Is the Gospel a Power Play? The perceived incoherence of belief and humility.

The heart of the gospel includes a *mode* as well as a *message*. Jesus is the substance of both of them.



The mode of the gospel is one of humility. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," Paul exhorts us in Philippians 2:3-11. "Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves… have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:… he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."

Here is what theologians call *kenosis,* the self-emptying character of the gospel. Jesus, who had the power to command twelve legions of angels, doesn't use the sword (Matthew 5:52-53) but lays down his life. This is the Teacher who sets the example of washing feet (John 13:1-17). "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant," he says to his disciples when they jostle for position, "whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-27).

We, who follow Jesus, are meant to reflect this mode. It's why we wince when there is hypocrisy in our midst, when we see the drippingly wealthy lifestyle of teleevangelists, or the coercive and oppressive legacy of Western colonialism. We align more clearly with the likes of Mother Teresa or William & Catherine Booth, and above all recognise that the greatest gospel heroes are usually unknown and unsung.

It isn’t always simple. Jesus’ humility, particularly during his passion and crucifixion, was one of complete surrender to the will of God; he was acquiescent, and was “led to the slaughter… like a sheep silent before her shearers” (Isaiah 53:7). At other times, he is forceful in his actions and language, particularly towards those who exercise and abuse their power. He turns over the tables of the exploitative money changers (Matthew 21:12-13). The pharisees and teachers of the law are “snakes”, a “brood of vipers” and worthy of judgement (Matthew 23:33-36).

When we consider these oppressive people, we agree with Jesus’ actions. Whatever humility means, it doesn’t mean being a doormat, or agreeing with oppression. In fact, **our postmodern world might give us an insight that Jesus appears to be addressing: truth claims are power plays.** By asserting what they declare to be *true* (in how the temple operates, or in the application of God’s law), Jesus’ opponents are constructing a social framework in which they get to have power and influence. Jesus is right to undermine it!

But here, if we are not careful, we run into an incoherence. Because the gospel is not just the *mode* of humility, it is a *message* of truth. Its shortest declaration is three words long: **Jesus is Lord. We are making a truth claim.**

We don’t want to lose humility. Should we therefore refrain from laying out this truth? Let us not fall into the trap of the Pharisees and assert our truth, especially when we inhabit a dominant or privileged Christian position in the Western World. Would it not be more Christ-like to withhold our voice, and be silent like lambs?

Perhaps we should not only lay aside our voice, but be aware of our own heart and attitude. Jesus was humble, so why should we be so arrogant as to hold that we have any particularly correct insight into the ways of the world, the way of God, and the wisdom of what is and what might be? Jesus was self-

effacing, so if we speak his name, we must be doing it for our sake, not his. Evangelism itself, therefore, is a form of oppression. We should lay down our power-claiming truths even within the confines of our heart; we should let go of our beliefs.

Thus, we arrive at our incoherence: For the sake of the gospel, we should stop sharing the gospel. Indeed, for the sake of the gospel, we should stop holding to the truth of the gospel.

If there is a defining dynamic of Western church life, this is it. We want Jesus, but we're embarrassed to believe much about him, let alone speak of him. What if we're wrong? We could so much damage!

I understand the dilemma. After all, other ways of resolving the incoherence may not be particularly attractive to us:

We could modify our sense of Jesus' example of humility and so be less humble ourselves: If he was humble at all, it was an acquiescence tightly attached to his self-sacrificial death on the cross – something he *chose* to do, and therefore a demonstration of his power and strength. The kingdom of Jesus is muscular and assertive: it lays a claim on truth, and on our lives, and dictates some specific ways of living. This world is caught up in a war between good and evil, and we must fight for righteousness in every area of influence: politically, financially, sociologically. This isn't dominance for its own sake, it's justice. We must protect the innocent, particularly the unborn, and hold back the warped worldviews that will pollute the world of our children.

I'm sure you've heard this rhetoric.

We could modify our sense of Jesus' claim to truth and so have less to believe and say: If he made any truth claims about himself at all, they were probably misinterpreted by his biographers, and later given the authority of holy writings by

power-hungry men. Jesus is not *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life (John 14:6), and if he said it, it only applies within the Jewish world that he inhabited, and he never meant it absolutely. Jesus may have claimed authority in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 28:18) but he meant it subversively, that we might further his Kingdom the way he intended: through dialogue with the oppressed, and inclusion of those discarded by society. The Kingdom of God is made present wherever the compassion that Jesus exemplifies is exercised by any of God's creatures.

I'm sure you've heard this rhetoric also.

Both extremes in this dialectic have a degree of appeal. But it's not a coherent resolution. Within the church, we find ourselves lurching between nihilism ("We can't really know or be anything, let us just be, resting in the empty and meaningless") and more explicit forms of control ("This is how it is, now get on and make the church bigger, don't fail or we will lose influence"). In over-simplification, it's so-called liberalism on one end, and traditionalism (even modern market-driven traditions) on the other.

The synthesis is where we need to be. Neither Jesus' humility, or his claim to truth, can be modified without losing the essence of who he is, and the gospel we believe.

This comes when mode and message combine. As we saw above, Jesus operates in humility. At the same time, Jesus surely does make truth claims about himself. His declaration to the Jews in John 8:58 – "Before Abraham was, I am" – is undoubtedly a claim to divinity. John 14:6 is unequivocal, "No one comes to the Father, except by me." Even the example of humility in Philippians 2 is not a denial that Jesus is "in very nature God", but an exposition of how Jesus didn't *cling* to it for self-grandeur. **We are not nihilistic. Jesus *is* Lord.**

Jesus is the only one who can lay claim to holding “all authority in heaven and earth” (Matthew 28:18) and do so with humility. Why? Because he is the only person for whom that is true, and who holds it rightly and justly and appropriately, and not by some pretense.

To hold that Jesus is Lord, therefore, not only speaks truth, it also embraces humility. If Jesus is Lord, then I am not. If Jesus mediates the way, the truth, and the life, then I can not. It sets the mode of the gospel: I can not speak the truth in and of myself, I can only seek to echo his words. I can not heal and transform, I can only seek to reflect his heart, and point others towards his safe life-giving arms. I can not untangle the warp and wefts of injustice and human brokenness, I can only, daily, seek to follow the lead of the Spirit of Jesus. **We are not authoritarian. *Jesus* is *Lord*.**

If we really hold to the truth of Jesus, we will be committed to humility. We will entrust others to his care, not try to control them. We will speak truth to power, without fear or favour. “We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly” (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). How? Because it’s not about us, it’s about Jesus. We live for Him.

The mode of humility involves a self-surrender. The message is that Jesus is the Lord. The two together is the heart of the gospel.