ministries regularly meet young people and adults who are just as ignorant of the Gospel as those in third world tribal settings. We need not blame the lost for our failure. Paul asked, how can they believe unless they hear? How can they hear unless someone preach? The Gospel is the same. People are the same in that they are sinners. But when we say people have changed in comparison to previous generations in America who had a world view based on basic Bible knowledge, it is true. People are different in comparison to a few generations ago when the average person gave the Church and Preachers and the Bible some respect, and credibility is at an all-time low due to numerous national religious scandals as well as the dry formalistic dead church environments. Seemingly the glory has departed. But before we join the chorus of "It ain't like it used to be." Let's reexamine that the Gospel from the O.T. Scriptures had such an effect on the pagan world that had never had any Biblical world knowledge much less a Biblical world view. They had never been Gospel hardened. They were hardened in sin and ignorance because the God of this world had so blinded their minds to keep the light of the glorious Gospel from shining into their hearts.

What was it that God sent His early witnesses equipped with, a summary presentation that would fit on a Gospel tract? No. It was with the whole plan of redemption by blood through faith with God's relationship and revelation to Israel as the recorded object lesson of God's undying love for a sinful people. When the stoic Romans and the intellectual philosophizing Greeks heard the Gospel, it was not just a set of beliefs or a new philosophy to live by. That would have been shelved along with all the other philosophies and truths of the pantheistic society. The truth of the Gospel is about a relationship. It is about a God whose 3000-year track record of faithfulness to a rebellious Israel was on display to reassure that this God could be trusted. This God had proven that He loves sinners to the uttermost. Then the proof of His loving relationship went even deeper when He became flesh. God came as a man in the role of an obedient son. Just like the account of Abraham and Isaac. When a sin hardened pagan hears the whole Old Testament prophecies of salvation first, then everything dovetails when he hears the Gospel of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection from the New Testament. The Gospel before the Gospels is the only foundation for salvation in a secular sinful godless world. If the church is to be established on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, then the Gospel of the prophets lays the foundation "footer" for repentance upon which the Gospel of the Apostles will stand.

We can see the clear Old Testament Gospel in the sermons recorded in the Book of Acts and the impact on unbiblical mindsets. We need to reexamine Romans 1:16 to see Jewish evangelism and missions as not only obedience to God's priority but also the key to keeping our Gospel witness sharp in a post-modern culture. The unearthing of the O.T. salvation message of the first century church will revitalize the powerful context of the Apostles message to our postmodern culture like it did for the pagan Corinthian world. "Salvation is of the Jews" was a statement by Jesus to identify the origins of the Gospel. Israel and her relationship to God is the context in which the truth of the Gospel can be clearly understood.

The only Gospel text before the writing of the "Gospels" was the Jewish Scriptures. The only ones carrying out the great commission with that "Old Testament" Gospel text were Jewish disciples. Even when Gentiles were becoming disciples and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah/Christ, the only text they had for decades was the Jewish scriptures. Once the Church became "gentile-ized", in violation of Jesus' very command, she did not love those Jews who

viewed them as enemies but on the contrary became anti-Semitic toward the very brethren of their Lord Jesus. Once the four gospel epistles became their new textual source ie: the New Testament, many in the 2nd century Church began to reject everything Jewish about the origins of their faith except Jesus' and his disciple's unavoidable Jewish genealogy. To the early Gentile Church, Judaism was simply a surrogate womb for artificial divine insemination. Since God in flesh was abandoned by Mother Israel, the newly adopted Gentiles abandoned her, despising everything about Israel, Jews and Judaism. They like sheep went astray and said we will follow the Jewish Messiah our own way as our Gentile Christ. It is true from the very first Church council in the book of Acts that Gentiles were declared free from the Jewish civil, ceremonial, and kosher commandments and traditions. Act 15:19 "Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God." 15:28-29 "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well." But never were Gentiles in a gentile church culture freed from understanding and interpreting scriptures that were all given by inspiration of God in any other way than the context in which God gave them, the Jewish scriptures and the Jewish Gospel of a Jewish Savior. The sad reality is that the interpretation and exposition of scriptures has purged truth of most of its Jewish context. It has given birth to centuries of error and doctrinal heresy with disastrous outcomes not only for the Church but especially for Jewish people even leading to theological anti-Semitism which directly led to the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust.

But even more serious than a physical holocaust is the spiritual holocaust of denying Jewish people of the opportunity of hearing the Jewish Gospel of the Jewish Messiah from the Jewish scriptures all the while thinking they have heard our gentile generic Gospel from the New Testament. Certainly, the New Testament is the final and conclusive vessel of the true Gospel. But after 2000 years of culturally sterile gentile generic and anti-Semitic Gospel polluted by the Catholic church, we who hold the pure Gospel of grace are not distinguishable to Jewish people from that false Christianity. Not only do we have a bad PR problem with Jewish people, but we also have a problem in communicating with a post Christian pagan mindset. The first century Gospel model which is based solely on a Jewish Old Testament text is the only model with the potency of reaching a Biblically illiterate post Christian era world view. Sadly the O.T. portions get left out.

That Gospel is summarized in Luke "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27). That was a 7-mile-long conversation plus time around the dinner table. Although the Gospel presentation can be reduced to a few "bullet points," it takes some time to go through "all the scriptures." Are we willing to approach unsaved Jewish people and begin a slow walk through the Old Testament Gospel. Not if our definition of success in the Gospel is how many we get to pray the sinner's prayer.

"Ye shall be witnesses unto me." Is our part. We are to be filled with the Spirit and clearly give the scriptures of the Gospel. We are to plant, sow, water and share in the harvest. The farmer works the field all season and all year long, but he does not get discouraged if he does not harvest every day.

- **Jesus showed us the process of giving the Gospel and of renewing discouraged disciples.**
- **Jesus sought them out and He's still seeking them out.**
- **He revealed Himself in the Old Testament scriptures.**
- **He gave them Spiritual Understanding – Peace = *assurance of salvation* (Vs 45,25-27)**
- **He not only wants you to believe in resurrection after death, He wants you to walk with Him in the resurrected life.**

Are you walking away from Jerusalem and the disciples or are you walking toward them with a renewed faith? Then let's come along side sinners who have no hope and give them the Good News.

1. The Canon of the New Testament By F. F. Bruce Chapter 3 in *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (5th edition; Leicester: Intersity Press, 1959).