

The Kingdom-Driven Gospel

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Abstract

The gospel is the message that empowers and underlines all of Christianity. In many churches, this gospel is equated with the plan of salvation—Christ came to save sinners, he conquered death, and thus sins can be forgiven if he is simply accepted into one’s life. But, this is only a portion of the gospel. In the New Testament, the gospel is kingdom-driven. Consistently, the gospel is linked to the coming kingdom of God and the transformation that this kingdom will bring. This article is a call to refocus our preaching of the gospel on the original, full, powerful Biblical gospel, and not solely on one aspect of it. The gospel is transformative, and a recognition of it in its entirety has implications for worship, for preaching, and for individual lifestyle.

Keywords: gospel, kingdom, evangelization

INTRODUCTION

For many Christians, the gospel is God’s plan of salvation.¹ The term specifically refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus for the personal forgiveness of my sins. Thus, the message of the Bible is distilled into a single sentence, and many are taught that this sentence alone can offer them salvation from death and suffering. However, the message that Jesus died for sin is only a piece of the gospel as defined by Scripture, and as a piece of it, it tends to miss other crucial aspects of the work and

¹ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 37; Matthew Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 28.

mission of the Lord Jesus Christ—leaving Christians with only a partial understanding of what the Christian faith truly means. This simplification of the gospel unfortunately leads to simple confessions of faith offered as prayers—and these prayers are taken as though they have now secured one’s eternal salvation. In other words, this simplification of the gospel has not only led to misunderstandings, but it has major confusion amongst Christians as to what Christianity really means, and because of that confusion, some Christians believe that they have secured their salvation but haven’t really ever fully committed themselves to the Lord. A true understanding of the Biblical gospel has major implications for Christians, and thus should be earnestly pursued.

While a correct understanding of the gospel has implications for salvation, there are also other key points that are missed when the gospel is misunderstood. The gospel reveals God’s character and what truly matters in humanity’s existence. If one believes that all of God’s plan centered around Jesus dying for *their* sins, that belief will affect their lives in a way that is different than if they believed that God had sent his son as a king to rule over a kingdom, and yet to suffer for his people before that rule. The element of kingship would color their view of God and Christ, and affect their actions. These nuances of the gospel are not simply unimportant details. The gospel is God’s power for salvation (Romans 1:16). It matters—and a proper understanding of it shapes not only one’s understanding of God, but also one’s understanding of His plan, and thus, their part in that plan. Without fully grasping the gospel, one can believe that they have committed themselves to Christianity, only to find that they only truly committed themselves to an oversimplified version of Christianity’s message, and thus, not to Christianity, or the Lord Jesus, at all.

With the importance of this topic established, this article will examine three facets of the gospel. First, it will look Biblically to understand *the full gospel*. How did Christ define the gospel and what did he emphasize about it? How did the apostles

preach the gospel? How did Paul expound the gospel in his letters? How does this understanding of the gospel fit with the entire story of the Bible, and does it need to? Second, this article will examine how this understanding of the gospel impacts our preaching to unbelievers. What should we be emphasizing and saying? Is it enough to encourage others to accept Christ into their hearts? Third, the article will move beyond preaching and consider our lives as Christians. As already stated, the nuances of the gospel matter and affect our actions. But how? How does this more robust theology determine the choices that we make and the way that we see our place in the world? How does it affect the Christian life? In all, this article will argue that the Biblical gospel is different than the simple plan of salvation that is often presented as the heart of Christianity, and that it instead focuses on the coming of God's kingdom with Christ as its king and the necessity for all Christians to acknowledge Christ's kingship, to live as part of that kingdom, and to declare the reality of that kingdom to others.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

When defining the gospel, many start with the epistles of Paul. While this is reasonable, considering that Paul uses the term more than any other writer (57 times in the epistles traditionally attributed to him versus 8 times in the Gospel of Mark, the next highest use), and refers to the gospel multiple times as "my gospel" (Rom 2:16, 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8), it also appears rather backward. Paul declared that he learned *his gospel* from the Lord Jesus (Gal 1:11-12). Therefore, in first considering Paul for a definition of the gospel, and then considering the Lord Jesus, scholars make the mistake of learning first from the disciple and then from the master. This article will start with Christ's definition of the gospel, consider the apostles' definition as they preached, and then examine Paul's definition.

The word "gospel" is translated from the Greek word *euangelion*. In some cases it is translated as "gospel" and in other cases as "good news." As the Lord Jesus went from town to town, it was

continuously what he preached to the people (Matt 4:23, 9:35; Mark 1:14; Luke 8:1). With that acknowledged, one can see that the gospel was a key part of the Lord's message. Yet, what was it specifically that he preached? Did he go from town to town declaring his death and resurrection? According to the evangelists who wrote about the Lord, he didn't start discussing his death until sometime in the last year of his ministry—the first time he declared that he would die was just before the transfiguration (Matt 16:21). So, then, what was it that Christ preached? Unfortunately, as Ron Sider argues, “Evangelicals have a problem. Many evangelicals today do not define the gospel the way Jesus did.”²

In each of the references above about Christ preaching from town to town, both Matthew, Mark, and Luke declare that the Lord preached “the gospel of the kingdom.” Mark even adds to this the specific words that the Lord spoke: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).³ Apparently the Lord's message was simple, but also was not what is normally associated with the gospel. The good news that Christ preached was specifically that the kingdom of God was coming. He said nothing about his death or his resurrection, and yet Scripture clearly indicates that his teaching *was the gospel*.⁴ Further, this message also involved some kind of conversion, or change of life, hence the command to *repent*.⁵

² Ron Sider, “What is the Gospel?” *Transformation (Exeter)* 16, no. 1 (1999): 31.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁴ Robert Guelich, *Mark 1–8v26*, vol. 34A, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Ralph Martin (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 14.

⁵ Anton ten Klooster, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand! ’(Mt 3:1 and 4:17): Conversion in the Gospel and the Christian Life,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10 (Special Issue 1) 2021: 55.

This conclusion is reinforced when one looks at Christ's commission to his disciples when he sent them to preach from town to town, just as he had. He gave them a specific message. They were "to proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:2). Luke, then, describes their preaching as they followed the Lord's command, "And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere" (Luke 9:6). Certainly, there was no possible way for the disciples to preach about the death and resurrection of Christ. They had not yet heard about it, and as Luke explained just a few verses later, when Christ did attempt to talk to them about his sacrifice, they "did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it" (Luke 9:45). Therefore, just like the Lord Jesus, when the apostles preached the gospel, they preached about the kingdom. At the time of the Lord's ministry, the gospel was focused on the coming kingdom of God.⁶

After the Lord's death and resurrection, he sent his disciples to preach (Matt 28:19-20), but specifically, to be *witnesses* of what they had seen and heard with him (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts records them fulfilling that commission (Acts 2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39, 41, 13:31). They were witnesses of Christ's sacrifice and his new life, and so they declared that to the people. Oddly enough, however, none of the apostles' speeches is termed "the gospel" by Luke. Perhaps the closest that Luke comes to identifying the gospel in Acts is when Peter is preaching to Cornelius. There, the noun *euangelion* is not used, but rather, a related verb *euangelizo*. Peter declares that God "preached good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)" (Acts 10:36). Yet what exactly does that mean? What is the peace to which Peter is referring? And why does Peter add the parenthetical statement that Christ is Lord of all? Again, this

⁶ Sider, "What is the Gospel?," 31.

preaching of the gospel is focused on the kingdom.⁷ As Paul later identifies, the kingdom of God is peace (Romans 14:17). It is a time when the earth is at one with its Maker. This connection to the kingdom also explains Peter's parenthetical statement—the existence of the kingdom of God means that Christ is a king!⁸ He is lord! This isn't just a phrase, it's a recognition of Christ's status. Perhaps, though, what is most important about this reference in Acts is what Peter goes on to say. He develops the gospel in more detail, explaining how Christ has been made Lord. He did good throughout his life (10:38), was put to death (10:39), and then raised again (10:40). He was then appointed by God to be judge at the resurrection (10:42). He is willing to forgive the sins of those who believe in him (10:43) because of who he is—or, as Matthew Bates would explain, those who give their allegiance to him (because, he isn't just a figure for belief, he is a *king*).⁹ This is how the gospel all comes together. God has a kingdom. Christ, through his commitment to God's plan, gave himself and was thus exalted by God to be a judge and the Lord of the kingdom. This is the good news! A kingdom is coming and the one who is the king is the one who died for us—therefore, when he judges and gives citizenship for his kingdom, he is willing to forgive those instances of disloyalty!

Thus, when Paul writes about the gospel, this is the foundation upon which he builds. His gospel teaches that Christ will come as a judge (Romans 2:16). It requires confession that Jesus is Lord—or *king* (Romans 10:9, 16).¹⁰ Perhaps the place where

⁷ Howard Marshall, "Acts," in *Commentary on the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 579.

⁸ Thus, D.A. Carson in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* explains that those who preach the gospel of the kingdom are those who "bow unqualifiedly to Jesus' authority." D.A. Carson, "Matthew" in *Matthew–Luke*, vol. 8, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 25.

⁹ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance*, 5.

¹⁰ Meaning, that Christ is king and requires obedience. *Ibid.*, 98.

Paul elaborates on his gospel the most is in 1 Corinthians 15. There, he states that he declared the gospel to the Corinthians, and he explains each of its parts (v. 1). Christ died for our sins (v. 3), rose again (v. 4), and was seen of many witnesses (v. 5-8). Unfortunately, many expositors stop at this point in Paul's treatise, thinking that he has finished explaining the gospel. Yet, this belies a misunderstanding of the gospel. Paul did not randomly, in the middle of his letter, decide to remind his readers of the gospel. Instead, he was reminding them of the gospel because *they had forgotten a major piece of it*. Thus, after laying the foundation of Christ's death and resurrection, Paul goes on to spend the longest time with a crucial element of the gospel—the latter-day resurrection of believers and the coming kingdom of God. The entire rest of the chapter is devoted to the topic of what will take place when Christ and the believers inherit a *physical* kingdom (v. 24, 50). It seems likely that Paul referenced Christ's death and resurrection because he was explaining how all of the pieces of the gospel go together—including the major element of Christ's kingship and kingdom. In other words, it appears that when Christians discuss the gospel, and only discuss the death and resurrection of Jesus, but don't consider his kingship and his kingdom, they have missed a massive part of the gospel and are in essentially the same position as those in Corinth whom Paul had to correct in 1 Corinthians 15. The gospel revolves around Christ's death, resurrection, *and kingship*, apparently to the point that when the Lord Jesus preached *solely* his kingship during his ministry, that idea was still, in itself, the gospel.

This understanding of the gospel fits powerfully into this grand story of the Bible.¹¹ Ever since the beginning, God has sought to create a kingdom, or a country. The first kingdom was Eden. It was meant to be a place where God was acknowledged as king. Yet, with the fall, sin entered into that kingdom and God sought a way to restore Eden. Eventually, this was attempted

¹¹ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Ralph Martin (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), liv.

through Israel, who would be a kingdom for Him (Exodus 19:6; 1 Chronicles 28:5). Yet, Israel also was overwhelmed by sin. Consistently, the places that were intended to be the kingdom of God were not. Therefore, Christ was sent to be that perfect king—to lead the subjects of the kingdom in the way that they were intended to live. With the Lord Jesus as the king of the kingdom, Eden can be restored (Revelation 21-22).

THE GOSPEL AND UNBELIEVERS

In recognizing this kingdom aspect of the gospel, preaching to unbelievers really should begin with the overall story of the Bible, as described in the paragraph above. Throughout the millennia, the goal has been a restoration of Eden, God's kingdom. This connects the beginning and the ending of the Bible. Nevertheless, one could argue that the same is done when the gospel is simply understood as the death and resurrection of Christ, without any focus on the kingdom. Indeed, this is the case—the fall in the garden explains the entrance of sin into the world and the need for individuals to have a savior. The picture of a restored Eden at the end of Revelation describes the paradise experienced by those who have the Lord as their savior. But, that version of the gospel is missing something. Why is Eden restored? Why not simply show those who have been saved as being in perfect bliss? For some reason, God goes to great lengths to connect the book of Revelation and the book of Genesis.¹² Perhaps these connections are because of the focus on the kingdom of God from the beginning of creation to the end. The Bible isn't simply about salvation—it is about God's country, its king, and its citizens. When one recognizes the nuance in that portrayal of the gospel, suddenly Israel's story also fits. One can now understand why such a massive part of the Bible is devoted to the nation of Israel: because they were God's kingdom. The

¹² “The events of Genesis 1-3 are seen as archetypes of the last days.” Christopher Rowland, “Revelation” in *Hebrews–Revelation*, vol. 12, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 532.

story of Israel is the detailed story of God creating another kingdom to be like Eden.¹³ Hence, the Bible's descriptions of Israel have consistent allusions back to creation (Genesis 3:23 and Leviticus 20:23; Isaiah 51:3; Ezekiel 31:9, 36:35). The coming kingdom of God is even described as the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6).¹⁴ When this kingdom aspect of the gospel is understood, the whole Bible fits together.

In order for an unbeliever to hear a robust understanding of the gospel, one should start in Eden and the fall. From there, the preacher can progress to the new creation with Noah, and then the new creation with Israel. These establish the pattern—God was consistently working to create a kingdom that would exalt Him as king and where His subjects would give allegiance to Him. Once this context has been established, one can present the story of Jesus—his story fits here as this is the place that it is presented in the Bible itself. The Old Testament comes first and establishes the foundation. Christ comes because Adam and Eve failed. Noah failed. Israel failed. Christ doesn't. He was the perfect king, even to the point of giving his life for his subjects. Thus, he was resurrected and given kingship over the church—one day to come back and fully establish his physical kingdom. Particularly relevant to an unbeliever at this point is what the gospel means to them—how they can become a citizen of that kingdom. Rather than simply praying a prayer, they must give their allegiance to the king. That means that they acknowledge his rulership in their life. They don't pray a prayer and then live however they want after that. They can't make a confession and then think that all of their sins will forever be forgiven. They must change citizenship, which Paul describes as starting with baptism (Romans 6:17-18). Then they must live

¹³ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 35.

¹⁴ Daniel Schwartz, "Jewish Movements of the New Testament Period," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 619.

as though they are part of that kingdom *today*.¹⁵ This is why Paul states that Christ had already transferred the Colossian believers into the kingdom (Colossians 1:14). It is why John wrote that the believers were *a kingdom of priests* (Revelation 1:6). This is why Paul can exhort the believers to live in peace with one another—because the kingdom of God is peace, and they were to live as though they were in the kingdom every day (Romans 14:17-19).

This understanding, then, for an unbeliever is crucial. The gospel involves commitment. It's a major change in one's life. It's an acknowledgment that an individual doesn't want their citizenship in this world and instead wants citizenship in a world to come—and therefore, they will follow, or give their allegiance to, the king. Just as the king gave his life for his subjects, so they will give their lives for one another. Just as the king conquered death, so they believe that death will not have power over them. The gospel is a call to follow the king of a spiritual country—yet a spiritual country that will one day be physical.¹⁶ Perhaps as the key piece in all of this regarding evangelization, Christians must acknowledge that if they are preaching about a coming kingdom that requires a different way of life, that way of life must be reflected in their own actions.¹⁷

IMPACT ON MINISTRY

This “theology of the gospel” essentially creates a mission statement for the church. The church is to strive to be the kingdom of God *today*. This mission has a far-reaching impact on almost every aspect of ministry, from programming to interpersonal relationships to individuals' prayers and

¹⁵ Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 242.

¹⁶ Jonathan Morrow, “Introducing Spiritual Formation,” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 35.

¹⁷ Darrell Bock, “New Testament Community and Spiritual Formation,” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Paul Pettit, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 117.

thoughts. As John Nolland wrote, “The gospel of the kingdom of God affirms and makes yet more radical the demands of the law and the prophets,” it impacts everything.¹⁸ Rather than focusing on forgiveness of sins and mercy (certainly those things should be discussed, but they shouldn’t be the sole focus of the sermons), programming will focus on God’s country and setting one’s mind on things above, rather than things below (Colossians 3:2). It will focus on what allegiance looks like, and how acknowledging Christ as Lord of your life changes what you do. Interpersonal relationships will change as individuals recognize that their allegiance to Christ affects what kinds of activities they want to do and what kinds of subjects they want to talk about. There will be more harmony amongst others, as kindness is embraced and peace prevails. Individually, rather than pursuing their own goals, members of the church will spend more time in prayer and in creating the values that citizens of God’s kingdom hold dear. The things of this world will matter less, because they aren’t really what concern the citizens of a different country.

Essentially, this focus of the gospel on the kingdom changes everything. Previously, the gospel felt as though it was, at least in some senses, a free pass to live however one wants. Christ died for sin and so therefore, when his sacrifice is accepted into one’s heart, God is a god of mercy and will forgive those sins. But, with this understanding of the gospel, one can see that God *is merciful*, but is also a King. He has standards and requirements for His citizens.¹⁹ If someone wants to be part of that future kingdom of God, then God has set it up so that they must at least strive today to *live as one of those citizens*, in effect showing that they are committed to the kingdom’s ideals and principles. As Michael Gorman writes in *Cruciformity*, “It is within the colonies of the heavenly Lord Jesus that real peace

¹⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 9v21–18v34*, vol. 35B, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Ralph Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 833.

¹⁹ Klooster, “Repent,” 52.

and security can be experienced now and guaranteed for the eschatological future.”²⁰

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to argue that the gospel is more than many understand it to be. While the death and resurrection of Christ are a big piece of the gospel, solely focusing on that aspect of the gospel prevents one from seeing the full picture of God’s coming kingdom and Christ’s kingship. It creates a theology that emphasizes mercy and yet not a changed life. The Biblical gospel brings a change in citizenship. It is transformative, not only because Jesus died for you, but because he died for you *as your king* to lead you and demonstrate what it truly means to be a citizen of God’s kingdom. Thus, those who follow the Lord don’t merely confess that Jesus was raised—they confess that *he is Lord* (Romans 10:9) and because of that confession, they take up their cross daily (Luke 9:23).

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²⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 365.

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