

Have You Heard the Gospel?

In 1 Corinthians 15:3 Paul “declares that he received *en protois*, **as one of the fundamental tenets of the Apostolic faith**, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”¹

It was not the whole Gospel. Paul highlighted, as does any good teacher, that part of the Gospel, the death and resurrection of the Messiah, which required urgent attention and correction. Amazingly, some at Corinth were beginning to throw away the faith. Nothing is more horrifying than to ditch the faith which leads to immortality. Imagine renouncing God’s promise that we can live forever and ever, “into the ages of the ages”!

Now notice very carefully a popular misunderstanding about the content of the saving Gospel. The Gospel in the Bible is not remotely about “going to heaven when you die”! A leading expert makes our point well for us:

“The Kingdom of Heaven is fundamentally the Kingdom of earth. While the majority of Christendom has been in the habit of thinking of ‘heaven’ as the place for which the children of God are destined, Jesus makes the startling statement that the meek are to possess the earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10; cp. Ps 37, repeatedly). This is in agreement with the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions.”² The Gospel is firstly about the Kingdom of God for which we pray “May Your Kingdom come”! The Gospel of course is also about the sacrificial death of Jesus for the sins of the world, and about Jesus’ return to life on the third day.

Have You Heard the Gospel?

Stupid question — or is it? Christianity, we all agree, is based on the Gospel. But what is the Gospel?

Well-known evangelistic organizations are ready with the answer. The gist of what they have to say is this:

“Faith is rationally impossible where there is nothing to believe. Faith must have an object. The object of Christian faith is Christ...Faith always implies an object — that is, when we believe, we must believe something. That something I call the ‘fact’...If you are saved from sin, you are saved through a personal faith in the Gospel of Christ as defined in the Scriptures...The Bible says, ‘I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you...For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he was raised from the dead the third day according to the Scriptures’ (1 Cor. 15:1, 3, 4).”³

I invite you to think hard about what you just read in this quotation. It all sounds most plausible — but for one major fact. **Jesus preached the Gospel for several years, without saying, at that stage, a single word about his death and resurrection.** Not only this, he sent out the disciples to preach the Gospel, *before* they understood or believed that he was going to die for the sins of the world and be raised.

So, then, it would be dangerously misleading to say that the Christian Gospel is a message about the death and resurrection *only*. The facts are that the Gospel which Jesus preached for a large part of his short ministry had to do **firstly** with the Kingdom of God, and not yet with his death and resurrection.

¹ *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, Vol. 1, p. 377. Henry Alford, *Commentary on Greek NT*: “not merely the death and resurrection which were primary parts of the whole Gospel.”

² G.R. Beasley Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, Eerdmans, 1986, p. 163.

³ Billy Graham, “Facts, Faith and Feeling.”

Let us demonstrate our point from the text of Scripture. The Gospel as defined by Jesus was about the Kingdom of God. Mark 1:14-15 summarizes his whole mission: “Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming God’s Gospel and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is approaching: Repent and believe in the Gospel [about the Kingdom].’” The preaching of the Gospel about the Kingdom was the basis of his entire mission:

That Kingdom Gospel Jesus called “God’s Gospel.” No message could be more sacred and hallowed than that. “This is my Son,” God said. “Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7).

Jesus was in full possession of the vital, saving Message: “I must proclaim the Gospel about the Kingdom of God to the other cities also: that is the reason for which I was commissioned” (Luke 4:43).

The same preaching of the Gospel about the Kingdom of God is the task Jesus gave to the Church: “This Gospel **about the Kingdom of God** shall be proclaimed in the whole world as a witness; then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). Only when this is complete will the end of the age, the future coming of the Kingdom on earth, happen.

Christian discipleship means that we become preachers of the Gospel about the Kingdom: “Jesus said, ‘Follow me and proclaim everywhere the Gospel of Kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:60).

The disciples went out to preach the Gospel about the Kingdom: “He called the twelve together...and sent them out to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God” (Luke 9:1, 2).

Now note carefully: At this stage, Jesus had said nothing about his death and resurrection, and later they did not believe it when he told them! (See Luke 18:31-34: “They understood nothing of these things [Jesus’ death and resurrection].”) Yet Jesus and the disciples had been preaching the Gospel for two or three years. The Gospel, then, cannot be a message confined to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

After the resurrection, in obedience to Jesus, the Church persisted with exactly the same message, amplifying it of course with the new facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus:

Philip in Samaria: “When they believed Philip preaching **the Gospel about the Kingdom of God** and the name of Jesus, they were being baptized [in water, of course, and to receive the spirit], both men and women” (Acts 8:12) Jesus had continued lecturing on the Kingdom of God for some 6 weeks after his resurrection (Acts 1:3). The Kingdom of God was Jesus’ favorite topic, and if you are following Jesus it will be yours!

Paul in Ephesus: “Paul continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about **the Kingdom of God**” (Acts 19:8).

Paul summarizing his whole mission: “[I solemnly testified] to the Gospel of the grace of God...to you among whom I went about **proclaiming the Kingdom**” (Acts 20:24-25). Note that “the Gospel of the grace of God” is exactly a synonym for the proclaiming of the Kingdom. There is no difference!

Paul in Rome to Jews: “Paul was explaining to them by **solemnly testifying about the Kingdom of God** and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus from the Law and the Prophets from dawn till dusk” (Acts 28:23).

Paul in Rome to Gentiles: “This [same] salvation of God [cp. Gospel of God, Mark 1:14-15] has been sent to the Gentiles...And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was **welcoming** all who came to him, **proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God** and teaching them about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). Compare: “Jesus **welcomed** them and began speaking to them about the **Kingdom of God**” (Luke 9:11).

With this data before us, we are in a position to evaluate the definition of the current “evangelical” Gospel. From a tract entitled “What is the Gospel?” we read:

“Our message is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ...the Gospel of the Son of God...the Gospel of the grace of God...Paul said, ‘I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God leading to salvation to everyone who believes.’

“In this little booklet, I want us to find out what the Gospel really is. There is a widespread ignorance even among Christians as to what ingredients are necessary to compose the Gospel...

“The word Gospel occurs over one hundred times in the New Testament...What then is the Gospel of the grace of God? Let us ask Paul. He would point us to 1 Cor. 15:1-4: ‘I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you...that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day’...Paul never discussed the earthly life of our Lord...**The fact that the Lord Jesus died to save is one half of the Gospel! The fact that he rose from the dead...is the other half of the Gospel.**”

But is that true? Why is there not a **single sentence about the Gospel which Jesus preached**, i.e., the Gospel **about the Kingdom of God**? Why are we not pointed to Paul’s own definition of the Gospel of God given in the very next verse after he speaks of the “Gospel of the grace of God”? “The ministry which I received from the lord Jesus [was to] testify solemnly of the Gospel of the grace of God...to you among whom I went about proclaiming **the Gospel of the Kingdom**” (Acts 20:24-25). Then see Acts 28:23, 31 where Paul preached precisely the same message to Jews and Gentiles!

No fact could be more demonstrable than this. The Gospel of the grace of God *is* the Gospel of the Kingdom. There is no difference. God’s grace is proclaimed in the proclamation about the Kingdom of God — that great world government which Jesus has promised to establish, with his followers ruling the nations with him, on earth when he returns (see Dan. 7:13, 14, 18, 22, 27; 1 Cor. 6:2: “manage the world”; Rev. 2:26-27; 5:10; 20:1-6; 2 Tim. 2:12).

Summary

The Christian Gospel of salvation was proclaimed by Jesus (Heb. 2:3-4) and the Apostles. It was (and is) the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the things concerning Jesus Christ (Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; **Acts 8:12**; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

This saving Gospel — “the Message about the Kingdom” which Jesus stated is necessary for salvation (see Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:12; Acts 8:12) — was the central core of all biblical preaching. It is the Message which Satan hates (**Luke 8:12; Matt. 13:19**).

It appears that we have abandoned Jesus’ Gospel of the Kingdom, or at the very least watered it down! To abandon Jesus’ Gospel is to abandon him (Mark 8:35, 38; 10:39, 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 John 7-9, John 12:44-50). There can be no “believing” in Jesus without believing his teachings. “Why do you call me ‘lord,’ and will not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46; Matt. 7:21-27).

Many have claimed, by proof-texting from one passage in Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:1-3, that the Gospel is a message *only* about the death of Jesus for our sins and his resurrection. That this is untrue is proved by the fact that Jesus and the disciples preached the Gospel, calling it “the Gospel about the Kingdom” and “the Gospel” long before a word was said about his death for sin and his resurrection!

The “evangelical Gospel” in contemporary America leaves out Jesus’ own Gospel preaching and distorts the Gospel of Paul, dividing the Apostle from Jesus and omitting vital information. Without the right facts, how can we truly believe for salvation?

The tract we quoted at the beginning is right: Faith must have an object. We must believe some fact. But it must be the right facts! The question is, what facts are we going to believe? It is a question of obedience and the lordship of Jesus. Are we willing to obey his first

commandment: “Repent and believe in the Gospel about the Kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14-15; cp. Acts 19:8; 28:23, 31)?

Should we pit the evidence of one passage in 1 Corinthians 15:3 against the witness of hundreds of verses which state or imply that the central ingredient and content of the Gospel was the Kingdom of God?

The Christian faith is defined by its Gospel. That Gospel is the actual Message about the Kingdom of God **on Jesus’ lips** as well as the facts about his death and resurrection which later fully supported the Message about the coming Kingdom. To alter the Message by adding extra material or leaving out essential elements is to pervert the Gospel, which then loses its saving power (Gal. 1:9; 2 Cor. 11:4).

Paul, on the other hand, faithfully preached “the Gospel of God” as Jesus had (2 Cor. 11:7), and this “Gospel of God” is defined for us by Mark 1:14-15: It was the Gospel about the Kingdom, including of course the news of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Our point was tellingly made by Archbishop William Temple when he observed that the Gospel as Jesus preached it **is absent from Church History:**

“Every generation finds something in the Gospel which is of special importance to itself and seems to have been overlooked in the previous age or (sometimes) in all previous ages of the Church. The great discovery of the age in which we live is the immense prominence given in the Gospel to the Kingdom of God. **To us it is quite extraordinary that it figures so little in the theology and religious writings of almost the entire period of Christian history.** Certainly in the Synoptic Gospels [Matthew, Mark and Luke] it has a prominence **that could hardly be increased.**”⁴

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the significance of this observation of the Archbishop. A glance at the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry will reveal to every reader the simple fact that Jesus, the original herald of the Christian Gospel (Heb. 2:3), was a preacher of the Kingdom of God. There can be absolutely no doubt about this. Can anyone question F.C. Grant’s assessment of Jesus’ purpose?

“It may be said that the teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God represents His whole teaching. It is the main determinative subject of all His discourse. His ethics were ethics of the Kingdom; His theology was theology of the Kingdom; His teaching regarding Himself cannot be understood apart from His interpretation of the Kingdom of God.”⁵

Have you understood the Gospel of the Kingdom which conveys the life-giving and energetic power of God and Jesus to us all (Rom. 1:16), if we believe it and pass it on? No question could be more relevant to us all as believers.

⁴ William Temple, *Personal Religion and the Life of Fellowship*, 1926, p. 69.

⁵ “The Gospel of the Kingdom, *Biblical World* 50 (1917), pp. 121-191.