

Empowered “The Publicist”

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Digging Deeper

Empowered: “The Publicist”

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 4:20; Romans 1:16; Acts 19:20; Acts 26:18; and others throughout.

Introduction

The American experiment in democracy since the founding of the republic involves citizens within a range of political activities, which is to say engaged in practices necessary to sustain the *polis* for *the people*. Of course not every resident within the United States have shared by law equally in these activities throughout the entire history of the republic. Slaves, immigrants, and even the indigenous peoples only gradually attained to this ideal of full participation. Among the sacred privileges and moral imperatives of citizenship is the franchise: the right to vote which directs the representatives of the people to implement their will for common good and to promote the general welfare. The founders of the republic chafed under the yoke of England’s parliamentary monarchy, marked by abuses of power and privilege and exploiting colonial status. Given the circumstances of America’s birth, citizens learned the vigorous practice of public discourse about political affairs, and the art of getting their message said so that their differences might be heard.

What 21st century Americans inherited was a political system already accustomed to the constant debate, the sharp disagreement, the regional divisions, the occasional burst of violence, and even the sustained dismay of civil war. We are, by all accounts, a scrappy population, having brought our grievances from other countries in search of freedom from the constant assault on liberty and opportunity. Therefore if we should complain about the incivility of our present-day form of political discourse, history is quick to remind us where we came from and what we were like when we came here. The American experiment in democracy has proved messy, raucous, riotous, and sometimes deadly. But Americans have somehow also kept true to their conviction that the whole crazy affair has been worth it and still remains worth it. Every generation of Americans embraces the belief that dying for the sake of one’s country makes a generation worthy of the sacrifices which came before it, and so every generation deems its own sacrifices to be worth the cost.

So what does all of this have to do with the Christian message? How does the story of Israel and the Church in some way connect with the experience of Americans? Admittedly, a great deal by the narrative often told by those who pay special attention to the religious history of the American people. Faith, God, and the life of the church paralleled and often intersected the narrative of the people who, even before the nation existed, had formed a deep and sacred bond with the land of the new world. Questing for liberty to worship without state interference, looking for a fresh start in a new place, imagining themselves to be a New Israel arriving in another Canaan across the sea, and embracing the challenge of creating a society that might become the city on a hill — doing all these things and more — religious persons arrived on American shores hoping to become better followers of their faith. And, they thought that God’s providence guided their arrival.

Whether the narrative of the church in the new world is true or not in all of its parts, there is little doubt that the narrative presupposes a *message* with deep roots in the Christian gospel. The new arrivals were on a mission that was both the Great Commission of Jesus and the Grand Compact for America. They were *publicists* for a new kind of society. Whether these two would form easy companionship would be for history to either prove or disprove. Now, 400 years since the first settlers put down foundations in North America, the United States of America continues to work out the painstaking details of politics with its roots in both the commission of Jesus

and the compact of Enlightenment ideals. Two streams, one religious and the other secular, engage with each other in a perpetual struggle over the identity of a people called Americans. Church and State remain uneasy companions in the narrative. Both have public statements about what this nation actually is, how this nation ought to conduct its business, and who will decide where this nation's destiny is taking its people.

Our politics requires messengers and publicists, politicians and prophets, officers and agitators, if we are to remain true to the vision of the earliest founders and their successors. Nothing is ever settled in experimental government, but the whole conversation remains fluid, dynamic, contested, and in search of stability for the sake of the nation's well-being. Historian Clinton Rossiter named his charming book, *Six Characters in Search of a Republic*, giving readers a lively account of the lives and thoughts of the six most notable and representative political thinkers of a "libertarian" cast of mind in the colonial period of American history: Thomas Hooker of Connecticut, Roger Williams of Rhode Island, John Wise and Jonathan Mayhew of Massachusetts, Richard Bland of Virginia, and Benjamin Franklin, citizen of Philadelphia, Boston, London and Paris. Of course there were others whose messages flowed into the stream of America's narrative, but these were "notable." Each in their own way they were publicists for their particular flavor of social order in the new world, including the politics and how it would be practiced. But the point is, they were each "in search" of what the people called Americans were *becoming*.

The year 2020 is a new installment in this search, complicated by a pandemic with its attendant social disruptions. The nation is also in the fourth year of a hotly contested political debate climaxing in the national election of a president and other officials at every level of government. The politics has drawn the religious and the secular into the national argument about what America will become once more. Followers of Jesus, usually lumped into the religious category, have had their messengers too but have sensed uneasiness with the practice of their messaging. Some would ask, "What is the politics of Jesus? Whose side does he support? How will his followers practice this politics in these challenging times?" To these questions, along with their assumptions, followers of Jesus do not necessarily give a unified answer because they, like their fellow Americans without religious faith, share in the secular dimension of politics and vote for candidates of the various parties on the ballot. And so we are forced to return to the question, "What is the politics of Jesus?"

In reply we must examine the witnesses of the Bible, the authorized record of God's revelation to humankind. Our discovery turns up surprising results: *Jesus doesn't have a politics, rather Jesus is a politics*. His messaging, his publicity, his *gospel* does not depend on party platforms or derive from political spectrums (right, center, or left). Jesus arrives on the scene of human history with a new word from God, a fresh breath of the Spirit that challenges the closely held politics of the Empire and, yes, refuses to be limited by the practice of politics in our republic. His inaugural message on the very first day of his public ministry began with a reading from the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-21).

Jesus is the heart and soul of the politics he embodies; he is the both the message and the messenger. He owes nothing to the power brokers of the religious community where he resides. He has no *quid pro quo* with the Empire or the Temple. He *does* obligate himself however to those on the margins of society, persons without power or wealth, prisoners without liberty, and the sick without decent health care. He is the politics of social transformation, creating structures and practices that develop among those he calls and who decide to follow him. He lifts the banner of his government high, *the light of the world*. He seasons the spiritual food he prepares, *the salt of the earth*. Jesus "gets the word out there" by preaching, teaching, healing, delivering, suffering, dying, and rising from the dead. *Jesus pays no ad agency to market his gospel: this is his gospel and he is his own publicist*.

And we are his publicists for our own time, lifting the voice of good news where there is only partisanship, incivility, foolishness, and evil. We follow in the footsteps of our founders, beginning with Jesus, “the pioneer and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2), and continuing by succession through the Apostles, Peter, James, John, and the others, including Paul. These hand over the message to us, empowered by the Spirit of Jesus, gifted to the church at Pentecost, enabling us to carry on the work of “getting the word out there” through both words and deeds. Our first visit this week will be to the front page of the church’s history from the book of *Acts*, where we discover how Jesus entrusted all of us to be his publicists, the narrators and the implementers of his politics contained in the gospel: the good news we declare to the world.

Power to Publish (Acts 1:8)

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:6-9).

Kingdom Questions (1:6-7)

Jesus had, in his previous conversations with the apostles over the course of forty days, spoken "about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Oddly, though perhaps not surprisingly, the apostles were stuck in their own understanding of a very narrow and nationalistic *kingdom*. They wanted to know when would Israel get to rule the world — even if it meant only rule their little piece of that world (1:6). After all, for the moment, *Rome* ruled the world; Caesar was in charge of everything from Spain to the West, the Indus to the East, Britannia to the North and North Africa to the South. The whole Mediterranean Sea basin was under its authority. As the *Revelation* put it, "The beast comes up *out of the Sea*" (Revelation 13). For the moment, the apostles were thinking about their immediate horizons: the little piece of real estate along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, divided into smaller Roman provinces: Galilee, Judea, Peraea and Samaria. There was no godly king ruling any Israelite territory, but only puppet tetrarchs like Herod Antipas in Galilee and procurators like Pilate in Judea.

If Jesus had risen from the dead (and he had), surely this signaled the beginning of "the revolution" in which Israel would occupy her rightful place at the center of the world, at the heart of the nations, perhaps, even as a dagger in the heart of Caesar's Empire. The time had come, they no doubt reasoned, to strike a blow for Judean freedom like the Maccabees under Judas, Simon, Jonathan and their courageous father Matathias, some two centuries before! After all, had not James and John petitioned Jesus for a place on Jesus' right and left once the kingdom had arrived (see Mark 10:37)? The disciples were asking a question about "authority," but Jesus had already told them in Mark 10:40 that such authority rested with God alone.

It's interesting that the apostles used the word "restore" in this context. From the Greek, *apokathistēmi*, the word has a range of meanings: "reestablish, restore, cure, make well, send, bring back." Additionally, they imagined that the kingdom would be restored "to" Israel (using the dative case in Greek). Ironically, Jesus seeks, not the restoration of the kingdom "to" Israel, but instead he wants *the restoration of Israel itself!* In fact, the apostles are the nucleus of that restored Israel, gathered around the resurrected Jesus! By choosing "twelve" apostles, Jesus was symbolically announcing the restoration of Israel as a new creation, corresponding to the original *twelve* tribes. Of course, because the betrayer, Judas, took his own life, that number stands, for the moment, at eleven, something the apostles will address shortly in anticipation of the Spirit's arrival.

The response of Jesus to the disciple's inquiry is direct. Using the language of prophetic "times and seasons" (Greek: *chronoi* and *kairoi*), Jesus declares that all such "date setting" is off-limits to his followers, reminding them that such matters belong to the Father's "authority" (Greek: *exousia*). The question of national Israel's place among the nations, as a matter of prophetic fulfillment, is hidden in the deeper purposes of God, Jesus instructs them. Unfortunately, the followers of Jesus, long after he spoke those words, have yielded more than once to the temptation to probe that mystery in direct contradiction to his instructions. There's hardly been a

"generation" when a flurry of prophetic speculation has not arisen, especially during times of distress. Even the appearance of the State of Israel, in 1948, triggered claims that within a generation of that event, the kingdom of God would reach its completion. Of course, as in other generations, those predictions proved false, largely because those who studied Scriptures chose to view prophecy as a crystal ball gazer might, rather than as the living word of God directed at each new generation of God's people — for their correction and growth. Jesus' words to his followers in Acts 1:7 agrees with his warnings given before his crucifixion: "No one knows the day or the hour..." (Matthew 24:36, 50; 25:13; Mark 13:32; Luke 12:46).

Sadly, those who become preoccupied with so-called "end time events" siphon off significant energy from the important task of *influencing* the world, as Jesus commanded. Those who treat prophecy only in predictive terms, tend to view events as inscribed in stone and see the world's future as scripted in advance so that no one can do anything about what happens. Those who cling to a "rapture" theology, supposing that they will be plucked from this world before the final curtain falls, might be tempted *not* to get involved with God's ongoing kingdom program. In this understanding of the future, since the whole world is going to end up in the dustbin or the incinerator of history, they might possibly ask, "What's the point? Why bother? Just save souls and wait for heaven." Nothing could be further from the mind of Jesus as he sets forth his kingdom program.

Persons, Power, Process, Places (1:8)

1. Central to the book of *Acts* is 1:8. What Jesus promises his followers is *power for divine influence*, and that power is not the sort prized by Caesar in Rome or vested in the Jerusalem leadership. The Greek word is *dunamis* and it points to that which *makes something happen*, that which *enables* it to take place. Our English words "dynamo" and "dynamite" derive from this Greek root. The former *produces* something, while the latter *deconstructs* something. Of course, the apostles knew nothing about either dynamos or dynamite, but they would soon know about the Holy Spirit!
2. Of importance in this passage is the role of the Holy Spirit as the source of *power* for Christian witness. The disciples are told not to rely on out-dated ways of thinking about the kingdom of God, as if it were a question of "restoring power" in a political sense to national Israel. That's what the disciples still imagined, but Jesus disallows this eventuality for them, reserving such matters for the hidden purposes of God. The witness of Christ's followers to the Gospel of Jesus Christ would not be *empowered* by a secular kingdom, equipped with armies and weapons, but by the Holy Spirit, the Father's promise, and their clothing with *power* "from on high." The followers of Jesus are instructed to "wait" in Jerusalem "for further *empowering*"!
3. The two words, *exousia* and *dunamis* appear in this passage. The first has to do with the *authorization* to act, whereas the second pertains to the *ability* and energy to act. God ("the Name", *hashem*) holds all authority "in heaven and on earth" as Matthew's version of the Commission explained. However, by His choice, He promises *power*, *dunamis*, to His followers. He *reserves* the *authority*, but He *authorizes* the *power*. The last command of Jesus is to "wait" for the arrival of the Holy Spirit--and power for witness.
4. Ironically, the disciples would no longer "see Jesus," the one to whom they are suppose to bear witness. The fundamental purpose of the "forty days" included their "seeing Jesus" who "showed himself alive" by infallible proofs. These are primarily proofs of "sight." Once Jesus vanishes from "sight", the Holy Spirit will become, as part of his *empowering* work, the one who will grant spiritual sight as the disciples bear witness to the words and deeds of Jesus, especially to the fact of his *resurrection*. The Spirit will provide "evidences" to the audiences where the disciples proclaim the Gospel. In the very next chapter, we hear Peter, now filled with the Spirit, telling his audience, "[Jesus] Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (Acts 2:33). The "witness of the Spirit" gives proof or evidence as the Christian bears witness to the Gospel.

The *power* which Jesus promises is something "received" when the Holy Spirit "comes on" the apostles. Just as they receive Jesus, so also they receive the Holy Spirit. According to John 20:20-21, Jesus told them "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Following this, he "breathed on them" and said, "receive the Holy Spirit."

If the Holy Spirit is something *received* then obviously the *power* Jesus promises cannot be self-bestowed. By their sheer effort or force, the disciples cannot bring about the kingdom of God on earth. This was the fatal flaw of the liberal "Social Gospel" which promised a gradual improvement of the world through the efforts of the church, imagining that such an outcome was inevitable through the progress of human history ("the myth of progress"). Two world wars undermined that theory, as theologians like Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out at the time. Human nature is fallen and requires restoration. For that reason, God sends the Holy Spirit on His people to *empower* them with the Gospel remedy.

Consider an analogy. The physical sciences distinguish between forces *centripetal* and *centrifugal*. Both words contain the prefix meaning "center." In the case of a spinning axis, the center is the axis itself. The centripetal force is directed inward, toward the center of a curved path around the axis. For example, if a satellite assumes an orbit around the earth, then the gravitational attraction of between earth and satellite supplies the centripetal force, acting *toward the center* of mass in both objects. On the other hand, any object traveling in a circle *acts as if* it is experiencing an *outward* force. This force is not *real*, but it feels that way to, let's say, a person riding a merry-go-round, holding on for dear life, lest they fly off! To apply this rough analogy to the first century Christ followers, we can see that the Holy Spirit supplies the inward motion which causes the believer to hold firmly to the center, Jesus Christ, and to derive life from him, even as the Spirit supplies *dunamis* for the *outward* motion into the world as witnesses. The witness to the world must be *derived* from our close connection to Christ and the Spirit.

What does this *centrifugal* ("outward") "force" look like in relationship to the early apostles? Jesus tells them that in Jerusalem (the geographical *center*) they will receive the Father's promise of the Holy Spirit (as we have seen above). In fact, he tells them that they *must not leave Jerusalem until* they have been endued with "*power from on high*" (Luke 24:49). There can be no *centrifugal* movement without a previous *centripetal* endowment by the Holy Spirit. All such outward efforts into the world would be entirely fictitious without the Holy Spirit operating *toward the center*. Given that enablement, the apostles will embark on an ever-increasing movement *outward*, described in 1:8 as:

- Jerusalem
- Judea
- Samaria
- Ends of the Earth

Each geographic *place* represents, symbolically, a fresh spiritual *epicenter*. Were we to outline the book of *Acts* in terms of these movements, we would have:

1. Jerusalem (Acts 1:1-8:4)
2. Judea and Samaria (8:5-12:25)
3. Ends of the Earth (13:1-28:31)

What this outline does not *seem* take into consideration is that during the course of the Judea and Samaria outward mission, the Christ followers also went to Syria where Antioch was located and from which the first missionaries were sent "to the ends of the earth." It appears that Luke, like other ancient writers, regarded Syria as "A Greater Judea," a position argued brilliantly by Martin Hengel.¹ Were we to enrich this simple geographical outline, we would point out the connections to North Africa through the efforts of Philip in the Judean wilderness *south* where he met the Ethiopian eunuch; and his mission to Samaria. Or the encounters of Peter with the house of Cornelius in Caesarea, the seat of the Roman procurators for Judea.

A reading of Acts 1:1-12:25 uncovers an intense and dense mission by the early apostles and their co-workers which saturated the regions *around Jerusalem*. Across a wide range of *people groups*, they sowed the seeds of the Gospel, establishing Christ communities, speaking in synagogues (where they were permitted), and

¹ Martin Hengel, "Joudaia in the Geographical List of Acts 2:9-11 and Syria as 'Greater Judea'," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10.2 (2000) 161-180.

stretching the cross-cultural boundaries even before embarking into the regions of Asia and Europe to the west. This was the commission Jesus gave the apostles, and through the Holy Spirit he *empowered* them to fulfill it.

Ascension Drama (1:9)

Luke abruptly and dramatically closes the curtain on Jesus' earthly ministry at this juncture in his narrative. The Jesus of history, crucified and risen, vanishes at some definite point after the forty days have ended. Just as surely as they had seen, touched and heard the resurrected Jesus *after his crucifixion*, so now they cease to "know him" in the same way again (compare Paul's similar view in 2 Corinthians 5:16). The words of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in the garden are apropos:

"Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17).

This "holding" onto Jesus finds parallel in Acts 1:10 where the apostles are "looking intently up into the sky," and must be counseled by the angels who ask, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" Humanly speaking, the apostles wanted to "keep Jesus" as he had been — with them in bodily form, visible and accessible. They had not yet experienced the arrival of the Holy Spirit who would make the presence of Jesus even more real to them, not through his tangible qualities, but through his mission through them that they would now undertake.

What does the *ascension* of Jesus mean? Recall the Apostles' Creed: "I believe ... he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead..." To hear Luke describe the event: "He was taken up before their every eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). Thank God for clouds! There was no need for the apostles to be concerned about the *mechanics* of the ascension of Jesus. In sacred literature, clouds often symbolized the thin veil which separated the invisible realm of God and the visible world which human beings inhabit. Heaven, rightly understood, is not a place light years distant from earth, "in a galaxy far, far away." Jesus did not need to travel like a spaceman beyond some incredible spatial divide to reach the right hand of God. "God is not far from everyone of us," Paul would one day tell his pagan audience in Athens (Acts 17:27-28). *Heaven is the realm of God* and one day it will include earth (see Revelation 21) within its domain, once God's will is done *here* as it is *there*. It was no more challenging for Jesus to ascend to God than to rise from the dead. In his resurrection he had already been taken up into the life of God Himself, wearing a deathless, but real body, energized by God's Spirit.

For Jesus to ascend meant he took his place "at God's right hand," a *majestic* place and a *royal* place (see Luke 22:69 where Jesus predicted his future ascension; also, see Luke's additional testimonies about Jesus in this new exalted role: Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56 — Stephen actually sees Jesus "standing at God's right hand" ready to receive him!). Paul speaks about Jesus as "interceding for us" (Romans 8:34), seated at God's right hand (Colossians 3:1; Ephesians 1:20). The writer to the *Hebrews* notes Jesus' exalted role after his death and resurrection (Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). Peter tells us that all authority is subject to Jesus "at the right hand of God" (1 Peter 3:22). The Psalmist, in 48:10, tells us "Your right hand is filled with righteousness," implying that the right hand of God symbolizes his righteous rule over the world. In one of the grand "enthronement psalms" which celebrated the annual renewal of the kings' rule in ancient Israel, we read how Yahweh speaks to "my Lord" and invites him to sit "at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet..." (Psalm 110:1). This psalm is quoted by Peter in his sermon (Acts 2:35) in a passage we will soon examine. Paul picks up this "under your feet" language in 1 Corinthians 15:25-27 when he writes about Jesus' *present role*: "He must rule until he puts all his enemies under his feet...the last enemy is death..." The writer to the *Hebrews* uses similar descriptions of Jesus' present role (1:13). In the *Revelation*, Jesus, pictured as the Lion-Lamb, takes the title deed of planet earth from the "right hand" of God (5: 7). Theologians refer to Jesus' ascended state as his "present session" — his status at God's right hand *before he comes* "to judge the living and the dead."

Kingdom of God: Place of Empowerment (1 Corinthians 4:20)

¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. (1 Corinthians 4:19-20).

“Talk is cheap.” And perhaps we might add, “Political talk is really cheap!” Election years drip with fast-talking candidates thick with promises that suppose they actually have the power to make things different. Voters simply need to believe that they will make them different. When Paul uses the language of “the kingdom of God” in the text for this section, he builds on pre-existing knowledge of what the kingdom means. Gentiles thought of kingdom in terms of Empire, whereas Jews thought in terms of “the kingdom of God.” A few comments about this kingdom are necessary at this juncture in our discussion.

Paul uses the phrase "kingdom of God" sparingly throughout his letters (see Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 6:9-10; 15:24, 50; 1 Thessalonians 2:12). Perhaps his reasons had to do with the overtly anti-imperial suggestion implied in the phrase. Only Rome got to decide who ruled and who didn't in any other colonies and provinces within the imperial realm. Even making the statement “Jesus is Lord” had subversive overtones since lordship was the sole prerogative of the Emperor. By calling Jesus “Lord” the Christian publicists attracted the attention of Caesar's intelligence community that was always on the lookout for brigands lurking in the shadows, biding their time to launch a strike against *Roman power*. Nobody had the freedom to use the title “king” or declare their rule over a “kingdom” without official authorization from Rome. The politics of Jesus and the politics of Rome certainly had different publicists, but they both knew and exercised distinctive kinds of power within the social order. So what exactly is the kingdom of God and where does it get its power?

The kingdom of God was God active rule or reign over His people. Later Paul would develop the idea that Christians have a dual citizenship: one on earth and one in heaven:

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Philippians 3:20-21).

Citizens have responsibilities toward one another in their respective kingdoms, and Christians, as citizens of God's kingdom have enormous responsibilities to live out consistently the life of Jesus in relationship to each other. In fact they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so. The whole world was, after all, potentially watching them to see what sort of society they were forming. The ancient philosophers agonized over the proper form of the "perfect state". Plato had his Republic. Aristotle elevated politics. The Stoics, like Socrates before them, looked for the "city of God". The New Testament envisioned little Christ communities scattered throughout the world, like so many menorahs, shining the light of the Gospel "so that men may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (see Matthew 5:16; also the imagery of Revelation 1-3 where the resurrected Jesus walks about the candlesticks of his churches who are located throughout Asia Minor).

God's reputation as righteous king is a stake in the lives of His people. Works of the flesh detract from the social harmony and ethical purity of the Christ community. More is on the line than simply the purity of a single Christian: the whole health of the community stands to suffer if social discord and conflict burst out in anger and malice; or, if immorality and other forms of impurity sap the vital energy of those who must be faithful to Christ alone. Paul spells out in some detail what Christian citizenship does and does not look like when practiced within God's realm, His kingdom, localized in this life of Christ's churches. Consider his characterization in Galatians 5:

¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. (Galatians 5:18-26).

How should Christians publicize the character of Jesus in their own lives so that citizenship in God's kingdom becomes a viable alternative to citizenship in the Empire? This text contrasts poor conduct with empowered conduct, works of the flesh as over against fruit of the Spirit. The power of the kingdom is animated in spiritual fruit, while the enemies of the kingdom are corrupted in selfish works. Rome promoted power in terms of law and order, conquest and domination. Christ's kingdom promotes life-giving power through virtues that reign supreme over all else. True kingdom living is known by the goodness it promotes not by the greatness it boasts.

Power in the Message: The Gospel, Simply the Gospel (Romans 1:16ff)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17).

For a Jew to enter the city of Rome, bringing with him this powerful new message which promised so much to so many, ought to have given him a reason to tremble. Was Paul confident enough of this "gospel" to announce it to the very center of Roman power? Did Paul really believe that Lord Jesus could do for Romans what Lord Caesar could not? Making such a bold claim left Paul open to the possibility of disappointment. What if a substantial crowd gathered around Paul's preaching ministry, supported by the little community already active in house churches throughout the city? Would the message live up to its expectations or would this disparate group of persons revert back to their divisive ways? What if it turned out that the only way to keep people together in society was by the power of the Empire? In other words, what if Paul's high hopes for a Roman mission ended in failure? Would this not expose him to *shame* in the presence of Jews and Gentiles who pinned their hopes on the good news — the gospel — he proclaimed? Going to Rome with such high expectations was full of risks, not only for Paul, but also for the reputation of the Christian gospel throughout the world. If things went badly in Rome, what would that mean for other important cities where the gospel had already come?

Paul no doubt thought long and hard about those questions. This mission to Rome and this letter sent in advance of it were no small undertakings. Much rested with this substantial venture into potentially hostile territories. The Greco-Roman world fostered a society where honor and shame were significant judges of success and failure. Yet, knowing all of this, Paul confidently begins the central text of his letter with these crucial words: "I am not ashamed of the gospel... (1:16)." He takes the Greek verb *aischunomai* ("to be ashamed") and he compounds it with the preposition *epi*, creating an intensive form: "I am *under no circumstances ever* ashamed of the gospel" captures something of his emphasis. Thus, he writes his letter and he plans his trip Rome without the slightest doubt that the God who announced this good news will deliver on His promises contained in it.

Paul makes this quite clear by adding "for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: Jew first and then the Greek [=Gentile]." The gospel is a royal proclamation from God, and therefore it does not contain an empty message. When God proclaims a message he follows through, as the Old Testament prophets remind us:

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

²³ By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." ²⁴ Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; all who were incensed against him shall come to him and be ashamed (Isaiah 45:23-24).

What God purposes He brings to fulfillment. His word goes forth and accomplishes what He intends. Thus, when Paul says that the gospel is "the power of God," he means precisely what these Isaiah texts declare. The word "power" is from the Greek *dunamis* meaning "strength, act of power, miracle." The emphasis falls on that which causes something to happen or brings about change or accomplishes something. Some modern readers of *Romans* associate the term with "dynamite," but the idea of "dynamo" may be a better analogy for the

producing of energy. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because he knows that it faithfully produces beneficial results.

In particular, the proclamation of the gospel produces *salvation*, that is, the “rescue” of human beings from the tragedies and deadly enemies of their well-being — deliverance from the *bad news*. As we shall see shortly, those enemies include *sin* and *death*. Paul proclaims the message of God so that God may rescue those who are threatened by these things and bring them into His kingdom and give them a place among the people who bear His name. After all, who doesn’t like hearing a story about a daring rescue! Throughout his ministry Paul has piled up countless evidences of how God, through the preaching of the gospel, brought about remarkable rescues of human beings from sin and death. Wherever Paul went the power of God through the gospel followed him. He had every reason to believe that the same outcomes would take place in Rome. Doubtless Paul stood in continuing amazement and gratitude as he witnessed the unbelievable changes in people’s lives when they reached out in trusting faith to the faithful God who proved Himself wholly reliable by sending the Lord Jesus Christ who is *mighty to save*. Imagine such things happening in Rome! Good News!

Among the marvels Paul witnessed was the consistent experience of seeing both Jews and Gentiles impacted by this message. Jesus is an equal opportunity Savior! Though the religious divide between these two people groups was enormous, time and time again, Paul the Jew found himself surrounded by countless Gentile respondents to the royal message he proclaimed. The thoroughly Jewish story of God the Creator proving His steadfast love to human beings touched the hearts of even the toughest Gentile audience. It’s tempting to say that in the gospel there was something for everyone. In its story of the one true God who kept His promises and sent the Messiah to Israel could be heard just what the Jewish soul long waited to see. At the same time, to Gentiles the gospel was a wholly new and refreshingly hopeful announcement that God was *one* and not *many*, and that this God had a universal purpose for the whole world. As Paul once told the Gentiles in Athens, believing in *one God* meant that they could accept everyone as coming from *one original parent* and avoid the inevitable conflict associated with trying to pleasing a whole bunch of gods (see Acts 17).

Going to Jews first was not an act of unfair advantage, as if Jews were more entitled to hear the message. Rather, Paul had method in his decision to seek out Jewish followers of Jesus, for they already knew the ancient Scriptures, the Bible of Israel — the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. They simply needed to get the necessary “updates” to that original text, namely, how its prophecies had at last found fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. It’s a huge advantage for Paul to find Jews who believe the gospel since they are already equipped to intelligently handle the words they have known from their childhood (see the case of Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15). “To the Jew first” was a strategic decision not a preferential one. Paul could quickly redeploy Messianic Jews to become preachers of the gospel to Gentiles without first having to train them in the Hebrew Bible, which they knew quite well as a result of their synagogue educations. Jews like Aquila and Priscilla (see *Introduction to the Series*).

“...everyone who believes...” This phrase underscores the essential element of faith as the activity of *believing*. What is it that attracts this faith to the message of the gospel? Paul declares that in the gospel “righteousness of God” is *revealed*. As we have already observed in our introduction, righteousness is God’s activity to right the wrong, make the crooked straight, and restore the damaged. It is not merely a property in God’s character, though we may confidently say that “God is righteous.” Righteousness is the *active* power of God to make things *right*. In the texts from Isaiah cited above, what “goes forth from God’s mouth” is the word of righteousness and strength. What Paul tells the Romans is that the word is the gospel, and when it goes forth from his preaching, God powerfully brings about change in people’s lives; crooked thought they may be, desolate though they may be, and sinful though they may be, He actively *rights them*.

God does this, says the gospel, because He is a person of faith. Paul writes that this righteousness involved a personal transaction “from faith to faith” (Greek: *ek pisteōs eis pistin*). Translations of the Bible sometimes mangle the language of this compound phrase, thereby obscuring the underlying grammar. Paul chooses his

words carefully. He tells his audience that the work of God's righteousness *originates* with the God of faith, or, from the God who keeps faith, or, from the God who is *faithful*. The preposition *ek* indicates *source* and *origin*. The righteousness in view does not originate from human effort or from the genius of the Empire, though Rome often claimed to have produced the most just society in the history of the world. The source of real justice, of real righteousness, is God Himself. His righteousness — His *dikaiosunē* — takes the initiative and does for the world what the world cannot do for itself. He gives to the world what the world cannot give to itself. Thus, God's righteousness acts with mercy and with grace, driven by the power of unconditional love for a world in deep need.

So, righteousness begins with God, but it does not end with God. For although it is “from faith” (that is, God's faithfulness), it is also “to faith,” and this has to do with the human recipients of the merciful and gracious acts of God's righteousness in Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's Messiah and Lord of the world. The human respondents to the gospel must reply to God's faithfulness by an act of faith themselves. If they listen carefully to the message of the gospel, they ought to be moved by its words of God's love for them, and they ought to be filled with gratitude for God's gift of Jesus to rescue them from their desperate human situation. If and when they respond favorably to what God has done, that response takes the form of *trusting faith*. We might say that God's faithfulness inspires human faith. What the preaching of the gospel must do is make very plain the righteousness of God, or, as Paul puts it, in the gospel “the righteousness of God is *revealed*” (Greek: *apokaluptō*, “to unveil, to disclose”). Such *revelation* of God's righteousness means that the gospel makes clear and plain what God has done in Jesus, and thereby tells the world something absolutely essential about *Who God is*. As we shall discover in the subsequent verses of Romans 1, human beings have experienced a horrible loss of the accurate knowledge of God. What has been lost can only be recovered by a breakthrough *from God* who overcomes all human *limitations* and makes possible a full *restoration* of the lost human condition.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul concentrates his efforts on explaining how the ways God's righteousness visibly change the course of human history as the gospel advances with its message that Jesus is Lord. God announces to the world in the gospel that He is making all things new, a possibility proclaimed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Such an announcement is the good news meant by the Greek word *euaggelion*. It is the *good news* that counters and remedies the *bad news* described in the subsequent verses. We will turn to that discussion shortly, but first we need to locate the word “gospel” in the wider vocabulary of Paul's time and place.

Sidebar: A closer look at the word “gospel”

The Jewish Background

Our earliest and clearest use of the term *gospel* comes from the Old Testament book of *Isaiah*. In the chapters starting with Isaiah 40, the emphasis falls on the promised return from Israel's extended exile in Babylon. The writer offers words of consolation and encouragement to a homeless people anxious to be back in their land where they can rebuild their homes desolated by war. To speak about this coming deliverance, the prophet uses the expression “good news” or “glad tidings” in at least four distinct passages which we present here:

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of **good tidings**; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9).

I first have declared it to Zion, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of **good tidings** (Isaiah 41:27).

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings **good news**, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isaiah 52:7).

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring **good news** to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners... (Isaiah 61:1).

As you can see in each case, the “glad tidings” or “good news” is an announcement of an extremely important nature that is marked *high priority*. The substance of the good news is that God is back in town and that he stands ready to rescue those who stand in need of deliverance. The Hebrew text uses words like *bāśar* meaning “bear good tidings.” In these texts from *Isaiah* the focus is on God’s coming to His people in need and on His personal coming to reign as king.

The Greco-Roman Background

But Paul had another source for his use of this word. In an inscription which dates from 9 B.C.E., the Roman emperor is honored by an unknown writer with these words:

The providence which has ordered the whole our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving it to Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere...; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the *glad tidings* [i.e. “gospel”] that have come to men through him. (*Priene Inscriptions*, edited by F. Hiller von Gärtringen, 104, 40)

Here, then, are two sources: one Hebrew and one Roman. Which one did Paul favor? He probably favored both, since each makes a powerful statement and suited his purposes well as he proclaims the “gospel of God”. Words not only have meanings, they also gain meanings from how they are used. They come from somewhere, but they also go somewhere. In this case, the God of Israel, according to *Isaiah*, “reigns” on his heavenly throne over the whole world. If this is true, then all of the pagan gods and pagan rulers are not the real kings. For *Isaiah*’s audience, Babylon who had taken the people into exile was not the real power behind the universe, though its kings and gods might think so. Yahweh is king. This, then, sets up a confrontation between the true ruler and the false ones. In Paul’s case, he is declaring by implication, that if Yahweh is the real king, then Caesar is not.

The *Isaiah* texts proclaim God is king over the whole world, not just Israel. Paul’s gospel in its own way says the same thing, namely, that the one true God has, in Jesus of Nazareth, become king once again and has won the victory over all the world. If we listen carefully to the opening verses of *Romans*, examined thus far, we can hear Paul saying this. This gospel is: 1) concerning God’s Son, 2) promised by God in the prophets, 3) the story about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, 4) a world-wide message which proclaims that God has become king of the world. The gospel is not a method for people to get saved; it is the announcement of what God has done so that people can experience this salvation. For Paul, to announce the gospel and to announce Jesus is one and the same thing (1 Cor. 1:23; 15:12; 2 Cor. 1:19; 4:5; 11:4; Gal. 2:2; 1 Thess. 2:9). A royal herald is a person who declares something like, “Nero has become emperor”. But he does not go around saying, “If you would like to have an experience of living under an emperor, may I recommend you try Nero”. *To proclaim* means to call people to obey. Paul calls this sort of thing the “obedience of faith”.

The *Publicist* Paul (or, as we call him the *Apostle* Paul) had embarked on a vocation of telling the story of God and the world to as many people as possible. He saw this story entirely wrapped up in the story of Jesus of Nazareth and it was a story filled with “good news” for the world. Several important points are found in this story: 1) the crucified Jesus had been 2) raised from the dead; 3) his resurrection proved him to be Israel’s expected Messiah; 4) it also made him Lord of the world. Succinctly, he proclaimed “Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord”. (Resource: N.T. Wright. *What Saint Paul Really Said*. Eerdmans, 1997).

The politics of Jesus, published through the proclamation of the gospel, was superior to the good news promised by Rome to the citizens of its Empire. Paul knew this and courageously ventured to write a long letter to the little community of Christians living in Rome, the capital city. Paul would, one day, journey to Rome where he would stand trial for proclaiming this alternative politics — the politics of Jesus. Ultimately, he would offer his life a sacrifice for the truth of this politics.

Our situation in 2020 shares similarities with the situation of the church in the 1st century. Citizens of this nation are living through turbulent times, led by three branches of government whose members espouse the two dominant political philosophies. As Christians who observe the rhetoric, the intrigue, the power plays, the prideful boasts, the narcissistic characters, and the empty promises for imminent change—as followers of Jesus who see all of these developments—we declare that there is a better way to reform society, engage in discourse, grow healthy neighborhoods, and make a way into the future. God’s righteousness is the better way for developing an alternative society, intentionally subversive, which refuses coercion or violence, whether in the streets or from the state house. It is the way of Jesus, the crucified and risen One whose kingdom is empowered by the truth of the gospel. And we are the publicists, in word and deed, of this kingdom with this gospel for this time.

Sent and Spread: The Empowered Gospel into All the World (Acts 19:20; 26:18)

²⁰ So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. (Acts 19:20).

[And also note the additional text referenced below that stress the theme of growth in the early church]

¹⁶ But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles-- to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' (Acts 26:16-18).

Things change when the gospel is proclaimed because the gospel is the power of God for salvation. The book of *Acts* is an authentic record of how the church experienced remarkable growth beginning in 33 CE and continuing into the 6th decade of the common era (50-60 CE). The following division markers in Luke’s history shows how this was the case:

Luke, in his structuring of *Acts*, takes great care to end each major section with information about the growth and expansion of the church:

6:7 "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly..."

9:31 "The church...grew in numbers..."

12:24 "...the word of God continued to increase and spread..."

16:5 "the churches were strengthened in faith and grew daily in numbers..."

19:20 "...the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power..."

28:31 "Boldly and without hindrance he (Paul) preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."

Furthermore, the church was on the move geographically as suggested by the following major sections of the book of *Acts* where we witness *the Epoch of the Church and Its Mission*:

1. Ascension, Holy Spirit and *Witness in Jerusalem* (1:4-6:7)
2. *Messengers in Judaea and Samaria* (6:8-9:31)
3. *Missionaries to the Gentiles* (9:32-12:24)
 - 1) *In Asia* (12:25-16:5)
 - 2) *To Europe* (16:6-19:20)
 - 3) *From Jerusalem to Rome* (19:21-28:31)

Men of Action in the Book of Acts — a book by Dr. Paul S. Rees — puts the role of early Christians as publicists at the forefront, underscoring the reason why *Acts* got its title. More than words within a message, the gospel is the embodiment of real-time activity by the key figures of the Jesus movement, including Peter, James, John, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, and countless others. They were persons of *action* who incarnated the Word of the Lord in concrete and substantive ways. Sent and spread: these words speak to the persons and the actions. Theirs was the language of the dynamic — the *dunamis* — announced by Jesus in Acts 1:8 and made palpable through concrete expressions in scores of cities and towns throughout the Mediterranean world. The first 60 years of evangelism drew the map for what Christianity would be saying and doing for centuries to come.

“Getting the word out” remained the mission, shaped the strategy and cast the vision of the church, persisting into our own time.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, at the most basic level, *publicists* communicate a business or brand’s messages to the consumers they hope to reach, impact and influence, says Sakita Holley, CEO of House of Success PR. “So the primary function of the role is to work with the brand to decide what those messages will be, how they will be delivered, who will deliver them (and on what platform), and how to engage and maintain a conversation with this target group of people and/or the market.”²

A publicist generates and manages publicity for public figures, businesses, films, movies and the like. There is a lot of writing involved: press releases, press kit materials, speeches, media alerts, bios and social media content. A publicist also stays busy managing the public image of clients and setting up publicity events such as book signings. Other responsibilities include pitching clients to journalists and influencers, arranging interviews and press conferences, managing crises, developing media lists, and tracking media coverage.

Before ascending to his kingdom throne at the right hand of his Father, Jesus commissioned the community of apostles and disciples to be his publicists. Until that moment Jesus had followed his vocation by being the Word of God in human form through words and deeds. He called his message “good news,” taking a page from both the prophets of Israel and from the practices of the far-flung Roman Empire. Jesus messaged a fresh understanding of God’s true nature and purpose, correcting distortions in the prevailing media coverage communicated by Rabbis and religious leaders and announcing the imminent arrival of a new form of government in the world. He relied on the accepted media forms of: story, parable, epigram, simile, proverb, discourse, wisdom saying, prayer, command, manifesto, and rallying cry. As a skilled publicist, Jesus put his unique stamp on each of these literary types, often making unexpected changes to how each of them worked when in normal usage. He especially liked the parable where he could alter “the twist in the tale” at some crucial moment.

Faithful contemporary publicists of Jesus and his message take up these original media types by reading them aloud and then adapting them to the conditions of life today. None of this hard work can happen in the sheer power of human initiative alone, but must rely on the inspiration of the Spirit who fills the heart with the message of God. In the words of the prophet:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ² The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; (Isaiah 11:1-3).

Through the enablement of divine wisdom, the Christian publicist speaks the word of truth through the eyes of human need and the summons to divine purpose. She is a discernor of the times, a master craftsman with human words to communicate divine truth. Scripture anchors and stabilizes the whole effort, supplying the milk and meat of the gospel for a wide range of human audiences, cultures, languages, and situations. At every turn, in each phrase, through careful speech and text, the publicists of Jesus bring the whole gospel to the whole world.

Glory to God! Amen.

² <https://www.mediabistro.com/be-inspired/advice-from-the-pros/what-does-a-publicist-do/>