

Revelation 14:6 in the Navajo Bible

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Nít'ée' náánała' diyingo naal'aí yá ańńi'gi yit'ahgo yíiłtsá, nahasdzáán bikáa'gi kéédahat'iinii, a'aa dine'é bił nidahaz'aanii áádóó a'aa dine'é áádóó bizaad a'aa ádaat'ėii índa nihokáá' dine'é danilíinii t'áá ałtso hane' yá'át'ėehii doo ninít'i'ii yee yił hodoolnih biniyé. (Revelation 14:6)¹

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth- to every nation, tribe, language and people. (Revelation 14:6)²

Introduction

Our passage uses the term "eternal gospel." What does "eternal" mean? If we were to draw a picture of it, what would the picture look like? We probably wouldn't draw a picture, as such, but we could draw a timeline that gets the meaning across. Here I'd like to put forward three different ideas of eternity, draw timelines for them, discuss the reasons why they're different from each other, and show which one works best in the present context.

What Does "Eternity" Mean?

To get started we'll need to show on our timeline where time begins for our world, where it ends for our world, and where we are now. We'll also show the point at which Jesus died on the cross. That will give us a reference point and put things in perspective.

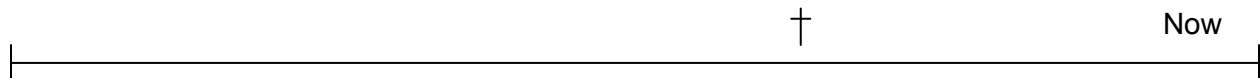


Fig. 1. Framework showing when time begins, when it ends, when Jesus died on the cross, and where we are now.

With this framework in place, there are three different ways to think about eternity – or maybe only two that are really different from each other. In the first model "eternity" means everything after the present. Thus, the "eternal gospel" is the gospel that won't stop being the gospel at any time in the future (see fig. 2, below), starting from now.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

² English Bible quotations not otherwise marked are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version®*. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

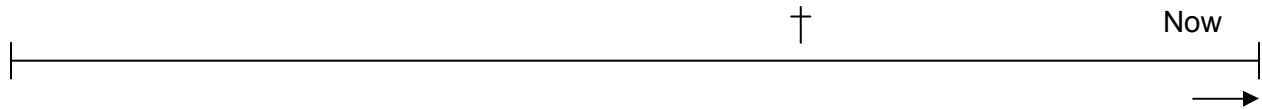


Fig. 2. Framework showing when time begins, when it ends, when Jesus died on the cross, and where we are now. Eternity is everything after the present moment.

Of course "present" for us is different by about 2000 years from what it was for the writers of the New Testament. So taking their point of view, rather than ours, "eternity" would look like fig. 3 instead of fig. 2. Here the "eternal gospel" is the gospel that began at the cross and never stops being the gospel at any time afterward (fig. 3). We don't know that the New Testament writers saw eternity this way, but they might here.

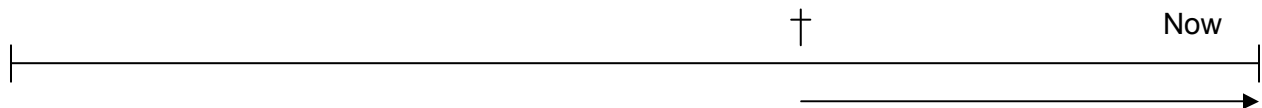


Fig. 3. Framework showing when time begins, when it ends, when Jesus died on the cross, and where we are now. Eternity is everything after the cross.

Actually figs. 1 and 2 display the same basic idea. They just have different starting points. What distinguishes these ideas from the one that follows is that they have a starting point. The only difference is which one, but this is not a big difference comparatively. And it's not the only way to approach the topic. It's not necessary to think of eternity as having a starting point. In fact it's pretty hard to do that. This brings us to fig. 4.

The element that's missing in what we've said so far is a concept of the past. If we include the past, it's possible to think of eternity extending both ways. It doesn't end (we all know that), but it doesn't necessarily begin either. In this third model the "eternal gospel" is not just what will always be the gospel in the future, but what has always been the gospel in the past (fig. 4). Here eternity extends both ways – into the future and also into the past.

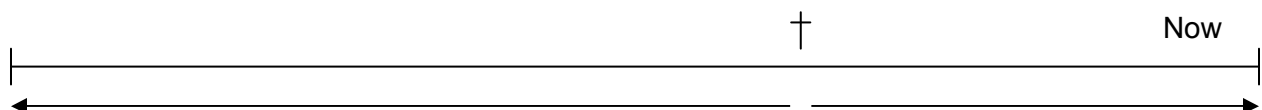


Fig. 4. Framework showing when time begins, when it ends, when Jesus died on the cross, and where we are now. Eternity takes in literally all time, past and present, and not merely as it relates to our world, but all time before and all time after.

It is a biblical fact that God loved you before the world began. He loved you before anyone else knew you would ever be. That's good news! And that's what the word "gospel"

means in the New Testament. It means "good news" (Greek *euaggelion*).³ It's the "eternal gospel" not just because it says God will always love you (although it's true that He will), but also because it tells us He always has. This is about as good as news gets. What it tells you is that you are not an afterthought in God's plan. You are His child.

It's not easy to capture in Navajo the idea of an eternity that extends to the past as well as to the future. If we say *hool'áágóó* ("forever"), to my ear that sounds like the future. If we say *doo ninínt'i'ii* ("endless"), as the translators have it in the passage we're studying, that's definitely the future. Or perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps these terms actually do include both ideas. If they do, that's good, because the verse before us is trying to convey to us that the gospel is truly timeless. Some might disagree, but before Jesus died for you on the cross, you were in His heart. That's good news. And good news is what the word "gospel" means.

Obedience and Faith

Notice one other thing. When John speaks later on in this same passage of "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12), he brings two different terms together – "commandments" (which carries with it the idea of obedience) and "faith." Keeping "the commandments of God" is consistent with having "the faith of Jesus." John puts them together in one sentence. Not everyone would do this. For some, a person can exercise obedience, or faith, but not both. For some, you have to make a choice which one you want to do, because the two are incompatible with each other. Obedience precludes faith, and faith precludes obedience.

But this is not the approach John takes. For him, obedience to God is part and parcel of exercising faith in God. Obedience is not incompatible with faith. A related point is that, when John says these things, he does so in the context of "the eternal gospel," i.e., the gospel that has always been the gospel. Right from the start – whether we take this to mean from the present moment (fig. 2), or from the cross (fig. 3), or from creation (fig. 4) – the gospel has always contained the twin ideas of faith and obedience.

Combining these things is not the same as preaching "a gospel other than the one we preached to you" (Galatians 1:8). It's the very same one. The gospel doesn't change, because Christ doesn't change. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). It might seem that doing the things God commands contributes to our salvation in some way and is therefore to be avoided. We can be glad that Jesus didn't hold such views. On the cross He did what God commanded. He didn't just agree that He should; He actually did it. That's why we have a gospel to believe in now. Christ's obedience made the gospel what it is. So why should anyone feel that obedience (the "commandments of God") and "faith" are incompatible with each other? Obedience is not foreign to the gospel any more than faith is.

If this is so, what would it take to produce "a gospel other than the one we preached to you" (Galatians 1:8)? Removing either faith or obedience would do this, because such a gospel would be fundamentally different from the one the apostles preached. If you remove either of

³ The English word "gospel" (in contrast with the Greek word *euaggelion*) means "God story." But that's not the meaning the word has in the New Testament. In the New Testament "gospel" is always simply a translation of Greek *euaggelion*, so it's the meaning of the Greek word that concerns us here in Revelation 14:6, not the meaning of the corresponding English word.

these things, it doesn't matter which one. In either case you would not have a complete gospel. A gospel without faith would not be the same gospel Paul preached, and neither would a gospel without obedience. It is not wrong to obey God. If it were, Jesus would be guilty of committing the sin of obedience and, as a sinner, He would not be qualified to be our Savior. But the fact of the matter is just the opposite of this. His obedience to God is the very reason why He *is* qualified to be our Savior. Everyone else had fallen into sin, but Jesus obeyed God in everything. And so we also should obey God in everything. The Bible does not condemn people for listening to what God says and acting on what He says.

Discussion

If you've been thinking about passages such as, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17), as you read what I've been saying, it may be that you're not convinced by my concept of eternity. What if the gospel really does begin with Jesus (and in one sense I agree that it did), what does that say about the gospel not changing? And what does *that* say about the relationship between obedience and faith, which is the real point I've been trying to make all along?

It really doesn't change a thing, because with or without a prior existence, the gospel has certainly been with us since the cross. So if a New Testament writer speaks of the "eternal gospel" and has only the future in mind, that's fine. My point above was that the gospel hasn't changed. Thus, the gospel that Christ established on the cross, and that Paul preached, and that John wrote about, is the same gospel we have today – if we understand it correctly. If someone were to take obedience away, or were to take faith away, it wouldn't be the same gospel and something would be terribly wrong.

Conclusion

It is possible to create our theories too tightly. It is possible to think of the gospel in such a way that people who obey God have "fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4). Have they? Not for a moment! God condemns people for making up rules and holding other people to them, but He doesn't ever condemn people for doing what He Himself says. Obeying the commandments of God is an important part of the gospel. It has always been an important part of the gospel. And it always will be. Ultimately the gospel is the good news about God – not the good news about what God will do for us – and He does not change. For this reason it does not change.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17)