



# The Gospel as an American Religious Concept

CHRISTOPHER J. RICHMANN

One of the greatest challenges facing preachers is the ambiguity of the concept of *gospel*. The early Lutherans were aware of the challenge. As the Formula of Concord (1577) puts it, “in the holy, divine Scripture and in ancient and recent teachers of the church, the little word ‘gospel’ is not used and understood in the same, single sense at all times.” The concordists went on to identify “two different ways” the term was used: “the entire teachings of Christ . . . in the New Testament,” and the “strictly speaking” sense of “the proclamation of the grace of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The history of American Protestantism confirms that the concept is capable of many meanings. As H. Richard Niebuhr wrote,

The kingdom of God in America . . . represents not so much the impact of the gospel upon the New World as the use and adaptation of the gospel by the new society for its own purposes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 582; see also 500–501.

<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1959), 9.

*The Christian gospel is a message to all human conditions and cultures, but often it can be co-opted by these human cultures and converted into a carrier for their various aspirations. This article details the ways in which the Christian gospel has been used and misused in America.*

In arguing that Americans put the gospel to “use and adaptation,” Niebuhr sounds like a historian, charting the evolution of a concept in human behavior. Niebuhr contended that in America, the gospel-concept passed through three distinct yet overlapping phases. Puritans saw the gospel primarily through the lens of God’s sovereignty and emphasized external structures and behavior. Evangelical revivalists emphasized the “kingdom of Christ,” or the internal “rule of knowledge in the minds of men.”<sup>3</sup> Social reformers of the nineteenth century welcomed and hoped to hasten the “coming kingdom.”

Frustrated, however, with those who regarded religion as an “epiphenomenon,” Niebuhr broke with the canons of historical interpretation. He portrayed developments in American Christianity as internally driven, determined primarily by the logic of the core gospel message inherent in Protestantism; each phase emphasizing a different, yet theologically necessary, aspect of the kingdom of God. All deviance from what he considered valid expressions of the kingdom of God he quickly dismissed as “exaggerations and perversions” (he was famously disparaging of liberal theology) or blamed on the law of “petrification” that apparently comes to all human institutions in time.<sup>4</sup>

With the Formula of Concord’s distinction of “two ways” of speaking of the concept, we see better the multiplicity of meanings of “gospel” in America that Niebuhr hinted at but ultimately obscured. We allow religion to be historical—that is, a complex set of developments driven by internal *and* external forces—without losing the ability to critique its developments from a perspective of faith. A brief survey shows that, in the broad sense of all New Testament teachings, more might be included in American Christianity as valid expressions of *gospel* than Niebuhr allowed. This reveals what Niebuhr tried to deny: American Christianity’s idea of *gospel* appears quite vulnerable to nonreligious forces like nationalism, expansion, industrialization, and consumerism.

---

*This reveals what Niebuhr tried to deny: American Christianity’s idea of gospel appears quite vulnerable to nonreligious forces like nationalism, expansion, industrialization, and consumerism.*

---

On the other hand, in the “strict sense,” Niebuhr’s perspective allowed too much; the dominance of gospel-concepts of the broader category demonstrate how often American Christians have been distracted from the pure proclamation of God’s grace. This gospel has been ignored, taken for granted, or unhelpfully mingled with the whole of New Testament teaching. Occasionally, false gospels without foundation in either category have become influential.

<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr, *Kingdom of God*, 105.

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, *Kingdom of God*, 143, 151, 165.

Preachers must be aware of the many meanings their hearers may attach to *gospel*, categorize them clearly, and relentlessly proclaim the “strict sense,” for only this gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.

## GOSPEL AS LAW

The Puritans, stressing the unity of the Old and New Testaments, viewed relationships with God and one another through the lens of “covenant.” Since covenants always imposed conditions, New England divines’ conception of the gospel included generous amounts of law. Inheriting the law-gospel dialectic from the continental reformers, some Puritan leaders sensed a vague discomfort with the confusion that might result from the covenant hermeneutic. As John Cotton revealingly put it, “to distinguish between that sanctification which floweth from the law, and that which is of the gospel, is a matter so narrow, that the angels in heaven have much ado to discern who differ.”<sup>5</sup> Still, the pull to give law a fundamental role in gospel was too strong. For Peter Bulkeley, an influential first-generation American Puritan, the “covenant of works” was indeed distinct from the “covenant of grace,” but the “covenant of works” was made not with Israel at Sinai but with all in Adam. The difference between Sinai and Calvary was one of degree rather than substance, for they both gave and demanded the same thing.<sup>6</sup> Anne Hutchinson did her prosecutors a favor by appealing to the bogey of “immediate revelation,” but her real crime was daring to “distinguish between the voice of my beloved [Christ] and the voice of Moses.”<sup>7</sup> In his famous “Model of Christian Charity” sermon, John Winthrop compared “the moral law” and “the law of the gospel.” Rather than freedom from the law, for Winthrop, the gospel’s defining feature was its greater legal demands: love of enemies and giving beyond ability. Fear of Hutchinson’s “antinomianism” further entrenched the gospel-as-law view.<sup>8</sup>

Although rarely stated with the Puritans’ care for doctrinal structure, a stress on the constitutive role of the law has been a stable feature of American gospel-concepts. Jonathan Edwards, theologian of the Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s, commented that, “There is perhaps no part of divinity . . . wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on law survived the erosion of Calvinism. As frontiers became settlements in nineteenth-century America, religion and law worked together to civilize virgin lands. In such conditions,

<sup>5</sup> John Cotton, “A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace (c. 1636),” in *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*, ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 149.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant, or, The Covenant of Grace Opened*, 2nd ed. (London, 1653), 66–71. See also Michael McGiffert, “From Moses to Adam: The Making of the Covenant of Works,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, no. 2 (1988): 131–55.

<sup>7</sup> “The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson,” in Heimert and Delbanco, *Puritans in America*, 160.

<sup>8</sup> John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in Heimert and Delbanco, *The Puritans in America*, 83–84; on antinomianism, see 150.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Greg L. Bahnsen, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Douglas J. Moo, Wayne G. Strickland, and Willem A. VanGemeren, *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 14.

revivalists proclaimed that the gospel was a “republication . . . in another form,” of God’s law.<sup>10</sup> This legacy was still felt a century later, as Christianity came to be increasingly associated with middle-class morality. In the mid-twentieth century, an Anglican observer decried American preachers’ “blindness to the starting-point of the Gospel. . . . You are still preaching Law, and a pretty easy-going or romantic Law at that.”<sup>11</sup> While its rationale, focus, and severity evolved, law remained a strong ingredient in the recipe of American gospel-concepts.

## GOSPEL AS NATIONAL COVENANT

Extending the “covenant of grace” to God’s dealings with the Israelites under Moses, the Puritans extrapolated their own gospel of corporate election—connecting commonwealth concerns to spiritual assurance (if not to salvation history). Winthrop, Bulkeley, and other early Puritans thought of New England as a “city set upon a hill.” This status *was* gospel for the dissenters, who in their new land faced religious controversy, famine, war, and perceived spiritual lethargy. They described this gospel as being “a people in covenant with God.”<sup>12</sup> Revolutionary-era sermons reinforced the image of America as God’s new Israel, with titles like *The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel* (Nicholas Street, 1777). Even when Americans had in mind a stricter New Testament gospel-concept, it came to depend on the values and institutions of the covenant people. As a Congregationalist leader in the early republic declared: “The expansion of republican forms of government will accompany the spreading of the gospel.”<sup>13</sup> With westward expansion in the nineteenth century, famed churchman Lyman Beecher saw the millennium approaching:

If it is by the march of revolution and civil liberty, that the way of the Lord is to be prepared, where shall the central energy be found, and from what nation shall the renovating power go forth? What nation is blessed with such experimental knowledge of free institutions, with such facilities and resources of communication, obstructed by so few obstacles, as our own?<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cited in David L. Weddle, “Law and the Revival: A ‘New Divinity’ for the Settlements,” *Church History* 47, no. 2 (June 1978): 207.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Roper Vidler, “The Appalling Religiousness of America,” *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 22 (December 22, 1947): 5.

<sup>12</sup> Bulkeley, *Gospel-Covenant*, 431. American Puritans did not have a fully literal view of themselves as the “New Israel.” But the image was powerful enough as a “motivational myth.” Jan Stievermann, *Prophecy, Piety, and the Problem of Historicity: Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures in Cotton Mather’s Biblia Americana* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 88–90, 219; Conrad Cherry, *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 19.

<sup>13</sup> John D. Woodbridge, Mark A. Noll, and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Gospel in America: Themes in the Story of America’s Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 215.

<sup>14</sup> Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1835), 10.

During the Civil War, both sides fought for the gospel, and the conflict would determine whose idea of the national covenant was sanctioned by God. A Virginian Presbyterian minister dreamed of “a gospel guarded against the contamination of New England infidelity”—by which he meant a Christianity that condoned slavery through New Testament proof texts and a Christianity that focused on simple evangelism without political entanglements. On the other hand, Northerners, referring to abolitionism, bemoaned that “the cause of Christ among his poor has suffered as their Master suffered.”<sup>15</sup> After defeat, Southerners saw themselves as the crucified righteous—the Lost Cause myth that allowed the South to write itself back into the national American gospel when trumpets of war sounded in 1898 and 1917.

---

*During the Civil War, both sides fought for the gospel, and the conflict would determine whose idea of the national covenant was sanctioned by God.*

---

The twentieth century forced American Christians to apply their national gospel to international affairs. During World War I, the priests of American civil religion argued that the greater call inherent in the gospel to fight German injustice and cruelty explains “how we can make war in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace.”<sup>16</sup> The view of postwar peace was just as gospel-soaked: the Federal Council of Churches regarded the League of Nations, with the United States its moral head, as “the political expression of the Kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>17</sup> The good news of America’s covenant with God was reified during Eisenhower’s presidency, as “under God” became part of the pledge of allegiance and communist Russia played the necessary role of antichrist.

Into our own day, Christians continue to mingle gospel with American ideals and values. Said a Baptist pastor in the 1970s, “In this church, we teach patriotism as synonymous with Christianity.”<sup>18</sup> Christians foisted American political ideals upon their faith, as in Baylor University’s early 2000s vision document, which described “the Church” as “the one truly democratic . . . community.”<sup>19</sup> A Christianity that epitomized American principles could function as a prop for narrower agendas, like the conservatism of Richard Neuhaus, who spoke of “the Christian warrant for democratic government,” which matter-of-factly included

<sup>15</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 22; Cherry, *God’s New Israel*, 173.

<sup>16</sup> Cherry, *God’s New Israel*, 268.

<sup>17</sup> Cherry, *God’s New Israel*, 271.

<sup>18</sup> Woodbridge, Noll, and Hatch, *Gospel in America*, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Mikeal C. Parsons, “Building the Faculty at a Christian University: The Significant Contribution Model,” in *The Baptist and Christian Character of Baylor*, ed. Donald D. Schmeltkeopf, Dianna M. Vitanza, and Bradley J. B. Toben (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2003), 66.

capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Church theology on social issues often did not escape the presuppositions of American political philosophy. For instance, a 2017 draft statement on women and justice from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America considered “created equally in the image of God” an incomplete sentiment without adding “and are endowed with certain inalienable rights.”<sup>21</sup> With the notion of a “covenant with God” as leaven, Americans’ political values have been baked into their gospel-concepts.

## GOSPEL AS CONVERSION

For the Puritans, a personal “experience of grace” qualified one for church membership. While this sentiment was relaxed in practice, it remained the ideal in the eighteenth-century and animated the Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s. While ostensibly offering a pure “proclamation of God’s grace,” revivalist preaching, influenced by Pietism, effectively communicated that the new birth was not in believing but in the knowing one’s self as a believer, either by ecstatic experience or reasoned psychological reflection. The normative *experience* of the gospel threatened to define the *substance* of the gospel-concept itself. As a defender of the “reasonableness” of the new birth explained, “what [are] the Evidences of God’s Favour; but a realizing Sight of the Actings of Grace in our Souls, and of the Truth of the Invitations and Promises of the Gospel?”<sup>22</sup>

The Great Awakening model of conversion was lengthy and emotionally taxing. The Calvinist specter of predestination precluded an easy belief that one was among the elect and that protracted guilt and despair of God’s grace were necessary elements of true conversion. Much of this did not sit well with the revivalists of the nineteenth century, whose Jacksonian political notions that commoners were the elect demanded a parallel religiosity. But rather than abandon the centrality of experience in conversion, the new generation truncated it. According to Charles Finney, the specific experience did not matter much: “Whatever point is taken hold of, between God and the sinner, when the sinner yields that, he is converted.”<sup>23</sup> The gospel came to be associated with the sinner’s act in a moment. D. L. Moody, preeminent urban revivalist of the late nineteenth century, outlined five aspects of repentance: conviction, contrition, confession of sin, conversion, and confession of Jesus Christ before the world. None of this was meant to imply a drawn-out chronological process, however:

<sup>20</sup> Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 202–3.

<sup>21</sup> ELCA, “Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice: For Study and Response Prior to September 30, 2018,” November 2017, PDF, 2, <https://tinyurl.com/y7fsqffp>.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, “The True Scripture-Doctrine,” in *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740–1745*, ed. Richard L. Bushman (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 83.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1835), 344.

If you have never turned to God, turn now. I have no sympathy with the idea that it takes six months, six weeks, or six hours to be converted. It doesn't take you very long to turn around, does it? If you know you are wrong, then turn right about.<sup>24</sup>

This evangelical-style immediate conversion dominated in the twentieth century, with preachers like Billy Graham telling potential converts, "Make it happen *now*. . . . If you are willing to repent for your sins and to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can do it now. At this moment you can either bow your head or get on your knees and say this little prayer."<sup>25</sup> The gospel was still an instantaneous experience of the sinner's initiation, but perhaps because determining the appropriate act of yielding demanded too much pastoral sensitivity for televised "crusades," the decisive act was narrowed to a "sinner's prayer."

## GOSPEL AS SANCTIFICATION

Theologically, conversion corresponded to justification and largely neglected sanctification. Psychologically and socially, conversion provided limited support for living the Christian life, and Christian morals were of particular concern as Americans spread into the "uncivilized" west in the nineteenth century. These needs were met by the holiness movement. Stemming from Methodism's founder John Wesley, holiness theology stressed that "full salvation" entailed a "second blessing," a supernatural experience of sanctification following conversion. Non-Wesleyans like Asa Mahan, president of Oberlin College, became proponents. "For our entire redemption from sin, into a state of perfect moral purity," wrote Mahan, "the gospel has made full provision."<sup>26</sup> Many saw parallels between spiritual health and physical health: if the gospel made one free from sin, why not also the effects of sin, like disease? In the 1880s, holiness leader A. B. Simpson unveiled his "fourfold gospel"—Christ as savior, sanctifier, healer, and coming king. The Pentecostal movement, emerging at the turn of the century, adopted Simpson's schema with a slight edit. For Pentecostals, the "full gospel" included "Baptism with the Holy Spirit," another post-conversion experience, often accompanied by speaking in tongues, that empowered the believer for witness and righteousness. Pentecostals believed that until their movement emerged, "men have been preaching a partial Gospel."<sup>27</sup> The spread of Pentecostal spirituality beyond the Pentecostal denominations—the charismatic and "Third Wave" movements—extended the motif of a "full" or "whole" gospel that stressed miracles, spiritual gifts, and power over evil spirits.

<sup>24</sup> D. L. Moody, *The Overcoming Life: And Other Sermons* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1896), 49.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in C. Douglas Weaver and Rady Roldán-Figueroa, eds., *Exploring Christian Heritage: A Reader in History and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 235. Emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Asa Mahan, *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection*, 7th ed. (Boston: Waite, Peirce, 1844), 143.

<sup>27</sup> Eddie Hyatt, *Fire on the Earth: Eyewitness Reports from the Azusa Street Revival* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2006), 21.



---

*Theologically, conversion corresponded to justification and largely neglected sanctification. Psychologically and socially, conversion provided limited support for living the Christian life, and Christian morals were of particular concern as Americans spread into the “uncivilized” west in the nineteenth century.*

---

A separate movement at the turn of the century also addressed conversion theology’s sanctification gap. The “social gospel” carried on the reform concerns of nineteenth century frontier revivalism but built them upon liberal theology and addressed them to the challenges of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Without denying individual salvation or divine consummation, social gospelers argued that Jesus sought to establish a steadily growing social order of love and justice. The kingdom of God, said Walter Rauschenbusch, “is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven.”<sup>28</sup> The church was to be the “social factor of salvation” that “brings social forces to bear on evil.”<sup>29</sup> Such sentiments, although chastened by two world wars and nuanced by neoorthodoxy, resurged with the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, and women’s liberation. “The church rightly engages in social welfare,” said the Lutheran Church in America in the 1960s, “because the gospel it proclaims impels Christians . . . to show concern for persons.” Therefore, “the church has this double commission: to serve human need and to testify prophetically for justice in the ordering of society.”<sup>30</sup> In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, mainline Protestant churches, like the early social gospelers, often identified the gospel as the kingdom of God in its this-worldly dimension and stressed the church’s role in social salvation.

## GOSPEL AS PROSPERITY AND POSITIVITY

With the grave exception of the Great Depression, the last century and a half has been a time of growing affluence for Americans. As such, the gospel-concept often reflected Americans’ privileges and aspirations. Some were gnostic distortions of other gospel-concepts. For instance, in the late nineteenth century, Mary Baker Eddy’s “Christian Science” took divine healing a step further, declaring that all disease was illusion. Refusal to acknowledge illness gave “the gospel a chance to be seen in its glorious effects upon the body,” by which Eddy meant complete health.<sup>31</sup> Around the same time, Baptist minister Russel Conwell was giving his

<sup>28</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 65.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 119.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Christa R. Klein and Christian D. Von Dehsen, *Politics and Policy: The Genesis and Theology of Social Statements in the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 191–92, 259.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: A. V. Stewart, 1912), 176.



popular “Acres of Diamonds” speech, in which he told Americans already feasting on a steady diet of Horatio Alger that “to make money honestly is to preach the gospel.”<sup>32</sup> As popular psychology emerged after World War II, concerns of positive emotion, self-image, belonging, and human development began coloring gospel-concepts. The preacher of “positive thinking,” Norman Vincent Peale, explained that his methods to “create your own happiness” were “the undiluted teachings of Jesus Christ. . . . The Gospel as we work with it proves to be the literal fulfilment of the astonishing promise [of] . . . ‘the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.’”<sup>33</sup> Robert Schuller of the famed Crystal Cathedral regarded “self-esteem” as “the sense of value that comes to me when I have been restored to a relationship with God.” For Schuller, this was gospel: “Christ died on the cross for me. If he thinks that much of me, I had better start thinking something good about myself.”<sup>34</sup> The sprawl of suburbia often meant the atomization of social life, and the gospel of positive self-image was often embedded in the rhetoric of community. In the 1970s, ministers began telling the young, “This is what the gospel seeks to do—to convince a person that he is loved by God and is an important member of God’s family. When such a message dawns on a person who feels worthless, it is ‘good news’ indeed.”<sup>35</sup>

---

*With the grave exception of the Great Depression, the last century and a half has been a time of growing affluence for Americans. As such, the gospel-concept often reflected Americans’ privileges and aspirations.*

---

No message “consecrated America’s culture of optimism” as blatantly as the “prosperity gospel.”<sup>36</sup> This teaching, emerging in force in the late twentieth century, combined Pentecostal divine healing theology and a metaphysical mental cure system known as New Thought. Sometimes called the “Word of Faith” movement, prosperity gospel proponents claimed that God has provided for believers’ present victory over all spiritual, physical, and emotional ills; the key to experiencing this victory is faith, or confessing it. In the words of prosperity preacher Kenneth Copeland, “the gospel to the poor is that Jesus has come and they don’t have to be poor anymore!”<sup>37</sup> Whether in “health and wealth,” belonging, or happiness, the American gospel of the late twentieth century, according to *Newsweek*,

<sup>32</sup> Russell H. Conwell and Robert Shackleton, *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Harper, 1915), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 179.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in William A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 126.

<sup>35</sup> Merton P. Strommen, *Five Cries of Youth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 26.

<sup>36</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 227.

<sup>37</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 77.

October 25, 1976, was “not a call to Christian servanthood, but an upbeat stress on what God’s power can do for you . . . a salvation-brings-success ethos.”<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This short review of American conceptions of the gospel omits much, like the black church gospel of hope, “no creed but the Bible” restorationism, and Catholic community of the faithful. It has skipped over theological controversies—for instance, biblical inerrancy and sexuality—that became so consuming as to functionally replace the gospel they sought to maintain. Nearly all the gospel-concepts overlap in varied and complicated ways that space does not permit to untangle. The present narrative also has not directly addressed some themes that permeate the story, like millennialism and individualism.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in stressing the variety and historical contingency of American gospel-concepts, we have sidestepped important leaders who tenaciously defended the “strict sense” of the gospel, like C. F. W. Walther.

We are confounded not only by the quantity of gospel-concepts but because so many (though not all) may legitimately fall under the broader category of “the entire teachings . . . in the New Testament.” Niebuhr’s “kingdom of God” litmus test is not much more than intuition when it comes to identifying “exaggerations and perversions.” Furthermore, since Niebuhr simply dismissed deviations from his “kingdom” paradigm, they lose their potency as signs of the perpetual human desire to make the gospel in our own image. For preaching, a far more precise tool is the one supplied in the Formula of Concord. The “strict sense” of gospel as the proclamation of God’s grace must be dominant and determine the valence of any message that would also don the label. Every concept of gospel—even those built on clear New Testament teaching—must be able to articulate its relationship to the “strict sense” gospel, how it serves it and remains in submission to it.

---

*We are confounded not only by the quantity of gospel-concepts but because so many (though not all) may legitimately fall under the broader category of “the entire teachings . . . in the New Testament.”*

---

From political revolutions to westward expansion to the rise of the middle class, historical circumstances prompt gospel-concepts. Residue of past concepts lingers among preachers’ hearers even as new concepts sprout forth. Welcoming the postmodern turn, some no longer even feign to begin with New Testament

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Woodbridge, Noll, and Hatch, *Gospel in America*, 180.

<sup>39</sup> William Dyrness regards materialism, optimism, and individualism as the central cultural characteristics by which Americans hear and articulate the gospel. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?*

teachings, asking simply, “What is the good news for this group?”<sup>40</sup> The notion that the gospel should mean whatever its hearers want is itself a gospel-concept. Faithful preachers may bemoan the fact that one may now drop pretense and allow the gospel to mean *anything*. Yet, like the *ouroboros*, perhaps the appetite for false gospels has begun destroying itself. The infinite options may send American Christians once again in search of a stable rubric, and we can pray that they will find it not only in the entire teachings of the New Testament but principally in proclamation of God’s grace. ⊕

*CHRISTOPHER RICHMANN has his PhD from Baylor University and is assistant director at Baylor’s Academy for Teaching and Learning and affiliate faculty in religion. He has published several articles on American Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. He is also a Synodically Authorized Worship Leader in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*

<sup>40</sup> Pete Ward, *God at the Mall: Youth Ministry That Meets Kids Where They’re At* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 107.