

The Gospel according to Anna: A story with many tellings

by [Gordon Atkinson](#)

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There is no such thing as The Gospel in the same way that there is no such thing as a circle. The Good News, like the perfect circle, lies forever beyond us and out of our reach. What we have is the gospel according to. Nothing more and nothing less.

We have the gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, and perhaps some others. These gospels were born in a mysterious and lost time of storytelling and shuffling through many other gospels. These few rose like cream to the top and now comprise a motley and somewhat unbalanced canon of scriptures. Each one wobbles along the pathway of its own agenda and contributes its part to a spiritual system of checks and balances. We need James to hold feisty Paul in check, for example.

We cling to these old and classic gospels in part because they provide a baseline and a boundary for us. We have been tethered to them by the seemingly ageless wisdom of the church, though the Spirit of God leads us to strain against the line, wrapping it round and round the pole, drawing us closer to the center.

We hope and pray these gospels are a close copy to the original, though we have no idea what the original was. I for one shudder at the very idea of the historic Jesus. Do I really want to know the original Word of God, the eternal Logos, before whom even the cherubim kneel in wonder and awe? I think not. When we sing “Jesus, The Very Thought Of Thee” so glibly in church, I want to crawl under the pew.

But I am safely insulated from the real Jesus by layers and layers of gospels according to. The gospel according to Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Theresa, Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Niebuhr, Thielicke, Lewis, Merton, Buechner, and many others.

And even these thrice-removed gospels have been handed down to me through more modest carriers. The gospel according to the reverend Tibbets, the gospel according to your 8th grade Sunday school teacher, and even the gospel according to dear old aunt Flossie. We are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, as

the writer of Hebrews says. A great cloud of gospel truths, swirling around us, charming us, humbling us, and forever warning us of the most dangerous kind of idolatry. For even the gospel is not to be mistaken for God.

In this world of many gospels, I have been given a unique and wonderful gift. For I am one of only a handful of pilgrims who have seen the mysterious “Gospel According to Anna.”

This precious manuscript, upon which only three sets of eyes had ever gazed, was given to me in the modest kitchen of my dear friends, Chris and Ellen. It was handed to me with solemn dignity by Anna herself, who remembered at the last moment that I might want a bookmark to keep my place in her gospel. She fetched a nice pink ribbon and placed it between the center pages of her little folio.

Anna is four years old. She is a tiny child who is numbered among the people who are Covenant Baptist Church. In this world of particulars, this world of skewed gospels, crooked circles, and little girls, I am tempted to say that Anna’s are the brown eyes that define brownness and hers is the impish smile of our deep dreams, the one that inspired Shakespeare to think of Puck. I know Anna, you see, and am known by her.

I knew her father when he was in high school. I knew her mother when she dated him. I spoke with a vested authority one day and pronounced them husband and wife. And I was there in the hospital waiting room on the day that Anna was born. I am a familiar character in her world, something less than family but more than a bit player on her stage. I am an archetypal symbol that she is just beginning to understand. I am the storyteller, the bringer of gospel tidings, the shaman, the healer, the one who sits on a blanket at the front of the church and blesses children. I am only a flawed particular, but she is already being drawn to the ideal.

This year Anna told her mother that she wanted to make a bible book to be a Christmas present for Gordon. So she gathered together everything she knew of the gospel. She collected pieces of stories, wise words, and even snippets of things she’s heard me say at church. I want to say that it was a lot to hold in one small girl’s mind, but I wonder what meaning that statement has, given that The Gospel is too much for anyone’s mind to hold.

With her mother as her amanuensis, she dictated “The Gospel According to Anna,” and the two of them bound the pages into a beautiful little manuscript. Like monks

of old, she illustrated it with her best art, with stickers and drawings, and yea even with a pipe cleaner wound into something like a circle and taped to one of the pages.

She gave it to me in their kitchen, shyly hugging her mother's legs while I gushed over it, and then dancing away to continue doing whatever it is that four-year-olds do with their days.

I have read The Gospel According to Anna several times now, and my awe and admiration increase with each reading. The original manuscript now resides in a sacred place in my office. If you ever make a pilgrimage to San Antonio, I'll show it to you.

Sweet Rose. God has come in from heaven. He has picked the sign of Lord God of Christ. You could understand that this is a good spirit, and God has said unto his kids, "I know that this is a perfect holiday, when it's my birthday on Christmas" (TGAA 2:1-4).

God is the lord of babies. He's Christ of Jesus. He is so lonely and is in a manger, with God in heaven (TGAA 4:1-3).

The gift of Anna's gospel has made me thoughtful about how sacred knowledge is passed from generation to generation. It has made me think about the gifts of pilgrims one to another. It has made me think about what it means to be the pastor of a church.

Preaching is perhaps my highest calling. I proclaim the gospel truth as reflected in the various "gospels according to" that appear in The New Testament. It falls upon me to be a gospel gatekeeper and a solemn truth teller.

But Anna's gift has helped me to see that I have another important role. I am also a listener, a hearer, a seeker of good news. It seems to me that people need someone to listen when they proclaim their own gospel with all of its glorious and particular imperfections.

If I close my eyes and think in new ways, I see that this is what I've been doing all these years, since back when Anna's father was a young man, telling me his own young man's gospel.

Yes, I listen to gospels of the young and old. I seek the goodness in them. I bless them. I bind and loose them. I carry the sacred knowledge of our scriptures and use that wisdom to guard and to guide and to make straight paths and clear fence lines. I bless gospel and I hold gospel accountable. This is the ancient craft of the shepherd.

My dear Anna, this is only the first gospel you have told. There will be others, so I make you this promise: I will listen to the gospel according to Anna. I will stand ready to hear the gospel according to you, for I am one shepherd in this world of many gospels.

The entire "Gospel according to Anna" can be seen at RealLivePreacher.com.