

Gospel-centered Living

Dan Cruver

I'm occasionally asked if I know of any resources that help explain what "gospel-centered" means. That is a very good question. Talk about gospel-centered this and gospel-centered that is common these days. Do a Google search for "gospel-centered" and you'll find references to gospel-centered communities, gospel-centered books, gospel-centered resources, gospel-centered blogging, gospel-centered preaching, gospel-centered homes, gospel-centered leadership, gospel-centered worship, etc.,—the list goes on for pages. Being known as gospel-centered is vogue. But what exactly do we mean by it? After all, aren't all Christians gospel-centered?

I'm sure we would all agree that the church needs many more men and women who are gospel-centered as husbands and wives, as fathers and mothers, as congregants, as servants, as leaders, as employees or employers of whatever profession. But before we can talk about men and women who are gospel-centered this and that, we need to talk about what it means to be gospel-centered students of Scripture first.

Why?

Because it seems to me that if Christians are gospel-centered in their study and application of Scripture, then they will become more gospel-centered in every other area of life. In other words, the gospel will begin to penetrate their daily lives.

A husband or wife who is a gospel-centered student of Scripture will find that he or she is becoming more gospel-centered as a husband or wife.

A father or mother who is a gospel-centered student of Scripture will find that he or she is becoming more gospel-centered as a mother or father.

A single man or woman who interprets and applies Scripture from a gospel-centered perspective will find that he or she is becoming more gospel-centered in all of his or her relationships.

If we can determine what it means to be a gospel-centered student of Scripture, we are then well on our way to being able to explain what it means to be a gospel-centered whatever.

So, let me begin by offering a one-sentence answer to our question about what it means to be a gospel-centered student of Scripture, and then we will look at some of the texts that are behind that answer.

What is a gospel-centered man or woman as it relates to the study of Scripture?

He or she is one (1) who believes that the center and ultimate reference point of Holy Scripture is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; and (2) who interprets and applies Scripture accordingly. That said, let's consider the following two points as it relates to being gospel-centered Christians *in our study of Scripture*: (1) The Essential Centrality of the Gospel and (2) The Functional Centrality of the Gospel.

I. The Essential Centrality of the Gospel

We are going to consider the essential centrality of the gospel from the bookends of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

A. Bookend One (Romans 1:1-4, 16-17)

Romans 1:1-4—Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, [2] which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, [3] concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh [4] and was declared to be the Son

of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

At first look, it appears that Paul is primarily concerned with introducing himself in verse one. But at a closer, second look, we'll notice that Paul is not so much concerned with introducing himself to the Romans (though he is introducing himself) as he is concerned with introducing a radically different, counter-cultural view of the world, a gospel-centered view of the world—of its history, its present, and its future. Paul begins his epistle to the Romans by looking at the world through the transforming lens of the gospel.

First, notice that Paul identifies himself as a slave, which given his historical context meant that he was identifying himself as a social outsider among those of social standing within the Roman Empire. The world of Paul's day, the world of the Roman church, was passionate about image. What mattered most to the citizens of Rome was attaining a social classification that would provide one with the rights, possessions, and property necessary to secure a prosperous future (cf., Matthew 20:20-28). But here we find Paul introducing himself to people who live in the very heart of the Roman Empire as one who is himself without social standing, as one who, according to the imperial worldview, had no social classification of any value whatsoever. Yet, although he identifies himself as a slave, Paul will not allow his identity as a slave to be defined by the prevailing worldview. Rather, he defines his servitude in terms of who Jesus is, namely, the Messiah. He is "a slave of the Messiah, Jesus," the one *in and through whom* the Old Testament promised that God would one day rule all the kingdoms of the earth, establishing His justice and shalom. The one before whom Paul stands as a slave is none other than God's Messiah who said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). Paul saw Jesus as the one who was not only Lord over the Roman Empire—where supposedly Caesar was Lord—but also Lord over the whole earth and all of its history: the past, present, and future. What we have in Paul's first clause of introduction is a gospel-centered view of the world. It is this particular worldview that ultimately defined who Paul was.

Second, Paul then adds that he was "called to be an apostle" and "set apart for the gospel of God." These second and third parts of Paul's "introductory comments" are parallel with each other. When Paul was called to be an apostle, he was also set apart for the gospel, which, as the text indicates, finds its origin in God himself ("the gospel of God"). So, the entirety of Paul's life—his worldview, his identity, his vocation, his mission—was centered upon and defined by God's gospel. **It is important to recognize that Romans 1:1 is not so much centered on Paul as it is centered on God, the Messiah, and His world-changing gospel.**

Now, let's make a couple of general observations that I think will help us see the significance of these verses regarding gospel-centered interpretation. First, as it relates to the primary subject matter of Paul's epistle to the Romans, the first word of verse 2, the relative pronoun *which*, is instructive. Its antecedent is the word *gospel* found at the end of verse 1. Paul now begins to write specifically about this gospel to which he was set apart. So, there is a huge stress in these first couple verses upon the Messiah and the gospel of God.

Notice, second, that God's gospel concerns or regards His Son (verse 3). **So, at the center of verse one is the Messiah, and at the center of God's gospel is the Messiah.** In his *Lectures on Romans*, Martin Luther makes a fascinating comment regarding Paul's phrase "concerning His Son." Luther comments, "Here the door is thrown open wide for understanding the Holy Scriptures, that is, that everything must be understood in relation to Christ" (*Luther's Works, Volume 25, Lectures on Romans*, p. 4). **Now how could Luther claim that everything in Scripture must be understood in relation to the Messiah?** It's because of what immediately precedes the phrase "concerning His Son." Paul's first statement about God's gospel is that God "promised [it] beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (verse 2). When Paul says "prophets," he is not merely referring to those who held the official office of prophet (i.e. Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) but also to all those who wrote the books of the Old Testament (see John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 4). Why do I believe that? Because Paul quotes from each of the three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures—the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms—in his exposition of the gospel in Romans. Paul, therefore, is stating that the entirety of the

Old Testament contains the gospel concerning God's Son in the form of *promise*. This accounts for why Paul spends a considerable amount of space in the book of Romans quoting the Old Testament in his exposition of the gospel. To Paul, the gospel in the Old Testament is in the form of *promise*, and in the New Testament we find the fulfillment of that gospel promise. So, the promise that unlocks the full significance of all the books of the Old Testament is the promise of the gospel. This is how and why Martin Luther could claim that everything in Scripture must be understood in relation to the person and work of the Messiah.

Now, with verses 1-4 in mind, consider the significance of Romans 1:16-17.

Romans 1:16-17—For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

In verse 16, Paul is telling us why it is that he is not ashamed of God's gospel; namely, because God's gospel is His power for salvation to everyone who believes (“I am not ashamed of the gospel, [because] it is the power of God for salvation”). There are a couple things of note here. First, because of what Paul has already written in verses 1-4, we should conclude that the gospel that is the very power of God unto salvation is not just what is found in the New Testament. No, it is also that which is found in the Old Testament in the form of promise. As John Murray notes, “The gospel was efficacious for those [i.e., OT saints] who received it in the form of promise” (*Ibid.*). In other words, the gospel was the power of God unto salvation for those who received it *in promise form*. So, the gospel as promised beforehand through God's prophets in the Old Testament is able to save (cf., 2 Timothy 3:15).

Second, the larger context of Romans requires us to understand the term “salvation” in Romans 1:16 as referring to more than just our deliverance from the wrath of God—as important as the wrath of God is in the book of Romans (1:18; 2:5; 5:9). It also has reference to our deliverance from the power (Romans 6) and presence of sin and ultimately to creation's deliverance from the bondage of decay (Romans 8:21). So, when we consider the larger context of Romans, we learn that the gospel, as it is promised in the Old Testament and proclaimed as fulfilled in the New Testament, is the very power of God not only to bring us into right relationship with God but also to transform us progressively and, in the end, change and renew everything (Romans 8:28-30). Therefore, the gospel is the power of God to save from start to finish.

Now, how are these thoughts from Romans 1:16-17 relevant to our discussion concerning gospel-centered Bible study? I think we will find an answer if we consider what Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:15-17 with both Romans 1:1-4 and 1:16-17 in mind.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 [Paul exhorts Timothy to remember] ...how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Notice, first, that Paul says that the Old Testament Scriptures (i.e., the sacred writings) are able to make us wise for salvation “through faith in Christ Jesus” (verse 15). If we synthesize our Romans 1 verses with 2 Timothy 3:15-17, I think we learn that the Old Testament is able to make us wise for salvation through faith in the Messiah precisely because ***in it*** God gave the gospel in promise form. This seems to account for why Paul says that the sacred writings—the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44)—are able to make us wise for salvation ***through faith in the Messiah, Jesus***. So, once again we see that when it comes to the work of God in salvation, Paul puts the gospel at the very center of the Old Testament.

Observe, second, that immediately after making this bold statement about the Old Testament in 2 Timothy 3:15, Paul says that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable...***that*** [i.e., in order that] the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” I would argue that given the

fact that (1) in Romans 1:16, Paul says that it is the gospel that is the power of God unto becoming progressively like the Messiah, and that (2) in 2 Timothy 3:15, Paul says that the Old Testament is able to make us wise unto salvation **through faith in the Messiah**, “all Scripture” equips us for every good work not **apart from faith in the Messiah** but **through faith in the Messiah**. At the very center of *all* Scripture (with reference to its saving and equipping work) is God’s gospel concerning His Son. In other words, it is through God’s gospel as it is promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament that we are made wise unto salvation and equipped for every good work.

B. Bookend Two (Romans 16:25-27)

Romans 16:25-27—Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages [26] but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— [27] to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

In his doxology, Paul states that God is able to strengthen believers **through** (I take *kata* as indicating means here—*BGD*; Dunn; Moo; Murray) the gospel that he preaches and **through** “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed.”

Question: How has this mystery—God’s salvific plan that was “kept secret for long ages”—**now** been made known through the prophetic writings? In other words, how can it be that through the Old Testament God has **now** made known His long-concealed salvific plan when, in fact, the Old Testament was around centuries before the New Testament? Because Paul is using the word **now** in eschatological terms, that is, in terms of what God has done in time, in history, to accomplish redemption. The **now** of Romans 16:26 refers specifically to the time of the Messiah in his incarnation and exaltation (this is the stress in Romans 1:3-4). Paul is telling us in Romans 16:25-26 that the meaning and significance of the Old Testament becomes clear through the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of the Messiah.

So, what do both of these bookends of Romans tell us about the central message of Scripture? The central message, the *essential* message, of the entire canon of Scripture is the *gospel* message. Martin Luther was right: everything in Scripture “must be understood in relation to Christ.” This is why I believe that to be a gospel-centered student of Scripture is to be one (1) who believes that the center and ultimate reference point of Holy Scripture is the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah; and (2) who interprets and applies Scripture accordingly.

What I wish to do now is give you an example of how this biblical perspective should direct our interpretation and application of a book such as Colossians.

II. The Functional Centrality of the Gospel (Colossians)

A. The Functional Basis

Let’s begin by observing Paul’s emphasis on the centrality of the gospel in his epistle to the Colossians itself. Notice, particularly, the words in bold throughout. First, in Colossians 1:3-6, we learn of the central place the gospel had in the church at Colossae.

Colossians 1:3-6—We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, [4] since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, [5] because of the hope laid up for you in heaven [Key Question: What is this hope that is laid up for us in heaven? We’ll come back to this later on.]. Of this [aid-up-in-heaven-hope] you have heard before in **the word of the truth, the gospel**, [6] **which** has come to you, as indeed in the whole world **it** is bearing fruit and growing—as **it** also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

Paul says that the gospel had come to them and was like a plant that grows covering more and more ground and bearing fruit—the fruit of faith and love (Colossians 1:4). Verse 6 also says that the gospel was growing in their midst since the day they “heard it and understood the grace of God in truth” (verse 6). Concerning these verses Tim Keller writes:

“Here we learn: 1) That the gospel is a living thing (cf., Romans 1:16) which is like a seed or a tree that brings more and more new life—*bearing fruit and growing*. 2) That the gospel is only ‘planted’ in us so as to bear fruit as we understand its greatness and implications deeply—*understood God’s grace in all its truth*. 3) That the gospel continues to grow in us and renew us throughout our lives—as it has been doing since the day you heard it... [The gospel] is a living power that continually expands its influence in our lives, just as a crop or a tree would grow and spread and dominate more and more of an area with roots and fruit” (article: ‘The Centrality of the Gospel’, p. 1).

Interestingly, Paul uses creation language to describe the gospel’s activity in Colossae. It is—note the verb tense—*bearing fruit and growing*. I think he uses creation language because he intends that we recognize that the gospel is God’s power unto the life of the New Creation (cf., 2 Cor. 4:6; 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:10; 4:24; Col. 3:10; also Rom. 1:16-17; 8:20-21)? We will see this developed as we move further into Colossians. But Paul’s point here is that God’s power unto New Creation life, namely, the gospel, was at the very center of God’s ongoing work in Colossae. Paul does not want the Colossians, or us for that matter, to think of the gospel only as that which gives entrance into the life of God’s New Creation, but also as that which sustains it and will ultimately bring it, this new creation life, to completion. So, the gospel, according to Paul here in Colossians, is God’s power unto the entirety of New Creation life, and is, therefore, God’s power to grow the Colossian church.

Second, notice what Paul does in verses 15 to 18 to take us deeper into this New Creation thinking that he introduced in verses 3 to 6. There are two key parallel phrases, though they are not exact parallels, which open and close these rich Christo-centric verses; and if we are to follow Paul’s line of New Creation thought, it is important that we discern how these two phrases are related.

Colossians 1:15-18 He is the image of the invisible God, ***the firstborn of all creation***. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, ***the firstborn from the dead***...

In what sense is the Messiah “***the firstborn of all creation***”? Paul tells us in verse 16. He is the firstborn of all creation in that it was “by him that all things were created.” He is not ***the firstborn of all creation*** in that he was the first to be created but rather in that he was the agent through whom the original creation was made and is sustained (verse 17). It makes sense, then, that the pre-incarnate Messiah, the Father’s agent in creation, would become man in order to bring about the renewal or recreation of the created order, which is with what the second phrase—***the firstborn from the dead***—is concerned. So verse 15, then, tells us that the pre-incarnate Messiah was uniquely qualified for the redemptive work of verse 18, where Paul refers to him as “***the firstborn from the dead***.”

Therefore, given the creation language of verse 6 and the parallel phrases in verses 15 and 18, we are to understand that the Messiah is not only the one through whom the original creation came into existence and is sustained, but that he is also the one through whom humanity is redeemed from the dead—death being the climactic effect of the corruption of sin upon the world—and ultimately the one through whom the entire created order is renewed (cf., Romans 8:18-21). So, what Paul is doing in this section of Colossians is identifying exactly what is at the heart of this gospel that is bearing fruit and growing, namely, the New Creation work of the Messiah in redemption (Col. 1:6).

Third, consider this epistle’s focus on the gospel by looking at Paul’s exhortation to the Colossians at the end of chapter one.

Colossians 1:21-23—And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [22] he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, [23] if indeed you **continue in the faith**, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard...

The occasion for Paul's letter to the Colossians was that there were false teachers who "thought that Christ was no more than a beginning; to go on to spiritual maturity, it was necessary to follow their rules and practices" (Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 335). The church's steadfastness in the gospel was what was at stake in Colossae. So, what does Paul do? He exhorts them to continue in the faith, that is, to remain steadfast in the apostolic gospel. It was essential for the Colossian church to keep the gospel central in its corporate existence.

Notice that Paul states that they are not to shift "from the hope of the gospel" (Col. 1:23). This is the second time Paul mentions *hope* in this epistle. However, we are left wondering, once again, what this central-to-the-gospel hope actually is. At this point, we do know that whatever this false teaching was that was threatening the church at Colossae, it was attacking the hope of the gospel.

Fourth, consider Colossians 2:6-7.

Colossians 2:6-7—Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, [7] rooted and built up in him and established **in the faith**, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Paul says that the Colossians "received Christ Jesus the Lord." The word "receive" is a technical term that is used when referring to the practice of transmitting a corpus of teaching from one individual or group to another. So, when Paul says that they "received *Christ Jesus the Lord*," he's referring to the reception of doctrinal content that concerns the Messiah. What we find, then, in the phrase "Christ Jesus the Lord" is the content of the gospel in compressed form. In essence, what Paul is saying is that they received the corpus of truth about the Messiah (i.e., "Christ") who is none other than the crucified and risen Jesus (i.e., "Jesus") and now the exalted Lord (i.e., "the Lord"). This is the message that they heard and understood when it was presented to them (Col. 1:6). So Paul, once again, exhorts the Colossian church to remain steadfast in the truth of the gospel.

Fifth, with reference to the centrality of the gospel in Colossians, consider verses 13-14 of the same chapter.

Colossians 2:13-14—And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Paul says that God made the Colossians alive together with the Messiah, having forgiven them all their trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against them with its legal demands. "Paul," we might ask, "where did God do this? Paul answers, "This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." God did this at the cross. What we read here of the gospel in these verses is described very eloquently by John Stott in his book entitled *The Cross of Christ*.

"The Biblical gospel of atonement is the good news of God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us. The concept of substitution may be said then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation...For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God; while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone" (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 160).

This is what happened when God canceled our damning record by nailing it to the cross. Paul is essentially saying that, legally, the Messiah became the record of debt that stood against us and in his

death destroyed it (per James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 166). Paul states, within this gospel-rich context, that the Colossians have been buried and raised with the Messiah (v. 12), so that what is true of him as the firstborn from the dead is now true of them.

In Colossians 3:1-2, Paul brings out some of the ethical implications that flow out of the truth of the gospel.

Colossians 3:1-2—If [“Since”] then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Paul’s argument here, in part, is essentially this: since, according to the gospel, it is true that you have been raised *with* the Messiah, set your minds on that which you have been given *in* the Messiah, namely, the life of the New Creation. Why do I think Paul is calling the Colossians to set their minds on the life of the New Creation as it is found in the Messiah? This is where we need to remember a couple of Paul’s earlier thoughts. First, it is important to recall Paul’s obvious use of creation language when describing the activity of the gospel in Colossians 1:6, where he states that the gospel “is bearing fruit and growing.” Second, Paul again uses creation language when he refers to the Messiah as both “the firstborn of all creation” (1:15) and “the firstborn from the dead” (1:18). So not only is it through the Messiah that the original creation was created and is sustained, but it is also through him that humanity is *re-created*. It is this Messiah, Paul says—the Messiah of the New Creation—that has ascended to the right hand of God (Col. 3:1). So, when Paul calls the Colossians to seek the things that are above, he is calling them to think on the life of the New Creation as it is found in the Messiah as well as on their participation in it.

We need to be careful here not to think of Paul’s phrase, “the things that are above” (Col. 3:1), merely in terms of that which is spiritual, that is, merely in terms of non-physical realities. When we consider the full context of Colossians, we are to see in that phrase a perfect wedding together of the spiritual world with the physical world. Paul, as we have noted, has been thinking in physical resurrection terms from the beginning of the epistle. He has already referred to the Messiah as “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18), and in Colossians 2:12, Paul stated that we were raised with the Messiah “through faith in the powerful working of God, *who raised him from the dead*” (a physical resurrection). Therefore, what I believe Paul means for us to understand when we get to Colossians 3—and what we are, therefore, to set our minds upon—is that in the heavenly places, as Ephesians puts it, God’s good future for the physical creation is already a reality. In the Messiah, we find a true resurrected human being who is enjoying perfect, unbroken fellowship with God, exercising dominion over the world as God originally intended, and who is totally free from every effect of the fall.

I think we find additional evidence that this is the case in verses 3-4. “Set your minds on things above... [3] for [i.e., because] you have died, and *your life* is hidden with the Messiah in God.” What exactly is this life that is hidden? Verse 3 says that it is hidden “with the Messiah in God.” This life to which Paul refers is entirely wrapped up in the resurrected Messiah. How wrapped up? So much so, that Paul says in verse 4 that the Messiah is himself our very life. If there is no Messiah, there is no life.

This is where things get really interesting. Verse 4 says, “When the Messiah who is *your life* appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:4). If we look at verses 3 and 4 side-by-side, we see two very significant phrases that will help us identify just what this hidden life actually is: “your life is hidden” and “your life appears.” So the life that is now hidden, the life that is entirely wrapped up in the Messiah, will someday appear. What’s Paul talking about here? Remember, he’s speaking of the physical, resurrected life of the Messiah, the true human being, the firstborn of the New Creation, who embodies in himself the perfect wedding together of the physical and spiritual worlds. Therefore, when the Messiah appears, that is, when he comes, Paul says, we “also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:4) so that the entirety of his New Creation experience becomes ours in experience.

When Paul calls the Colossians to set their minds on “the things that are above,” he intends that they think on the place where God’s intended goal for the renewal of all creation is being kept in store,

namely, “at the right hand of God” where the resurrected Messiah is seated (Col. 3:1). This is, I believe, “the hope of the gospel” to which Paul refers in Colossians 1:5 and 1:23. The *hope* of the gospel is the resurrected life of the New Creation as it is wrapped up in the Messiah himself. Therefore, they do not need any other teaching than that which has already been given them in the gospel. They are, in other words, already complete in the Messiah. They do not need to follow the rules and practices that these false teachers were giving them in order that they might go on to spiritual maturity. Paul is, in no uncertain terms, exhorting the Colossians to find the totality of their identity *in the identity of the Messiah*. He is calling the Colossians to find their identity in who the Messiah is for them in his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the Father’s right hand, namely, the firstborn of the New Creation.

We need to see in Colossians 3:1-4 that Paul intensely desires that the gospel and its hope of the renewal of creation be the **functional** center of the believer’s life. The life of the New Creation, as it is found in the Messiah, is to be what Christians live and breathe at all times! It is to be that which determines the Christian’s sense of identity and establishes his perspective on all of life as it is lived in the here and now.

Now, with this in mind, consider Colossians 3:16 and then I’ll discuss the relevance of all of this to gospel-centered interpretation.

Colossians 3:16—Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

The phrase “the word of Christ” is just another way of referring to the gospel. The word that is to *dwell richly* in the congregation at Colossae is the word *about the Messiah, the one who in himself*, seated at the right hand of God, **is the New Creation**. Paul is exhorting the Colossians to let the message of what God has done, is doing, and will do, in and through the Messiah “fill to the full” every aspect of their corporate existence.

Paul goes on to say that not only must the gospel dwell richly in their teaching and admonishing and in their singing, but also in everything that they do, in word or deed (verse 17). It is not until after this point in his epistle that Paul begins to make concrete applications to specific areas of life. In other words, it is not until after Paul has established the functional centrality of the gospel in all of life that he gives commands to wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. Therefore, as interpreters, we must be very careful not to separate these imperatives from the gospel message as it is articulated in Colossians.

B. The Functional Connection

1. Marriage Implications

Colossians 3:18-19—Wives [in light of the gospel and your identity in the Messiah], submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. [19] Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

Remember: A church where the gospel **dwells richly** is a church where believers are actively finding their identity in who Jesus is for them in his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the Father’s right hand.

What is the functional gospel-connection to these imperatives for wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives? When wives are finding their identity in the gospel, in the life of the New Creation as it is found in the Messiah, submitting to their husbands is not a burden (cf., 1 John 5:3). Likewise, when husbands are finding their identity in the gospel, in the life of the New Creation, loving their wives and not being harsh with them will not be burdensome. I would like to suggest (given the overall context of Colossians) that the failure of a wife and

husband to do what God has commanded here is due to their attempt to protect or create an identity of their own making. After all, isn't creating their own identity what the false teachers were instructing the Colossians to do? Therefore, the functional centrality of the gospel in the marriage relationship is absolutely essential.

2. Family Implications

Colossians 3:20-21 — Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. [21] Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

When children are finding their identity in the gospel, obeying their parents in everything will not be a chore. When our children are finding their identity in who Jesus is for them as the New Creation, they won't obey their parents in order to derive their sense of identity from parental approval or acceptance. They also will not disobey their parents in an effort to establish an identity of independence (e.g., prodigal son and elder brother). Parents and churches should show children the connection between the command to obey and the gospel of what God has accomplished for them in the Messiah.

Likewise, when fathers are finding their identity in the gospel, they won't nag or belittle their children. Why not? Because they realize that their identity is not found in a well-ordered, well-behaved household. Fathers who are finding their identity in Jesus will not be finding their identity in children who, through their good behavior, reflect well upon them as fathers. Rather, they will demonstrate unconditional love and acceptance, disciplining their children within that gospel-rich context.

3. Social Implications

Colossians 3:22-4:1 — Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord... [4:1] Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

When slaves are finding their identity in the gospel, in who Jesus is for them as the New Creation where there is neither slave nor free (Col. 3:11), they will obey their masters in everything because they are not allowing their earthly social classification to define who they are. Likewise, masters who are finding their identity in the Messiah will treat their slaves justly and with dignity because their identity is not defined by the possession of power.

I have attempted to demonstrate that we must not functionally disconnect the indicatives of the gospel, that is, the declarative statements concerning the truth of the gospel, from the imperatives that flow out of the gospel. Only in remembering and rehearsing the gospel are wives empowered to submit to their husbands and husbands empowered to love their wives. Graeme Goldsworthy does an excellent job explaining the necessity of not losing sight of the gospel when considering the imperatives of Christian living. He begins by asking:

“What is the relationship of this text to the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth? Let me be a little more specific. Preachers with a concern for expository preaching are predisposed to developing a preaching program in which a series of expositions from one particular book is given. In my experience the preaching of a series of sermons, say, from an epistle, easily leads the preacher to fragmentation because, while the epistle was written as a single letter to be read at one time, it is often divided up so that it is dealt with in Sunday sermons over a period of several weeks. There is nothing wrong with that as such, provided we recognize the changed dynamics. Thus, Paul may expound the gospel in the first part of the letter, and then go on to spell out some ethical and pastoral implications. When the preacher finally gets to deal with the latter, it is possibly a couple of weeks or more since the gospel exposition has happened, and the connection between the gospel and behavior, very closely related in the epistle, can be lost. The result is that the exhortations and commands are no longer seen to arise out of the good news of God's grace in the gospel but as simple imperatives of Christian

behavior...The relationship between what is and what ought to be, that is, the relationship between the finished work of Christ and the task of the believers, is often well flagged in the text" (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, XIII-XIV).

A gospel-centered student of Scripture is one (1) who believes that the center and ultimate reference point of Holy Scripture is the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah; and (2) who interprets and applies Scripture accordingly. If that is what a gospel-centered student of Scripture is, what would we say is a gospel-centered man or woman? A gospel-centered man or woman is one who (through the word of the gospel) is finding his identity functionally in who the Messiah is for him in his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God. He is one who is increasingly defined functionally not by the world and any of its seductive values but *by the gospel* as it continually reveals who Jesus is for him as the life of the New Creation