

THE GOSPEL IN SEVEN WORDS

IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Will Campbell recalls how his friend P. D. East had badgered him for a succinct definition of Christianity. East did not want a long or fancy explanation. "I'm not too bright," he told Campbell. "Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what's the Christian message?"

Campbell obliged his friend: "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway," he said. To which East replied, "If you want to try again, you have two words left."

Campbell and East eventually had an extended conversation provoked by Campbell's summary. It had stuck in East's mind. He wasn't sure he bought it, but it gave him something to think about.

The CENTURY invited some authors to try their hand at summarizing the Christian message. We instructed them to proclaim the gospel in a maximum of seven words and expand on their statement in a few sentences. It's instructive to see what Christian proclamation boils down to when someone is put on the spot and has only a few words. What is the essence of the essence of Christianity?

The exercise can have practical benefits. Christian leaders often need to have what business consultants call an "elevator speech"—a quick way to sum up what's distinctive and compelling about Christianity. When asked to sum up the Christian message, one must do better than, "Ah, well, it's complicated, but . . ."

Campbell clearly thought that a pithy version of the good news needed to begin with some account of the bad news. It's the bad news, after all, that occasions a longing for the good news. Campbell and East were friends in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the South in the late 1950s. Their lives had been defined by the racism, violence and moral evasions that pervaded that segregated society. Campbell did not exempt himself or his friend from that reality. Indeed, he thought that naming the dark side of humanity is an essential part of the Christian message: "We're all bastards . . ."

Our respondents were not so blunt in diagnosing the human

condition. Many seem determined to make grace, not sin, the prominent feature. Nevertheless, sin is acknowledged in some way.

In Martin E. Marty's "God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow," the "anyhow" hints at the mercy in God's welcome. Donald W. Shriver makes a similar move with "Divinely persistent, God really loves us," as does Beverly Roberts Gaventa with "In Christ, God's yes defeats our no." The human propensity to mess things up and long for another chance is central, if implicit, in Mary Karr's "We are the Church of Infinite Chances." Interestingly, Karr was the only respondent to squeeze in a mention of the church—there's no second chance without a church to offer it.

Other summaries present the human problem not as a matter of human character but as a matter of relational conflict or estrangement. Brian McLaren highlights the call to reconciliation; Carol Zaleski celebrates the end of captivity ("He led captivity captive"), and Ellen Charry reports that "the wall of hostility has come down."

Charry's is one of several contributions that draw heavily or completely on scripture. She adapts Ephesians 2:14–18, and Zaleski cites Ephesians 4:8. Lamin Sanneh quotes Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world." Bill McKibben opts for the Golden Rule (Mark 12:31): "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In "Christ's humanity occasions our divinity" Scott Cairns manages to capture a distinctively Eastern Orthodox understanding of the gospel in which sin is not even alluded to (and he is impressively concise at only five words). Walter Brueggemann's gospel is dense: "Israel's God's bodied love continues world-making." ("I used only six words," he says; "I rested on the seventh.") M. Craig Barnes boils it down to four words: "We live by grace."

One can imagine such a claim, like many others listed here, lodging in the listener's mind, provoking thought and inviting further conversation: "So what do you mean by grace . . ."

—David Heim

To read all the efforts to put the gospel into seven words or fewer, go to christiancentury.org/7words

HE LED CAPTIVITY CAPTIVE.

Among gospel epitomes I especially love the Jesus prayer, the Agnus Dei and “When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive”—the good news as I first heard it from Paul (Eph. 4:8) and Christ’s Jubilee proclamation (Luke 4:18). Christ ascended the cross, descended to the dead and ascended to heaven to restore us to the Father. He has broken our fetters; it remains for us to shake them off and enlist in the service of self-giving love.

—Carol Zaleski

By grace we’re created in the image of God. When we corrupt our lives with sin, the grace of God in Jesus Christ forgives us and makes us fully alive again. By grace the Holy Spirit binds us to this savior, includes us in the church, moves our chaos over to create beauty, and interrupts our plans with God’s dream that we too become gracious. Along the way the holy image re-emerges in our lives.

—M. Craig Barnes

WE LIVE BY GRACE.

THE WALL OF HOSTILITY HAS COME DOWN.

Christ “has broken down the dividing wall . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you”—gentiles—“who were far off and peace to those who were near”—Jews—“for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:14–18).

—Ellen T. Charry

Our no is a human rejection of God's claim on us as our creator, sustainer and Lord, a rejection that produces alienation and isolation, even from ourselves. In Jesus Christ, God unmask and defeats that no and signals that we are not our own. We belong to God's love, from which we cannot finally flee. Grasped by that love, we are enabled to love God and one another.

—Beverly Roberts Gaventa

IN CHRIST,
GOD'S YES
DEFEATS
OUR NO.

DIVINELY
PERSISTENT,
GOD
REALLY
LOVES US.

The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is working to infiltrate the whole creation with God's love. Paul's testimony to the work of the Spirit in Romans 8 is for me the key chapter in the New Testament. Dependence on—and receptivity to—the daily presence of the Spirit makes possible faith, hope and love in a human life. In addition, Romans 8 implies a cosmic work of the Spirit: the Spirit yearns for the redemption of the whole created world, not only us human inhabitants.

—Donald W. Shriver

We are the Church of Infinite Chances, where every sinner is a saint and vice versa. "Sinners welcome," reads the banner on my church. Or as Blake said: "We're put on earth a little space to learn to bear the beams of love." Also, I would add, to reflect them. Without a Christos-centered worship of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, I find this impossible.

—Mary Karr

WE ARE THE
CHURCH OF
INFINITE
CHANCES.

GOD,
THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST,
WELCOMES
YOU ANYHOW.

The gospel begins and ends with God. Jesus makes God's action good news. But the word *Jesus* alone doesn't help me; such Jesus is a nice guy, but I need Jesus Christ, God's anointed. God welcomes (or "accepts," etc.) you. According to Luther, the words "for you" are the most important in the sacraments (and preaching). "Anyhow"—fill in sin, guilt, pride, the misfires of "spirituality"—implies that you weren't welcome without this transaction, and that you bring nothing to it.

—Martin E. Marty

God was in Christ, proclaiming and demonstrating the good news of the kingdom (or commonwealth). This new way of life challenges us to rethink everything in our lives that resists reconciliation. In it we experience peace with God. The Spirit of God teaches us the way of peace and bears through us the fruit of peace: with the least, the last and the lost; with the outsider, the stranger and the enemy; with all creation. God invites us to participate in a new reconciled humanity in Christ.

—Brian McLaren

IN CHRIST,
GOD CALLS
ALL TO
RECONCILIATION.

LOVE YOUR
NEIGHBOR
AS
YOURSELF.

This always seemed like hard moral advice that very few of us were really able to follow. But in recent times its meaning seems clearer. Loving mainly ourselves—which is the definition of the high consumer society we inhabit—means creating a world that stinks. It's a world that is getting steadily hotter, where almost all of us increasingly feel economically insecure. Jesus had it figured out: It only works when we're in it together.

—Bill McKibben

According to both Irenaeus and Athanasius, God became like us so that we might become like God. Clement observes that through obedience one “becomes a god while still walking in the flesh.” Cyril avers that as we are called “temples of God and even gods, so we are.” Gregory of Nazianzus admonishes us: “Become gods for His sake.” The consensus of the church fathers and mothers is that the purpose of Christ’s coming is to endow us with life, divine life, endlessly becoming. Good journey!

—Scott Cairns

CHRIST’S
HUMANITY
OCCASIONS
OUR DIVINITY.

GOD WAS
IN CHRIST,
RECONCILING
THE WORLD.

By his atonement, Christ effected our reconciliation with God and invested in us—without counting the cost—so that we may become teeming vessels of witness and service to others. God was in Christ to show that the only acceptable offering we can give God is ourselves. And we give God only the life that is already God’s. Christ showed that self-giving is self-abnegation. In hymn writer Augustus Toplady’s words: “Nothing in my hands I bring / Simply to the cross I cling.”

—Lamin Sanneh

In the death and resurrection of Jesus it is clear that our God is the kind of God who insists on having the last word. To be sure, the second-to-last word, which can be very powerful, can be given to something else—despair, estrangement, hurt, evil, even death. But our God insists on having the very last word, and that is always a word of hope, of reconciliation, of healing, of goodness and of life.

—Martin B. Copenhaver

GOD GETS
THE LAST
WORD.

GOD WAS
BORN.
WE CAN BE
REBORN.

Birth is a messy, painful affair, fraught with risk and danger. Yet Jesus was born. Walking beside us, Jesus lifts the lowly, satisfies the hungry and teaches us to live in love. Likewise, the Spirit gives birth to us. Transforming our lives, the Spirit grounds our being, urges us to create and leads us in abundant life. The core of the gospel exists in this fecundity.

—Carol Howard Merritt

The modifier “Israel” assures that God is the creator of heaven and earth, who emancipated Israel and gave the commands of Sinai. This God is fully and uniquely bodied in Jesus and his restorative life. “Continues” concerns the ongoing force and rule of God’s Spirit that is the presence of Jesus. This covenantal love binds the world to God’s goodness, which creates and recreates worlds (cosmic, public, social, personal) toward flourishing. This love invites creaturely engagement with such flourishing. I used only six words; I rested on the seventh.

—Walter Brueggemann

ISRAEL’S GOD’S
BODIED LOVE
CONTINUES
WORLD-
MAKING.

WE ARE WHO
GOD SAYS
WE ARE.

In the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ we see that God is so for us and with us that we can no longer be defined according to death, a religion-based worthiness system or even the categories of late-stage capitalism. We are who God says we are: the forgiven, broken and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near. Nothing else gets to tell us who we are.

—Nadia Bolz-Weber