

Focus on the Kingdom

Vol. 11 No. 7

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April, 2009

John Chapter 5:1-32

We continue here with our translation of John's Gospel, from the Greek text. Chapter 4 appeared in the *Focus on the Kingdom* of August, 2006.

After this there was a Jewish festival and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.¹ Now in Jerusalem at the sheep-gate there is a pool called in Aramaic Bethsaida with five colonnades. In this there lies a mass of sick people, blind, crippled and paralyzed. There was one man there who had been sick for 38 years. Jesus saw him lying there and knowing he had been an invalid for a long time, asked him, "Do you want to be healed?" The sick man answered, "Sir, I have no one to take me down into the pool when the water is stirred up. As I try to go down, someone else goes down in front of me." Jesus said to him, "Pick up your bed and walk," and immediately the man was healed and picked up his bed and began to walk. Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It's Sabbath and it is not permissible for you to carry your bed." But he answered them, "The one who healed me said, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" They said to him, "Who is this man who told you to get up and walk?" The man who had been healed did not know who it was, because Jesus had left since there was a crowd at that place. After this Jesus found him in the temple and he said to him, "Look, you are healed now. Don't sin any more. If you do a worse thing might happen to you."

The man went off and announced to the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. So then the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he had done these things on the Sabbath. Jesus replied to them, "My Father is working up to now and I am working too." For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only had he broken the Sabbath but he was calling God his own Father and making himself equal to God. So Jesus answered them by saying, "Truly I tell you, a son is unable to do anything on his own authority. He can do only what he sees his father doing. Whatever his father does, the son does likewise. Because the Father loves the Son and has shown him what He is doing, and He will show him greater things, so that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and makes them alive so also the Son makes alive whom he

¹ John and his community do not think of these as Christian festivals but as Jewish festivals. Col. 1:16-17 describes the Jewish calendar, Sabbath, holy days and new moons as a single shadow of which Jesus is the substance.

wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that everyone may honor the Son as they honor the Father. The one who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who commissioned him as his agent. Truly I tell you that the one who hears my word² and thus believes the one who commissioned me has the life of the age to come,³ and will not come into judgment but he has been transferred from death to life. Truly I tell you that the hour is coming, and now already is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will come back to life. Just as the Father has life in Himself, so also He has granted the Son to have life in himself, and He has given him authority to carry out judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear the voice of the Son of Man. They will come out of their graves, the ones who have done good to a resurrection of life and those who have practiced evil to a resurrection of judgment. I can do nothing on my own authority. As I hear I judge, and my judgment is fair, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who commissioned me as His agent. If I witness about myself, my witness is not true. But there is another who witnesses about me and I know that the witness He gives on my behalf of me is true. ✧

Which Gospel? Which Jesus?

The word "gospel" bombards the American churchgoing public from every quarter. Yet there appears to be very little analysis of what the Bible means by the Gospel. There is no more important and urgent matter demanding our attention than this: to discover what Jesus and the Apostles taught as *the Gospel*. Believing the Gospel is everywhere in the New Testament directly connected to salvation. We just finished translating the words of Jesus in John 5. Jesus makes our entire destiny rest on the acceptance of *what he taught*. Salvation means gaining immortality in the future resurrection and helping to supervise a new world order, with the returned Messiah as its governor. There is no way of gaining immortality apart from the resurrection of the dead which Jesus will accomplish when he comes back (John 5:28-29).

² i.e., my Gospel of the Kingdom as described in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

³ i.e. life in the future Kingdom of God, tasted in advance by the spirit given to believers.

There are cosmic forces at work attempting to prevent us from understanding the vital message of salvation. In Luke 8:12 Jesus brilliantly describes what happens when some hear the biblical Gospel about the Kingdom of God. The Messiah's intelligence report in Luke 8:12 lifts the lid on Satan's counter-Gospel activity: When anyone hears the Gospel message, "then the Devil comes and snatches away the message [the Gospel of the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19] which was sown in their hearts, *so that they may not believe it [the Gospel] and be saved.*"

This is a devastatingly important scriptural truth.

A destructive system, known as ultra-dispensationalism, boldly proclaims that the Gospel of the Kingdom is *not for us today* at all! It claims, contrary to the plainest biblical evidence, that Paul introduced another and different Gospel for us now: the Gospel of grace. Paul however makes the Gospel of the Kingdom *identical* with the Gospel of grace. For this fact, simply read Acts 20:24-25. Paul here summarizes with crystal clarity his whole Gospel-preaching career. It was to proclaim the Gospel of the grace of God which in the next breath he says is the preaching of the Kingdom! Paul was following the great commission of Jesus who had commanded that his Gospel of the Kingdom be taken to all the nations.

Salvation, we learn, is gained by believing and obeying the Gospel message. The linkage of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19) and salvation is obvious. Satan aims to obstruct belief in that Gospel. One strategy open to him is to remove the Gospel from the heart of the potential believer (Luke 8:12). Another clever way of achieving his goal is by *distorting* the message. Paul warned his Corinthian converts that it is all too easy to believe in a pseudo-Jesus, a counterfeit spirit, and a fake Gospel: "If he who comes preaches *another Jesus*, whom we have not preached, or if you receive *another spirit*, which you have not received, or a *different gospel*, which you did not receive, you put up with this beautifully!" (2 Cor. 11:4).

The Corinthians were gullible, easily deceived. Christians are to be alert and instructed. If they are not, they will fall for "other gospels" and "other Jesuses." There are lots around and they can be very appealing.

"Another Jesus." "Another spirit." "A different gospel." Paul here "blows the whistle" on the Satanic methods. He unmasks the Devil's subtle tactics. Satan's seductive plan is to "preach Jesus, Spirit and Gospel," using these New Testament terms as a camouflage for his own twisted message. Satan's Gospel will sound biblical enough. The name "Jesus" will be prominent in the message. Yet in a subtle way this pseudo-gospel will divert its well-meaning recipients from the real message of the real Jesus.

According to another translation of 2 Corinthians 11:4, Satan offers "another way to be saved." Observe that Satan's business is "salvation." But it is "salvation" on *his* terms. The reason why the yet inexperienced Corinthians were, as Paul said, "putting up with the pseudo-gospel beautifully" was that they could not see the difference between the true and the false versions of the Gospel.

In these immensely instructive verses Paul exposed Satan's deceptive techniques. Paul was giving his own commentary on the warning words of Jesus in Luke 8:12. Satan's business is to get rid of the saving Gospel as Jesus preached it. Satan knows that if the true Gospel as Jesus preached it takes root in our minds, then we are on the way to the salvation which Satan does not want us to have.

Paul went on to say that Satan "dresses himself up" as an angel of light (implying that he is actually an angel of darkness),⁴ and that he works through his ministers, who also appear to be ministers of light, to mislead the unwary: "And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:14-15).

Nothing alarmed or angered Paul more than the preaching of a distorted Gospel — and with good reason. For a message of salvation which is untrue to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles inevitably lulls its recipients into a false sense of security. They will think they have "received Jesus," *but the Jesus presented to them will be a cunningly devised misrepresentation of the real Jesus who alone can save.* When Paul found Satan at work among young believers whom he had reached with the true message, he rushed to their rescue:

"I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the Gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven [suggestive of the 'angel of light' of 2 Cor. 11:14] should preach to you a gospel other than the one which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:6-8).

Beware of a Distorted Gospel

The reason for Paul's strong words is clear. Acceptance of "another gospel" and "another Jesus" (the pseudo-Jesus would of course be offered as Savior and Lord) could not possibly lead to the desired salvation. But the victims of such preaching would be convinced that they had come to believe God's message. They would think that they were being saved, when in fact the genuine message of salvation had been hidden from

⁴Satan was not created as an evil person but fell into condemnation (1 Tim. 3:6) and has therefore been judged (John 16:11).

them. They would have fallen prey to Satan's policy of opposition by imitation.

A shrewd observer of the history of religion has observed that the fact "that any religion *works* does not mean that it is right. It is in the nature of all religions that they should *work* for those who are persuaded that they represent the determined vehicle of communication between the Seen and the Unseen."⁵ A faith which seems to work, and a Jesus who seems to produce results, do not necessarily correspond with the Jesus proclaimed by Jesus, Paul and his colleague Apostles. It is essential to understand the subtlety of Satan's strategy of deception, and to realize that he conceals himself under religious, biblical terminology.

By a subtle shift in the meaning of words, we suggest, the biblical Gospel has been, in many quarters, deprived of its principal and fundamental ingredient: *the Kingdom of God*. This has come about in two ways. Firstly, the content of the popular Gospel has been derived almost exclusively from isolated verses in Paul's epistles (usually Romans, cp. "The Roman Road") and the gospel of John. In these writings, because writer and audience *already understood* the meaning of "Gospel," the precise terminology of the Gospel appears less often, or appears under different terms, and there is thus more room for us to misunderstand. Paul was not writing (in Romans) to people who had never heard the Gospel. He was not writing to make converts out of non-Christians. Paul could assume that his audience knew what the Gospel was. This allowed him to concentrate on certain elements of the Gospel and treat other parts of it with less detail and clarity.

The loss of a clear perception of the Gospel message has come about because Jesus' original words describing and *defining the Gospel*, recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke, have been ignored or rejected. Jesus has been presented to the public as one who died and rose, but not as the original and definitive *preacher and teacher* of the saving Gospel — the Gospel about the Kingdom of God.

Almost all "Gospel-talk" has centered around the *person of Jesus, to the exclusion of the saving message he taught*. **Churches speak of the messenger, Jesus, but usually fail to tell us about the Gospel message which he proclaimed.** This practice is devastating. The abundance of talk about "Jesus" gives the impression that the Jesus of the New Testament is being presented. What many do not notice is that Jesus' saving message about *the Kingdom* is quietly omitted!

"Test the spirits," John urged as the New Testament period was ending (1 John 4:1). Listen to the words being announced as "gospel." Do you hear the Kingdom

of God as central in the Gospel presentation? If not, beware: the voice of Jesus and his Kingdom Gospel are absent. Jesus had remarked, "My sheep know my voice" (John 10:27). If the message is not about the Kingdom of God, it does not sound like Jesus!

Matthew, Mark and Luke unanimously record that Jesus and the disciples always proclaimed the *Gospel of the Kingdom* (Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:43; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 16:16). Mark calls this Gospel the "Gospel of God" (Mark 1:14). It is the saving message sent by God Himself through His spokesman Jesus, the promised Messiah. **Once this critically important definition of the Gospel — *the Gospel of the Kingdom* — has been established, Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to it by a kind of "shorthand" as "the Word" or "the Message."** Luke makes this crucial equation in his first volume: "He said to them, 'I must preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to the other cities also, *for I was sent for this purpose*.' And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea. Now it came about that while the multitude were pressing around and listening to the *Word of God*..." (Luke 4:43-44; 5:1).

Matthew and Mark also use the terms "Word (message) of the Kingdom" and "the Word" respectively when they record the parable of the sower. This parable, of course, is the prototype of all good evangelism, though it is seldom referred to by contemporary evangelists. The Gospel of the Kingdom in the three versions of the same parable appears as follows: "Whenever anyone hears the *word of the Kingdom*..." (Matt 13:19). "And they hear the *word*" (Mark 4:16). "The seed is the *word of God*" (Luke 8:11).

The Gospel Fully Defined

The "word" in question is fully defined in Luke 4:43 and Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 as *the Gospel of the Kingdom of God*. (Note that the KJV expression "preaching the Kingdom" means in the original "preaching the *Gospel* of the Kingdom," as modern translations and commentators make clear.)

After the resurrection of Jesus, the Apostles, in obedience to Jesus, went out to proclaim *exactly the same message of the Kingdom*. They added to the message, under the guidance of the spirit of Christ, the new facts about Jesus' death and resurrection, of which Jesus had said very little (and when he did he was not understood — Luke 18:31-34) when he preached the Gospel. In Acts 8:12, therefore, we have a perfect formula which covers the whole ground of the Gospel message. There are two components in the Gospel — the Kingdom of God and "the name of Jesus": "**When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news [=Gospel] about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus, they were being baptized**" (Acts 8:12).

This comprehensive definition of the Gospel is the one which should be constantly instilled in the minds of

⁵ Hugh J. Schonfield, *Those Incredible Christians*, Bernard Geis Associates, 1968, p. 217, 218.

those who go out to preach. The fact is, however, that this model text in Acts (repeated in Acts 19:8; 20:24, 25; 28:23, 31) is seldom, if ever, quoted. What is often quoted is another verse from Acts: “Philip...preached Christ to them” (Acts 8:5).

This is another of Luke’s “shorthand” summaries of the Gospel. He intends to remind us of Jesus’ own preaching of the Kingdom of God and the Apostles’ preaching about the Kingdom and the name of Jesus (Acts 8:12). By itself, however, the expression “preaching Christ” is unclear. Explained by Acts 8:12 — “the Gospel about the Kingdom and the name of Jesus” — it is easily understood. By forgetting Acts 8:12 evangelists almost always omit the principal subject matter of Jesus’ own preaching — the Kingdom of God! Thus they subtract from the message one of its two major components.

An illustration will make the matter clearer. In Acts 15:21 James stated that “Moses has in every city those who preach him.” We have no difficulty in seeing that “preaching Moses” means that the law of Moses and his *teaching* were being proclaimed. In the same way “preaching Christ” involves not only telling the facts about the person of Jesus, but also giving an accurate account of his message — what he taught as Gospel.

Now it would be very strange to say that “Moses is the law,” unless we explained that we were using language in a special way. Yet this sort of “Jesus is the Gospel” or “Jesus is the Kingdom” language has been introduced, and with disastrous consequences. It may sound good to say that “Jesus is the Gospel,” but the objective reality of the Kingdom as *the future reign of Christ on earth* (with strong implications for the *present* period of preparation for the Kingdom) has been lost from the Gospel message. Jesus’ version of the Gospel is thus eclipsed.

Some translations contribute to this loss. Note carefully: the NIV (read by millions) misleadingly tells you that Jesus preached the “Good News of the Kingdom,” while Paul preached the Gospel. The key “**gospel** of the Kingdom” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14) texts describing Jesus’ Gospel are thus made less than clear. There is of course no difference in the Greek between “good news” and “gospel.”

It is commonly said that Paul did not preach the Kingdom of God, though Jesus did. Imagine the chaos into which New Testament Christianity would be thrown if this assertion were true. If Paul did not relay the same Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus had preached he would be in violation of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19, 20), which is obviously binding on all who preach. Jesus’ final words were these: “Go and make disciples and *baptize* them into the name of the Father, Son and holy spirit, and teach them everything I taught you.” It could not be clearer. Apostolic Christianity is

based on the preaching of the historical Jesus. If Jesus preached the Kingdom as the foundation of the Gospel (and no one could argue with this fact), then the Apostles also taught that same Kingdom Gospel, with the addition of the new facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

To suggest that Paul did not concentrate on the Gospel of the Kingdom is to say that he was in direct disobedience to the Great Commission. Paul was intent on Christ living in him, and the Christ who lived in him was the risen historical Jesus who continued to preach the same Gospel of the Kingdom everywhere. Paul says this quite expressly: “I went about preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom” (Acts 20:25). He makes no difference at all between the Gospel of grace and the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24, 25). It would be completely false to assert therefore that the Gospel of Jesus did not continue in Acts. Luke intended that we never forget this. Acts 28:23, 31 describes the evangelistic ministry of Paul as the preaching of the Kingdom of God, both to Jews and to Gentiles. There is no preaching of Christ without the preaching of the Message of Christ, the Kingdom of God.

The Blurring of the Message

It was Origen, a philosophically-minded “church father” of the third century, who began to say that “the good things the apostles announce in the Gospel are simply Jesus. *Jesus Himself preaches good tidings of good things which are none other than Himself.*”⁶ With this kind of poetic, allegorizing language the Kingdom was turned into “good things” and the message about the Kingdom of God was swallowed up in the term “Jesus.” The Kingdom disappeared behind the word “Jesus.” This trend has continued to the present day.

Origen set a fashion of speaking of the “Gospel” yet saying nothing about the Messianic Kingdom of the future which was the heart of Jesus’ saving message. Jesus’ use of the term “Kingdom” in its Hebrew, Old Testament sense as a “concrete” reality of the future was frittered away, dissolved into thin air. The spell which was thus cast over the churches resulted in what one contemporary writer has called “the hopeless confusion of evangelicals over eschatology.”⁷ Another theologian warned of the catastrophe which occurred when the Greek incomprehension of the Messianic Kingdom caused it to be dropped from the Gospel message. The loss was not a legitimate transformation of the message, as some would have us believe; it was a suppression of the apostolic *Gospel of the Kingdom*: “When the Greek mind and the Roman mind, instead of the Hebrew mind, came to dominate the Church, there occurred a disaster

⁶ *Commentaries on Matthew and John*, emphasis added.

⁷ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970, p. 244.

from which the Church has never recovered, either in doctrine or practice.”⁸

Propositions about Jesus *being* the Kingdom or the Gospel sound plausible or “spiritual,” but they are misleading. Jesus did not come into Galilee saying, “Repent and believe the Gospel about *me*.” He commanded belief first and foremost in the Gospel of the Kingdom, *God’s Gospel* (Mark 1:14, 15). Jesus did not say that the sower went forth to sow himself! He went out to sow “the Message of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). Jesus spoke also of giving up everything for him *and the Gospel* (Mark 8:35; 10:29). Origen — and the evangelical world has often followed him — confused the biblical message by practically equating Jesus with the Gospel Message, the messenger with the message. The result was the loss of the Message about the Kingdom, of which Jesus will become the ruler as Messiah, and into which Jesus invites his followers as co-rulers (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4-6).

Our point is well made by a commentator who challenges the traditional idea that Jesus proclaimed himself rather than the Kingdom of God:

“Attempting to read the gospels unshackled by the conventional wisdom or dogma of the past leads to some startling conclusions. Nowhere is this more obvious than when we ask the central question, What was Jesus’ message? The various churches still operate on the axiom that His message concerned Himself. Here, they say, is God-in-the-flesh, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, walking about the Holy Land with a group of former fishermen, proclaiming Himself as the only way of salvation. He is the content of the message; or rather, he is the message itself...”

“As I realized, however, the moment I could read the New Testament with any seriousness...this is not what the Gospels say at all. If you begin with the Gospel of St. Mark...you will find that Jesus came preaching the ‘good news of God’ and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent [have a change of heart] and put your trust in this good news’ (1:14-15)...If you take the combined witness of Mark, Matthew and Luke, it is obvious that Jesus came to proclaim what is translated as the Kingdom of God or Heaven — the two are synonymous.”⁹

Misleading Terminology

“Preaching Christ,” “proclaiming Jesus,” “receiving the Lord” and “giving your heart to the Lord” may have a religious ring about them. But they may also be a “front” for a message which tells you nothing about

Jesus’ Gospel about the Kingdom of God. Remember that throughout the book of Acts where the indispensable information about the apostolic presentation of the Gospel is given, *the Kingdom of God was still the first item on the agenda* (Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31). This is true of preaching from the beginning of Acts to the end. It is true also of the message which was given to Jew and Gentile alike:

“So they [the Jews] fixed a day and came to him [Paul] at his quarters in large numbers. From morning to evening he expounded and testified the Kingdom of God and persuaded them concerning Jesus from the law of Moses and the prophets...He stayed two whole years in his own rented home and welcomed all who came to see him [Jews and Gentiles], preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness, none forbidding him” (Acts 28:23, 30, 31).

A Word from the Scholars

A New Testament professor from Harvard has subjected the writings of Luke in Acts to a minute analysis. He reports that what Luke says about the future Kingdom is “natural and spontaneous” and therefore most revealing as a guide to the apostolic Gospel. Professor Cadbury notes that Acts includes “many of the familiar elements” in New Testament preaching. “*The preachers preach the Kingdom of God or the things about it*” (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31 — these texts should be examined carefully). The term “Kingdom of God appears from almost the first verse to the last verse in the book.” “Kingdom of God” “constitutes a formula apparently parallel to the writer’s more characteristic single verb ‘evangelize.’” “*Nothing obviously distinguishes the term Kingdom of God in Acts from such apocalyptic use as it has in the synoptic gospels. For example one enters into it [in the future] through much tribulation* (Acts 14:22).”¹⁰ We find this scholar in complete agreement that the Kingdom of God is everywhere in Acts the heart and center of the Gospel. And by Kingdom of God the Apostles do not mean a present reign of Christ “in the heart” but the worldwide Kingdom of God to be inaugurated by the Second Coming of Jesus at the end of the age and introducing a new society on earth — “the inhabited earth of the future about which we speak” (Heb. 2:5). This point is most essential for anyone who sets out to make converts through the Gospel message. The Kingdom of God, as the future Kingdom, is the core of the message. It was when potential converts expressed an understanding of and a belief in the Kingdom of God and the things

⁸ H.L. Goudge, “The Calling of the Jews” in the collected essays on *Judaism and Christianity*, Shears & Sons, 1939.

⁹ Tom Harpur, *For Christ’s Sake*, McClelland and Stewart, 1994, p. 21.

¹⁰ H.J. Cadbury, “Acts and Eschatology,” in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, ed. Davies and Daube, Cambridge University Press, 1956, p. 311, emphasis added.

concerning the name of Jesus that they were ready to be baptized (Acts 8:12). Clearly any preaching which does not have the Kingdom of God as a major component of its content has little relation to the New Testament Gospel.

No Kingdom, No Gospel

When in the book of Acts Luke refers to “preaching Jesus” or “evangelizing,” both phrases must be amplified and illuminated by the fuller description of what the Apostles were saying. They were proclaiming the *Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus* (Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31). The loss of the facts about the Kingdom of God would amount to a loss of a major part of the Gospel itself. A gospel without the Kingdom of God would appear to be even “another gospel.” Even though the name “Jesus” might still be heard, his message about the Kingdom would have disappeared. A gospel deprived of essential information will not have the powerful converting energy necessary to make healthy, well-instructed Christians.

When Paul preached in Ephesus he “reasoned and persuaded them about the Kingdom of God” for three months (Acts 19:8). He later described his whole ministry at Ephesus as a “solemn testimony about repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). What then is Paul’s definition (not ours!) of “faith in the Lord Jesus”? Paul immediately gives us two further clarifying descriptions of the Gospel. He equates “faith in Jesus” with “the Gospel of the grace of God” (v. 24) or a “declaration of the whole purpose of God” (v. 27). But none of these phrases must be divorced from verse 25. There Paul sums up his ministry as the “*preaching of the Kingdom.*” Could contemporary evangelists so describe their own ministries when they speak of “heaven”? Where did any New Testament preacher promise his audience that they would “go to heaven”?

Paul’s preaching in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch followed the same pattern. After preaching the Gospel, he exhorted the converts to endure trial patiently before they “enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22), i.e., at the Second Coming. Our final glimpse of Paul is in Rome where once again we find him “solemnly testifying *about the Kingdom of God* and trying to persuade them about Jesus” from dawn till dusk (Acts 28:23). Luke ends where he began in Acts with Jesus discussing the affairs of the Kingdom of God for six weeks with the disciples (Acts 1:3). Indeed Luke concludes his second volume where he began his first, the gospel of Luke: Jesus is destined to receive the Kingdom of his father David (Luke 1:32, 33) and rule in it forever. Luke’s last word is that Paul was “*preaching the Kingdom of God* and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

The message is clear beyond any doubt. It is the Good News about the Kingdom and about Jesus Christ which must be proclaimed (Acts 8:12). These are distinct but closely related topics. The great mistake is to merge them so that the Kingdom is lost!

When Paul wrote to his converts he most often simply referred to the “Gospel” without further definition. Both writer and reader knew what was meant. We must be careful to go back to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts to find out exactly what that Gospel is. It is interesting to note that Paul avoids in his epistles the full phrase “Gospel of the Kingdom.” Talk of the “Kingdom” in opposition to Caesar could very well create unnecessary trouble in the Roman empire. In Thessalonica Paul was mobbed for having dared to say that “there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:5-7). When Paul wrote from prison he used terms to describe the Kingdom which were less provocative: “glory,” “age to come,” “light,” “life,” “inheritance.” But he still mentions the Kingdom in contexts where he has just mentioned the Gospel: “We proclaimed to you the *Gospel of God*...God calls you into His own *Kingdom* and glory” (1 Thess. 2:9, 12; cp. Mark 1:14-15: Gospel of God = Gospel of the Kingdom). “...you may be considered worthy of the *Kingdom of God*...Those who do not obey the *Gospel* of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:5, 8). “I became your father through the *Gospel*...*The Kingdom of God* does not consist in words, but in power” (1 Cor. 4:15, 20). “The word of truth, the *Gospel*...He transferred us into the *Kingdom*” (Col. 1:5, 13). Note that we have not yet inherited the Kingdom (Col. 3:24; 1 Cor. 15:50).

A Bible Dictionary Documents the Loss of the Kingdom from the Message

Despite the very clear evidence that the New Testament Christians always proclaimed the Kingdom of God, both before and after the resurrection of Jesus, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* attempts to divide the Gospel into two *different* messages. It speaks of “forms of the Gospel to be differentiated.”¹¹ Contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture, the article maintains that the Gospel of the Kingdom ceased to be preached when the Jews rejected their Messiah and that a different form of the Gospel — the Gospel of grace — then came into force. The proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom, we are told, will be resumed during the tribulation just prior to the return of Jesus.

However, this is to create a distinction which is not in the New Testament. The Gospel of the Kingdom definitely *did not cease to be preached* when Jesus was rejected. The Kingdom of God remained the central theme of apostolic teaching *after the resurrection* (Acts

¹¹ *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1969, p. 420.

1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). What's more, the Gospel of grace is exactly the same Gospel as the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24-25).

That many do try to create a distinction between "two forms" (a marvelous smokescreen phrase!) of the Gospel is not disputed. The distinction, however, is based on a man-made "dispensationalist" theory, which denies that the Gospel of the Kingdom has always been and always will be the Christian message.

The Indispensable Word of the Kingdom

Throughout the New Testament, the "shorthand" expression "word" (message) stands for the "Gospel of the Kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). Sometimes the message is simply "the truth" (Col. 1:6). All these abbreviated descriptions of the Gospel must be referred back to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom (Luke 4:43; Matt. 4:23).

If these simple principles are kept in mind, Christians will not run the risk of losing or distorting the Gospel, which is the greatest tragedy that could befall them (Gal. 1:7-8). They must insist that Jesus' own message about the Kingdom is always at the heart of evangelism. This can be done best by maintaining a "sound pattern of words" (2 Tim. 1:13). This does not mean that preaching should be wooden or unimaginative, controlled by a mere formula. It will mean, however, that we will not be misled into thinking that Christ has been preached *when nothing has been said about his Good News of the Kingdom*, Jesus' own Gospel, the Gospel of salvation.

The Good News of the Kingdom has to do with God's purpose to bring peace and international harmony to our war-torn earth by sending Jesus to rule the world at his Second Coming. The earth is going to be filled with the knowledge of God and the nations are going to beat their awful weapons of mass destruction into farm implements (Is. 2:1-4). In preparation for that great day, believers are to repent and believe the message (Mark 1:14, 15), **be baptized** and receive the Spirit of God (Acts 2:38). Some will say: "What good is that knowledge of the future for me *now*?" The answer is that God is intensely interested in the future of the world and the great reversal in world politics which is going to come when Jesus returns with his Kingdom. If the spirit of God and Christ is in us, that spirit will convey the same intense interest in the Kingdom as motivated the entire ministries of Jesus and the Apostles. God speaks to the present from the future. Hope is a powerful energy. But hope is no hope unless it is given content. That content is the Kingdom of God coming on earth and our inheritance of the new land/earth (Matt. 5:5).

We conclude by reflecting on the strange phenomenon that a leading writer of Bible notes quotes Matthew 24:14 and twice on the same page (his only references) omits the words "of the Kingdom" from

Matthew's (and Jesus') prediction that the Gospel of the Kingdom is going to be preached worldwide. Readers are permitted to see only that "this gospel...will be preached."¹² The Kingdom, which describes the content of the Gospel, has been dropped from the text!

Another evangelical writer refers to "preaching Christ" and "preaching the word," but omits altogether Luke's illuminating explanation of these phrases as "the Gospel of the Kingdom and the name of Jesus" (Acts 8:12). Recently a leading spokesman for evangelicalism delivered a lecture on the topic "What is the Gospel?" During the course of an hour he managed not to mention the word "kingdom" once! Discussing Acts 20:24-27 he referred to the "gospel of the grace of God" (v. 24) and equated it correctly with "declaring the whole purpose of God" (v. 27). Can anyone explain why he skipped verse 25 which tells us that it was the *Gospel of the Kingdom* which Paul called the Gospel of Grace and the whole purpose of God? Clearly no one is going to understand the Gospel fully until he is instructed in the meaning of the term Kingdom of God and invited to believe the Good News connected with that Kingdom (Mark 1:14-15).

To cap it all, at an international meeting of evangelists in Lausanne in 1974 a spokesman asked: "How much have you heard here about the Kingdom of God? Not much. *It is not our language*. But it was Jesus' prime concern."¹³ Next time you hear an evangelist, in spoken word or tract, summon the public to belief in *the Kingdom of God and the things concerning the name of Jesus* (Acts 8:12), take careful note. You will be hearing the language of Jesus and the Apostles. If offers of salvation contain no word about the Kingdom of God, remain suspicious — and reread 2 Corinthians 11:4 and Luke 8:12! And Mark 4:11, 12, where the intelligent reception of the Kingdom Gospel is a condition for repentance and being forgiven. ✧

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¹² Selwyn Hughes, *Every Day with Jesus*.

¹³ Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Controversy*, Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981, pp. 102-103, emphasis added.