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Book Review: Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News

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bursting with robust, respectful, and cogent scholarly expositions of biblical creation which are not often accessible today. The academic community stands in debt to the authors for this distinctive contribution.

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Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News. By Darrell L. Bock. Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010, viii + 146 pp., \$16.99 paper.

Darrell Bock (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen) is Research Professor of New Testament Studies and Professor of Spiritual Development and Culture at Dallas Theological Seminary. As a scholarly writer, he is best known for his many publications on the Gospels and the writings of Luke, including major commentaries on Luke and Acts. Among his popular publications are a book-length response to Dan Brown's mega-seller, *Breaking The DaVinci Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), and a follow-up study, *The Missing Gospels* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006)—which is seemingly what Bock's present book title plays on.

Before proceeding to the review proper, I should admit up front that this book was a surprise to me for several reasons. When I asked to review it, I had just seen the fairly aggressive advertising that Broadman & Holman had done, including several recommenders' blurbs. The mentions of "biblical theology" caused me to assume I would be dealing with a fairly classic biblical theology methodology. However, to my initial surprise, the approach Bock is employing is, in my opinion, virtually as close to systematic theology as biblical theology.

As I read on, though, I had the *déjà vu* sense that I had previously encountered a fair amount of the material. At that moment, not having any of Bock's commentaries within easy reach, I grabbed what I did have: the Dallas Seminary faculty volume, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), which Bock edited with Roy Zuck. In his chapters on the theology of Luke and Acts, I noticed a marked similarity between categories in *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel* and their earlier development in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. Then, I recalled Bock had written the "Introduction" to that work (pp. 11–17), where he makes his case for much the same biblical theology methodology worked out in the volume presently being reviewed.

A second area that was surprising to me has already been mentioned above: no real mention of the "lost gospels" issues that have been so visible in NT studies the past several decades and that have spilled over into the public consciousness through the writing of several best-selling fiction and non-fiction works in recent years. The reason I expected those issues would come into play in this book is because of its title: *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel*. Given Bock's previous publications in that area, I wonder if Broadman & Holman suggested the final book title, to entice a wider readership to consider the book. The volume's subtitle (*Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News*) is a better reflection of what the book is about. However, if unbelievers choose to read the book based on its slightly misleading title, the title may be justified somewhat in increased outreach.

The third and fourth areas that, at first glance, were surprising to me from the advance publicity were the size and popular nature of Bock's volume. Without the back matter (i.e. the biographical sketch of the author and indexes), the text itself is only 136 pages long. In respect to the "scholarly" level of the book, there are only seven true

footnotes (i.e. bibliographic in nature) in the entire book—four of which are in one chapter (three of which refer to Bock's own previous publications). All additional content in footnotes are Scripture citations, usually passages of 3–4 or more verses—sometimes as long as a half-chapter or more. What that tells me is that this book is short and simple by design, at least partly because of the well-documented brief (i.e. instant everything) attention span of much of the intended audience. In spite of its size and simplicity, though, Bock has still packed a powerful literary punch into the short span.

A final area of surprise is one of which younger readers of *JETS* might not be aware, but which the “old heads” among us will remember well. This book is very much about the gospel, but is significantly different from the various publications of the “lordship salvation” controversy twenty years ago, all of which focused squarely on the gospel message. The two primary reasons for that, in my opinion, are (1) the gospel is approached in Bock's volume from a “wide-angle lens” perspective, not just the “snapshot” focus on the point of becoming a Christian, as was primarily the case with the tomes two decades earlier; and (2) the tone of the book is irenic, not polemical.

Now, to the review itself. In overview, Bock's work includes a very brief Foreword (by Rick Warren), a concise Introduction, seven chapters, a crisp Conclusion, a very brief Appendix, and two short indexes. Only one chapter is over twenty pages long.

The title of the Introduction is “The Gospel from the Hub to the Whole: More than Dying for Sin.” As the title implies, it is Bock's intent from the beginning to make clear his bedrock contention that “the gospel” is about much more than just the cross or the point of saving faith. Biblically, his most important argument in the Introduction seems to be that Paul's reference to the cross in 1 Cor 2:2 is a synecdoche (i.e. a part representing a whole) and his laying out of the historical dimension of the gospel in 15:3–5 should be understood in light of 1:30: “But from Him you are in Christ Jesus, who for us became wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption” (HCSB).

In Chapter 1, “The Gospel Starts with a Promise: Relationship in the Spirit,” Bock goes all the way back to Genesis, surveying the biblical covenants (i.e. Abrahamic, Davidic, and New), referring to them as “the gospel's backbone.” He then moves crisply through key passages in Luke and Acts that show that Jews and Gentiles are one new people possessing the Holy Spirit in Christ.

In Chapter 2, “The Gospel is a Meal and a Washing: The Lord's Table and Baptism,” Bock again goes back to the OT roots of these NT rites: the Passover meal and ritual cleansing. In discussing the transition from Last Supper to Lord's Supper, it seems to me that he emphasizes that corporate/community angle of the Supper more than many such discussions. The cleansing of baptism “means that God gives us the new life of His Spirit and makes us into a new temple of His presence” (p. 37).

Chapter 3, “A Unique Action Meeting a Comprehensive Need: The Cross,” Bock frames Micah 6 and Romans 3 as two divine lawsuits against humanity made in God's image, whose need is desperate because of their sin (Rom 1:18–3:18). The cross is discussed in several contexts (1 Corinthians 1; Galatians 6; Ephesians 2; 1 Peter 1; Hebrews 8–10) as the reflection of the Lord's incredible commitment to recover the lost and restore his image in mankind.

In Chapter 4, “The Gospel is Inaugurated as a Gift of God's Grace,” Bock rehearses several crucial angles on the grace of the gospel or the gospel as a gift. Key passages (e.g. Acts 2; Romans 4; Galatians 1–2; Ephesians 2; Titus 2–3; 1 Peter 1; Jude; and John 1) are probed for what they contribute to the subject. A catchy, but still substantive, summary quote here is: “Everything about grace rotates around Jesus. He brings it. He shows it. He gives it” (p. 71).

In Chapter 5, “The Gospel is Affirmed in Divine Action and Scripture: God Showing Who Jesus Is,” the key question being asked and answered is whether it is legitimate (Bock's word is “kosher,” p. 74) to substitute Jesus into God's place in revealing who

Jesus is. This chapter is the most atypical in the book in two respects: (1) there is much more discussion of historical/cultural background issues here than elsewhere in the book; and (2) as already noted, there are scholarly footnotes in this chapter not found elsewhere in this volume. These words from the chapter's conclusion pull together well what Bock is arguing here: "God had demonstrated to all the world—both inside Israel and outside—who Jesus was. . . . He was a one of a kind person who brought God's promised kingdom and was called to be God's anointed. And best of all in the view of the early Jewish Christians, it was all completely kosher" (pp. 86–87).

In Chapter 6, "Embracing the Gospel: Repentance and Faith," Bock carefully discusses the key terms "turn," "repent," and "faith." His word studies, while not comprehensive, still hit all the high points with precision. Particularly telling is the final section of the chapter: four passages in which these three terms are used in various combinations (Mark 1:15; Acts 3:19–21; 20:21; and 26:15–23). Putting it all together, "So repenting, turning, and faith are three parts of a single triangle of response" (p. 109).

Chapter 7, "A Different Kind of Power Through a Way of Life Pleasing to God: Reconciliation, Peace, and Power of God unto Salvation," is a concise exposition of the believer's reconciliation and peace with God, then the power of God not just to justify, but also to sanctify (see Romans 1–8)—only slightly different in content than the treatment in a soteriology class that has a biblical theology flavor. Near the end of the chapter, Bock makes this "big picture" statement: "This is the good news we have sought to recover in this book. It is good news to know that God gives us the power to live as He designed us to live. That power stands at the center of the gospel" (p. 121).

In his Conclusion, "Getting the Gospel Clear: A Relationship Rooted in God's Love, Not Just a Transaction," Bock begins by asking the question, "Why should God pursue those who have chosen to go their own way?" His answers: "[F]irst, God loved us; second, God sought to motivate us through His love" (p. 125). He ends with this overarching assertion: "[R]elationship, rooted in God's love and everlasting in duration, is what Christianity is all about. The gospel is what the church is called to preach—and to live. It is a message we need to recover and share with a tone that reflects the love and reconciliation that motivates it because it is a testimony to the wonderful and deep love of God for us" (p. 132).

The Appendix, "Showing the Gospel," is but two pages long and clearly an attempt to make sure there is no basis for criticism of this work in regard to a typical historical blind spot for evangelicals: "We are to be salt and light, and being salt and light includes caring for and about God's creatures and His creation. There is no reason to have an either-or mentality about these matters: there's no reason to choose between preaching the Word of the gospel on the one hand and serving on the other. That kind of dichotomized thinking is not biblical" (p. 135).

(Mostly) obvious strengths of *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel* are: (1) its writing style is crystal clear as well as eminently readable; (2) its tone is generally very upbeat and peaceful, for the most part keeping the "heat" (i.e. emotions, notably anger or defensiveness) level down, thus allowing the "light" (i.e. insight) level to go up; (3) I have to think that even the very brief Foreword by Rick Warren is a strength, given the popular targeting of the book, since far more readers at that level know about *The Purpose-Driven Life* and who Warren is than are familiar with Darrell Bock; (4) the initial analogy that the cross is like the hub of a wheel, but not the entirety of the gospel, sets the stage very helpfully for Bock's development of the good news; (5) Bock actually made his case well to back up the hub/wheel analogy throughout the book; (6) because I wrote the entry on "Gospel" for the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* and "Repentance" in the NT for the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I can attest that Bock's discussion of the various elements of the gospel message in chapter 6 is on target exegetically; (7) of wider contemporary theological significance, Bock tied his progressive dispensational

views into the gospel from the very beginning, as his discussion of the biblical covenants in chapter 1 shows (i.e. ultimately, there is one people of God); and (8) without stating it as part of his agenda, Bock forges an implicit synthesis of a sort between a gospel message that appears to lean somewhat toward the Hodges-Ryrie side of the older gospel controversy, but more toward the MacArthur side in regard to the need to show the fruit of repentance and Eph 2:10/James 2 good works resulting from being saved.

The few perceived weaknesses (or limitations) of Bock's volume are: (1) I do not understand why the chapters are sequenced in the order Bock chose, particularly holding off the chapter on the "embracing" (his terminology) of the gospel message through repentance and faith until chapter 6 (of seven chapters)—though that may be part of his strategy of showing that "the gospel" is much more than the cross or initial faith; (2) a couple of the chapter titles (see chaps. 5 and 7, as well as the Conclusion) are overly long and unwieldy; and (3) if an in-depth scholarly discussion of the gospel message, or some other aspect of the good news, is desired, the reader will be at least somewhat disappointed (though such can be found in most of Bock's commentaries and some of his other writings).

Would I recommend *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel*? Yes . . . unreservedly, and for the widest possible readership, even though I should say before closing that I do not agree with every aspect of his treatment. Its apparent primary popular audience definitely needs to have laid out for them an understandable overarching biblical narrative of the good news in a span brief enough, and simple enough, for them to handle. However, in a very real sense, pastors, teachers, and scholars need just as badly to read and interact with its content. Why? I say that for two reasons: (1) because they need to come to grips with the now broadened landscape of foundational issues (thanks at least partly to Bock) that revolve around "the gospel"; and (2) because they minister to—or are charged with preparing those who will minister to—the same generational groupings of largely biblically illiterate people—or, at least those with short attention spans—that Bock has intentionally, and for very good reason, targeted.

If nothing else (though there is much more!), in *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel*, Darrell Bock again demonstrates exceedingly well that a brilliant scholar can communicate at a widely understandable level.

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