New Zealand is in the midst of a healthy conversation over our identity. This has led many New Zealand Christians to ask ‘what is our identity as Christ followers in these Islands?’ I believe we can turn to two sources, one primary and one secondary, one ancient, one historical, but both incredibly important for our life and mission in NZ.

The Gospel and the Treaty of Waitangi

Paul describes the gospel in Romans 1:1-5. The Gospel is God’s word speaking through the scriptures about Jesus. Just as all roads in New Zealand ultimately lead us to State Highway One all parts of scripture point us ultimately to the person and work on the cross of the Lord Jesus.

Timothy Keller summaries the gospel as: through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God fully accomplishes salvation for us, rescuing us from judgment for sin into fellowship with him, and then restores the creation in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever. It is this gospel that is arguably the largest single influence on the content, shape and reception of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Why have we not heard this?

In a 1991 Survey Dr Peter Lineham observed that New Zealand historians continue to ‘downplay the significance of religious belief’ which continues to be poorly integrated into the writing of NZ history.¹ In 2001 Dr Allan Davidson “wrote with the partial exception of James Belich’s Making Peoples, general histories of NZ have mostly written out, marginalised or trivialised religion”.²

We’ll explore five ways this gospel has influenced the Treaty:

1. **The gospel contributes to the motivation for the treaty in New Zealand**
   In the late 1830’s the Church Missionary Society missionaries and Wesleyan Missionary Society missionaries were genuinely concerned about the imminent threat of unrestrained immigration on Māori communities. They believed a formal relationship via a treaty with the British Crown was needed as a protection for Māori. It is likely they also desired to retain their own influence and position in the country and could see that it would be diminished by commercial colonisation.³

2. **The gospel contributes to the motivation for treaty in the UK**
   In the years leading up to the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi most of the 25 staff members of British Colonial Office were also members of William Wilberforce’s Clapham Sect. This wide-ranging group of influential,

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evangelical Christian friends include the Colonial Secretary himself, Lord Glenelg. The Gospel’s vision of equality and God’s justice inspired these parliamentarians and civil servants to passionately campaign against slavery for the rights of indigenous people. This led them to campaign for the protection and preservation of Māori society. At the time they form only one voice amongst many competing ones on the issue of colonisation. The overall effect of the debate in Britain was the realisation that the government needed to enter into a formal treaty with Māori that would protect indigenous Māori rights over land, bush, river and seas in exchange for British protection and sovereignty. Lieu-Governor William Hobson is therefore dispatched from Sydney in January 1840 to achieve that end.3

3. This gospel has shaped the content of the treaty
James Stephen was the permanent undersecretary in the Colonial Office. He was possibly the most influential civil servant of his time. He was profoundly influenced by the gospel. His gospel convictions expressed themselves in a deep commitment to the abolition of slavery championed by his brother-in-law William Wilberforce and others.6 He later became concerned about the negative impacts of colonisation on indigenous peoples.7 Stephen, wanting to avoid a similar pattern in New Zealand, drafted the instructions for Lord Normandy which were given to William Hobson when he was sent to New Zealand in 1840. Parts of the instruction are as follows:

- All dealings with Māori must be conducted with sincerity, justice, and good faith
- They must not be permitted to enter into any contracts in which they might be ignorant and unintentional authors of injuries to themselves
- You will not, purchase from them any territory that would be essential, or highly conducive, to their own comfort, safety or subsistence.8

The content of the treaty was shaped by these instructions. The instructions themselves were shaped by the biblical gospel.

4. The gospel shaped the nature of the treaty to Māori
Missionaries cultivated an image of the Queen as personally loving towards Māori. Henry Williams would affirm to Māori at Waitangi that the treaty was an act of love towards them on the part of the Queen.9 This thinking led many chiefs, who were by then, either Christian or associated with Christianity, to see the treaty in terms of a spiritual bond – a covenant.10 For these chiefs the Treaty of Waitangi was a covenant between the Māori people and the Queen as head of the English Church and State. The Māori name for the Treaty is ‘Te Kawenata o Waitangi’ (‘the Covenant of Waitangi’).11 At the time many Māori believed the Treaty enabled Pakeha and Māori to be one people in both a spiritual and societal sense.12 Affirming this was Hobson’s words to each Chief as they completed their signing

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of the Treaty at Waitangi were “He iwi tahi tatou” - now we are all one people. His words were selected by CMS missionary Henry Williams and are loosely based on Ephesians 2:13. The northern tribe Ngapuhi, in particular, understood the treaty as a special kind of covenant with the Queen, a bond with all the spiritual connotations of the biblical covenants; there would be many tribes, including the British, but all would be equal under God. Claudia Orange argues “For British officials it’s fair to say the perception of covenant, and the missionaries emphasising the humanitarian protection of the British were simply part of securing sovereignty…”

5. This gospel influences the reception of the treaty
On February 6th 43 Chiefs signed the treaty, in all over 500 would sign the treaty over the next 8 months. The majority of Treaty negotiators where either missionaries or closely associated with them. Missionaries with considerable mana with Māori – particularly Henry Williams – took the treaty throughout the country to be signed. On many occasions it is the credibility of the missionaries and their endorsement which gives the treaty its credibility. In the years before the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi 74,000 copies of biblical books and New Testaments had been printed and distributed throughout New Zealand. Coupled with the focus on literature the gospel had spread rapidly. Almost half the Māori population would be influenced by the gospel. Chiefs who had come to faith in Christ or who had been influenced by the gospel were far more likely to be well disposed to the treaty, although where the gospel was not strong amongst senior chiefs it was a far more difficult process to obtain signatures.

What are the implications for us today?

1. I want to reclaim the treaty as part of our Christian story
As gospel people the Treaty of Waitangi is part of our history, it’s a part of our legacy and its expression today is a part of our responsibility.

2. I want to understand the nature of the Crown’s historical breaches, and the Church’s complicity in this
The gospel calls us to be a reconciling people. As we’ve learnt from South Africa, truth comes before reconciliation. Wanting to know the truth compels me to understand the Crown’s historical breaches and the Church’s complicity in these.

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22 ‘The Church was certainly complicit in land alienation in the nineteenth century both actively and passively. Where was the church voice when the legislation was passed in the 1860’s that resulted in confiscations? Where was the church voice when the Native Land Court was used to wrest land from Māori hands? Where was the church voice when the Māori King and Te Kotahitanga protested against the loss of land? Where was the church voice when Te Whiti and Tohu and their followers were trying to defend their land?’ Reece, A., ‘Truth, Repentance and Naboth’s Vineyard: Towards reconciliation in Aotearoa New Zealand’. pg. 53
3. **I want us to discover how we can apply the Waitangi covenant to our life together as a church**

When we seek to explore what it means to uphold and express the values of the Waitangi covenant as the people of God I believe it leads us towards a deeper experience of what it means to be Christian, and a richer experience of what it means to be kiwi. Why? Because the Treaty of Waitangi affirms our place on the land together.

As Chief Judge Eddie Durie expressed it in his Waitangi Day address in 1989:

> We [Māori] must not forget that the Treaty is not just a Bill of Rights for Māori. It is a Bill of Rights for Pakeha too. It is the Treaty that gives Pakeha the right to be here. Without the Treaty there would be no lawful authority for the Pakeha presence in this part of the South Pacific. The Pakeha here are not like the Indians of Fiji, or the French in New Caledonia. Our Prime Minister can stand proud in Pacific forums and in international forums too, not in spite of the Treaty but because of it. We must remember that if we are the Tangata Whenua, the original people, then the Pakeha are the Tangata Tiriti, those who belong to the land by right of that Treaty.  

I believe that as we seek to embody the gospel and express the Waitangi covenant biculturally and multiculturally over the next 30 years, our frail and faltering attempts will show the credibility and authenticity of the gospel to Māori and the rest of New Zealand. It is my prayer Māori would again respond to the gospel. In turn due to the growing prominence and preference given to Māori spirituality in New Zealand society Māori will have the opportunity to take the gospel back to the entire society.

The gospel has had a significant impact on all aspects of the Treaty. As a result, we the people of God in Aotearoa New Zealand need to reclaim it as part of our story. We need to understand the historical injustices of the past and we need to find ways of expressing with grace and truth the values of the Treaty of Waitangi in our life together into the future.

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23 New Zealand Church Leaders Statement 1990, Page 10