

The Nature and Importance of ‘Gospel Literacy’ in the Local Church

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Significant discussion is occurring about the question “what is the Gospel?” Keller’s recent book “Center Church” devotes its first several chapters essentially to defining Gospel. At first it seems surprising that 2000 years after Jesus we still find ourselves debating such a question. Surely Christian leaders would have sorted out this most significant issue centuries earlier.

This discussion begs a second, equally important question, which is the focus of this workshop: if Christian leaders and scholars struggle to define “Gospel”, where does this leave the majority of Christians? What responsibility does the church have to equip Jesus Followers with Gospel literacy? Is this at all important? For what reasons? What does this entail? If it is addressed well, what does this do for the church? If it is ignored, what harm may accrue? Does the NT provide any guidance as we seek answers to these questions? Keller¹ addresses some of these questions, primarily in chapter 21 “Equipping People for Missional living.” To paraphrase Keller’s view developing and sustaining gospel literacy in a local church requires pastoral leaders who understand the good news and its appropriate contextualization, equipped lay leaders, and equipped lay ministers.

The thesis of this paper is quite simple: when we generate Gospel literacy among Jesus Followers, the mission of Jesus Christ advances. Conversely, when we neglect Gospel literacy, the church is weakened and anemic. I consider three questions as I seek to unpack this proposition:

1. How should we define this “Gospel” about which Jesus Followers need to be literate?
2. How do we define and measure “Gospel” literacy and why is it important to develop this within a local church?
3. How can Christian leaders in local churches equip believers with “Gospel” literacy?

In respect to all three questions I will seek to consider what guidance the NT provides for our practice today. Our approach will be:

- a. Work from the NT data into the modern context;

¹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervans, 2012), 277-90.

- b. Interact with Keller’s perspective in *Center Church*;
- c. Reflect to some degree upon the Canadian context;
- d. Discern strategies to advance Gospel literacy today.

We are dealing, in my opinion, with the broader issue of discipleship – helping people learn to be obedient, fruitful Jesus Followers.

Section One: Defining “Gospel”

Keller devotes chapter 1 “The Gospel is not Everything” to answering the question “What do we mean by ‘the gospel?’”² He answers this by saying “the gospel is a message about how we have been rescued from peril...a news report about some life-altering event that has already happened.”³ A few pages later (basing himself on Gathercole’s argument) he writes that Paul and the Gospel writers considered “the good news to have three basic elements: the identity of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation.”⁴ Jesus took three years to educate the Twelve about his “good news” (Gospel) (Mark 1:15) and his work was not completed until his forty days of teaching after his Resurrection and before Pentecost. I think it is important to remember that all of this took place within a Jewish frame of reference and so we must define “Gospel” accordingly.

Defining Gospel today is not easy, but in some sense the idea of “Kingdom of God” remains central to Jesus’ announcement of good news. The four canonical “Gospels” lay out for us through story, teaching, and comment how the early church in the middle of the first century was understanding the essence of the “good news” as proclaimed by Jesus in word and deed. Their production 30 – 40 years after the resurrection of Jesus indicates that defining this “good news” carefully and completely had become an important desideratum for the developing church and its mission, particularly in light of increasing false teaching and the death of apostolic witness.⁵

² Keller, 29’

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Luke 1:1-4 focus upon accuracy of the things taught. Luke uses the expression οἱ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται⁵ καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου – “those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and servants of the Word” delivered to us – one group that has a double responsibility; early witnesses who also become ministers of the word. Presumably this is a reference to apostolic eyewitness and apostolic proclamation. Their witness gives Theophilus assurance regarding the things he has been taught.)

C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pub., 1994), p. 235 defines αὐτόπται a spectator who sees with his own eyes. Here it refers to “a qualified witness who personally affirms both that which he has seen and his conviction, thus making certainty possible. He guarantees the truth of the gospel – someone who has participated in the event. Josephus, *Ag. Apion*, 1.55;

In the first twenty-five years of the early church defining and preserving the “good news” were critical issues and the voices of the apostles, including Paul, were instrumental in this debate. In Acts 2, 10, 13, 15 we discern significant statements of this good news which represent early church perspectives on this issue. Paul’s letter to the Galatians (2:1-10) summarizes the results of these early discussions. Paul and the “pillars” in Jerusalem agreed about the essence of the good news. Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians expresses a fuller and more detailed understanding. 1 Peter 1 presents another, complementary perspective.

In the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s of the first century deviations from this “good news” arise as we see in NT writings such as the Pastoral Epistles, 2 Peter, Jude, 1 John and Hebrews. While earlier examples of this occur (e.g. Galatians 5:4 – “becoming alienated from Messiah” and “falling from grace”), the activity of “false teachers” (Acts 20:29-30) seems to escalate with tragic consequences as people “drive their ship of faith upon the shoals of false teaching” (1 Tim. 1:19). The issue always seems to be what is the content of the good news and how are people, assuming the mantle of teaching, distorting this good news by adding to it or subtracting from it? Numerous times Paul will use the term “my gospel” (Romans 2:16; 16:25) or “our gospel” (1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3; 2 Tim 2:8). According to Moo in Romans 2:16 “my gospel” “does not mean a particular form of teaching peculiar to him, but the gospel, common to all Christians, which has been entrusted by God to Paul for his preservation and proclamation.”⁶). While I would agree with Moo’s statement generally, I think that we cannot entirely eliminate the sense of defensiveness with which Paul uses this expression with this pronoun, whether first person singular or plural. In almost every Pauline letter in the NT there is some definition of the Gospel, indicating his perception he needed continually to promote Gospel literacy among his audience, so that there would be coherence among house churches as to the essence of “my Gospel.”

Proclaiming the good news is central to Jesus’ role and that of the apostles and other key early church leaders such as Phillip. From these and other discussions can we sort what the NT writers regarded as “central” and “essential” to this good news? Three times Paul used the preposition phrase *κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου* (Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8), which resonates with similar expressions which came to define the four canonical gospels – e.g. the gospel according to Matthew. Paul provides numerous summaries of “his gospel” and his last in the canonical

cf. *War.* 3,432. Luke references common historiographical hermeneutics employed by Herodotus, Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Diodorus Siculus, and Josephus.

Paul may reference this language in 1 Corinthians 4:1 when he describes himself and his fellow-workers as *ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ καὶ οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ*. Cf. Acts. 26:16 – the apostles.

⁶ D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1996), 154.

materials occurs in 2 Timothy 1:9-11, an expression of the “testimony of/concerning our lord (2 Tim. 1:8):”

- “God saved us”
- “God called us with a holy calling”
- “Not in accordance with our works, but in accordance to God’s own plan and grace”
- “This grace/favourable response began in Messiah Jesus before creation”
- “This grace/favourable response has become public knowledge through the appearance of our Saviour, Messiah Jesus”
- “Messiah Jesus destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light **through the Gospel.**”

In this outline we discern the three major themes of the gospel identified by Keller – the identity of Jesus as Messiah [and Son of God], the death of Jesus for sin and justification (here expressed as “salvation”), and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation (use of death and life language, as well as God’s plan). Additional elements would include the theme of “holy calling” with its ethical implications. What Paul assumes in this definition is the “telos” of this divine activity, namely the creation of the people of God.

Generally the “good news” incorporates the themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration, i.e. the mission of God centred in Jesus Messiah and fulfilling various covenant promises. Additional emphases found in the NT writings with respect to “Gospel” include:

- 1 John – Jesus is Son of God – human and divine
- Synoptic Gospels – entering the Kingdom is entering life, based upon the covenant that Jesus has established “in his blood” (Mark 14).
- Galatians – Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham – faith in Christ, reception of the Spirit
- 1 Corinthians 15 – death, burial and resurrection of Jesus in accordance with the Scriptures
- Romans 5, 8; Ephesians 2:8-10 – no works – God’s gracious intervention with eschatological transformation – moving people into the kingdom of grace.
- 1 Peter 2:9-10 – sprinkling of blood and obedience – new, re-visioned people of God.

In both Jesus’ teaching (Mark 4:10-12) and that of Paul (cf. Romans 16:25; Eph. 3:3-4; 6:19; Col. 1:26-27; 4:3; cf. Greek translations of Daniel) τὸ εὐαγγέλιον is related to the concept of “mystery” generally located in the context of apocalyptic theology and literature. This term sets the “good news” in the context of God’s eternal plans (salvation history) initially revealed in the

OT, regards this good news as a divinely ordered “revelation” of a prophetic nature (eschatological dimensions), and sets it within the larger conflict with Satan and his evil designs (final restoration). For Jesus to be at the centre both of its production/execution and proclamation requires that he be a divine figure appropriate to the scope of God’s cosmic initiative.

Section Two: “Gospel Literacy”

Gospel defines our Christian existence, personal and corporate, and results in ethical transformation based upon the work of the Holy Spirit which then finds expression in a new Messianic community. If these are the essential features, the contours which define the “good news of God” in Jesus Messiah, then what does the development of “Gospel Literacy” require?

What is “literacy” and when applied to “the good news” what does literacy entail? A simple definition of Gospel Literacy might be:

Knowing the content of the “good news” and being able to enrich this understanding with self-directed Bible study.

However, Gospel literacy is more than knowing, it is a knowing the results in the integration of Gospel-based principles in all of life. So fleshing out this definition we might say that:

it is motivating people and developing their capacity to define and articulate the “good news” consistent with biblical truth and with sufficient understanding so that they can apply that meaning to generate personal and corporate life-changing discipleship and explain its basic meaning to other people.

The “Gospel” as we have quickly reviewed in section one entails “three basic elements: the identity of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation (according to Keller). The goal in gospel literacy is to enable people to be fluent with these ideas, knowledgeable about where they are taught in the NT, and able through personal study to initiate serious contextualization of these principles in their network of relationships. The Holy Spirit of course is presumed to be active in this program of Christian paideia. Gospel literacy enables people to engage in the “missio dei” in a robust manner.

Among several questions which deserve consideration, we will engage three:

1. What does the NT have to say about “Gospel Literacy” as a value and goal within local congregations? Who actually proclaims the Gospel in the NT?
2. Given that generously 15% of the population in antiquity formally was literate, what expectations would the apostles, evangelists and other church leaders in the first

century have for people in the house churches regarding the study and dissemination of the Gospel?

3. Because our standards of literacy are much higher today and people's ability to interact directly with Scripture enhanced, how does this change the congregational dynamics and expectations related to Gospel Literacy and "Personal evangelism"?

A. NT Examples of those who "proclaim the Gospel."

Paul claims that he has been "entrusted with the Gospel" – Galatians 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:11; Tit. 1:3 (ἐν κρυόγματι). Is this a statement that every believer can and should be making? Why? In Paul's view this is a function of his apostolic role. He also identifies and recognizes the particular role of "the evangelist (τοὺς εὐαγγελιστάς Eph. 4:11; cf. Acts 21:8 where Phillip is described as "the evangelist" and 2 Tim. 4:5 where Timothy is enjoined to "do the work of an evangelist").⁷ Within the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists we generally do not identify "apostles" as part of our congregational leadership structure, nor have we formally established the role of "the evangelist." Generally we have included within the pastoral role some of the apostolic responsibilities regarding "proclamation," as well as the "evangelist" responsibilities. We have been reluctant to appoint a person as "an evangelist" for fear that this will diminish a sense of personal responsibility for evangelism within the congregation. We consider "sharing the good news" to be the role of every believer, given the Great Command from Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20. This conviction carries with it the implication that every believer is "entrusted with the Gospel" and has the responsibility to disseminate it effectively. However, we do not find this term "evangelist" in the NT applied to average believers. Timothy is charged by Paul "do the work of an evangelist" (ἔργον ποιήσων εὐαγγελιστοῦ) (2 Tim. 4:5) which seems to have some formal character to it and is central to his work as a teaching leader in the Ephesian church. Presumably it describes the function of a messenger who proclaims good news.

Who actually "proclaims the Gospel" according to the NT record, i.e. fulfills the function of an εὐαγγελιστής? When you examine the occurrences of the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι in the NT you discover the following:

- a. Jesus is the subject (Mt. 11:5; Lk.4:18,43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1; Acts 10:36; Eph. 2:17)
- b. John the Baptist (Lk. 3:18)
- c. Angels (Lk. 1:19; 2:10; Gal. 1:8; Rev. 14:6)

⁷ This Greek term does not occur before the NT.

- d. God (Rev. 10:7)
- e. Moses (Heb. 4:6)
- f. Apostles generally (Acts 5:42)
- g. Phillip (Acts 8:12,35,40)
- h. Peter and John (Acts 8:25)
- i. Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:32; 14:7,15,21; 15:35)
- j. Paul + ??? (Acts 16:10)
- k. Paul (Acts 17:18; Rom. 1:15; 15:20; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:16(2x),18; 15:1,2; 2 Cor. 10:16; 11:7; Gal. 1:8b, 11,16,23; 4:13; Eph. 3:8)
- l. Timothy (1 Th. 3:6)
- m. Undefined subject (Acts 8:4; 11:20; Rom. 10:15 (Isa. 52:7); Heb. 4:2; 1 Pet 1:12, 25; 4:6).

We find only one or possibly two places where believers, who are not specifically identified as church leaders, may function as the subject of this verb (Acts 8:4; 11:20 (men from Cyprus and Cyrene)). Keller claims that

not only the apostles ([Acts] 5:42) but every Christian ([Acts] 8:4) did evangelism – and they did so endlessly. Passages such as Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Hebrews 3:13; and 1 John 2:20,27 indicate that every Christian was expected to evangelize, follow up, nurture, and teach people the Word. This happened relationally – one person bringing the gospel to another with the context of relationship.⁸

But what do these texts actually say and about whom are they speaking? And what are the implications for 21st century believers embedded in congregation life? Let’s evaluate these texts which Keller uses to support his contention:

Acts 5:41-42 “The apostles left the Sanhedrin...Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

The text is quite explicit that it is the apostles who “proclaim the gospel” going from house to house and also expressing it publicly in the temple.

Acts 8:4 “Those who had been scattered went, communicating the message as good news (εὐαγγελισζόμενοι τὸν λόγον). Philip went down to a city of Samaria and proclaimed (ἐκήρυσσεν) the Messiah to them.”

⁸ Keller, 277. He references Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* and suggests that informal missionaries communicated the gospel through informal conversation naturally and enthusiastically.

This activity follows the description of Saul's attempts to destroy this new Jewish Christian sect. This includes everyone but the apostles (8:1) who for some reason were not directly affected. Verse 4 picks up the note about persecution and scattering in verse 1. The primary example of this follows in v.5 with Philip being the focus, presumably one of the Seven appointed in 6:5 to oversee the care for the widows of Hellenistic Jewish Christians. If we read the text carefully, it suggests that those among the scattered who "communicated the message as good news" were leaders and not just "ordinary believers," what Stephen did in Acts 6-7, Philip now does in Acts 8. Who else was included remains undefined.

Romans 15:14 "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another."

Paul is concluding his Roman letter. He affirms his confidence in their ability to disciple one another. There is no specific mention of "communicating the message as good news" to people who are not believers. It is Paul rather who has "the priestly duty of proclaiming (ἱερουροῦντα τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) the gospel of God so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (15:16). There is no implication in this text, in my opinion, that Paul expected every believer in the Roman church to be "communicating the message as good news."

Col. 3:16 "teach and admonish one another with all wisdom."

Here again the focus in Paul's exhortation is upon discipleship, not evangelism.

1 Thess. 1:6-10 "so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message (ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου) rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it....they tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...."

Paul celebrates the faith of these Thessalonian believers, which has become the talk of other groups of believers in Macedonia, Achaia and elsewhere. "They tell" presumably identifies believers in these other places who share with Paul their amazement at these developments. Again, can we say with certainty that this identifies an evangelistic thrust by average believers? If so, this is a very opaque reference.

Hebrews 3:13 "But encourage one another daily...so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

Here again the conservation is among believers for the purposes of spiritual nurture and development, not evangelism per se.

1 John 2:20,27 "You have an anointing from the Holy One and all of you know the truth...the anointing you received from him remains in you and you do not need anyone to teach you."

These believers have the Holy Spirit who is instructing and encouraging them in their Christian obedience. Again, while they have knowledge of the truth, the focus seems to be on mutual encouragement and exhortation, not specifically on evangelism. The Holy Spirit can protect them from false teaching.

The texts above cited by Keller certainly illustrate that Christians were expected to “nurture, and teach people the Word” within the church. However, we find very little evidence that average believers were engaged in the formal communication of the message as good news or its proclamation as evangelists. Apostles and other leaders in the congregations did this, not the average believer it seems. Now let me express a caveat here. *I am not arguing that average believers did not proclaim the gospel formally, only that if they did, the NT does not give much space to describing this activity.*

We find also with the verb κηρύσσω, when completed by the object τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, that it occasionally describes Jesus’ work (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14), the apostles’ focus (Mark 16:15) and that of Paul (Gal. 2:2; 1 Th. 2:9). The passive form is used without an explicit agent in Matt. 24:14; 26:13; Mark 13:10; 14:9) as Jesus anticipates information about him, i.e. the gospel, being proclaimed among the nations, without specifying who will do this. Several times Jesus or Messiah is the object of this verb and the subject is Philip (Acts 8:5), Paul (Acts 9:20; 19:13; 1 Cor. 1:23; 15:12; 2 Cor. 1:19; 11:4), others (Phil. 1:15; 1 Tim. 3:16). However, very rarely do we find this verb used explicitly to describe the activity of an average believer. Perhaps one example might be Mark 5:20, but this is a pre-resurrection occasion.⁹ The passive uses which occur as prophetic announcements by Jesus may allow for this, but again are not explicit.

According to 1 Cor. 9:14 Paul affirms that “those who preach (καταγγέλλουσιν) the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” This suggests a formal, trained person who is gifted and recognized as one who proclaims the gospel. In the context Paul is defending his apostleship and so it would seem to describe an apostolic function. Paul asks prayer from the Ephesian Christians that he would have boldness in “proclaiming (γνωρίζαι τὸ μυστήριον) the mystery of the Gospel” (Eph. 6:19). The Philippian believers share in the “advancement of the Gospel” by supporting Paul in various ways (Phil. 1:5,7, 12).

So what do we do with Jesus’ commandment in Matthew 28:19-20? First we note that Jesus is addressing the Eleven (v.16), according to v.18 “and Jesus, drawing near, said to them, i.e. the

⁹ We might also cite the example of the woman at the well (John 4) who returns to her village and “tells (λέγει) the people, “Come, see a person who has told me everything that I have done. Is not this one the Messiah?” (John4:29). Many believe διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς γυναικὸς μαρτυροῦσης ὅτι.... (“because of the word of the woman bearing witness that....” v.40).

Eleven.” The second person plural in v. 19 “make disciples” logically and grammatically would continue with this reference. In other words Jesus addresses his words to the Eleven, who are charged with the responsibility to “make disciples of all the nations.” They do this by baptizing and teaching. Logically, if we interpret the verb “make disciples” as applying to all believers, then we should have no problem in enabling all believers anywhere to baptize people – something we rarely teach or allow, although theoretically we might endorse the proposition. Our practice indicates some limitation in the application of this commandment. However, I would argue that as the apostles “disciple all the nations,” some among these new Jesus Followers will become evangelists and teachers who have the giftedness and training to preserve the witness and proclaim the good news in diverse ways (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2-3). As new disciples effectively “obey all that Jesus commanded,” they proclaim the good news in their living, as well as the conversations.

So what have we come to through this brief review? Who actually “proclaims gospel” in the NT?

- a. The formal proclamation of the message about Jesus as good news seems to reside initially with apostles, those who were direct, eyewitnesses of his ministry, and then primarily with trained, gifted people.
- b. We find few, if any, examples where “average Christians” are involved in this formal proclamation directly. The composition of the four written Gospels seems to be done by apostles or those closely linked and perhaps guided by them (Mark by Peter and Luke perhaps by Paul). In Luke’s terms this writing occurs in order to assure believers of the accuracy of what they have been taught.
- c. Average believers are expected to know the content of the Gospel, but this knowledge serves primarily to enhance their personal spiritual formation as well as that of other believers in their network of relationships. It also gives protection against false, deceptive teaching.

The power of imitation needs to be brought into this discussion as well. 2 Timothy 3:10-16 “follow my teaching¹⁰” Much of the training/equipping re gospel proclamation seems to occur through mentoring relationships (e.g. Peter and Mark; Ananias and Saul; Paul and Timothy/Titus; Priscilla-Aquila and Apollos).

Paul summarizes this perspective in Ephesians 4-6 where we discern “apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers equipping believers for ministry “so that the body can build the

¹⁰ The concept of μιμητής, μιμέομαι (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:7; Heb. 6:12; 13:7; 3John 11) is pertinent here. Similarly consider the use of τύπος in 2 Thess. 3:9; 1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7; 1 Peter 5:3.

body.” Through the transformative power of the Gospel – learning the truth as it is in Jesus (Eph. 4:21) – they develop new habits of thinking that generate new patterns of behaviour (defined in Ephesians 4-6), in which they imitate Christ and so demonstrate this “good news” in their relationships.

The specific situations in which believers publicly “proclaim their commitment to the Gospel occur in three different contexts:

- a. Personal baptism in which individuals “confess that Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 8:36,38). The evidence is tangential.
- b. Worship settings, but particularly in relation to the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:26 τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ). Cf. 1 Peter 2:9.
- c. Situations of persecution where believers are being challenged to explain themselves (1 Peter 3:15-16; 1 Tim. 6:12). There is encouragement to “witness a good confession” as Jesus did.

B. What does the NT have to say about “Gospel Literacy” as a value and goal within local congregations

Do we have examples of congregations in the NT where they intentionally practiced the development of “Gospel Literacy,” i.e. a full understanding among believers of the “good news” which has Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and its implications as its central concern?

1. In Acts 2:42 the believers in Jerusalem “engage with the teaching of the apostles” (2:42), which suggest continuing discussions about the apostles’ witness and the meaning/implications of this “good news.” (cf. 5:41-42) So the apostles are the key source of gospel literacy (as evidenced in Peter’s Pentecost Sermon) and they endeavor to generate such literacy among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Later in Acts when people from the Jerusalem church are scattered because of persecution, some proclaim the good news to people in Cyprus and Cyrene (Acts 11:19-21). We are not sure who is included in this group of proclaimers, but since they come from the Jerusalem church, they seem to have been equipped by the apostles to do this work effectively. In 1 Corinthians 15:6 we have reference to “over 500 brothers at one time” to whom the risen Christ appeared. Perhaps Paul’s reference to Andronicus and Junia “who are outstanding among the apostles, and...were in Christ before me” (Rom. 16:7) refers to some of these eye-witnesses of the resurrection who, like Paul, became recognized in the church as “apostles” because of this remarkable, revelatory experience.

2. Paul expects the people in the Philippian church to collaborate with him to “advance the good news” (1:12) because they share a common interest in and concern for the good news (1:5). He expects that these people “will live in a manner worthy of the good news” (1:27) because they are “contending together in the faith of the good news” (1:27; cf. 4:3 “contending in the cause of the good news”). The ability of these believers in Philippi to collaborate with Paul in these matters requires that they possess “gospel literacy.” The foundations for this literacy would have been established when Paul established this house church during his second (Acts 16) and third journey (Acts 20). He reinforces this literacy through his letter. What “with one ‘soul’ contending together in/for the faith of the good news” means can be debated. Sumney, for example, suggests “striving together with one life for faithfulness to the gospel.”¹¹ It does not at first glance refer to formal evangelism.
3. Paul instructs Timothy to “entrust to reliable men” the content of Paul’s teaching so that they in turn may “be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2). Part of this involves “correct handling of the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Gospel literacy seems to require some biblical and theological literacy. Older women who are spiritual mature have the responsibility “to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women...” (Titus 2:3-4). Presumably the content of this teaching echoes the content of Paul’s letter to Titus that incorporates Gospel explanation with theological and ethical guidance.
4. The verb *κατηγέω* has the sense “teach, instruct” and Luke uses it in Lk 1:4 to describe the purpose for which he composed his Gospel, namely that Theophilus will “know well the certainty of the things/matters which you have been taught/instructed.” What follows then is Luke’s account of the good news about Jesus. The composition of the other gospels fills a similar purpose – John 20:30-31. Mark 1:1 places this outcome at the top of his compositional agenda – “the origin of the “good news” of Jesus Messiah, Son of God....” They become guidebooks for discipleship.
5. Yet, surprisingly we do not find specific contexts where the terminology of “teaching” has *εὐαγγέλιον* as the object, i.e. “teach the good news.” I am sure it happened, but it seems that leaders in the early church were focused on teaching

¹¹ J. Sumney, *Philippians. A Greek Student’s Intermediate Reader* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pub., 2007), 35-36.

the implications of this good news, as Jesus expressed in Matthew 28:19-20. Perhaps much of this has to do with unpacking the teaching of the OT with reference to Jesus and his mission.

6. Both Apollos and Paul in Acts (18:25; 28:31) are said to “teach the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.” Their activities seem to involve sharing the good news about Jesus, particularly with reference to the OT. Consider the work of Paul and Barnabas described at Antioch (Acts. 15:35 – “they and many others taught (διδάσκοντες) and proclaimed as good news (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) the word of the Lord”). The phrase “word of the Lord” could include both the Jewish Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus. The verb καταγγέλλω also applies to the proclamation of the “word of the Lord” or “the Messiah” (Phil. 1:17-18; 1 Cor. 2:1; Col. 1:28; Acts 13:5,38; 16:17; 17:3, 13, 23). In one context Paul says that “those who proclaim the gospel (τοῖς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον καταγγέλλουσιν) should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14).
7. In Matthew 5 Jesus teaches his “disciples” that they are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of world” (5:14-16). We frequently reference these texts to encourage evangelism. But note that Jesus in his conclusion to this short segment explicitly says “Let your light shine in such a way before people, in order that **they might see your good deeds** and give your father in heaven glory” (v.16). The focus is upon deeds, not words at this point. Similarly in Matthew 6:1 Jesus enjoins people “to do your righteousness before people” in a certain way. In Matthew 7 he warns about false prophets and advises that “good trees produce good fruit” so that “you should recognize them based upon their fruits” (7:16, 19-20)
8. Surprisingly in Galatians 1:12 Paul will claim that he “has not been taught the good news (by human agency).” Rather he received it “through a revelation/unveiling of Jesus Messiah.” The implication is that Twelve were in fact “taught the good news” directly by Jesus prior to the cross and resurrection.
9. Ephesians 4:20-21 may be the most direct statement in the NT about teaching people the good news, even though the term εὐαγγέλιον does not occur in that context. cf. Col. 2:6-7.
10. We have the disappointing statement by the writer of Hebrews (5:11- 6:3) about those who have already received “elementary teachings” but have not progressed as expected.

So it is clear from these and other texts that teaching was a frequent occurrence within the house churches. Such teaching would have various emphases, such as demonstrating the truth of the gospel from the Jewish Scriptures, explaining how the gospel should affect ethics and relationships, and helping people discern the “times” in which they were living. So Gospel Literacy was something desired, but “gospel” in such an expression has a rather broad scope. We do not find a specific instance where a leader intentionally teaches average Christians the content of the good news or an approach to “evangelism” so that they can go directly to their neighbours and talk to them about the good news. This may have happened, but we do not find a documented case, it seems to me, in the NT. Leaders, however, are trained in this regard so that they can make formal presentations of the Gospel to non-believers.

What does happen in the Gospels and Acts is that people who meet Jesus or see miracles accompanying the apostles share this “good news” as a story/witness with people in their household (Philippian Jailer) or their towns (woman at the well). Yet we cannot say that in this they share the gospel message based upon gospel literacy. They are sharing the experience of their personal interaction with Jesus or his designated representatives (Mark 16:19-20 – “signs following”). Their knowledge of the Gospel in these contexts is quite minimal.

- C. Given that generously 15% of the population in antiquity formally was literate, what expectations would the apostles, evangelists and other church leaders in the first century have for people in the house churches regarding Gospel literacy and the dissemination of the Gospel?

As the review in the previous section has shown, we can argue that some measure of Gospel literacy was a goal for those involved in the house churches. House church leaders (cf. 1 Tim. 3) need to demonstrate an aptitude and ability for teaching, for example. The various controversies which enveloped Paul with respect to his Gospel suggests that others in the church had a sense of the Gospel and considered Paul’s version to be deficient in some sense. He tells us (Galatians 2:4-5) that some “false brothers” sought to sneak into discussions and prevent his Gospel from receiving the approval of “the pillars” – Peter, James and John. Paul argues for his version of the Gospel as being the true Gospel in Galatians. These conflicts presumably occurred among church leaders, but they would be supported in some sense by the rank and file. Note that in Acts 15 the entire Jerusalem church is involved in discerning and supporting the solution regarding non-Jewish believers

– an issue central to Gospel literacy. Similarly in Romans Paul is presenting his understanding of the “Gospel” to the Roman house churches in order to garner their support for his projected mission to Spain. While this occurs at the highest levels of leadership in the early church, it has significant implications for everyone who should grasp the Gospel and be able to communicate it. It also presumes that when the letter was read people in the Roman churches would be affirming the Gospel as Paul was defining it.

Most gospel literacy projects in the early church would proceed through oral instruction, rather than through the personal study of written texts. Such texts were expensive and not always available. To “proclaim the good news” might be thought to require the ability to read, the opportunity to access and study the texts of Jewish Scripture, and the time necessary to equip oneself with these skills and this knowledge. The goal would be to demonstrate that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God from these Jewish Scriptures as modelled by Peter, Stephen and Paul. In the case of the emerging NT documents, whom would the church leaders entrust with these compositions for the purpose of study and discussion? If synagogue practice is any indication, texts were read publicly and then expounded publicly by recognized, competent leaders. Jesus demonstrates his literary ability in this regard in Luke 4.

D. Because our standards of literacy are much higher today and people’s ability to interact directly with Scripture enhanced, how does this change the congregational dynamics and expectations related to Gospel Literacy and “Personal evangelism”?

I think this question deserves some exploration. 21st century technology, general educational levels, and the general literary sophistication of much of the population, specifically in Canada, indicate that expectations might and should be greater today among average believers. In other words we have improved opportunity to develop Gospel Literacy among believers because of access to the Scriptures, general literacy, and general educational levels. Our theology of the priesthood of the believer, the residence of the Holy Spirit within the believer, and the expectation of giftedness to support involvement in specific ministries all support such an expectation as well.

As Keller argues, contextualization of the Gospel must be a significant part of such gospel literacy. He sees contextualization as important on four “ministry fronts:”

- a. Connecting people to God – through evangelism and worship
- b. Connecting people to one another – through community and discipleship
- c. Connecting people to the city – through mercy and justice

- d. Connecting people to the culture – through the integration of faith and work (p. 293).

Keller presumes that “the Bible tells all Christians to evangelize and love their poor neighbor. Yet some people have gifts of evangelism (Eph. 4:11).”¹² Does Keller’s conclusion need modification? As 1 Peter 2:10 urges, we as the people of God must “declare (ἐξαγγεῖλητε; allusion to Isaiah 43:21) the praises/praiseworthy actions of the one who has called us from darkness to his marvelous light.” No exceptions to this expectation are suggested. In Peter’s view this occurs primarily through individual believers knowing what “the good” is and having the courage to “do good” and thus “gain the unbeliever” for the kingdom (cf. 1 Peter 3:1-2).¹³ As this occurs believers will also on occasion have to articulate “the reason for their hope” which generates their counter-cultural way of life (1 Peter 3:15-16). The primary expectation from Peter’s point of view is that believers are supported, trained, and encouraged to live the Gospel in their relationships, with the concept of “submission” being a central feature. This is their primary responsibility as they “follow in the steps of Jesus” (1 Peter 2:21). They need to know why they are doing this and how it expresses their “living hope” (1 Peter 1:3-12). Some will be equipped with gifts that enable them to speak and others will be equipped with gifts that enable them to serve (1 Peter 4:10-12). It is the “elders” who shepherd the flock” as they enable them to grasp the hope of the Gospel (5:1-7).

The focus in this project of gospel literacy as expressed in the NT encourages believers to a practical contextualization of the principles centred in the good news within their network of relations – in the household, in the marketplace, and in their civic contexts. (cf. Matthew 5:14-16).

E. How did early church leaders measure “gospel literacy”?

I would suggest the following means were employed in the NT:

1. The degree of commotion believers were causing by their transformed conduct and their sharing about Jesus and his significance (1 Peter 4:1-5). How much “commotion” did the believers cause in their communities? This is not agitation, but rather the natural result of clashing cultures. The witness to the gospel is generated by persistent, gracious holiness.

¹² Keller, p. 293.

¹³ It may also occur in worship contexts, although Peter does not specify this.

2. By the degree of suffering experienced changes – what is the “suffering” quotient?
 - i. Positive embrace of “holiness” as a defining lifestyle
 - ii. Stewarding life as a continual offering of self to God
 - iii. Commitment to the “agape” way of living (1 Cor. 13).
3. By the way that people chose to engage their cultural contexts.
 - i. “not forsaking the assembly together”
 - ii. “doing good” in the face of criticism and rebuke
 - iii. “obeying God rather than men.”
4. Understanding of the Jewish Scriptures and the relationship between the Messianic movement and Judaism.
5. The ability to recognize and denounce idolatry (1 John 5:21).

Section Three: Equipping People today with Gospel Literacy

So what does the New Testament offer as guidance for us today regarding this matter of “Gospel Literacy”? How important should it be for the leadership of the church and does it contribute to the health of a local congregation?

1. Proclaiming the Gospel in a formal setting was an important role, but it seems to be allotted to specific leaders within the church. We do not find contexts in the NT where average believers were engaged in “formal, verbal proclamation of the Gospel.” This is something that apostles and other recognized and gifted leaders do in the early church, i.e. Timothy, house church leaders, Apollos, etc. Paul expects Timothy to engage in some kind of training project to develop additional, capable teachers (2 Tim. 2:1-2) which suggests that proclaiming the Gospel required some tutoring. This indicates that pastoral leaders/elders have this special responsibility formally to present the gospel as well as develop gospel literacy within the faith community.
 - a. So one of the tasks of the local congregation is to discern who among them is gifted as evangelists and equip them and support their efforts. We need to recapture the role of the “evangelist” as expressed in the NT and incorporate this into our ministry leadership strategy within the local church. If the lead pastor does not have the gift of being an evangelist, then the church leadership should take seriously the importance of appointing a paid or volunteer “evangelist” as part of the ministry team. The Twelve are to

“testify, for you have been with me from the beginning” (15:27), particularly when the Spirit comes (cf. 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:2; 4:14; Rev. 1:2,9).

- b. The task of evangelism takes training because it is done in a public context and requires specific skill, particularly on the part of pastoral leaders and elders. The contextualization and cross-cultural elements are complex. We must take care lest we inhibit the reception of the good news because we have not taken the time to learn how to do this well.
2. This is not to say that average Christians were left out of this activity entirely for we find, for example, in 1 Peter 3:16ff the responsibility for believers “to give a reason for the hope that they possess.” Jesus sends the man who is released from the power of the demon of legions back to his village to proclaim “how the Lord has had mercy upon you” (Mark 5:19-20). Philippian believers are to contend for the faith of the Gospel (Phil. 1:27). It is the expectation that the Holy Spirit will enable believers to be “his witnesses” as necessary. But what is the content and context of this testimony that people are to present?
 - a. Here I think we have to focus on people’s stories – how did they enter into a relationship with Jesus. In this they are “witnesses” to what Jesus has done for them personally. John’s Gospel emphasizes this element particularly. Note for example the woman at the well and how she influence people in her community who put confidence in Jesus “because of the word of this woman who bore witness” (4:39; 1 John 5:10).
 - b. In connection with the Gospel people are said to witness to it (Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:9). The programmatic statement that the ascending Jesus gives to the apostles is this: “you shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1:18) and this is empowered by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39,41; 13:31; 22:15; 26:16). However, in Acts this noun *μάρτυς* is used primarily in reference to the apostles being witnesses of Jesus’ life, crucifixion and resurrection. Paul includes himself in this vanguard (cf. 1 Peter 5:1). Presumably others can be taught how to continue this “witness” which is encapsulated within the NT Canon. However, it does require specific training. Providing resources so that others could become such “witnesses” was probably a strong motivation in the creation of the Gospel literature. Again, if this is the case, then it presumes that others who were not formally apostles could still, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and

mentored training become equally effective witnesses. To what an extent this expectation applies to every believer seems to be an open question.

c. Some or much of this training occurred through mentoring.

3. The nature of Christian witness primarily is behavioural and relational.

Keller acknowledges Michael Green's finding that in the early church the good news spread primarily through relationships in the household (οἶκος).¹⁴ Note how Peter outlines this in 1 Peter 2:18-3:7. Within the household we discern occasions for teaching (Acts 5:42), as well as opportunities to share the good news with friends and neighbours (Acts 10:22). Of course, in the absence of any other buildings, the local household was the natural venue for such things to occur and this would be relatively private. Friendship, a very serious role, also served as a natural network for such discussions. The patron-client relationships that people cultivated would be another natural venue for such demonstrations of Christian values to occur, with accompanying discussion.

It is also the case that more formal occasions were planned. According to Acts 19:9-10 Paul spent two years in Ephesus "dialoguing interactively" about the good news (διαλεγόμενος) using the "lecture hall of Tyrannus." Through this means "all the inhabitants of the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." However, note again that this is led by someone who has formal training and gifting as an evangelist and as an apostle.

Proposals for today?

Keller encourages the development of "lay ministers"¹⁵ who "actively bring their Christian example and faith into the lives of their neighbors, friends, colleagues and community." He distinguishes between lay leaders, who guide programs, from lay ministers who are "servants of the gospel." The leadership in the church equips and supports these lay ministers. Such lay ministers will be "like others and unlike others, Christians...engaged with others"¹⁶ He quotes with approval Kreider's observation that "the early Christians did not engage in public preaching; it was too dangerous. There are practically no evangelists or missionaries whose names we know....and still the church grew. Why?"¹⁷ The answer is because people were attracted to the

¹⁴ Keller, p. 278.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 283.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 285.

good news by the lives of people they knew. Here is where the issue of contextualization becomes very significant (cf. the points of connection proposed in Keller).¹⁸

Keller also emphasizes the role of pastoral leaders in developing lay ministers who have relational integrity, such that they can share their faith. This can happen in various ways:

- i. One-on-one informally
- ii. One-on-one in planned and intentional contexts
- iii. Provide an experience of Christian community
- iv. Share one's faith.¹⁹

He also encourages the church to provide various venues through which people can introduce their friends to the good news.²⁰

Conclusion:

Gospel literacy is a critical element in the ministry of evangelism primarily because it enables Jesus followers to live “christianly” in the context of their current relationships.

The NT demonstrates that “proclaiming the Gospel” primarily is a task given to those equipped and gifted to do this.

Average believers bear witness to the Gospel as they are engaged in “doing good,” i.e. contextualizing the good news in their network of relationships. They understand why this is important and have the ability to “give a reason for the hope they possess in the good news.” In this they become living samples of kingdom reality, empowered and led by the Holy Spirit.

Developing such Gospel literacy functions then at various levels:

1. In the equipping of pastoral leaders/evangelists who have the giftedness and ability to proclaim the gospel publicly.
2. In the equipping of believers to live out their Christian commitment within their network of relationships by “doing good.” This requires the ability to contextualize their “witness” within this network. This can be done somewhat through formal training, but also requires mentored learning opportunities.
3. The celebration and communication of the “good news” within the worship of the church so that believers can learn the essence of the “apostolic witness” to the Gospel.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 293.

¹⁹ Keller, p. 287-88.

²⁰ Ibid., 288-89.

Gospel literacy must be intentional if faith communities are to express their Gospel potential. The ability for people to contextualize their faith commitment within relationships, business activities, civic contexts, etc. is a key element of this gospel literacy as it is nurtured within local church contexts. The greatest weakness within the evangelical church today, broadly speaking is the dearth of intentional, sustained discipling focused on developing gospel literacy. We need to recalibrate our efforts in Gospel literacy towards equipping people to contextualize the Gospel within their personal networks, thus enabling people to see our good works, the evidence of the transformation produces by the Gospel and able to explain why this transformation has occurred.