

In the last article I talked about leadership, and our need to recover the biblical frame and practice offered in Ephesians 4. We have tended to recognize only two or three of the five equipping types, rolling pastor-teacher into a single gift, and sometimes adding evangelists. Reducing Paul's equipping frame worked in a stable culture: but apostles and prophets were given to the Church for unstable and changing times, and unless we learn to recognize and equip these gifts again our ability to welcome the work of the Holy Spirit in OUR time will remain limited.

In this article I want to talk about the way we see the Gospel itself. There isn't really a more basic question we can ask: what is the Gospel? A friend of mine is fond of asking this question in the first year bible class he teaches in a west coast college, and his discovery is that few can define it, and if they do, it's usually a short-hand, reduced version of the biblical gospel. But a reduced, boiled-down version is the only version many live into, and like a bowl of oatmeal compared to a full feast, it's not very satisfying. So before you read any further, write down your answer to this question: what is the Gospel?

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What did you write down? If you are like many people, you might have written something like this: "Jesus died for your sins, according to the Scripture. Repent and believe the good news."

It's not a bad place to start. But notice, there is no end goal in this statement: there is no clear purpose, what theologians call *telos*. Unto what purpose did Jesus "die for your sins?" Where does redemption take you? How does "following Jesus" fit in?

What would it look like if we added a *telos* – an "unto." "Jesus died for your sins **so that** you would live forever."

That's a more complete summary, but it's still only a summary: only part of the story. Now the gospel has a goal, but the goal is other-worldly. How do we get at the "life in this world part," as in Jesus words: "I came that they might have life, and that more abundantly!" If we miss this part, we leave the impression that actually *following* Jesus isn't so important: that life is not now, but later. Let's expand the frame a bit more.

So let's take the next step and remove the veil between sacred and secular, heaven and earth. Let's grab the sense of meaning that is found in the prayer of the kingdom: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth.. as it is in heaven." Adding the force of that prayer, a prayer that is intimately concerned with life in this world and not only in the next, gives us this summary:

"Jesus died for your sins to restore your relationship with God so that you can follow Him in this life and reign with Him in the age to come."

Ok, now we are getting close to an Ephesians frame – a cosmic gospel that unites heaven and earth, this world and the world to come, Amen. We have not yet included a corporate dimension. We could still be talking about individual Christians without a covenant connection to the "one new humanity" God is

creating in Christ. There is no “body language” in this frame yet. But let’s leave our summary there for now and talk about the Gospel Jesus preached.

The Gospel Jesus Preached

Way back around 1978 I read George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Ladd was pulling together threads that had been noticed by others, but he did so at a time and in a way that was focused and memorable – and in a single stroke recovered a gospel theme that was central to Jesus, but often minimized in our churches. Today it is ALMOST common to say that the Gospel Jesus preached is the gospel of the kingdom of God – the good news of God’s reign. Let’s look at a passage from Mark’s gospel as we begin.

In the first chapter of Mark, we read the evangelists summary of Jesus preaching.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

A helpful exercise is to count the number of times this phrase appears in a single gospel. In Luke it occurs something like 25 times.

So what is this “kingdom of God,” and why is it at the heart of Jesus message? To answer this question we have to turn to the Scriptures that both Paul and Jesus were immersed in: the Old Testament.

Jesus often quotes from the prophet Isaiah. In fact, there are more quotes from Isaiah in the words of Jesus than from any other prophet. A good place to start to get a handle on this connection of gospel and kingdom is Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7. In these passages the meaning of gospel is clear: the declaration, “Here is your God!” and “Your God reigns.” And this is set in the context of Israel’s return from Exile, from living in a kingdom filled with idols and where Israel was a conquered people.

But the word was not uncommon in the world of Jesus time either. “Gospel” was not a Christian invention: it had a common use and meaning in the politics of the first century. The announcement of the birth of Octavian – the Roman emperor -- about 55 BC went like this:

“The providence which has ordered the whole of our life .. has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving it to him . . .

*“and by sending in him, as it were, **a savior for us** and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create peace everywhere. . . .*

*“The birthday of the god / was the beginning for the world of the *euangelion* – the **gospel** -- that has come to men through him.”*

So this word “Gospel” was already a political term in Jesus time: it represented the reign of a king who would bring peace and prosperity. The Romans claimed that this was exactly their role in history. Rome brought peace by the power of the sword. So already in Jesus time “good news” was deeply connected to life and political reality.

And one more small note: By the time Jesus was born, Augustus had been ruling for a quarter of a century. His title was – can you guess – “Augustus, Caesar -- *King of kings.*” He ruled from Gibraltar to Jerusalem, and from Britain to the Black Sea.

So this is the background, the big story that is the setting of this little word that we have tended to reduce to a small, personal action. And the more Jewish we make the gospel, the more it directly confronts the power and claims of every king and kingdom, and every idol, whether religious or secular.

Gospel, then, is not first a system of how people get saved. The gospel, strictly speaking, is the declaration that God is king, as in the classic phrase, “Jesus is Lord.” To say that Jesus is Lord is to summon people to obedience, and to declare that there is a just rule coming to earth, a rule and a kingdom that will judge all other claims to power. When we pray “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking for God’s just reign to appear on earth.

A Larger Story

There are still a couple of other things to say to round out this picture. Recently a friend posted a statement for comment on Facebook. He wrote this:

Three people meeting in a room is not a “church” because the word “church” (ecclesia) means “political presence” in the neighborhood. Agree?

In Yoder’s words, *ecclesia* is a *polis* because, “it has ways of making decisions, defining membership, and carrying out common tasks. That makes the Christian community a political entity in the simplest meaning of the term.” (Yoder and Cartwright, *The Royal Priesthood*, 1994). To maintain that the church has a “political presence” means that the church lives out a particular way of life that is in keeping with the Kingdom of God – an *alternative* to the existing social order.

And then finally, Jesus is not declared Lord just so he can be declared Lord, but *for us* – for our redemption. His Lordship is as much “for” as “over.” He rules to restore all things. Luke 4 should remind us strongly of this, just as Isa. 61 does. Jesus brings good news to the oppressed, binding up the broken hearted, and bringing liberty to the captives.

This “Christus Victor” theme within the atonement has been somewhat neglected in the last generation, in part because our narrowing of the Gospel to a personal exchange meant a similar narrowing of our understanding of atonement. Summaries like that of Colossians 2:13-15 propose both a substitutionary view AND a triumphal view. On our behalf, Jesus has disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them (See my article “Which Atonement” in *Theodidatkos*, Vol. 7, No.1). That truly is good news!

Conclusion

Many have noted that the frame for the gospel in western churches grew increasingly narrow in the last generation. We emphasized personal salvation and decision over discipleship. Gradually our frame has been expanding, taking in more of the biblical story, and moving toward *shalom*: God restoring all things, putting all things to rights under His rule.

The good news is personal but not private, and finds its miraculous beginning in individual commitment in this world. But God's purpose is to redeem all creation, resurrect our physical bodies and even renew the earth. *The kingdom of God is creation healed.*

BIO



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See also NT Wright on [VIMEO](#).

See also "[Which Atonement?](#)"