

Spiritual Escape

by Aaron W Calhoun, MD

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Spiritual escape, let's explore how that might affect our understanding of the Gospel, how it addresses the soul of the body. In our witnessing to colleagues and others, we focus when we preach about where their soul will be throughout eternity. My goal is to point to neglected aspects of the Gospel. That is the question that I would like to address today.

How does the Gospel integrate with our work? I think it is easy to think that the farther away you get from a clinical domain that the Gospel might not be relevant. Is what we do from day to day valuable in and of itself, or is it solely a means of witnessing and carrying out the Great Commission?

This is a very timely topic; it really gets to the heart of what we do as people in the health care professions. What does it mean to live out the Gospel in our every day practice? That is the question that I want to address. As we look at that question, we begin to look at our own faith; we begin to look at our own understanding of the Gospel and what it means to be children of God. It is then that we obtain a better idea of how that translates into our everyday work.

What is the connection between work and faith? What does the Gospel have to do with our jobs?

Is the Gospel something incidental to our work? Is our primary calling in work witnessing? Does the work that we do apart from the human connections we make at that work; is that something of value for God? These are questions that we all face on a regular basis.

One of the reasons I wanted to become part of the health care field in the clinical domain, is that it was very easy to make the connection between helping a human being that you are looking at with some illness whether you are taking it from a medical end, nursing end, or pharmacological end. It is very easy to see the connection between that and doing something for the Lord.

I had a conversation with a friend, Michael Radmacher, who does more laboratory based work. Most of his time is spent away from the bedside. He asked a question that pertains to many of us, and it should be a question in the forefront of our minds. How does what we do affect the Gospel, how does the Gospel integrate with our work? I think there are many who see a disconnect between their work and their faith. That would not exist for those just in a laboratory, but I could also see it in a local pharmacy. In an administrative office, if you are not interacting with human beings who are ill, how does your work and faith integrate?

I think this question affects all human beings who know our Lord. I do not think anyone is exempt from asking how does what I do from day to day and the faith that I profess come together? If we are going to answer that question, the answer has to hold true across the board; it needs to hold true, not just for physicians and pharmacists, but it needs to hold true for lawyers, sanitation workers, custodial staff, business executives...

Is such an integrated answer possible? As I thought about this question, I began to really look at what the Gospel means. How my understanding of the Gospel was shaped and how that played into it. I began to see that even the question may be an artifact of our assumptions that we make when we look at scripture.



About the Author

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It is those assumptions that I would like to address in this talk. I feel that for many Christians (myself included) our vision of the Gospel falls short of the Scriptural vision of the Gospel. I think that broadening our view of the Gospel to encompass all that the Scripture offers according to what Christ's mission on this world is and how we are involved with that, we'll find out that this isn't a question after all.

So how do Christians view the Gospel? What is God's program of salvation? What is the goal of it?

I've been very helped by viewing the Gospel as a story – a story of God's interaction with us on earth and His rescue of us on earth. What is the content of that story and how does it help us to see things? As I've examined this question, I've come to the conclusion that, for many in the church, across denominational lines, across the board the Gospel is primarily about spiritual escape rather than redemption. That's a big assertion and a lot is contained in that. I would like to try to unpack that, as I do you will see how this could inform that question.

What does it mean to have a gospel of spiritual escape versus a Gospel of redemption?

I'd like to take that apart word for word. First, spiritual escape and how that might affect our understanding of the Gospel. The gospel of spiritual escape addresses the soul over the body. In our witnessing, we focus primarily on where the soul will be throughout eternity. That's an important question; my goal is not to deemphasize this but to balance it out with other neglected aspects of the Gospel.

A few weeks ago I was listening to a popular Christian talk radio discussing the materialistic philosophies common in our day. Rightly attempting to oppose this philosophy, the host stated we are more than our physical makeup, possessing immortal souls that, depending on what they did with Christ in this life will either live in heaven or hell forever after those material bodies have died. Few Christians would find much objectionable in that statement, but I wonder though, if in stating it this way, the host did not go too far in the other direction, for alone among world religions, the Christian faith preaches the resurrection of the dead and the eventual reconnection of that soul with the material body that once housed it.

Alone of all the religions on the earth Christianity and the message of Christ is not that our goal is to escape to an eternal somewhere else, but to be reunited body, soul and spirit, and resurrected the way we were meant to be.

Gilbert Meilaender, a Christian Bioethicist, puts it this way in an article titled Broken Bodies Redeemed.

“At any rate, the human person, we are accustomed to saying, is the union of body and soul. When, however, we try to articulate what that means, we may think of this person as a composite of two things that are in principle separable,

that are temporarily glued together in this life, that will, by God's grace, be separated in such a way that the person continues to live even after the body has died, and that will one day have these two parts reunited. If pressed, we may have a hard time saying why, apart from the fact that the Church has taught it, this reunion of parts should really matter, if the person lives on even after death.”¹

How many of us have wondered what the importance of the resurrection is? If the whole point is for our soul to go somewhere else after we die, a place of happiness and joy – which we all believe. But if the whole point is for us to stay there and not be reunited with our physical bodies, then what does the resurrection really mean? Why is it such a key part of the early Christian witness? Why is it all over the pages of the New Testament?

It should give us pause when we consider think about this tendency to emphasize the escape of our spirits from this earth rather than the resurrection of our bodies and the restoration of this world. When we look at the history of the early church, there are a lot of small fringe groups of semi-Christians that believed in Jesus but denied that this world had any importance to God or could be redeemed (typically because of philosophic bias). Several of the books of the New Testament were written to counter this teaching. Today we call these individuals the Gnostics, and many of the early Christian writings were to condemn this point of view – to say the body is not bad, matter is not evil; God loves it and intends to redeem it. This world is not an evil place created by an evil God, this world is a good place that has gone wrong and he intends to restore what's here. But if you look at our society the statement of the talk radio host above is representative of how we look at things. We have a tendency to slip into the idea that only the soul matters; that our religion is primarily a spiritual thing, when in fact it's something that should encompass all parts of who we are. The message of Christ is the message of the redemption for our bodies as well as our souls.

The second issue is that of escapism. I'd like to illustrate this by quoting the words of several hymns in which this tendency is marked. Expressions of the worshipping people of God, these songs can say a lot at to what their authors and those who sing them long for and seek after.

*Some bright morning when this life is over
I'll fly away
To that home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away
I'll fly away oh glory
I'll fly away (in the morning)
When I die hallelujah by and by
I'll fly away*

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I don't think you can get more escapist than that!

*I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home;
Earth is a desert drear, Heaven is my home.
Danger and sorrow stand Round me on every hand;
Heaven is my fatherland, Heaven is my home.*

I am not suggesting that the above hymns are in some way 'bad' or incorrect. The sentiments suggested within each are quite appropriate in many circumstances. Paul said that he would "... rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." (2 Cor 5:8 ESV) But taken alone, they do not tell the whole story. Who among us, after experiencing a personal tragedy, has not wished to flee our circumstances and be with our Lord?

But is that God's sole intention, to pull us off the sinking ship of a world like it's the Titanic or is He sending in engineers to try to keep the boat afloat to raise it up and make it something better than it was before. I think the New Testament would answer the second way.

Fundamentally, the Gospel as a story of spiritual escape addresses what we are saved from, but does not address in any way what we are saved for. I think that's the main issue. In a recent article in Christianity Today, titled "The 8 Marks of Robust Gospel," Scot McKnight, a New Testament scholar at North Park University puts it this way.

"The gospel is the story of the work of the triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) to completely restore broken image-bearers (Gen. 1:26–27) in the context of the community of faith (Israel, Kingdom, and Church) through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Pentecostal Spirit, to union with God and communion with others for the good of the world. The gospel may be bigger than this description, but it is certainly not smaller."²

If the Gospel is primarily about the rescue of our souls, the question I asked at the beginning of this talk becomes very difficult to answer. It implies that our work here on earth takes on value only inasmuch as it is useful for witnessing to people and getting them to make the decision to live for Christ. Don't get me wrong, the spreading of the Gospel and the winning of individuals for our Lord is indeed our primary calling. But we need to ask the question, is it our only calling in the sense that everything we do has to be a means to this end, and without that end everything else we do is worthless. Or is it possible that our "other" work, which in fact makes up the bulk of our lives, is valuable as more than just a witnessing opportunity.

Is it possible that our work here, on this earth matters in and of itself? The answer, I believe, lies in a wider vision of the Gospel, a vision that addresses not only our spiritual needs, but the corruption, evil, and death present on this earth, a gospel that redeems both body and soul.

I see this as the potential problem behind that understanding and look at how that could inform our own work.

God is good. First, we live in a world that is the result of the creative activity of a good God. God intended this world to be good, when He made various portions of this world; He said that it was good. A world that is, even in all its materialness, fundamentally good. The Word of God itself, the story starts with a simple phrase "in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." And as He brought this world into being, at each stage of the work He called it good. The stars burned in the heavens, and He called it good. The oceans retreated to their appointed places, land surging from beneath the waves, and He called it good. This phrase, repeated so many times in the book of Genesis, should immediately put to rest any Gnostic thoughts that God is evil. As C.S. Lewis so aptly stated in *Mere Christianity*.

"There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature... We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it."³

Second, even as we affirm the goodness of the world that God made in all its physical and spiritual components there is, there is no way around looking at evil and suffering and death around us. It's something we have to look at. Those of us in the health care profession can get a great sense of what that evil actually entails. We see evil in the world on a personal level, natural level and even a cosmic scale. We see men fighting men, nation fighting nation, brothers killing each other; the story of Cain and Able, the first murder. We see small children die of cancer, septic shock, trauma, situations that I, as a pediatric intensivist, face with regularity. Violent hurricanes destroy cities along our gulf coast, windstorms that damage houses. We think that this can't be the way it was meant to be. We say it must be an act of God, but is it really? Is this an act of the one that called the world good? It's clear to me that we live in a simultaneously beautiful and repulsive world. Even as in that beauty, we see glimpses of God's original intent, we see the cracks that have defaced that beauty. If the world is, in some sense a portrait of its Creator, then it is a portrait that is cracked, torn and defaced. If we read the Bible, especially the first few chapters, we see the world was cracked, torn, and defaced by itself. The creation itself with us as its representative chose to rebel against its Creator, and we see that evidence day after day.

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Third, God initiated a great plan to restore this world to what it should have been, and He did this by direct power or decree, but by calling a people to Himself. The Lord first called Abraham, promising in Genesis to make of him a great nation, giving the following promise.

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2-3 ESV)

And so through Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, our Lord began the healing of our world. Later, throughout the Old Testament, hints of how that blessing would come were given, Scriptures and hymns. In the Song of Solomon it is written in a passage speaking of marital love, but seemingly applying just as well to God that

*“for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the LORD.”
(Song of Solomon 8:6 ESV)*

Such love is incredible enough, and yet it goes beyond this, for in Psalm 16 David writes the following

*“I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.
For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.” (Psalm 16:8-10 ESV)*

It talks about the love of God that is stronger than death, a love of God that is as strong as the grave that goes through it out the other end to bring new life. The love he intended to display through his people.

The nation itself is failing, but one will come who will be Israel, who will stand and take the problem on for the sake of His nation and be a light to the world. Things come even more into focus with Isaiah, who wrote of one who would bring the blessing promised to Abraham, saying...

*“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” (Isaiah 11:1-2 ESV)*

Addressing how the advent of this One would redeem the world, he said...

*“The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:8-9 ESV)*

A redeemed world, cleansed of evil and darkness, but not a world we escape to but the world we are on right now. That He’s intending to bring this redemption to pass through His Chosen One. He talks about this individual who we will later see as our lord who will suffer.

*“Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.*

*But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:4-5 ESV)*

This last passage is a prophecy of suffering, of utter self giving. And immediately the question is raised, how could suffering lead to the restoration of the World?

Fourth, God entered the world to enact its redemption, not just a representative, not just someone called but God Himself taking on human form, becoming one of us. Jesus had a physical body, He was simultaneously God and man. He came into this world to redeem it by becoming one of us. As we read about His life, His public ministry, crowds flocked to hear Him even as those in power wished Him dead, for He spoke of the Kingdom of God, calling those who listened to take up their crosses and follow Him. He freely forgave the sins of those who came to Him in faith, and when challenged simply asked which was easier forgiving sins or causing the lame to walk, even as a man lame since birth rose from His bed for the first time. He healed the sick; a lot of what Jesus did in the New Testament was to heal the sick. Not simply to gain an audience for His spiritual teachings, but because sickness was but one (thought not the deepest) of the manifestations of the sin and darkness that had infested our world, the darkness that He had come to illuminate and defeat. Needless to say, this challenged the authorities and powers of the world in that day. And so, after a sham trial He was crucified. If He had been merely human, that would have been the end of it. And yet there was more, for three days later rumors began circling among the disciples that Jesus was alive. Soon He had appeared to them.

We have to look at what He did when he appeared: He walked through doors, entered locked rooms; we know

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His relationship to the world is a little different than we might expect. But He ate a fish; you can't get more material than eating a fish. This was not a spirit or a ghost. The early Christians were very clear about that. Nor was this a person that had survived the cross.

This was someone that had been through death and come out on the other side, taking the weight of the world and its darkness and having new life to give to His followers. This was the God-Man who had submitted to death, and had slain it by doing so, and was now truly, physically, materially alive with a new life. Here, at last, was the Kingdom of God, the restoration and healing of a broken world, embodied in the living form of the risen Son.

It did not end there. For after He had ascended Luke records that, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples were indwelt by the rushing wind of His Spirit, and immediately went into the world as the Church, the called out ones (ecclesia) the body of Christ. He is calling all of us.

This chapter of the story has now been going on for over 2000 years, with some successes and failures. As Father Andrew Greeley put it, *"God has called humans to be part of his church, not angels and presumably he knew what he was doing."* Yet still, sometimes through us, many times despite us, the Kingdom has been growing, marching forward to a time when He will return physically to this world as promised to effect the final restoration of the world. It is here, looking forward to the final pages of the story, that we see His plan. Far from bringing us all to a disembodied existence in the sky, He instead will bring heaven to us. We don't read about us flying up to the city, or if we do, it's only to bring the city back. Here heaven and earth are recreated and united once and forever as the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

How does the retelling of the story change how we look at the Gospel? How does it counter the escapism?

A Gospel of redemption sees the creation not as a desert or a prison but as a shattered paradise, a place beloved of God that He has promised not to abandon to decay. A gospel of redemption sees salvation not simply as individual rescue (though individual rescue from sin and death plays an integral role), but also as a call to be agents of renewal, to be the hands and feet of Christ in this age as He works behind the scenes to effect the redeeming of creation in preparation for His return. This is not a gospel of health and wealth, a call to personal financial prosperity, but rather a call to suffer as Christ suffered because if we are the body of Christ on earth, it's our call to embody the suffering of Christ for this world in preparation for His return. And to be co-crucified with Him, as Paul says,

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live." (Galatians 2:20 ESV)

It's also a call to submit and trust in God's promises, knowing that while we represent the presence of Christ on earth, the final redemption will be accomplished only when He returns. This last point is not meant to sound fatalistic, but meant to be freeing, knowing that the outcome of our labor is ultimately in God's hands.

The gospel of redemption sees the Church not just as a collection of the followers of Christ (which is, I'm afraid, how many of us view it at times), but as the continuing presence of God's mission on earth. Scripturally it seems apparent that when God works in our world, He does so by calling a people, a corporate body to embody His character, His healing and his love, and, in our age, He is doing so through the Church.

I'd like to return to the question, how does this affect us personally?

How does this understanding alter our approach to the original question that I posed of how to integrate our work as clinicians, scientists, and researchers with our commission to spread the gospel. How does the physical nature of the redemption accomplished by God in Christ as evidenced in the resurrection and, the promise of His second coming) unite the Gospel and healthcare?

First, our work as healthcare provider, researchers, and pharmacists, can be done for the Kingdom in a primary fashion, not just as a means to witness to colleagues. Though we should always be ready with a good word regarding our Lord that is not the only motivation for what we do, for in research, we seek to uncover the details of material creation, a creation declared fundamentally good. We seek, as believing scientists of the past have stated, to "think God's thoughts after Him."

Second, our fight against disease is not different than the Gospel, but can be the tangible expression of what it means to bear the resurrection life. After all, why do we seek to uncover new drugs, new therapies, and apply them to our patients if not to counter illness, pain, and infirmity, the very results of the fall that God wishes to abolish in the new creation. We seek to use these new discoveries to heal the human body, a work of art made forever holy by the mere fact that, right now, Christ's fully human body is seated on the throne of creation as its Lord.

Finally, our attempts here to undo the damage of sin to peoples physical bodies can be an expression of the greater healing that Christ has worked in us, is working through us in those who we touch both directly and indirectly, and will eventually work on the day of His return. Our devotion to performing good research, our attention to detail as we prepare and administer therapies, our compassion as we deal with the sick, can be offered to God as a prayer of

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gratitude for His devotion to us. Our commitment to working for the good of those whom we (either directly or indirectly) are attempting to heal can be used to reflect the character of a God who has spent thousands of years preparing and enacting His plan of redemption for us and for this world.

And so I will conclude by reframing the initial question that I used to open this talk. "Given the great plan of our Lord for the restoration of this world, how can I best use my work to embody that redemptive love?"

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Editorial

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Humans are amazing creations. As pharmacists we tend to think of this in terms of the intricacies of the human body and the way it functions. Certainly the anatomic and physiologic design of the human body is truly amazing and a credit to the creativity and brilliance of God. However, there is another aspect of humans that is truly amazing. This is the curiosity and ingenuity of people in exploring the world and universe. Whatever the area of study or exploration, people have gone there. No other creature in creation has done this. This is one way that humans are unique and distinct in all of God's creation.

As Job was in the middle of his suffering, he ponders this reality. In Job 28, Job considers how people go to all sorts of lengths to search for things. What captures Job's imagination is how people mine the earth or go places where animals never go. Humans are able to accomplish all sorts of engineering fetes in taming rivers, cutting channels of water, and reshaping mountains. It seems like there is nothing and no end to what mankind attempts to accomplish. All of this is truly amazing.

However, there is one thing that is missing. It does not matter what people do or accomplish. All of what humans do may be truly amazing and unique in all of creation. However, it is meaningless without one critical element. That element is not the human factor, as suggested in a popular recent advertisement for a chemical company. The only element that brings meaning to human accomplishments is wisdom. Without wisdom mankind is engaged in futility.

Job highlights another truly amazing thing about people. Despite the ability to do so many amazing things, people have trouble finding wisdom. It is not just a problem of finding wisdom, but it is something that humans do not really attempt to find. Yet wisdom is the most valuable thing that could ever be discovered or found. It should be pursued with the same or greater zeal than the pursuit of anything else that might be seen as valuable.

If wisdom is so valuable, where is it found and what is it? At the end of this chapter, Job clearly knows where to find wisdom and what it is. The answer is rather simple, wisdom is found in God. As Job describes it, God knows the way to wisdom and is the One who possesses true wisdom. From mankind's perspective, wisdom is found in the fear of God and turning from evil. When people embrace wisdom in this way, then pursuits of life have meaning, direction, and purpose.

This is a truth that we need to remember every day. As pharmacists, we can easily marvel at the accomplishments of modern medicine in finding cures for all sorts of diseases. We can feel empowered in many ways as being instrumental parts of delivering this care to patients. However, if we forget to seek after wisdom in our professional and personal activities it is all meaningless. The differences that we, as Christian pharmacists, provide to our patients is that we fear God, and in so doing begin to know wisdom and have understanding. In doing this, we can begin to meet the true needs of our patients. Let us be sure to consistently include wisdom in all that we do.