

THE GOSPEL

What Is It?

by Anthony Buzzard

A widespread confusion prevails about the meaning of that most important of all words — **Gospel**. Few words are so misused, tossed around, but almost never defined. It is time for Bible students to go back to first principles and ask the fundamental questions.

What do you mean, “gospel”? Good news, certainly. But about what? The answer to that question will change your life, if you are honest with the biblical facts. One thing is clear. The Gospel *is* Christianity. It is the message which Christ proclaimed. We all agree; but we have been surprisingly slow to grasp what that message is about. Perhaps this is less remarkable, however, since spokesmen for religion constantly avoid Jesus’ own definition of the Gospel.

A reaction of disbelief to this last statement is understandable, but the facts will show that the Gospel, as Jesus taught it, is generally not being preached. One has only to listen to sermons and examine tracts claiming to offer the Gospel of salvation to detect a glaring difference between popular evangelism and the Bible on this vital matter of the Gospel. The difference is very simple. Jesus spoke always of the Gospel or good news *about the Kingdom of God*. Popular evangelism speaks of the Gospel of salvation, the Gospel of grace, the Gospel of Christ, but almost never of the “Gospel *of the Kingdom*.” The New Testament introduces the Gospel by calling it the Gospel about the Kingdom (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 9:35; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 16:16; cp. Matt. 24:14).

Word Association

Today’s Christian evangelism almost never gives the Gospel its primary New Testament label, the Gospel *about the Kingdom*. Jesus’ definition of the Gospel has apparently been stifled. Once this fact is pointed out, there will be ample opportunity to verify it, especially in America where the public is deluged with invitations to accept “the Gospel.” Simply ask yourself: What word do I associate with the Gospel? If your immediate reaction is “Kingdom,” you are a rare person — rarer still if you have heard anyone invite his audience to be saved by believing the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Yet in Jesus’ language the Gospel was always the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. It is that message, as we shall see, which you must believe *to be saved*.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke this is plainly stated in verse after verse. But the churches seldom refer to those books in their definition and preaching of the Gospel. They begin in John, or Romans, or Revelation. In these books the Gospel is less clearly defined (because reader and writer already knew what the Gospel was) and is therefore more open to misunderstanding. But in Matthew, Mark, and Luke there can be no possibility of mistake. The message of salvation is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. It is that message which you must understand and believe in order to be a Christian. It is possible, however, to sit in church for years and never once hear the message about the Kingdom of God.

Getting the Facts

Here are the New Testament facts. They are not complicated. It is well known that Jesus compared the preaching of Christianity to the sowing of seed in a field. The Christian Gospel, he said, is an idea sown in the mind. That idea he called the message of the Kingdom: “When anyone hears the message **of the Kingdom** and does not understand it, the Devil comes and snatches away the message which is sown in his heart, so that he may not **believe and be saved**” (combining Matt. 13:19 with Luke 8:12).

What a wealth of critically important information is here. Jesus’ message of the Kingdom, when believed and held fast (Luke 8:15), leads to salvation. Satan knows this and does his utmost, therefore,

to prevent that message from taking root in your mind. He does not want you to believe and be saved. As you read those vitally important words of Jesus, there are forces at work to divert your attention away from the message. No wonder Jesus raised his voice and cried out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 8:8).

The parable of the sower (Matt. 13; Mark 4; Luke 8) describes the process of conversion as Jesus taught it. He did not just say, “Believe in me.” He said in effect, “Believe my (and my Father’s) message *about the Kingdom of God*. Beware lest Satan diverts your attention from the message. If he does you will not believe it and you will not be saved.” Christianity as Jesus defines it is based on the acceptance of Jesus and his Gospel of the Kingdom.

We can see, then, why Satan does not want the message of the Kingdom to be known. He has done everything possible to suppress it. He is quite willing to have the word “gospel” in circulation, but not “Gospel of the Kingdom of God.”

In this way people may be convinced that they are preaching or believing the Gospel, when they really never mention it or hear it. It is time to see through the great Gospel hoax.

Jesus Defined the Gospel

That hoax is perpetuated by our simply not *paying attention to Jesus’ own definition of the Gospel*. In any textbook you should begin at the beginning. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe in detail the beginning of Jesus’ proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom: “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and **believe that Gospel**’ (Mark 1:14-15).

There is no doubt that the Gospel is about the Kingdom of God. That is the message you must believe. “Jesus was going through all the towns...proclaiming the Gospel about the Kingdom of God...and they pressed around him to hear the message of God” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35 and Luke 4:43; 5:1). Again there is no doubt that the message was about the Kingdom: “The revealed secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you to know,” Jesus said to his disciples (Mark 4:11). So there is knowledge to be acquired in the good news, a secret about the Kingdom to be learned for conversion. The preaching of the Gospel is evidently first and foremost an appeal to the mind, a demand for wholehearted acceptance of the facts about the Kingdom of God. Unless that vital information about the Kingdom passes from the preacher to his audience, how can biblical conversion take place? There is a subtle danger here.

False Evangelist

Satan is also a great evangelist. So Jesus warned: “The enemy [the Devil] sowed tares among the wheat” (Matt. 13:25, 38, 39). The Devil is also busy sowing his pseudo-gospel. According to the marginal note in the New American Standard Version, tares resemble wheat — the product of the good seed. In other words, Satan’s evangelistic effort parodies and mimics the evangelistic activity of Jesus. Satan, too, makes his converts, and on a large scale, judging by John’s remark that the “whole world lies in [Satan’s] power” (1 John 5:19; cp. Rev. 12:9; 2 Cor. 4:4). Our task is to distinguish the true from the false, the genuine from the counterfeit.

All this demands effort on our part, a determination by prayer and study to know the truth and not to be taken in by the lie. We must develop a love of the truth to be saved (2 Thess. 2:10). The great Christian virtue of love is characterized by its joy at the truth (1 Cor. 13:6). Unfortunately most churchgoers do not give themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of truth. They seem content to believe whatever they are told. They exhibit very little of the spirit of the Bereans who “searched the Scriptures daily” to see if what Paul was saying was true (Acts 17:11). As a result of their diligence, they became genuine believers.

Revival Needed

What is needed everywhere in churches is a revival of interest in the Parable of the Sower. We need to define the Gospel from the very words of Jesus. He himself said that this parable provides the key to understanding all the parables (Mark 4:13). Its great importance lies in its description of the genuine conversion experience. It shows what Jesus preached as the Gospel. We learn from him that conversion is based on acceptance of the Gospel of the Kingdom — and no other Gospel.

If that is true, it is obvious that we must define the Kingdom of God. It is simply this: God is going to send His Son to rule the world. He is to be the first world governor. To be converted and saved you must begin by believing that stupendous fact. The good news about the Kingdom allows you to know what God is planning to do. Jesus' first command to us is to repent and believe in God's Kingdom plan (Mark 1:14-15). There will be universal peace on the earth (Isa. 2:1-4) and Jesus will be here with us to bring it about. He offers his followers a share in that coming rule on earth (Luke 22:28-30; Matt. 5:3, 5).

We are to pray for that day to come: "Your Kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will awake from the sleep of death to take part in it (Dan. 12:2; Luke 13:28-29). It will arrive at the end of the age, following a series of cataclysmic events (Luke 21:31). The Kingdom of God will supersede all existing national governments (Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 22, 27). The power to rule over the world will be given to the Messiah, and to you, if you will accept the message and act on it (Dan. 7:27; Luke 19:17, 19; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 20:1-4).

How You Respond to the Gospel of the Kingdom

The Gospel of the Kingdom is much more than a message about Jesus' death to secure forgiveness of sin (although that is an *essential* part of it, added later: Acts 8:12). Jesus preached the Kingdom of God long before he said a word about his death for our sins or his resurrection (compare Luke 4:43 with Luke 18:31-34). The good news about the Kingdom is a statement of God's intention to put an end to the world's insoluble problems. He will send his Messiah to abolish international warfare (Isa. 2:4), to cure the incurable, and to eradicate famine and poverty.

Conversion is your response to that supremely significant piece of good news. Forgiveness of sin is based on our response to the Kingdom message. Jesus did not just say "repent," he said, "repent and believe in the Gospel of the Kingdom." The parable of the sower lets you into the secret of Christianity, the secret about the Kingdom plan (Mark 4:11). Satan stands ready to "snatch that message from your heart so that you may not believe and be saved" (Luke 8:12). His intention is to interfere with your reception of the message about the Kingdom, and thus with your salvation.

If you accept the Gospel message about the Kingdom, and receive forgiveness in the blood of the Messiah, you enter upon a period of training and testing in this present life in preparation for royal office in the age to come. The army's slogan applies exactly: "Training today for leadership tomorrow." There could be no more accurate description of New Testament Christianity.

Following your acceptance of God's message of the Kingdom of God, you should be baptized in water as a responsible and intelligent believer. That is part of obedience to Jesus' orders: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16; see Acts 8:12). (Infant christening and baptism in ignorance of the message of the Kingdom should be compared with the biblical examples: Acts 8:12.) Communion, commemorating the death of the Messiah and looking forward to the Kingdom, should be celebrated following Jesus' instructions (1 Cor. 11:23-26). With the help of the spirit of God, you must persist as a Christian to the end: "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13).

In order to worship God successfully you must lay aside traditional beliefs which conflict with the teaching of Jesus. It is important to believe in "one God, the Father" (1 Cor. 8:4-6), "the one who alone is God" (John 5:44), "the only true God" (John 17:3), "the only wise God" (Jude 25) and in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Other creeds distort belief in the first commandment, that none

is absolutely God but the Father (Deut. 6:4; Eph. 4:6). God is looking for those who will worship Him in Spirit and truth (John 4:24). You must believe, of course, in Jesus, the Son of God, in his death, resurrection, and return to establish the Kingdom on earth.

Obedience is crucial for success in the Christian life: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘lord, lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven; rather it is those who do the will of my Father” (Matt. 7:21). Obedience requires effort. Note that the believer who hid his talent was refused entry into the Kingdom, i.e., was not saved. Obedience is also costly. Christians must prepare for the Kingdom by developing their talents in the service of the Kingdom Gospel (Matt. 25:14-30). Christians must be prepared to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:44) and separate themselves from the machinery of warfare which threatens the lives of their enemies and their fellow believers in other lands. Christians are to be nonviolent: “He who takes the sword will perish with the sword” (Matt. 26:52).

In Summary

Such in brief is the Christianity of the Bible. It begins and ends with belief in the coming Kingdom of God and in Jesus, the King of that Kingdom (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Rejection of Jesus’ Gospel (note that Satan has his “gospel” and his pseudo-Jesus: 2 Cor. 11:4, 14, 15) does not lead to the desired result, but to tragic disappointment: “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom and yourselves being cast out” (Luke 13:28). So said the one who spoke with the full authority of his Father, and who invites you, through belief in the Gospel of the Kingdom, to share rulership with him when he comes to reign on the earth (Rev. 5:10).

In the Gospel message of the Kingdom, Jesus, on behalf of his Father, invites you to be a king — quite literally. You may never have thought of yourself as an administrator in a world government, but God’s intention to honor you in this way is plainly declared in the Bible. As a disciple of Jesus, you are entitled to know what purpose there is in following him, often through trial and tribulation (Luke 22:27-30). Jesus promises you, as he did Peter and his church as a whole: “I am telling you the truth: when the world is reborn and the Son of Man will sit on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones to govern the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:27-28). “The conqueror I will allow to sit beside me on my throne... I will give him authority over the nations” (Rev. 3:21; 2:26).

We have heard what Jesus says. Careful note should be taken of Luke 8:12 and the astonishing words of Jesus in Matthew 7:13-29, especially verses 21-23. According to this very disturbing teaching “many” Christian believers will be judged unacceptable when Jesus returns, although they were fully convinced they were following him by preaching in his name as well as performing exorcisms and miracles! Jesus’ teaching is obviously designed to startle us into activity. Nothing could be more urgently needed than a restatement of the Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it.

It is interesting to compare New Testament evangelism with today’s Gospel preaching:

Luke 9:11: “Jesus welcomed the people and began speaking to them about the Kingdom of God.”

Acts 28:30-31: “Paul welcomed everyone who came to him, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and teaching about the lord Jesus Messiah with complete boldness and without restriction.”

Note: This article is not intended to say that the death and resurrection of Jesus are anything less than essential parts of the Gospel. Our point is simply that the Gospel of the Kingdom is the primary ingredient of all apostolic preaching because it derives from Jesus himself. It is that primary element which is missing from contemporary presentations of the Gospel.

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